

LATINO LEADERSHIP IN CORPORATE AMERICA:

TRANSLATING REPRESENTATION INTO IMPACT

INTRODUCTION

In corporate boardrooms at companies across the country, an increasingly diverse group of leaders has emerged. Whether a result of long-term and sweeping DEI commitments, or to better and more authentically address cultural sensitivities in the wake heightened focus on addressing social injustice, organizations know that diverse voices – including and especially those in leadership roles – must be a part of all facets of the business to drive progress. Now more than ever, current and potential employees are holding companies accountable for fulfilling their diversity, equity and inclusion commitments, which has drastically changed how organizations communicate and market to consumer audiences, how they recruit, retain and advance diverse talent, how they organize teams, how they approach training and career development, and how they build diverse representation into the leadership pipeline.

On a parallel path, companies are continually increasing their marketing and communications budgets to capture even greater market share from culturally diverse audience segments. Latinos, in particular, are now the largest ethnic group, representing 18.5% of the U.S. population and 21% of Millennials. With \$1.5 trillion purchasing power, surpassing the GDP of Mexico, and growing at a rate of \$100 million a year, they're an audience that will continue to have significant cultural and economic impact.

Despite these important shifts, the number of Latino leaders in organizations isn't growing at the same rate as the overall growth of the Latino population in the US. According to the US Census Bureau, the Hispanic or Latino population was 62.1 million in 2020, which represents a 23% jump since 2010. Among the U.S. workforce, Hispanic or Latino workers total 29 million (18%) but only 11 percent of those workers are in management occupations, according to the US Department of Labor. Of those in management positions, even fewer hold executive leadership positions. Only four percent of executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies were held by Latinos, according to the 2016 Corporate Inclusion Index published by the Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility (HACR). The stats for Latinas are even more concerning. Of the approximately four percent of Hispanics in leadership positions, only one percent are women.

Why does Latino leadership matter? Because for companies looking to win with Latino consumers, they need to communicate to them in culturally relevant and authentic ways. Latino representation is mandatory at the intersection of lived experience, influence, action and impact. The voice of the Latino leader is already an established driver to increase creative ideas, problem solving and performance as a benefit of diversity in innovation.

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“For me, it’s important that my teams represent the audience we’re trying to influence,” said Diego Bertagni, EVP, Executive Creative Director North America at BCW.. “In a way, I want my teams to look like a snapshot of Times Square, comprised of people from all walks of life. If your team represents your audience, and you share certain cultural nuances, the creative output is going to be much more honest and, as a consequence, effective. As a leader in a creative industry, I feel a responsibility to create opportunities for more Latinos to enter into this field and build careers. And at BCW, I have the autonomy to build teams and make decisions that create impact in not only the work we deliver to our clients, but in how we operate as an agency.”

Latino representation matters, but it doesn’t always translate as easily into impact within a company as Bertagni describes. And that’s where organizations have an opportunity to implement a more immediate and significant change in fulfillment of its larger DE&I and business objectives. It’s not enough for companies to give Latinos a seat at the leadership table, they also have to embrace the disruption to previous ways of working that often result from welcoming more diverse voices to the conversation.

A CULTURAL & CORPORATE CONFLICT

The gap in Latino leadership exists because there’s often a misalignment between the longstanding values and behaviours that are ingrained in corporate America versus the tightly knit cultural and family-centric values held by Latinos. In many instances, Latinos don’t feel like they can be their authentic selves in the workplace, which ultimately impacts how they think, feel, speak and act – even in leadership roles. According to a 2020 study by [Coqual](#), the vast majority of Latinos say they repress certain aspects of their personas in the workplace, and those who expend a great deal of energy doing so are also more likely to say they think they are being promoted quickly. [Another study](#) showed that nearly 60% of Latino professionals ages 18-34 say they have been overlooked or intentionally passed by for career advancement opportunities because of their race and, one in two (44%) Latino professionals say they have faced blatant discrimination and/or microaggressions at work.

