Case 11: Pronouns

Carlos is a manager in the accounting department at Clear Web—a medium sized tech company. To promote learning opportunities, Clear Web is asking all staff to attend TechMind, a national tech conference.

At the start of the conference, Carlos meets with his team to hand out name tags and the program for the conference and to brief them on the seminars and learning opportunities available. There are six people on his team, and everyone is quite close; they have a positive team dynamic.

Carlos asks everyone to write their pronouns on their name tags as part of Clear Web's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative for public events. Carlos notices that one of his accountants, Bailey, writes "they/them" in the pronoun space of the name tag.

Carlos is confused. He's always referred to Bailey as "he/him" when speaking of them in conversation. Bailey always wears a suit to work, and while their hair is a little longer than most men, they present as masculine. Carlos doesn't say anything in the moment, but later, at lunch, he makes his way over to Bailey. He knows that Bailey likes hockey, so he brings up a recent game. After some light conversation, Carlos asks Bailey about the pronouns written on their name tag.

"I didn't know you used 'they/them' pronouns," Carlos says. "I've been referring to you as 'he/him' all this time. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I thought this might come up," Bailey responds. "I never corrected anyone because some people are uncomfortable with that sort of conversation. I don't want to cause any problems."

Bailey's response upsets Carlos. He feels badly; he tries to cultivate an inclusive work environment for his team. Carlos doesn't want Bailey to feel this way. They should feel like they can be who they are, without judgement. Carlos lets it drop and the topic doesn't come up again for the rest of the conference. However, once everyone is back at the office, Carlos asks to speak with Bailey privately in his office.

"I want to continue the conversation we started during lunch at the conference," Carlos says as Bailey takes a seat. "I don't like that you don't feel comfortable being yourself at work. I want you to be yourself. I know everyone cares about you, and I don't think anyone would ever judge you or your capabilities because of it."

Bailey thinks for a moment. "I don't feel like I'd be judged," they say, "but I feel like there will be a lot of questions. And, even if I don't mind answering questions about my gender identity, I don't know if I'm quite ready for the pressure of having to explain myself."

"I won't lie to you," Carlos says, "but I have some questions of my own." He takes a deep breath before he blurts out, "You look like a man, dress like a man, I mean, you love hockey! You seem so...

masculine." Then he stops. "I'm not trying to be offensive or insensitive," he says, "I'm just... confused." Carlos is worried that he's saying all the wrong things.

Bailey smiles at him and says, "Don't worry, Carlos, it's okay. I said I don't mind answering questions. I know you're not trying to be hurtful or disrespectful. Let me try to explain. I'm non-binary. You say I dress like a man," Bailey continues, "but it's only because of Clear Web's dress code policy. Our current policy doesn't really account for non-binary people. So, I've chosen to dress more masculine as that is my sex assigned at birth. But I don't identify as a man. Or as a woman. Being non-binary means that I have a gender identity that is not exclusively man or woman. Does that make sense?"

Carlos takes a moment before he responds. "So, you don't identify as a man. Or as a woman. You identify as somewhere in between—as both?"

"Not exactly. Being non-binary or gender non-conforming means that my gender expression may not be exactly what society expects." says Bailey. "For example, I love hockey. Not because it's manly, but because it's a high energy game. And liking hockey doesn't make me more masculine; that's just a gendered stereotype. If I told you that I sometimes like to paint my nails, would you think I'm more feminine?"

"Maybe," says Carlos. "I don't know." Then he asks, "*Do* you paint your nails?"

Bailey laughs. "Sometimes," they say. "But Clear Web's dress code is pretty strict, so I usually remove it on Sunday evenings before the workday on Monday."

"That doesn't really seem fair," Carlos says, "You're an excellent employee—whether you wear nail polish or not. Let me talk to someone and see what I can do about the policy. May I ask one more question?"

"Of course," Bailey says.

"Why is it that you feel so much pressure when it comes to talking about your identity?"

Bailey shares their previous experience working in teams at other organizations. They mention that they don't want to be tokenized as the spokesperson for all non-binary individuals. While they don't have a problem talking about their personal experience, they don't want to find themselves in a position where they're giving lectures about pronouns.

"I get it," says Carlos. He then tells Bailey that he'll look into creating more opportunities for them (and any other gender diverse individuals), so they feel more comfortable being their authentic selves at work. He feels bad that Bailey was never given the opportunity to be completely who they are at work, but is very appreciative of Bailey's openness. Gender diversity is a newer concept to Carlos.

The next day, Carlos visits Zahira, a Human Resources manager at Clear Web. He tells her that he has a non-binary team member who feels like they can't be who they truly are at work. Zahira promises to investigate and that she'll do her best to implement changes.

Uneasy that there wouldn't be any immediate changes, Carlos hosts a team Lunch & Learn about gender identity. He pulls resources that might be helpful and has an open discussion with his team, including Bailey. During the discussion, everyone is open-minded, kind, and eager to learn more about this topic.

Questions:

(1) Why has Bailey never come forward about their gender identity at work? What pressure did they feel? Did Carlos put pressure on Bailey?

(2) What policies could Clear Web implement to support its non-binary employees? Could these policy changes benefit more than just non-binary employees?

(3) List some gendered stereotypes. What are the negative repercussions of believing in and adhering to gendered stereotypes? Where do gendered stereotypes come from?

(4) In the conversations Carlos had with Bailey, what did Carlos do well? Is there anything he could have done better?

(5) How did Carlos use his power and privilege in this setting? Did he use his position of power in a positive or negative way? How might he continue using his privilege as a cisgender man?

Additional Resources for Case 11:

- Why We Ask Each Other Our Pronouns (article by Human Rights Campaign), here
- Pronoun Usage Guide (resource by Egale), here
- Genderbread Person: Components of Human Identity (resource by Egale), here
- 2SLGBTQI Glossary of Terms (resource by Egale), here
- Unsure of someone's pronouns? Here's what to do (article by the Chicago Tribune), here