

The background features a vibrant gradient from orange at the top to purple at the bottom. Overlaid on this are several black line-art profiles of human faces, some looking left and some right. A large, semi-transparent white number '1' is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the line art.

THE POWER OF AUTHENTICITY: A LATINA EXECUTIVE SHARES HER STORY

Tricia Montalvo Timm

My heart is racing so fast that I'm sure everyone around me can see it beating out of my body.

I practice my relaxation techniques. Close my eyes. Slowly take three deep breaths.

I enter the stairwell on my way to the conference room where I am about to deliver my story to the whole company. The talk had actually been my own idea but, in this moment, I regret suggesting it. Alone in the stairwell, I stop and pause. Another deep breath.

I remember a quote from the poet Maya Angelou: ***"I come as one, but I stand as ten thousand."***

You may feel alone, I remind myself, but you stand as ten thousand.

I arrive in the conference room and watch our employees gather. I smile. You know that fake smile, like everything is totally okay and that you've got this? I'm the general counsel of a hot Silicon Valley tech company for God's sake. Why wouldn't I have this?

The clock inches toward the top of the hour. Time for me to start. The CEO takes a seat in the front row. I glance at him. He gives me a slight nod and a smile and I breathe a little bit easier.



I begin.

The road to that moment was not easy. It was during National Hispanic Heritage Month at Looker, a data analytics software company in Santa Cruz, California. This is where I told my story for the first time.

My parents are both immigrants to this country. They met in Los Angeles and worked several jobs to make a life for themselves. For them, success was defined by providing their children with a better life and a good education.

When I was born, we lived in a predominantly Latino community in Los Angeles. My parents managed an apartment building, which allowed them to live rent-free and gave them a chance to save up for a house. When my sister and I were about to start elementary school, they wanted us to have the opportunity to get a better education, so they moved us out of the city and into the suburbs, and enrolled us in a local Catholic school.

My mom used to say to me, “They can always take away your things, but they can never take away your education.” I am not sure who “they” were in this advice, but it was something that was drilled into my head every day. Education would be my ticket to the American dream.

My school was predominantly white with very few Latinos and even fewer Black students. All of our teachers and coaches were white, and I quickly realized that my family was different. My parents had thick Spanish accents. We had relatives in faraway countries and our traditions and celebrations were different from those of my classmates. Even at that young age, I picked up on these differences.

"SCAN-EVALUATE-ADAPT"

As I started every new chapter of my life, I kept conformity as my guiding principle. I was usually the only person of color in the room and many times the only woman. The skills I learned in grade school to keep from standing out, such as adapting my clothes and hairstyle to the accepted fashion or laughing or staying silent at uncomfortable remarks, served me well in my professional world.

I had the routine down cold: walk into a room, scan it and then adapt. I call this the "Scan-Evaluate-Adapt" process.

How many women are in the room?

Are there any people of color here?

Am I the youngest or oldest person?

These were all very important questions as I figured out how to show up in gatherings or approach conversations. Most of the time I instinctively knew that I could not show up as the loud Latina girl who liked to share her opinion confidently.

Many of us worry that, if we showed our true self, we would not be accepted.

I quickly figured out which persona needed to be present in any given situation. What sport do I need to be able to talk about? What hobbies should I be interested in? Do I like red or white wine? If red, is it a cab or pinot? In order for me to fit into the traditional corporate setting, I needed to have shared likes and experiences with those around me. Talking about tamales, sangria and mariachis would simply not cut it. Not if I wanted to advance.

I learned to assimilate to my environment as a result of my experience of being the “only.” Either the “only” woman, the “only” Latino or the “only” working mom. If you have ever felt like the “only” of something or like an “other” in the room, you know how lonely it feels. So, instead of standing out and having the spotlight on your “otherness,” you have likely gone through the experience of downplaying or hiding that piece of your identity that you believe may not be welcomed in a given situation.

The most common identities we think about are race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. But anybody can be an “other.”

It can be the single mom who struggles to keep it all together at home but pretends to be totally fine. It can be the executive with a learning disability who doesn’t want others to know that reading or spelling is hard for him. Or it can be a manager who battles anxiety and depression but doesn’t want to ask for time off for fear that her team may think she can’t handle the workload. Many of us worry that, if we showed our true self, we would not be accepted. All of these fears are real and often push us toward hiding those parts of our identity.