When corporate values exist in conflict with closely held cultural values, this can impede growth, both for employees and the organization. By failing to embrace the natural disruption that comes from introducing diversity at leadership levels, companies are missing out on the full value of their diverse Latino leaders.



| LATINO VALUES | TRADITIONAL CORPORATE VALUES |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Family First | Me First* |
| Interdependence | Independence |
| Humility | Self - Expression |
| Work Hard | Work Smart |
| Sacrifice | Pay Your Dues |
| Stability | What’s New? What’s Next? |
| Respect for Authority | Challenge Authority |
| Modesty | Toot Your Horn |
| I Accept Life’s Problems | I Solve Life’s Problems |
| Whatever God Wants | The Sky is the Limit |
| I Hope to Achieve | I Believe I Will Achieve |
| Give Respect | Earn Respect |

Source: Lionel Sosa, Think and Grow Rich – A Latino Choice (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), p. 15, *Revised and adapted based on member feedback from the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement (HACE)

Bruno Giordano, Vice President at BCW states, “The real challenge arises when running a truly diverse and inclusive workforce comes into practice and creates a disruption. What happens when the working style of a Hispanic team member disrupts the status quo? Are we supporting them and embracing this disruption? Are we asking them to adapt to the ‘corporate culture’? Or are we recognizing that different working styles, personalities, lived experiences, and approach to work is something that makes us grow as organizations, by benefitting our teams, and above all, bringing value to our clients?” Giordano highlights that companies need to adapt, embrace this change, and understand that the disruption is part of embracing diverse and inclusive core values in an authentic way. “When an organization embraces this diverse disruption, they are ready to become a purposefully diverse and inclusive company, mirroring the reality of the country we live in.” Giordano shares.

COMMUNICATION AS A BRIDGE TO DO BETTER

To help members of this demographic feel like they can be their authentic selves in the workplace, we can start with understanding Hispanic/Latino cultural norms. Here are two examples of how Hispanic values have clashed with American values and may have been misunderstood in the workplace.

1 Community and Family

Latino families are tight-knit communities, not just among immediate family members but also the extended family including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and close friends. Often, the well-being of the family is more important than an individual’s well-being. Support and security are top values and hierarchy still plays a role in these families.

In the workplace, the importance placed on families can be misunderstood. For example, according to [Robert Rodriguez, a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(DE&I\) consultant](#), company executives often complain that Hispanic candidates don’t interview well because when asked to talk about themselves, they often talk about their families. A study also found that **37%** would turn down a promotion opportunity if they thought it would reduce time with their children or loved ones.

We saw this play out recently during the pandemic. In [September 2020](#), NPR reported that women left the workforce in September at four times the rate that men did, with Latinas leading the way. Latinos left at nearly three times the rate of white women and more than four times the rate of African Americans, and part of the reason was to care for their families at home.

2 Personal Relationships and Expression

A strong sense of community often translates to the workplace as well. Hispanics want to establish personal connections with co-workers. They often take a deep personal interest in others which includes small talk and personal contact. In the Latino culture, it’s not uncommon for people to sit or stand close to one another during conversations. They also often use their hands and facial expressions to add body language to verbal context.

Unfortunately, these types of behaviours can be misunderstood. In a [Refinery29 story](#), a 25-year-old Puerto Rican was told by his manager that there were concerns about his ability to behave in an office setting because he was “visibly expressive” and “too loud.” Unfortunately, this same worker ended up leaving that job and moving back to Puerto Rico.



Employers need to create a workplace where Latino professionals feel they can be true to themselves, contribute their insights and opinions, and lead in an authentic way. When Latino talent thrives, organizations are much more likely to meet their goals of diversifying leadership, attracting and retaining top talent, and tapping into the enormous market opportunities. This can be resolved through internal DE&I best practice advancement initiatives such as sponsorships, ERGs and leadership accountability.

