

Autenticidad: Helping Hispanic and Latin American Employees Bring Their Whole Selves to Work

By *Unidad*, the Hispanic and Latin American affinity group at Spencer Stuart

For Hispanic and Latin American members of the workforce, societal barriers can make them hesitant to bring their “full selves” to work. Many feel pressure to modify their appearance, the way (and language) they speak, their communication styles and their body language to fit into their companies’ culture. One of the members of *Unidad*, the Hispanic and Latin American affinity group at Spencer Stuart, described the pressure:

“I have been extremely guarded since I started my work life at 17. Working in corporate environments that were very Caucasian, I learned early on to temper my ‘regular self’ down so I wouldn’t be judged as ‘that loud Hispanic.’ The way I saw it, being ‘myself’ meant risking my job and my financial stability.”

It’s a reflection of what members of historically underrepresented groups can feel at work, where corporate cultures often implicitly discourage breaking away “norms” that can make people feel like they shouldn’t show up as their true selves. Amid conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) in the workplace, we take the time to reflect on the lived experiences of Hispanic and Latin American employees in the workforce.



We believe organizations can be active participants in creating space for Hispanic and Latin American members of the workforce to feel more welcome in both their virtual and in-person office spaces. Below we highlight some ideas from our Unidad affinity group and ways that companies can facilitate safer, more inclusive work environments.

Engender trust

For all the progress that has been made in DE&I, all of our group members have stories about times in our professional lives where we have been made to feel uncomfortable in the workplace. Mispronouncing our names. Jokes that lack contextual sensitivity. Getting mistaken for the only other woman in the office who has curly hair.

As our colleague above mentioned, progress on diversity, equity and inclusion is limited when your people cannot trust that they are in a safe environment to truly be yourself. When you don't feel safe, the fear is that what makes us different — and fully embodying it while at work — could be misconstrued. Many of us worry that our language and/or accent, our hair and/or clothing, even our personal backgrounds (in which many are first-generation college graduates) could inadvertently have a negative impact on our standing at work.

To truly thrive, we believe Hispanic and Latin American employees need to trust that they can be themselves in a way that is free from personal and professional repercussion. Words and behaviors from co-workers and managers can go a long way in making this possible: not shying away from informed questions and honest conversations about our lives, even if we come from different places. Those day-to-day interactions can help all parties involved imagine a new way of engaging more meaningfully and positively.

“You hope that people can open their own eyes and be a little bit more thoughtful on the little things, because I think it's the little things that build up to the big difference. We all have these biases and preconceived ways of speaking and doing things out of habit, but being a little bit more thoughtful about those can go a long way.”

Foster conversation

For employees from underrepresented groups, it can often feel like the onus is on them to make the leap of faith that it's okay to make themselves vulnerable. At the same time, we often feel like outsiders who are not invited to the conversation. In such a broadly diverse group as the Hispanic and Latin American community, we often feel a large burden to educate others about ourselves, our community and about some of the preconceived notions.

Personalized connection is the best way to bring down walls between people. Town halls and other convening events can bring together employees and help build the kind of culture that truly embraces diversity. But getting at the heart of what makes us unique as individuals is how we develop the openness that makes workplaces thrive. Seeing vulnerability from other colleagues and leaders can also create room for us to do the same. For example, one of our affinity group members recalled being inspired many years ago by hearing a white male colleague share the story of his background and upbringing in a poor community. Hearing his story and knowing that she wasn't alone was inspiring and encouraged her to be more open about her own background.

“If we really want to drive change and increase transparency, on all levels, then we need to take these conversations to our microenvironments. There is no other way that we come out ahead of this without being vulnerable, but to be vulnerable you need to know you have a safe space.... Allowing people to be vulnerable and really listening, then maybe taking a break to reflect, and revisiting the conversation again later, that's the key as it shows sustained commitment. But that vulnerability requires trust.”

Increase representation at the top

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18.9 percent of the population is Hispanic and Latin American, yet the group accounts for only 4 percent of senior positions, according to the Hispanic Association of Corporate Responsibility. It's a stark contrast that plays out in the workplace, as diverse employee bases work for often-homogenous leadership teams.

Countless studies point to the importance of diversity in workplaces and leadership teams, and their connection to improved results. There are plenty of steps firms can take to increase diversity within their leadership teams — both by casting a wider net during recruiting efforts and by improving internal mentorship and leadership development programs. Companies can also make a greater commitment to expanding the criteria for their leaders, and not just relying on the same handful of educational and professional backgrounds that often favor those of a certain socioeconomic status, regardless of race or ethnicity.

“A commitment to look for talent in different places actually makes a difference in who is in the room. Even if it’s not at the super-senior level, suddenly you have a peer that might come from a situation similar to yours, even if they don’t look exactly like you. And then I think there’s something around making yourself more human and more accessible and more open in whatever way and telling your story at a very personal level. Hearing the stories of others who have similar backgrounds has been very inspiring to me. Their willingness to share at a personal level has been a small gesture but a big step at the same time.”

Bring diverse perspectives into decision-making

Who is at the table for organizational decision-making and team development? This is a crucial guiding question when it comes to creating a safer space for Hispanic and Latin American employees as well as those from other historically underrepresented groups.

Inclusion goes hand-in-hand with equity. While roles and hierarchies will always exist within organizations, if every employee is treated with the same candor and respect, it is a first step to ensuring that members of historically marginalized communities can come into their virtual and in-person offices with a sense of openness. When people feel that they have a true say in important decisions, they are more likely to feel empowered, included and, therefore, more confident about bringing their true selves to work.

“As an organization, you have to proactively look for different voices and perspectives. You have to actually ask and be inclusive. If you're forming task forces, committees or groups, doing offsite planning, whatever it is, make sure that you've got people with different perspectives in the room. Don't just expect them to raise their hand. Earlier in my career especially, I didn't have the courage to ask to be included... senior leaders need to be the ones asking, ‘Who can I bring in deliberately and intentionally to make this a better community, a stronger, more diverse, more representative community?’”



Bringing your whole self to work requires being in a place you can trust. And creating that environment takes hard work — objectively demonstrating in deed and word that Hispanic and Latin American employees and others from underrepresented groups are not alone, that they are heard, and that they are welcome, appreciated, and embraced for who they are.

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