HIDING MY IDENTITY MAKES ME FEEL LONELY

It wasn't too hard for me to hide my ethnic identity. As a lighter-skinned Latina, I could often pass as white. It was even easier after I got married and went from "Patricia Montalvo" to "Tricia Timm." I held the belief that if I hid or downplayed my ethnicity I would progress in the workplace. I was surprised to learn that I was not alone in feeling this way. According to a study by the think tank Coqual, 76 percent of Latinos expend energy on repressing parts of their personas in the workplace. They cover or downplay who they are, and modify their appearance, their body language, their communication style and their leadership presence.

Another unfortunate consequence of hiding is that others around you are uninhibited about what they say. I sat in silence more times than I care to admit as people around me made jokes about my ethnic background without knowing they were talking about me. A little bit of my sense of self-worth was lost every time a classmate would say a derogatory remark about Latinos, a co-worker expressed frustration about diversity efforts in the workplace or a soccer mom complained about the injustice of affirmative action in the college application process. All of these societal and cultural moments kept reinforcing the message to me that I was somehow "lesser than" those around me. Despite all the success I had earned with my hard work and perseverance, I did not feel entitled to it. As a member of an underrepresented group, I internalized the belief that I somehow got an unfair advantage because of affirmative action programs or diversity mandates. And as this belief worked its way inside me, I came to question whether I deserved all my success, despite my hard work. I started to wonder if I had genuinely earned everything I had achieved, and if I belonged in the room after all. This led to self-doubt and my need to prove myself at all costs.

The weight of hiding who you are is heavy. You can lug it around for a long time, but after a while the loneliness and shame start to overshadow your everyday life. It took me two decades to realize this.

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EMBRACING YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF WILL LEAD YOU TO WHAT YOU MOST WANT

It wasn't until I truly accepted myself and started showing up authentically that things finally changed for me. I was in my mid-forties and had decided that I no longer wanted to do the general counsel thing anymore. I had worked at a top law firm, I had been the general counsel at a public company and I had helped build companies. I was frankly tired and needed some time to myself. I had decided to revive the legal consulting business I had started years earlier so that I could remain engaged in my profession but have more flexibility. It was during this time that I unknowingly embarked on my own personal transformation, one that led to my awakening.

I was living a simpler life with no desire to go back into the corporate world when an amazing job opportunity presented itself. You know the saying “Luck is when opportunity meets preparation”? I believe this to be true. I could say I was lucky to have joined Looker, but it was really that I had been preparing for that moment my whole life.

It was 2017 and Looker was seeking its first general counsel. I remember the interview process. By that point, I had determined that I was no longer going to pretend to be someone different. I was committed to showing up as myself. If I didn’t get the job, it meant that it wasn’t the right place for me. I would not be disappointed by the rejection.

During the interview, instead of worrying about whether they thought I was qualified enough to do the job, I spoke confidently about what I knew and how I could help them scale the company. I talked about my kids and what they were up to at school and the struggles of parenting. I was not concerned if my laugh was too loud. I even had a great conversation with the VP of HR about culture and belonging.

For so long, the image of a general counsel of a Silicon Valley high-tech company looked like a gray-haired older white man in a tailored suit. I was the exact opposite of that and for many years had to combat that bias—one held not only by others, but by me as well. But at this Santa Cruz data analytics company, someone like me was exactly who they were looking for. Had I conformed my behavior, mannerisms or opinions to what I thought they wanted, I likely would not have landed that job. Looker was perfectly okay with a confident, slightly loud Latina with kids.

I knew that I had landed in the right job the first day I walked into the Looker offices.

I started the day before the winter break, so things were a little chaotic. I began during an off-cycle, which meant that my new-hire orientation was a little different from most. The first thing I saw as I entered the building was “The Kitchen Table,” a large table where employees would gather to work or hang out. Music was playing in the background and, as I learned was typical, a couple of dogs were walking around. I immediately felt at ease in this casual environment.

