



## McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

### Celebrating Carl Nassib, and Allowing Others to Follow His Lead

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Las Vegas Raiders' Defensive End Carl Nassib's announcement that he's gay is a watershed moment in men's professional sport. But he is not alone. Not only are there other gay men playing professional sport, but there are also gay men working in front offices, on coaching staffs, in athletic departments and at various levels of amateur and professional sport.

How can sport organizations make it easier for sport employees to follow Nassib's example and express their authentic selves?

Our work, recently published in the *Journal of Sport Management*, provides some insights. We interviewed gay men working in various areas of the sport industry to learn about challenges and opportunities they faced during their careers. Our findings reveal many of the men were hesitant to pursue careers in sport because of the homophobia they witnessed, or experienced, in youth sport. The fear of being outed or simply perceived as not being (hetero) 'man enough' had a lasting impact, shaping the way they acted around coworkers, dictating which jobs they pursued, and affecting their mental health.

Despite a complicated past with sport, these particular men migrated back to the industry as employees, fully aware of the closets they may have to retreat to for the sake of their career. Fortunately for most of our interview participants, they thrived both personally and professionally because they found supportive allies, and workplace environments, along their career paths. They also realized their sexual orientation (and subsequent unique life experiences) was more a superpower than a disadvantage—allowing them to make a meaningful impact in the lives of others and their organizations.

The question remains, however: how can sport organizations effectively create inclusive environments that allow all their employees to thrive?

Our study, which included interviews with gay men ages 22 to 59 who had sport industry experience, provides some directions for sport managers moving forward.

### Signal Inclusion Early, Often

The men in our study emphasized that being an "athlete" was central to their identity growing up. And while they felt "othered" because of their sexual orientation, particularly during locker room banter, they loved sport and wanted it to be part of their lives. They even described time spent participating in the physical activity of their sport as freeing, calling it "therapeutic", and crediting sport with getting them through difficult times in their lives. Their decision to continue in sport, or re-enter sport, as an employee was often a function of these positive feelings associated with sport participation.

However, their understanding of homophobia in sport meant they often concealed their identities (pretended to be heterosexual) or covered (downplayed or mitigated elements of their sexual identity) while in their jobs. Sport managers must recognize sport's troubled past with homophobia and intentionally demonstrate their organization's acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. They must do this early, and often, so that gay employees will know the organization is a welcoming place. Prominently centering sexual orientation in non-discrimination statements, highlighting LGBTQ+ initiatives or employees on diversity pages on corporate websites, actively engaging in Pride events, and advocating for inclusive public policy and against discriminatory laws are all signals of inclusion that sport organizations can send to prospective gay employees.

## Reconceptualizing Sexual Orientation as an Advantage

Despite initial fears about coming out in the workplace, many of our study's participants talked about how they started to view their sexual identity as an asset to both themselves and their organizations. As society has evolved on issues of LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusion, and as organizations continue to prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, these employees see themselves as representing a unique constituency that can not only add to a sport organization's diversity, but also provide it with insight into marketing to, and engaging with, the LGBTQ+ community. Others, particularly in coaching roles, spoke about how their experience growing up as a closeted athlete could help them be better role models to their young athletes who may also be struggling with their identity.

## Coming Out is Complex

Even though sport organizations are becoming more inclusive and gay employees are realizing the benefits they bring to a department, coming out is still complex. It typically must be done multiple times, whenever a gay employee starts a new job or interacts with a new client, and multiple factors influence one's decision to come out.

Our research suggests gay employees feel *most supported* when their organization (1) clearly articulates how the employee's performance and skillset brings value to the organization; and (2) enacts formal, LGBTQ+ inclusive policies. For older participants, having their organizations implement same-sex spouse or partner benefits was a sign that they – and their families – were truly welcomed and protected. In addition, finding a network of LGBTQ+ sport employees and vocal allies created a safe space for the men to share stories and build friendships. Having these networks within, and outside of, their organizations gave many of our participants the confidence to come out professionally.

Society is becoming more accepting, and the sport industry must keep up. Show gay employees they are valued, create policies that protect them, and give them a support system that will allow them to thrive.

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