Stanford Graduate School of Business has a course that seeks to reduce gaps in companies that discourage, and often violate, the workers of the LGBTQ community.

By Daniela Arce
Leadership is increasingly adapting to new realities and technologies. It is a matter of reviewing how companies are changing their hierarchies with the arrival of digital transformation, where leadership no longer only goes through the name of the position but also because of having certain skills. This more collaborative work goes hand in hand with the new focus of several organizations that are questioning the way in which it is led.

And in this leadership, which now seeks to be more transformational and less static, diverse and inclusive spaces are also important. For this reason, more and more companies are taking actions and creating inclusive policies that, among other things, consider the workers of the LGBTQ community.

It is a reality that can be seen more and more in different Latin American or multinational organizations that are in the region, where there is growing interest in rethinking what has been done so far. In this line, Stanford Graduate School of Business proposes the LGBTQ Executive Leadership Program, designed for LGBTQ executives who are preparing to lead more significantly or to guide those leaders who are in the process of creating more diverse and inclusive units.

One of the main drivers of this program is the search to break down a series of barriers faced by LGBTQ professionals, who "often avoid and fear being authentic in their workplace. Many of them really face ceilings to ascend and be promoted. These barriers reflect the complex set of attitudes, obsolete policies and biases, as well as individual internal perceptions," says Tom Wurster, professor of Management and co-director of the program.

The Colombian Chiqui Cartagena, expert in the Latin market of the U.S. and author of the book Latino Boom, participated in the program two years ago as part of an initiative of her company at the time, which sought that its executives take courses or workshops to be better leaders. At that time, she says, "I was in charge of the internal group of LGBTI employees and my boss and I found this new course offered by Stanford very interesting, which is unique in the US." This aspect was one of the main motivators, because although in New York there are many recognized universities such
as NYU, Columbia, among others, "none has a similar program, so I applied and they accepted me."

Like Cartagena, other executives with at least 10 years of professional experience, from different levels and from different industries and sectors have completed this program. Marina de la Torre, VP, Customer Success and Global Business Strategy at FastSpring, also studied this program at Stanford. After 10 years of her master’s degree in business, she thought it was time to go back to the classroom. "I signed up because I was intrigued and attracted that the program was exclusively dedicated to an LGBTQ audience" and after concluding it De la Torre affirms that "the direct impact of the program for me came from the side of unconscious biases like identifying and modifying unconscious prejudices in the workplace and what to do about it, part of the program was dedicated to this topic."

**Many companies have realized the great benefits they can have both for their culture and for their image to be seen as places open to inclusion and diversity,** as long as they are intentions that translate into actions and policies. On this, Wurster says: "With a vision of the future, many companies recognize that the success of their competitiveness depends on their diverse, inclusive and motivated workforce accepting and embracing differences."

And Cartagena agrees: "Companies that start focusing on diversity and inclusion know that their companies can grow and win in this competitive world, because they will attract the best employees and that inclusiveness and diversity have to be palpable at the levels highest in the company, both executives and board of directors."

**Open to this type of initiative, in addition, attracts all kinds of talent.** There are studies that have shown that the more heterogeneous and inclusive they are, including LGBTQI executives, for example, they become more attractive in the market and as places of work. And to this is added that internal commitment increases.
The approach to these professionals should be done in the same way that all kinds of talent are captured. And that is why both Cartagena and De la Torre consider that it should be done in an open and honest way, demonstrating that diversity and inclusivity is part of their DNA.

"It does not matter what community they want to attract as employees, be it LGBTI, young millennials, women, people with physical disabilities, etc. The company needs to demonstrate what their core values are and that they 'live' them at all levels. the company from the team that cleans the offices to the CEO," says Cartagena, and De la Torre adds: "It is important to be able to connect with peers -- in this case at the intersection of the personal and professional. There are challenges that are common to LGBTQ professionals and it is not easy to connect with our peers. The program at Stanford provided a space and platform for the connection and collaboration between LGBTQ professionals."

For this to happen, it is vital that LGBTQ professionals feel welcomed, as well as that they can strengthen their network of contacts. Do not forget to power these relationships and how they can strengthen the work teams, generating confidence. Sarah Soule, codirector of the program and senior associate dean for academic affairs, adds that "LGBTQ professionals may find it difficult to find and build their own peer networks, especially among senior executives, who share their sexual and gender identity. Without networks, some find it solitary or discouraging to advance in their careers. One of the unique strengths of the Stanford program is to encourage enduring networks."

That is why the Stanford program includes personal leadership and management skills, among others, that are taught in small practical workshops, as well as lectures or dialogues with world-class academics.