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Schools had already let out for winter break, so there were kids roaming around. A few school-aged kids were playing on their phones or reading books, and some younger ones were scooting happily around the office. I looked around the open office space to see if anyone was annoyed by this, but no, everyone was just working like it was normal. Many had their headsets on and were typing away at their computers. Others were walking in the hallways or talking to colleagues, perhaps avoiding the kids but not bothered by them. I was amazed.

I thought back to those earlier days in my career when I kept my daughter's existence quiet, even secretly nursing her in the parking garage between company meetings. I reveled in the stark contrast of these two work environments, overjoyed that a workplace could look so different. Parents working here were allowed to be just that—working parents.

They had permission to openly juggle their job and their kids, and to talk about how it was hard and required flexibility. There was no shame in caring about your family.

In those first few hours I learned everything I needed to learn about belonging. When employees can show up as their authentic selves, they come to work with excitement and purpose. When they feel seen and heard, they don't have to waste time or energy in changing their appearance, mannerisms or language, or fabricate an excuse for leaving early if they want to go watch their kids' events. All that energy wasted on hiding can instead be harnessed into producing high-quality work, and the extra time can be devoted to participating in life. While no company is perfect, this one had put value in belonging and was striving to create a place where people felt seen and heard.

The culture at Looker did not happen by accident. The founder was very intentional about creating a company where everyone felt welcome. One of their first values was, in the early days, called the "Island of Misfit Toys," named in honor of the animated Christmas adventure *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The idea was that while some of us may be different (like Rudolph and his red nose), it is exactly our difference that makes us special. On this island—the Looker Island—we were all welcome, no matter how different we were.

I remember hearing this value for the first time and smiling. I had fond memories of that film and identified with those misfit toys. We eventually changed the name of this corporate value to "Belonging" to better capture the inclusive essence of the environment Looker wanted to create. Although we had used the term affectionately, we came to realize that none of us is a "misfit."

Since Looker had fostered an inclusive space for its employees, I felt more comfortable showing up authentically. It was during my first weeks that I decided to tell the CEO a little bit about my background and the challenges I had faced as a young working mom. It was the first time I had ever shared personal parts of my life with a manager, let alone a CEO. Over the coming weeks, I would reveal more, and he would listen. Given my past corporate experiences, I was worried that he would either ignore my story and go on with the business at hand, or start walking on eggshells for fear of offending me. Instead, he told me how eye-opening my story was and, later, he asked me if I wanted to lead the company's first-ever diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) program.

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My courage to speak my truth in that moment led to the development of a DEI program that ultimately changed lives.

Looker had very little attrition and I believe that a large part of that was due to the inclusive nature of its workplace. Investing in its people and culture ultimately contributed to the company's success, and to its \$2.6 billion sale to Google three years later.

SHOWING UP AS YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF ADDS VALUE TO YOUR ORGANIZATION

Telling my story during National Hispanic Heritage Month was a life-changing moment for me. The event took place only a few short months after I had told the CEO about my background. I had downplayed my heritage my entire career, so this was uncharted territory for me. The thought of not only revealing my ethnicity but shouting it from the rooftops was terrifying. Would the executive team treat me the same? Would my legal advice hold the same value? Would I get excluded from meetings? All sorts of “what-ifs” were circling my mind. But I did it anyway.

I had prepared a slide deck to tell my story because, hey, I’m a lawyer so that’s what I do. I began the presentation with some background information about my parents and where they came from, including a picture of each of their flags: El Salvador and Ecuador. I shared pictures of my very large and vibrant family in Ecuador at a family BBQ. I included two different headshots that I used in my brief days as an actress and recounted how I was forced to change my last name to be more “American.” I talked about the dichotomy I experienced while working in the law firm by showing pictures of white men golfing and a Latino janitor and asking which picture looked more like me. I confessed that I struggled to feel like I belonged anywhere.

I did not realize what a profound impact telling my story would have ...

At some point, I paused and looked around the room. Complete silence. Nobody was checking their phones and all eyes were fixed on me. Everybody was paying attention. As I scanned the room, I even noticed that several people were wiping away tears.

After the presentation, a line formed of people I knew and others I had never met. Many gave me hugs of support, but I distinctly remember one employee in particular. She was a young Latina, probably in her mid-twenties, who was working in customer support. She came up to me and broke down in tears.

