



**SHAPED BY THEIR ENVIRONMENT:
HOW LGBTQ+ LEADERS TURN LIFE
EXPERIENCES INTO SUPERPOWERS**
Bree Fram & Liz Cavallaro

Some people develop almost superhuman abilities to understand the world around them.

Imagine hiking with a geologist who immediately grasped how every rock formation or gully you passed came to be. Think of stargazing with an astrophysicist who by looking at a star could tell you about its age, temperature, and the direction it was moving. It seems like magic. For some people, their ability to understand the world comes from reading the people around them. Just by observing, they quickly learn things others would never notice.

When Bree attended graduate school, one of her classmates, Becky, had an uncanny knack for catching little signals no one else picked up on. After another student's presentation, Becky asked about a seemingly innocuous point in the presentation. The student wondered why that bit drew her attention. Becky said when he was talking about it, he got a little flush in his neck, which to her indicated something deeper was there. She was right, there was a lot more to the story, but only someone who noticed this tiny thing could have caught it.

Air Force technical sergeant Andrea Herzenach said skills built through observation and coming out helped her "identify the signs of silent struggle" for her airmen, which allowed her to help provide guidance. A leader with this skill can encourage team members

who may lack the confidence to share their great ideas to engage merely by recognizing them during a meeting. Some people have natural affinity for this kind of observation, others study it passionately.

George Takei, who didn't come out until 68, was asked if he was afraid early in his career that others might think he was gay. He didn't think so because he was so good at hiding it, despite the amount of work it required. He said, "I was acting a part. I wasn't being paid for it, but I studied the part and I took on all the accouterments of that part." Like actors, LGBTQ+ leaders can be excellent at understanding the human terrain nuances around them and adjusting accordingly.

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LGBTQ+ leaders develop environment-scanning skills as a protection mechanism. If they didn't pick up on the characteristics of their environment, usually the human terrain, and act appropriately, they could be outed, beaten up, or even killed. "Before anything else, [LGBTQ+ people] have to feel safe in their environment," said Lorena Soto. "I don't think people realize how important that is and how easy it is to make queer folk feel unsafe."

An anonymous contributor said, “Depending on where I’m at...I hold off on letting people know I’m part of the LGBTQ community. I get a feel for the environment to know how different people might react to the situation. It’s horrible we have to worry about this.” Because of that unease and need to feel safe, LGBTQ+ people hone the skills to pick up what others might miss. They watch, listen, and absorb.

The downside: scanning takes effort and can be a cognitive drain.

When Lindsey Medina was a military cadet, and not out, she struggled in the program because she exerted too much effort scanning. “I was so used to trying to please other people that I was putting myself second and just assessing my environment to see if I was safe or if I felt maybe I could come out,” said Medina. “But that forced me to the sidelines. Other people didn’t know what I was doing internally; they thought, ‘She’s not ready to join the conversation, or she’s not ready to get the task started.’”

Amanda Fisher tells a similar story from her time at the Coast Guard Academy before coming to grips with her gender identity.

There was a running joke among a few men that I picked up on: “There goes Fisher—always aware of large predators.” That jab aside, I was not ever particularly bullied. I’ve always been relatively popular in a niche offbeat sort of way, and would cultivate a few very close male friendships. People sort of framed me as “earnest, just always missing the mark a bit.”

In social situations, especially the highly charged, hyper-competitive social environment the Academy breeds, I was more of a watcher. When I would wade in I was generally thought of as awkward, or weird, though ultimately harmless.

Internally, I now recognize I was battling a sort of constant negotiation between my intense desire to simply be accepted and perform well as a man and a military officer, and the constant tug at my proverbial sleeve of That Which I Dare Not State. It was a recipe for anxiety—I assumed either everyone wrestled with these feelings, and I just wasn't handling it as well as everyone else did, or I was literally the only person in the world who felt this way.

Amanda's analogy of feeling like a prey animal is an insightful description of LGBTQ+ people scanning the environment to ensure no danger lurks in the tall grass or in the next room. However, like many traits born from negative experiences, once they were out, LGBTQ+ leaders mostly turned them into positive aspects of their lives.

When scanning is turned positive, it's a critical tool for understanding audiences, reaching people where they are, and forging strong connections.

