



ARE LGBTQ RIGHTS GOING BACKWARDS?

LGBTQ LIVE PANEL BROADCAST FROM THE 2017 WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM IN DAVOS

The LGBTQ panel at Davos 2017 took place against a backdrop of considerable political upheaval in many parts of the world. In the face of both continuity and change, the panel took on a wide-ranging set of topics, including the responsibilities that business has to help drive and sustain change.

Panelists included Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch; Susan Hauser, Microsoft Corporate, External and Legal Affairs, Corporate Vice President, Business and Corporate Responsibility Group; and Sander v. T Noordende, Group Chief Executive, Products, Accenture. The discussion was moderated by Zanny Minton Beddoes, Editor-in-Chief, The Economist.

WHAT DO THE POLITICAL CHANGES OF THE PAST YEAR MEAN FOR THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY?

One concern is whether or not there will be a persistent rise in a type of social conservatism that could threaten gains made by LGBTQ persons. Sander v. T Noordende of Accenture noted some reports indicating that, after the US election, "80 percent [of LGBTQ people] are thinking that it will be more difficult to come out. We need to tell them that we stand with them in this journey." Ken Roth from Human Rights Watch pointed to several specific concerns in the United States, among them the make-up of the US Supreme Court and unresolved issues such as transgender rights and so-called "conversion therapy." But according to Roth, the big issue in the United States right now is "religious liberty"—that is, whether people's religious convictions allow them to discriminate against LGBTQ persons.

Said Roth, "We would never say, 'My religious convictions mean that I get to discriminate against blacks or women.' But somehow this question is still in play with LGBTQ people."

According to Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, similar concerns exist in some countries in Europe. "In northern Europe, the populists have captured that crown. In southern Europe, it's not so clear. When I was in Austria about a year ago, and I was meeting with the LGBTQ community, they were concerned that the politics of exclusion propagated by the Freedom Party was also putting pressure on their own community after years of progress.

However, Zeid also pointed to signs of progress: Over the past 25 years, 70 countries have de-criminalized LGB behavior. Fifty countries have also taken measures against unfair practices against the LGBTQ community, and 30 countries have legalized same-sex marriage and partnerships. Even setbacks can have some positive repercussions. In India, for example, the Supreme Court in 2013 upheld a law criminalizing LGB behavior. However, said Al-Hussein, "the entertainment industry, the private sector, and the media gave enormous attention to LGBTQ rights at that time. Even though the courts take a position, you can still have the private sector decide to do otherwise. And while the law was upheld, the LGBTQ community was given unprecedented attention, and this is the sort of thing that one wants to encourage."

HOW DOES THE PRIVATE SECTOR REACT WHEN THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT CHANGES?

According to Susan Hauser of Microsoft, companies should remain true to their principles and convictions regardless

of what happens in the political realm. Said Hauser, "There's absolutely no doubt that discrimination breaks up communities. It's bad for employees and business, and it stifles innovation. So at Microsoft we have a set of principles about standing behind our LGBTQ employees. We were very clear, the day after the US election, that our principles had not changed. We have also provided an opportunity through our employee network groups to have open dialogue because the concerns and fears are real."

"I think our responsibility continues to be education. Supporting LGBTQ persons is not just a matter of human dignity; it's also a matter of driving better business results. It is an imperative in terms of innovation. If you are not being open and allowing all employees to have human rights, then you are limiting yourself from a business perspective."

Sander echoed the importance of being clear about core values, especially during a time of uncertainty when many are fearing the possible changes ahead. Sander noted, "We stand firm by our core values so that when you come to the political or international environment, it's a matter of navigation. What we say at Accenture is very clear: everybody is welcome; everybody should take their whole self to work."

WHAT ARE SOME CONCRETE THINGS COMPANIES CAN DO TO HELP ADVANCE LGBTQ RIGHTS?

Both Sander and Susan stressed the importance of creating LGBTQ networks across a company. According to Sander, "Most of our LGBTQ networks start from the ground up. We help people who take the initiative. I was with a group of our employees in India a few months ago,

and there were ten people around the table who said they wanted to start an LGBTQ network in India at Accenture, and they were looking for our help.” The other thing Accenture has done is to create an honest assessment of policies in each country of operation and then compare that to an ideal benchmark. “Sometimes,” said Sander, “local leadership needs to be educated because they all have different starting points. We tell them, ‘Global leadership at Accenture is supportive of equal rights for all and you should be supportive, too. If you’re not, then we need to have another conversation.’”

