



Why Entrepreneurs Must Continue To Change The World, One Brick At A Time

By Tyler Arnold

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Entrepreneurship has been deemed “cool” by a variety of pop-culture movements, which has brought a group of newcomers to the business stage. Yet the urge to chase Zuckerberg has celebrated the celebrity-factor of growing a business instead of the softer skills and deep-seated sense of responsibility required to make a difference as a founder. Even the hit HBO series “Silicon Valley” poked fun at the behavior of every app-making entrepreneur claiming to be making the world a better place. Somewhere along the line, the idea of just building a business, treating stakeholders fairly and being a good steward of your community was just not sexy enough, and entrepreneurs lost their way.

What many rookie entrepreneurs don’t realize is that they need to see themselves as more than just business leaders. They’re first and foremost problem solvers, for customers, suppliers, investors and employees. As such, they represent our communities and the organizations they run reflect their values. That’s why taking a stance on issues that improve the lives of employees, whether a startup or multinational, is so critical. They have the ability to drive real change. Many of today’s top CEOs would agree.

Recently, in a packed room of over 3,000 people at [Out & Equal’s Workplace Summit](#) at San Francisco’s Moscone Center, I listened to Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf talk about growing up in a small farming community that “had two types of people: men and women.”

The Workplace Summit, a yearly gathering that helps advocate for LGBT workplace equality around the United States and the rest of the world, was eager to hear about how Stumpf has brought workplace equality to his army of more than 250,000 Wells Fargo employees. The second oldest of 11 children, one can’t help but see Stumpf as a natural born leader that expanded his horizons on the walk from one end of the diversity spectrum to the other. This journey was possible because of Stumpf’s understanding that the most talented executives at Wells Fargo were more diverse than his small farming town. He was already a senior executive in the company in 1998, when Wells Fargo became the first financial services company to extend benefits to domestic partners.

LGBT equality is only the most recent example of how the private sector has driven positive societal change as entrepreneurs and business leaders touting “inclusive” work environments became the norm. Wells Fargo took a risk when they pushed the boundaries of society in 1998 with same-sex benefits. Tim Cook pushed boundaries again when he became the first openly gay CEO of a Fortune 500 company nearly 16 years later. Whether advocating for workplace equality as Stumpf has done, or coming out as Cook did earlier this year, both are calculated risks. Globally, homosexuality is still a punishable offense

in more than 80 countries. Many of those countries have Wells Fargo offices or buy Apple products. Yet, our greatest business leaders deem that the cost of doing what's right is worth paying.

Cook closed [his coming out piece](#) by saying: "We pave the sunlit path toward justice together, brick by brick. This is my brick." Arguably, the bricks laid prior to Cook's decision were labored into place by entrepreneurs in smaller communities before them, who took equal or greater risks that allows others to be able to support equality trends today. The actions of business owner and advocate Harvey Milk brought the first workplace protections for LGBT employees in San Francisco in the 1970s. Over time, business owners across the nation slowly began to see the wisdom in treating their LGBT employees like everyone else. Each leader took a risk doing what's right by alienating less progressive parts of the population (many of which may be customers). Those risks have culminated into a safe haven for executives like Cook and Stumpf, who through the scale of their organizations can advocate for even greater change abroad at a more comprehensive scale.

While there's still significant work to be done, I'm curious about the social issues troubling entrepreneurs today. What would Harvey Milk be advocating for in 2014? Income inequality seems to be a serious societal concern and confronts business leaders with a challenging proposition: At what point does the line of fiduciary responsibility and a responsibility to society converge? Milk's opponents raised those same questions decades ago.

It's up to entrepreneurs to continue to be a segment of our population that drives us towards a more productive and fruitful society. This is progress that will only be possible because of the dividends paid by the fellow entrepreneurs and business leaders who laid bricks before them, often at great cost and without the glory of positive recognition. They're the leaders who take the stewardship of their community so seriously, they actually dared to make the world a better place, brick by brick.

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