SPONSORSHIPS

Latinos with sponsors, or senior-level advocates, are **42%** more likely to be satisfied with their career progression than Latinos without sponsors, yet a mere five percent of full-time, high-earning Latino professionals in large companies have a sponsor in their corner.

These types of advocates are so important today, especially since **63%** of Latinos reported they do feel empowered to share their ideas and opinions, they are not confident that their ideas are heard and valued, and they do not feel welcomed or included.

ERGS

Companies can also help Latinos feel valued and included by cultivating culture-smart leaders through ERGs. Studies show that the first 60 to 90 days of employment are a critical time for any new hire, and they can be particularly challenging for members of traditionally underrepresented groups. That short window of time can mean the difference between whether an employee stays for the long run or leaves the organization before the year is out. ERGs can be leveraged to acclimate employees' sense of loyalty and belonging to their new company.

Although ERGs have been around for decades and **more than 90%** of Fortune 500 companies have one, more than half (**51%**) of Latino professionals believe that their workplace talks a lot about creating a more diverse workplace but doesn't make any material changes to policies or culture to make it happen.

LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY

While companies may brag about their diverse hiring efforts, there's still more work to be done. According to IBM data, **67%** of junior managers say they have to work harder to succeed because of their Hispanic identity. When it comes to pay, Latinos continue to face the **largest wage gap**, especially among women. Latinas in the United States are typically paid just 55 cents for every dollar paid to White, non-Hispanic men.

This aligns with how Hispanics are feeling. New [data](#) from LinkedIn revealed that:

- 70% Latino professionals with darker skin tones say that if their skin complexions were a different tone, they would advance further in their careers.
- More than half (60%) of Latino professionals say they would prefer a mentor who looked more like them.
- 37% of Latino Professionals surveyed say they are thinking about leaving their current job.



Companies must be held accountable to ensure their current Latino workforce is being treated fairly, not only through the hiring process, but also when it comes to fair career opportunities, promotions and pay – ultimately ensuring that Latinos have a path to leadership now and in the future. Some considerations for organizations include:

1. **Give autonomy to leaders to recruit non-traditional talent.** According to BCW's Bertagni, companies' recruiting efforts often only focuses on candidates with degrees from traditional four-year colleges or universities with renowned communications and advertising/creative programs. This overlooks a huge segment of potential talent who may attend smaller, two- or three-year schools, which often have strong programs taught by equally qualified teachers, and at a tuition cost that is more financially accessible than that of a four-year university.
2. **Give agency to leaders to modify, transform or dismantle ineffective or dated ways of working within the organization** – or to establish new programs that better serve the organization and its clients. Allow your leaders a real opportunity to implement change when processes can be improved. In 2022, BCW's longstanding and highly competitive HAROLD Internship program welcomed a new track specific to students interested in careers the creative field. This change was a direct result of Bertagni, and BCW's Global Chief Creative Officer Fede Garcia recognizing that there was an opportunity to broaden the talent pipeline even more by exposing more students to a future in the creative communications industry.
3. **Embrace diversity of thought.** Empower employees of all levels to speak up without fear of repercussion in the face of a situation that could be culturally, socially, or racially charged. Diverse employees bring their own lived experiences that can shape the work done for clients and can also protect the organization from potential gaffes that might cause reputational harm to either a client or the company.
4. **Support sponsorship for Latino leaders.** Invest in continued career development for emerging and established Latino leaders and match them with career sponsors who can help accelerate their growth. Sponsors ensure Latinos have greater visibility within the organization, can help open doors for new assignments or roles, and can advocate for them in ways that help demonstrate their values and contributions to the organization.



CONCLUSION

Strategic communications can improve business outcomes for organizations that want to make bigger, more powerful commitments to championing Latino representation in leadership roles. By embracing the unique cultural perspectives, values and traditions that Latino leaders bring to work, companies can not only better connect with this increasingly influential audience in authentic ways, but also create connections that improve business outcomes.

bcw Juntos
**National Hispanic
Heritage Month**