Susan agreed about the importance of employee network groups and of local leadership. “We find that providing support, country-by-country, and creating a network of connections across countries, is really critical. It’s also important to give managers and other leaders the right level of training so they can be active in celebrating differences of all kinds.”

Susan also stressed the importance of companies becoming actively involved in policy reform. “Our leadership has been very vocal and engaged in policy reform and standing up on behalf of our employees—letting it be known that this is a business imperative.”

HOW CAN COMPANIES MOVE BEYOND AN ATTITUDE OF INCLUSIVITY TO REALLY GET AT MATTERS OF “BELONGING”?

Zeid stressed the importance of the question because “belonging” suggests an emotional component, further underscoring the importance of strong, consistent leadership. Creating belonging “requires that leadership set a good example.” As Susan noted, “Every time Microsoft’s CEO speaks with employees, he includes LGBTQ as a topic in his discussion. Every single time. And as a role model, it actually filters down and you start seeing every leader including that and having an open dialogue.”

According to Zeid, beyond the core C-suite leadership, the Board and shareholders need to be supportive, and the customer base needs to appreciate what the company’s stance means. “The power of the corporate world needs to be brought to the forefront because a government can’t do it alone when they themselves are being rocked by changes in the electoral cycle. At the heart of it, we need to get to the CEOs of companies, and we need for them to see and witness the leadership that other companies have taken on this issue and encourage them to take similarly decisive steps.”

Wielding the power of change through supplier networks is also an important tool. According to Susan, “At Microsoft, we obviously have a code of conduct for ourselves, but we have a tremendous number of suppliers and so we have enforced our supplier code of conduct with them, as well. That is helping us take our strong beliefs in anti-discrimination and expanding them into our huge network of suppliers. In the end, this has an important multiplier effect.”

Microsoft also performs a human rights assessment as part of the due diligence at the beginning of acquisition activities as opposed to after the fact. Said Susan, “That has actually influenced our decisions in terms of where we make investments. And that has become an important part of our culture.”

WHERE IS LEADERSHIP COMING FROM AROUND THE WORLD WHEN IT COMES TO LGBTQ RIGHTS?

As Ken noted, an assumption is sometimes made that the West is the only bastion of progressivism on LGBTQ issues, but that’s just not true. “If you look today at where some of the strongest leadership is coming from on LGBTQ rights issues, it’s Latin America. Despite being a traditionally oriented region, Latin America has come a long way in recent years. At the international level, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia are all playing leadership roles. They’ve helped get an independent expert on LGBTQ rights appointed by the UN. They’ve helped get endorsements of principles against discrimination and violence against gays. And in Africa, we have seen progress including in Mozambique and Botswana. Even Kenya came out against violence against gays.

“So, there’s this tendency to view LGBTQ rights issues as somehow imposed from the West. I sometimes have this image where they think there’s this Western helicopter running around airdropping gays into countries. It’s important to fight back—to show that every country in the world has diversity with respect to gender identity and sexual orientation, and that the job of the West is to enable this natural existence to flourish and to fight against conservative forces of resistance.”

WITH REGARD TO LGBTQ RIGHTS, WHAT DO YOU HOPE WILL BE ACCOMPLISHED BY A YEAR FROM NOW?

- **Sander:** “I would like to have a CEO of a major company on this LGBTQ panel next year at Davos. That would be my agenda.”
- **Ken:** “The good news behind the current political backlash from social conservatives is that there’s a stronger LGBTQ rights community around the world. What I want to do is mount a strong defense and fight back. I know that this is going to be a tough year, but I want to maintain the progress.”
- **Susan:** “I’d like to see us advance in countries where it’s been a challenge and see us actually be able to report back that we’ve made progress in certain countries that may not necessarily have the same principles as Microsoft in terms of the private sector. We see tremendous business results when we have inclusive environments where people feel safe and comfortable being who they are.”
- **Zeid:** “Even within the context of the UN, every cause needs champions. Certainly, this cause has had outstanding champions, and the challenge is to make champions of everyone. No one is without enough brainpower to change this landscape. And no voice is too small.”

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