“I just wanted to say thank you,” she told me. “Your story reminded me of my parents and abuelitos in Mexico. I know exactly how you felt because that is how I have felt before.”

I stood there, amazed. Suddenly all my fears of revealing my true self disappeared, and joy filled my body. I realized that by being vulnerable and sharing my story, I had helped her.

It was worth it.

“Seeing that you come from such a similar background as me and that you’ve made it to the top makes me feel like I can do that too and that I don’t have to change anything about myself to get there,” she told me with a smile. I saw so much gratitude in her eyes.

I did not realize what a profound impact telling my story would have on any one person. In that moment, I flashed back to the days when I saw no one who looked like me, and how lonely that felt. I thought about all the times that I had hidden details about my background as a Latina and a working parent and what a disservice that was to others.

I was now someone that the next generation could look to for hope. By telling my story, I had made it so that she was no longer alone.

On that day, showing up as my authentic self at work gave permission for other Latino employees at my company to show up as their authentic selves too.

A company that ensures that all people are represented in its leadership makes varied identities normal and acceptable, reducing the need for any person working there to downplay their particular identity. Ultimately, if employees are able to bring their authentic selves to work, organizations will also thrive.

When employees have a sense of belonging, they are engaged and productive. Organizations retain top talent and employee morale increases. A diverse workforce will be able to meet the demands of a global community by designing products and branding that appeal to customers that are reflective of our diverse world.

“I COME AS ONE BUT STAND AS TEN THOUSAND”

I remember how I felt the moment after I told my story to hundreds of my co-workers at Looker during National Hispanic Heritage Month. Moments before, my heart had been pounding and I was frightened about how people would react to my story. Unexpectedly, however, those nerves and anxieties were replaced with feelings of relief and gratitude. Relief that it was over. Gratitude that I had the courage to tell my story. Frankly, I had expected to feel that relief, but what I had not expected to feel was a newfound sense of purpose.

As I was telling my story, I saw people's lives change before my eyes. I saw young Latinas in the audience seeing their future selves in me. I saw the CEO in the front row awakening to the real me. Sometimes I look back at that hour and I replay it in slow motion. It was as if something inside me had sparked.

I went home that evening and re-told the moment to my husband Derek.

"My life changed today."

"What do you mean?"

"I think that this was the proudest moment of my life." Tears welled up in my eyes. "It was so hard to tell people my story, but when I finished, it was as if I was a new person."

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I'm not sure why that moment was so transformative. I often wonder if I would have had the same feeling if it had fallen on deaf ears. If there had been silence, blank stares and no reaction. I don't know the answer to that question. I just know that sharing my personal story that afternoon changed me. I realized that storytelling was no longer just about me. It had a bigger purpose.

The words of Maya Angelou—I come as one but stand as ten thousand—made more sense to me now. Telling my story was no longer just about having the courage to stand up for myself, it was about having the courage to stand up for everyone else like me who may not have the strength or privilege to do so. I realized that if I showed up and told my story, told the truth about the challenges I had faced, that it could change the lives of others.

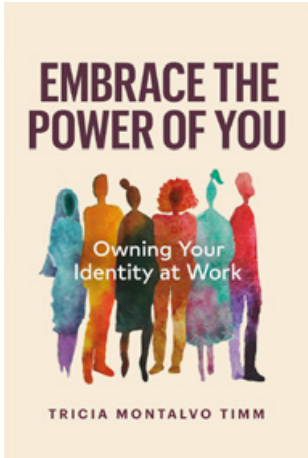
Coming out of hiding is hard. There is a lot to unpack and potentially a lot to lose in the short term. But as we have seen over and over again with those who have let go of that burden, it is also freeing. It will not please everyone and some won't accept you, but over time you will realize that there is more support for you than you know.

You will find that walking around in the world as who you are—truly are—is a breath of fresh air. **And worth it.** 📌

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tricia Montalvo Timm is a first-generation Latina who rose through the ranks of Silicon Valley advising high-tech companies both big and small, culminating in the sale of the company Looker to Google for \$2.6 billion. A mother and entrepreneur with her own legal consulting business, she has been the first lawyer at several different high-growth start-ups and was awarded the 2020 Women of Influence Award by Silicon Valley Business Journal.

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