



CLAIM YOUR EARNED SPACE:

HOW **COURAGE** LEADS TO **CONNECTION**

Nellie Borrero

Salsa dancing was a significant part of my young adult life.

My friends and I had our game plan down to a science, frequenting clubs in New York like the Copacabana (or Copa, as we knew it), La Epoca, Chez Sensual, and many others. From Manhattan to the Bronx, we knew where to find the best salsa music and the best dance partners. We would befriend the deejays to ensure that our song requests were played. Then we'd scope out the dance floors for any talented new dancers and make our way towards them.

Just like that, we were on the dance floor showcasing our best moves with the best partners. We were in our flow, our groove, with our best dance skills in full confident display and our energy soaring. Our clubbing attire was right on point, and our self-empowerment in full effect! We looked good and felt good, all while having some of the most carefree and magical moments of our lives. We were savvy and intentional, displaying confidence even when some dance moves challenged us. We wanted to be seen in those salsa clubs, and we figured out exactly how to make it happen.

Reminiscing on those days, I now recognize that we had identified and implemented the necessary steps to effectively reach our goals. We knew where to go and who to align with. We figured out how to be seen and engaged with the people who could help us evolve our skills. We were unapologetically claiming our space and showing up.

Basically, we knew how to effectively build relationships and network. Of course, I didn't know what to call it that back then, but that's exactly what we were doing, and we were really skilled at it.

So how did I go from victoriously carving out and confidently owning my space on the dancefloors of New York City to sheepishly retreating to the ladies' room for the entirety of my first corporate networking event?

During my first year with Accenture, I was asked to attend an event at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in Times Square. A lot of leaders would be in attendance, and I was excited about being invited.

Walking into the room, I was overwhelmed by the beauty of a massive chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The dark wood walls were so impeccably polished that they reflected the silhouettes of people as they moved around the room.

I was in awe. I felt as though I had walked onto a movie set.

But those feelings soon turned to panic.

I didn't know anyone, and I didn't have any members of my team to lean on. Walking around the room for the first time, I observed the attendees in groups talking and laughing. Not connecting with anyone on my first stroll, I decided to take a couple more walks around the room. But I still couldn't find the confidence to insert myself in any of the conversations. My blood rushed through my ears as the sounds of people's voices grew increasingly louder.

Uncomfortable and unsettled, I decided to go into the ladies restroom to clear my head and bring down my heart rate. I was greeted by an amazing Latina woman who was working in the powder room section.

As we effortlessly began talking, I found her relatable, friendly, and welcoming—all the things I couldn't find from the attendees in that massively beautiful reception room. The ease of my conversation with her inspired me to give it another shot, and I went back into the event determined to connect with someone.

The truth is that networking is not an effortless process. It takes time, commitment, energy, and planning.

Instead, I ended up in a line to order a drink. When the bartender asked what he could get me, I responded with a smile, "Water please." It felt like a simple answer to a simple question.

Well, even that quickly became unfamiliar to me as the bartender asked in very rapid pace, "Sparkling, still, lemon, or lime?"

Huh? Smile gone! Believe it or not, I had never tasted sparkling water before and for sure had never put lemon or lime in my "still" tap water.

So out of sheer frustration, I responded, “You choose.” Bad choice. My taste buds did not appreciate what felt like an assault of bubbly and bitter lime-tasting sparkling water. I felt such a sense of personal disappointment as I quickly placed that cup down.

I tuned into the voices once again, but it was painfully clear that my own silence was louder in my head than those hundreds of voices together. I spent most of my first networking event in that ladies room. That’s where I found my comfort zone. This incredibly relatable woman was doing her job beautifully, but I was doing mine horribly.

I know many in that event noticed me walking around alone several times, but not one thought of pulling me into their conversation.

So when people ask me for an example of lack of inclusion within a culture, I say:

“Think about a networking event hosted by your organization. Think about how much easier it is to be there and be present when you know the people who are in attendance—your colleagues, team members, and leaders. Now picture yourself in a small group while you are at this networking event. You are engaged and maybe even enjoying yourself. You look up to see someone walking around the room alone, and it is obvious the person has not found a connection. This is your moment of choice. Are you going to act with an inclusive mindset and invite this person into your group, or are you going to ignore this individual and let them keep walking around the room trying to find that connection?”

