

# Safe Spaces for Workplaces

## The What, Why and How

When workplaces invest in training for their workforce, the results are typically clear – improved work output, better skilled employees, or fewer accidents. While the results of creating a safer space in your workplace may not be immediately apparent, the benefit is real. If you have an interest in protecting and taking care of your employees or in reducing stress, turnover, or workplace harassment, then investing in creating a safer space is a must.

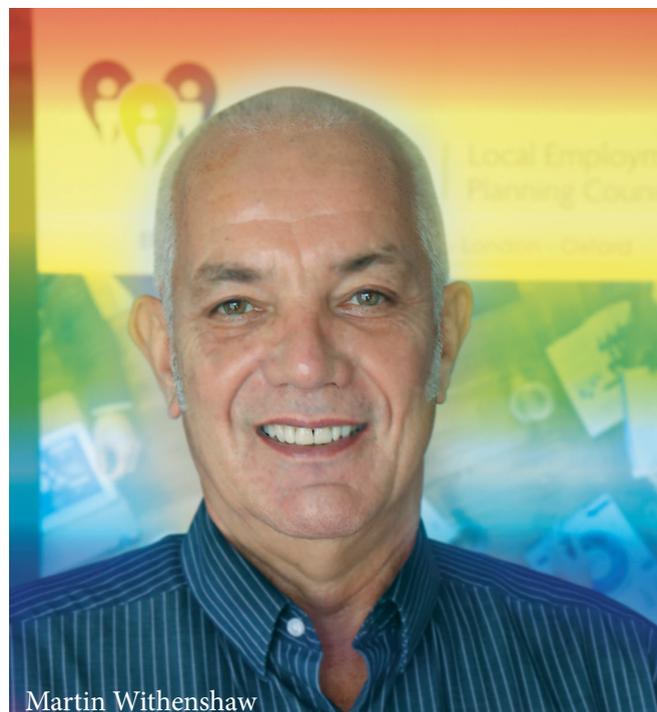
“Workplaces need to be inclusive. Safe spaces represent our community”

- Martin Withenshaw

Martin Withenshaw has been an activist for LGBT2Q+ rights in Canada for over 4 decades. Among his many feats in activism, Martin has formerly been the secretary of HALO (the Homophile Association of London Ontario), is the founder of the world’s first LGBT2Q+ Optimist Club (the Rainbow Optimists-Southwestern Ontario), and was grand marshal of the 2019 London Pride Parade. He’s also an advocate for safer spaces in the workplace. “Workplaces need to be inclusive. Safe spaces represent our community - not all people are the same.” says Martin.

He also sees a benefit in the bottom line “It can be economically viable when people see themselves in your business.”

While there are significant benefits for your workplace, it’s also about Ontario Human Rights Code compliance. In the workplace, gender identity and gender expression were introduced as a prohibited grounds of discrimination under the OHRC and under the Canadian Human Rights Act in 2017. Employers have a duty under the Code to accommodate gender diversity and take steps to create an inclusive workplace.



Martin Withenshaw

## What is a Safe Space?

The term “safe space” can mean a variety of things to different groups, but at its core a safe space is a place or environment in which a person or group can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment or any other targeted emotional or physical harm.

The goal is to create a space where people can find themselves represented and reflected. Martin adds: “It’s a space where they understand that all people are treated with respect and dignity”.

## Creating Safer Spaces

In a safe space, people’s gender identities and expressions are acknowledged, affirmed and respected. There are many facets of your workplace to take into account when creating a safe space:

1. Materials in the workplace must be inclusive. “It’s not enough just to say ‘marginalized groups’, you have to be explicit” says Martin. He suggests revisiting HR policies and naming specific groups, like LGBT2Q+ individuals, in harassment and protection policies.
2. Consider the images, iconography and symbols in your workplace as well. Who do they represent, and do they reflect the diversity of people who make up your workplace and community at large? Ensuring that there

are visible and verbal reminders that your organization is a safer space is also important.

3. The use of language must be positive and inclusive, and people in the space must feel comfortable using positive and inclusive language. “To create a safe space, employers can invest in gender pronoun training”, Martin suggests. The use of negative and non-inclusive language can result in increased stress in the workplace and can manifest in harassment at its worst.

4. Accessible and supportive processes are also an important part of a safe space. Comprehensive complaint and feedback policies must be made available to help people raise issues and concerns. “You have to make sure people are being heard.” says Martin. Those who undertake these processes must feel that they have been acknowledged and that there will be follow-up to their comments.

5. Getting to know and getting involved with your local LGBT2Q+ community is an important first step. Search for local groups in your area online and find out how you can create a connection with your workplace.

## Challenges:

Creating a safer space comes with its own set of challenges. It is necessary to be aware and be active in addressing these when they come up. For instance, intersectionality can present new challenges for the space. “All LGBT2Q+ people have their own unique issues” says Martin. For example, Trans Women report that they find considerable transphobia in spaces which are supposedly safe for women and feminists.

There’s also the challenge of continuing the commitment to education and moderation. This can be confronting for the owners of the space, and all parties must be committed in order for a safe space to work. “Creating a safer space is an ongoing process and the work is never done.” says Martin.

Though these challenges arise, the important thing is maintaining a solid commitment to the values of safer spaces.

There are simple and free steps you can take toward creating a safer space. “You start by adding your pronouns to your e-mail signature.” suggests Martin. You can get started on education today by looking at the following:

# HELPFUL RESOURCES

## The 519 Glossary:

An extensive glossary of terms and definitions as they relate to various communities. Comes in a downloadable format as well.

[www.the519.org/education-training/glossary](http://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary)

## Pride Understanding:

Family friendly videos and resources to increase awareness and understanding and decrease stigma to start a discussion.

[www.prideunderstanding.ca](http://www.prideunderstanding.ca)

## Rainbow Optimists:

The Rainbow Optimists are dedicated to bettering the lives of LGBT2Q+ rural youth, their families and communities.

[www.facebook.com/rainbowoptimistclub](https://www.facebook.com/rainbowoptimistclub)

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