

TheHolmesReport

Are We Shattering The Glass Ceiling For Lesbian/Gay Communications Professionals?

David Landis 18 Jun 2013

June is lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual (LGBT) pride month, which means lots of celebrations, parades, parties and festivities throughout the US. I've got my feather boa in hand and I'm ready to party.

There's a lot to celebrate this month. With the impending judgment by the country's highest court set to decide the fate of the Defense of Marriage Act and California's Proposition 8, the LGBT community may be poised to inherit rights that our straight colleagues and friends have enjoyed for years.

But it got me thinking: how has the LGBT community fared in the business world, and more particularly, in my chosen field of communications? Depending on whom you ask and where you live, the answer appears to be better. . .or maybe not.

Full disclosure here. I've been an out gay man in the communications field since my early days at both KPIX TV (the CBS affiliate in San Francisco) and the San Francisco Symphony. I've been running my own PR agency, Landis Communications Inc., in our fair city since 1990. Here, it's a badge of honor to be part of the LGBT community.

Yet early on in my career at KPIX TV in the 80s, I took my then boyfriend (now husband) to our company's holiday party and danced with him. For about two seconds I worried, "Would this impact my career?" Then I decided, it's television and folks just need to get used to it. Turns out, it actually helped connect me with my co-workers because it was a great icebreaker - although my disco moves are still a fright to see! Still, I know full well that San Francisco doesn't reflect the rest of the world.

Last April, when I was elected president of our agency's international PR network, the Public Relations Global Network (PRGN), I got to thinking: how many out LGBT communications professionals are there in the field? Why aren't people talking about this more? And more importantly, is there a glass ceiling for gays and lesbians?

According to [Pew Research](#), "An overwhelming share of America's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults (92%) say society has become more accepting of them in the past decade and an equal number expect it to grow even more accepting in the decade ahead."



Looking around, there are numerous examples of success stories: Kevin Brockman, EVP of global communications at Disney/ABC Television; Ben Finzel, SVP of public affairs and GM of Waggener Edstrom Washington DC; communications consultant [Mary Cheney](#); my husband, Sean Dowdall, former CMO at Rabobank, North America; Stephan Roth president of OutThink Partners; and Ryan Peal, GM at FleishmanHillard Los Angeles. If we broaden the field to include journalists, of course we can add the likes of [Rachel Maddow](#) and [Anderson Cooper](#), and many more.

But is this a positive trend – or are these errant examples?

Bob Witeck, openly-gay president/founder of Washington, DC-based Witeck Communications (a prominent agency working with Fortune 100 corporations and the LGBT community) says, “It still can be an issue in the top, multi-national agencies. You don’t always see LGBT professionals at the senior level of running these agencies. Perhaps this is through self-selection: often, LGBTs may go to other, smaller agencies where they can be themselves. If the group of decision makers at the big agencies deciding who to promote are straight white men, they tend to select straight white men.”

Jesse Melgar, communications director for Equality California, the state’s LGBT advocacy organization, thinks, “Acceptance and advancement depends on where you are located. A lot of LGBT communications pros move to San Francisco or LA for professional work because it’s more progressive and there’s more professional development. But it’s different in rural areas such as Fresno – or smaller communities such as Riverside.”

There’s also the question of whether lesbians have a more or less difficult path than gay men. Some in the industry say that like other women in business, it’s still an uphill struggle. But others think lesbians have fared as well as gay men.

Barbara French, vice chancellor/university relations at the University of California San Francisco surmises, “To be honest, I have not encountered or witnessed a ‘glass ceiling’ for members of our community who are excellent in the field of communications. I do believe that is due to the fact that my professional career has been primarily based in San Francisco. Here, members of the LGBT community are visible at the highest levels of private, public and not-for-profit organizations. My experience is that being out and proud is a benefit from the standpoint of professional growth and development. It means we bring our whole selves to the workplace. That means we are fully present and ready to do our best work.”

San Francisco-based communications consultant Linda Gebroe, who has written for the San Francisco Giants Magazine, quips, “With respect to the glass ceiling, I don’t know what I would say on account of I’m not sure I’ve ever bumped my head on it. I have felt it as a woman, but not as a lesbian.”

Out communications professionals appear to be more prominent in the fields of entertainment, less so in industries such as financial services.

But that is changing. Former VP of communications for the New York Philharmonic Eric Latzky adds, “Glass ceilings for out communications professionals remain in conservative business arenas. However,

ceilings are getting higher constantly. Discrimination of any kind is bad for business and that is becoming more a part of the American vernacular. I've watched those ceilings yield to the need to retain talent."

Echoing the legacy of visionary activist Harvey Milk, Mr. Melgar concludes, "The more out that people are in the profession, the more people know it's OK and it should be celebrated."

In reference to his now acclaimed anti-bullying video series, journalist/author Dan Savage would say, "It gets better." I do believe nowadays that there are fewer obstacles for gays and lesbians to be promoted in the communications field – and hundreds of success stories – but we still have a significant way to go.

I'll be pondering that as my husband and I avidly await the results of this month's Supreme Court decision.

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