Austin Wilson described how his negative experiences turned into a tool he now relies upon.

Growing up gay, even if I hadn't realized it yet, forced me to become extremely adept in terms of social and emotional intelligence. Every encounter from school to church and eventually the workplace required observation and an assessment of how much of my true self I could reveal in each respective scenario.

I knew if I wanted to avoid ostracism or at times even physical danger, I had to adjust my behavior according to the parameters of each unique situation. "You talk funny, are you gay?" meant I lowered my voice and talked less. "Why do you listen to girl music?" meant I hid my Hilary Duff CDs when my friends came over.

While these examples seem trivial, they reflect a larger mentality that became internalized over time. Observe, assess, act accordingly. By spending so much time studying others, I learned how to identify those factors which most greatly influenced their behavior. Put another way, I learned to read the table before showing my hand. As a leader, this is an important tool because it allows me to adjust my tone, gestures, and overall demeanor according to the audience I want to reach.

Just as I used to assess the personalities of others to ensure I didn't reveal my sexuality, I can now use the same skills to elicit the intentions and motivations of my soldiers. Consequently, I am better prepared to tailor my communication to each individual and provide more relevant and genuine guidance.

While my initial motivation for blending in with my surroundings was the fear of being outed, ultimately I gained the social and emotional competencies necessary to communicate effectively and relate with those around me more easily.

When scanning is turned positive, it's a critical tool for understanding audiences, reaching people where they are, and forging strong connections. Brianna Titone describes how she learned to connect with different groups:

When I worked in the environmental industry, I talked to drillers the way drillers wanted to be talked to. I told the jokes they wanted to hear. I interacted with them in different ways. When I'm talking with executives, I talk to them in a different way. It's about trying to understand, through questioning, through listening, what is it that they want? What is interesting to them? And then focusing on those aspects.

It's playing to the audience. If I'm talking in a political event, to pro-choice people, I'm going to talk to them about what they really care about. When I'm talking to the environmentalists, I'm talking about environmental stuff. I'm not being disingenuous. I care about lots of different stuff. It's about delivering what they want to hear. I'm not going to talk to people about healthcare at an environmental rally. They don't want to hear that. They're going to tune out and they're going to say, "Forget this. I don't want to hear this." My philosophy is to find out who I'm talking to and find out what's interesting to them. Then listen, listen, listen.

Before I got the courage to come out, I was ignorant about many things because I was keeping my distance and doing my own thing. I avoided the topic of the LGBT community and LGBT anything. As someone who wanted to protect myself from being outed and not really trying to understand who I was, I was afraid of even associating myself with anything LGBT, because then I might be pigeonholed in that way.

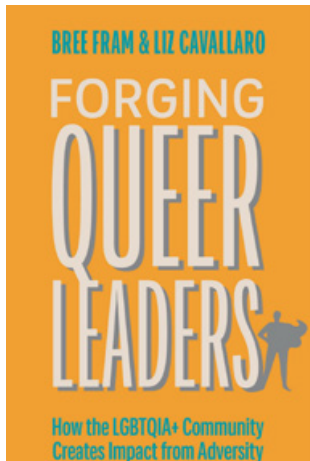
Once I realized [my ignorance], I learned and listened, because one of the things good leaders do is not use their mouth all the time. It's about understanding and taking mental notes, watching other good leaders, watching the reactions people get from the words that they use, the enthusiasm in their voice, the mannerisms that they have. All of these different things can get someone to pay attention to what you're saying, get them engaged, get them to trust you.

Brianna's listen-first attitude helped her get elected and understand the needs of her constituents. **She turned environmental scanning into a strength that lets her meet others where they are, build bonds, and lead effectively.** 📌

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Liz Cavallaro is an adult development scholar and professional executive coach, who specialises in helping leaders thrive through the development of enhanced cognitive capacity. Through her work she's observed the powerful impacts of adversity on the development of leaders with unique personal and professional journeys. Liz is based in Newport, Rhode Island.

Colonel Bree Fram is an active duty astronautical engineer in the US Space Force, and currently one of the highest ranking out transgender officers in the United States military. She co-led the Department of the Air Force LGBTQ+ Initiatives Team and is a former president of SPARTA, an organization dedicated to the support and professional development of transgender service members. Bree is based in Reston, Virginia.



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