

My Company Went Unnoticed for Years – But Everything Changed Once I Stopped Doing This One Thing

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I hid for most of my life, and my personal journey directly impacted the way that I grew my business. My company, Tangible, flew under the radar for years. Our team produced incredible work and built years-long partnerships with some of the world's most innovative brands, but no one else knew who we were.

Today, I am a proud member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and I feel strongly that now more than ever, it is important to *not* hide – both personally and professionally. That's why I'm writing this here.

When I was a young man in my formative years, I did not know one queer person. Not one. The only images of queer people were from movies and media, which either portrayed them as villains or guys who like to wear high heels – neither of which I identified with. Had I known just one person like me, it would have changed the trajectory of my life.

Since then, Harvey Milk has become an inspiration. When I was younger, all I knew about him was that he was a troublemaker in San Francisco who, sadly and unjustly, was assassinated. But the more I learn about him, the more I understand why diversity, equity and inclusion efforts are so vital to the future of business.

DEI programs, by definition, are initiatives designed to create workplaces and communities where people of all backgrounds, identities and experiences have equal opportunities to succeed, feel valued and contribute meaningfully. In the business world, this means creating working environments that are open, honest and safe so anyone – no matter where they come from, who they love or what they believe – can show up to work as their true selves.

And what's more, studies show that investing in DEI has a direct impact on business success. A 2023 McKinsey report revealed, "A strong business case for ethnic diversity is also consistent over time, with a 39 percent increased likelihood of outperformance for those in the top quartile of ethnic representation versus the bottom quartile."

Boston Consulting Group issued an earlier study in 2018 showing that "Companies that reported above-average diversity on their management teams also reported innovation revenue that was 19 percentage points higher than that of companies with below-average leadership diversity."

So, how can you learn from my story and continue to make DEI a priority? In keeping with Milk's principles, let's take a look at some of the ways that you can get personal and take your business to the next level.

Related: DEI Initiatives Are Dissolving – Here's How Managers Can Step Up and Reverse This Unsettling Trend

Visibility as power

Milk championed the idea that visibility changes hearts and minds. Just as he urged people to come out, your audience will grow if you shine a light on the things that make your brand different. Telling people who you are doesn't alienate anyone – everyone has the right to choose what they want to support – and it may even create stronger brand alliances because

customers have become so purpose-driven. Whether your business is LGBTQIA+-owned, minority-owned, woman-owned or just a small, independent shop, shout it from the rooftops and use that community visibility to build real connections.

Authenticity in leadership

Visibility as a business is a direct result of authenticity in leadership. Any business can make claims about its mission and values, but if it doesn't come from a place of truth, no one will buy what you're selling. If you want to lead a business that people believe in and stand up for, you need to share your "why." Why do you do what you do? Why is your business affiliated with a certain cause or community? Why is it so important to you? Be open. Let people in. And don't be afraid to show that leaders are also human.

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Economic empowerment

Milk understood that equality isn't just social; it is also economic. Raising awareness of your brand's differences and joining organizations that support those efforts also provide on-ramps to new business opportunities and relationships, because – as I learned – there will be other companies out there looking to partner with businesses like yours. Furthermore, this type of collaborative empowerment creates opportunities for other people in your community, leading to more holistic advancement. Which brings me to my next point...

Inspiration for others

You can be an inspiration for others. I used to think that maybe my story didn't matter – and I acknowledge that there are so many people out there fighting bigger battles than mine – but even the smallest stories of self-acceptance, growth and

love matter. At the end of the day, businesses and their customers are just people. Showing up as a role model for the next generation means creating a safe space for them to start their own purpose-driven businesses and services.

“Hope will never be silent”

This is, in my opinion, the most important tenet. Milk’s famous words constantly remind me that representation matters. Businesses should reflect the people they serve. Period. I hope that more brands have the bravery to fight for their people. Tangible is lucky to work with a number of brands that are doing just that.

This is an interesting time for DEI in America. Since January, it feels like brand after brand has been in the news for scaling back its DEI efforts, and it’s a real blow every time. But for every brand scaling back its DEI efforts, there’s at least one – hopefully more – that is doubling down on the principles of Harvey Milk, doing right by its people and customers in the process.

Related: Prioritizing DEI Is the Secret to Future-Proofing Your Business

So, as you consider the stance that your own business wants to take, ask yourself these important questions: What feels true to you and to your brand? What do you want people to see and how can you be an inspiration to others? How can you build more transparency to make that happen? Remember Milk’s words. And don’t be silent.

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