

Being Out There – Beyond Borders

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LGBT Live Panel Broadcast from
the World Economic Forum in Davos

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The LGBT panel at Davos 2016 focused on the rapidly changing international landscape of corporate LGBT issues. Although the new status quo among multinationals includes same-sex benefits, employee resource groups, training and mentoring, the evolving state of LGBT issues points to new challenges as companies and their people operate beyond traditional corporate and geographic borders.

In this environment, strong and sensitive leadership is more important than ever. Now that “being out” is increasingly accepted, it is vitally important for leaders to be “out there”—serving as role models and ambassadors, and creating safe environments for their employees.

Richard Quest from CNN again served as the moderator for the LGBT panel. Guest panelists were Sander van 't Noordende,

CEO of the Products Operating Group for Accenture; Shamina Singh, Executive Director, MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth; and Ty Cobb, Director, Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Global.

How has the world changed and how is it changing with regard to LGBT rights in the workplace?

According to Sander van 't Noordende, “We have made tremendous progress in the last year. In the US, marriage equality has been the biggest step, but then there was also the impact of Caitlyn Jenner coming out as transgender. We’ve also made tremendous progress in Accenture with creating new LGBT networks around the world.”

Ty Cobb agreed. “In Ireland, a huge majority of voters came out and voted marriage equality as the law of the land; you had Malta passing a massive gender recognition law; you had other countries like Nepal enshrining LGBT protections into their constitution. So we have this great forward momentum.”

In 2002, only 13 businesses scored 100 percent on HRC’s Corporate Equality Index; today, 407 businesses have achieved this top rating, representing virtually every industry and investment throughout the world.

What challenges still remain?

Panelists discussed challenges both inside and outside corporate borders. Sander noted that, even with the progress made toward LGBT acceptance in the workplace, only about one-third of LGBT people are out at work. “I was speaking with a young employee recently,” said Sander, “who said that he had always been out at university but not at his company [Accenture]. So we do need to keep working and pushing on that.”

Internationally, a sobering statistic remains that in 75 countries around the world it is illegal to be gay.

What can leaders do to make an impact on these issues?

According to Shamina Singh, the tone of an organization with regard to LGBT issues is set at the top, and diversity in general can aid the acceptance of diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. Said Shamina, “At MasterCard, we have a CEO whose core principle is self-awareness above all as a competitive advantage; that tone set from the top then moves throughout the culture of the entire organization.”

Ty agreed. “I think it’s a problem when you don’t have that leadership from the top. We expect our leaders to embrace these values [of

LGBT acceptance]. Business leaders realize it's good for recruiting, retention, for the bottom line, for marketing to the community, for the allies that are consumer based that are loyal to the brands which support the community."

Shamina added, "I think leaders are being watched all the time as role models in the company and in our lives. It's not necessarily about proactively reaching out, it's about being consistent in your approach, and not being someone who does one thing and says another, or says one thing and does another. I think that's the role of a leader in the company and in the world."

In countries where LGBT people are either not accepted or where it is illegal to be so, what can business do?

In Shamina's view, "I think it's safety in numbers outside of the United States and outside the developed markets. One of the things we're working on is doing a road show where we go out together as companies like Microsoft, MasterCard and Accenture, and we have forums for our employees in these other countries so we add value to the country and add diversity to them." Sander agreed that an important activity for business is to create LGBT networks in these countries, to give people a voice and support.

Sander also noted that businesses can have an impact even at the individual level. He related a story of an employee in Uganda who was fired from the retail business that he worked at. This was an international franchise business, however. "So," said Sander, "this somehow worked itself up to headquarters. There was one phone call from the headquarters to the local people, and now the guy has his job back. So that's one way business can make an impact."

All panelists agreed, however, that the overriding concern is safety for employees. In Sander's words, "At Accenture we always want to have a safe and inclusive LGBT work environment. There's no discussion there; safety is table stakes, period." Sander noted that LGBT employees are given options if they are to be sent to a country hostile to LGBT people. Employees can refuse the assignment, with no negative consequences

to their careers. Or they can accept, at which point the focus is on creating a safe work environment for that employee.

The safety issue, according to Shamina, comes down to what she called "calibration"—there is no single approach that will work everywhere or in every country. People and companies must continually calibrate what is possible in a particular environment.

How do general LGBT advances in the workplace extend to the transgender community?

Richard Quest put this question bluntly: "Transgender is an issue that has taken the LGBT discussion into an entirely different realm. Many people are saying, 'where is this going?' Where do you think it's going?"

Ty responded, "There's two examples of that, and one is seeing that when HRC started rating corporations in 2006 on whether or not they give comprehensive trans healthcare coverage to their employees, there were none. Today it is over 500. That's tremendous progress. But then when you look around the world, when you talk about transgender, trans people may be farther ahead and more culturally accepted in other countries than they are in the US. So what's going on in the US is not necessarily reflective of what's going on around the world.

Sander added that, with regard to transgender people, "I think it's going toward total equality—that's the end game, always. Will it be more difficult? Probably yes, but that's primarily because there are fewer transgender people, and so fewer role models in senior positions. So it's likely be a longer journey."

In the end, however, corporate attitudes toward transgender people will be shaped strongly by the desire to have the best people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. As Shamina put it, "A primary purpose of a publicly traded company is to be profitable. So, given that there is immense talent in the LGBT communities, corporations want the best person with the best talent, and they're willing to fight for that person. So that's what I've seen with multiple corporations that I've worked for, and I've also seen it with governments.

What can leaders do to "stretch themselves" in advancing LGBT causes in business?

Richard briefly left his role as independent moderator to share a story of how he is stretching himself with regard to LGBT issues. "I have a certain access at high levels when I'm interviewing people in government, so I now take five minutes after I've done my basic job to speak at a personal level. 'I'm gay and though you're being nice to be because I'm Richard Quest on television, what are you doing to help others without that kind of fame and influence?'"

Sander concurred: "This is how I look at it: Every little step taken by every person, powerful or not, matters. And that's why I say to the younger people—come out because it matters not only for you."

Ty noted that HRC is stretching itself by leveraging what the organization has done domestically. "We brought corporations together so they can move forward on this issue together. So companies aren't jumping out one at a time, but they're coming together as a coalition. In the last three months we've been able to build a coalition of 20 industry leaders who are committed to workplace protections as well as trying to understand what the best practices are to deal with these challenges in difficult environments."

Sander added, "I stretch myself by doing more internationally. I helped open up the LGBT network of Accenture in Indonesia, which is a country you wouldn't expect to have an LGBT network. I put myself out there much more in terms of doing speeches and working with people. And, finally, I bring it up more with clients."

Sander said in conclusion, "So my dream for 2016 and beyond is that [all our new hires] would all be out day one, and that life would continue as normal and they would have a great career at Accenture."

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