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Apple CEO Tim Cook pushes corporate America toward more open future

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CUPERTINO -- Apple CEO Tim Cook says he is not an activist. But by coming forward as the first publicly gay CEO of a Fortune 500 company, he will have a profound impact on corporate culture and the gay community's place in it, advocates for gay rights say.

Cook discussed his sexuality in an open forum for the first time Thursday in an essay published in Bloomberg Businessweek, announcing that he was "proud to be gay" and becoming by far the most prominent U.S. business leader to come out. The National Football League, the National Basketball Association and the U.S. Senate have all seen their first openly gay representatives in recent years, but the top ranks of corporate America remained a notable holdout.

Fearing the consequences for their careers, executives and employees further down the hierarchy often feel they need to keep quiet about their sexuality in the office. But now that the leader of the world's most valuable company has come out, many more employees are likely to feel empowered to do the same, said Selisse Berry, founder and CEO of Out and Equal, a San Francisco nonprofit that advocates for gay rights in the workplace.

"It's very powerful to say, 'This is who I am,' and put your energy and your focus on being successful in your career -- not on hiding who you are and looking over your shoulder," she said.

Cook, who had long been rumored to be gay, wrote that the choice to open up was difficult. Though he was reluctant to compromise his privacy, he concluded the sacrifice would be worth it if his story comforted others or inspired them to stand up for their rights.

"So let me be clear: I'm proud to be gay, and I consider being gay among the greatest gifts God has given me," Cook wrote.

Cook's revelation comes amid a broader debate about diversity in Silicon Valley, with calls mounting for tech companies to do more to hire and promote women and minorities. Domestic partner benefits are more common among companies in the valley and the greater Bay Area, Berry said, perhaps in part due to the stiff competition for top talent. But the shortage of openly gay CEOs leading major tech companies suggests the valley could do more, said Freada Kapor Klein, co-chair of the Kapor Center for Social Impact.

"The thing with all diversity issues in Silicon Valley is that a lot of decisions are made by people who consider themselves to be open-minded, and yet bias creeps in," she said. "If we were really as bias-free as we aspire to be, then there would be many more openly gay and lesbian CEOs."

Experts say dual forces account for the shortage of openly gay CEOs. While fear of hurting business keeps some executives in the closet, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender employees must also break through a so-called "pink ceiling" as they climb the ranks, advocates say. Companies sometimes steer gay employees away from important meetings due to biases they perceive in their clients, Kapor Klein said.

Laws on the books also make it hard for workers to let down their guard -- employees can still be fired based on their sexuality in 29 states. What's more, a report released last year by Deloitte found that 83 percent of LGBT workers mask at least one aspect of their identities at work, perhaps altering their voice or the way they dress. They struggle to do their best work that way, said Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of the gay rights group GLAAD.

"Companies are starting to realize that there is a hard dollar cost when people aren't bringing their authentic selves to the office," she said.

The global reach of their businesses may also give some Fortune 500 executives pause before they come out, said Tim Bajarin of Creative Strategies. International sales drove 60 percent of Apple's revenue in the fourth quarter.

"People don't buy products because of the CEO," he said. "But the CEO of a Fortune 500 company with an international profile has to be at least aware of the fact that in some places where they do business, this is not acceptable."

Art Levinson, chairman of Apple's board of directors, stressed that the company stands behind Cook.

"Tim has our wholehearted support and admiration in making this courageous personal statement," he said in a statement. "His decision to speak out will help advance the cause of equality and inclusion far beyond the business world."

Cook suggested in his essay that he wants to get back to the business of selling gadgets.

"I'm an engineer, an uncle, a nature lover, a fitness nut, a son of the South, a sports fanatic, and many other things," he wrote. "I hope that people will respect my desire to focus on the things I'm best suited for and the work that brings me joy."

Cook's move drew praise from some of Apple's fiercest competitors. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella posted on Twitter that he was "inspired" by Cook, and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and COO Sheryl Sandberg applauded him on their site.

"Thank you Tim for showing what it means to be a real, courageous and authentic leader," Zuckerberg wrote.

Three years after succeeding Steve Jobs as CEO of Apple, Cook has a track record of advocating for gay rights. Under his leadership, Apple has supported a workplace equality law in California and denounced an Arizona bill that critics warned would permit discrimination against gay people. Cook marched

alongside more than 4,000 fellow Apple employees in the San Francisco Gay Pride Parade earlier this year and pushed his home state to do more to support gay rights during his induction to the Alabama Academy of Honor this week.

Cook stressed in his letter that his sexual orientation had given him greater empathy and insight into the challenges faced by other minority groups.

"It's also given me the skin of a rhinoceros, which comes in handy when you're the CEO of Apple," he said.

Vivienne Ming, a 43-year-old transgender woman who lives in Berkeley, found she could relate. The founder of ed tech company Socos, she said she has found it challenging to be open about her identity while doing business in the valley, though she wouldn't choose a different path.

"I'm very proud of the things I've done in the business world," she said. "And I know I wouldn't have done them if I hadn't been open about who I am."