The truth is that networking is not an effortless process. It takes time, commitment, energy, and planning. In many cases, even after putting in the effort, some people still have a difficult time engaging comfortably. But we must find our own ease with it. That requires a thoughtful contemplation why we are not relaxed and confident in these situations.

Could it be, for example, that you're not knowledgeable about the topic everyone in the room is discussing? I remember one dinner I attended where I felt completely out of my element and couldn't figure out why. So I stepped away and asked myself, "Why are you feeling this way?" I needed to identify the source.

I had become used to being one of a few people of color in the room, and I was able to rule that out as the source of my discomfort. I had also built great relationships with several of my colleagues in attendance, which made my uneasiness even more perplexing.

Sometimes we must acknowledge how we are feeling and step away to assess why we are feeling that way.

After a bit more internal assessment, I finally got it. It wasn't the composition of the people in the room; it was the topic of discussion that everyone was engaged in—technology and blockchain. I was not able to relate because I was not well informed about that part of the business.

Instead of leaving the dinner, I did what I had heard our current CEO Julie Sweet say so many times: "Be a continuous learner. Don't be afraid to ask or say you don't understand."

Inspired by those words, I selected my target audience within the attendees, strategically picked the opportune time to insert myself, and said, "I want to learn more and need to

make time for it. Where do you suggest I start?" Immediately, I felt more at ease as recommendations started pouring in from the group.

Sometimes we must acknowledge how we are feeling and step away to assess why we are feeling that way. Don't default to the reactions that feel familiar without considering what other factors may be driving your response.

I have sought to learn and evolve, but I have also given myself grace when my mistakes led to tough or disheartening lessons.

Today, more than 35 years into my Accenture journey, I am aware of what it takes to claim my earned space and have my voice heard. I have learned how to position myself to be seen and have my value acknowledged. I have assertively positioned myself, and I have recognized how each career decision impacted my overall wealth-generating goal.

Claiming my earned space has required honest conversations with myself about what is impacting me, while challenging myself to move out of the comfort zones that could have limited my opportunities and kept me stagnant.

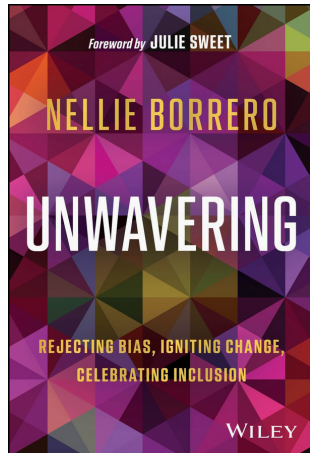
I have learned how to differentiate between emotionally charged decisions versus those that are well thought out. I have surrounded myself with motivators, and have assertively communicated my career goals with leaders, holding them accountable as my advocates.

To claim my earned space, I have sought to learn and evolve, but I have also given myself grace when my mistakes led to tough or disheartening lessons. I have used the lessons to teach and bring others along on my journey while also helping them navigate their own paths.

It has been a truly incredible ride with many incredible people, and it was only possible because I refused to let biases define me, and **unapologetically defined my brand of courage.** 🙌



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nellie Borrero is the Managing Director and Senior Strategic Advisor of Global Inclusion & Diversity at Accenture. Borrero is a first-generation Latina and award-winning executive at a Fortune 100 company, and has long been known for her unwavering advocacy of inclusion, diversity, and equality. Nellie joined Accenture in 1986 and soon created the company's first role specializing in diversity. In her current position, Nellie sets the vision and strategy for Accenture's diversity initiatives. She has launched award-winning diversity and inclusion programs in Japan, India, South Africa, Brazil, and Europe. Every day, at Accenture and with its clients around the world, Nellie works with leaders and their teams to increase their commitment and effectiveness in creating a workplace where all people belong and have the same opportunities to excel.

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