



## Why I'll Always Be “Too Much:” Honoring Pride in the Workplace

June 30, 2021

By Rocky Graziano, Human Resources Program Manager

A few weeks ago, at our first onsite company gathering in more than 16 months, a colleague unknowingly gave me an incredible compliment: “**You bring your whole self to work all the time.**” She went on to explain how rare that is and how difficult it can be for others, and she asked me what my secret is. Her comment really stuck with me, and her question led me to start thinking about why I am the way I am. To be honest, with that reflection has come some uncomfortable memories.

Before I got into the world of tech, I spent 17 years in retail banking. During that time, I climbed the ladder and managed several branches before entering the learning and development space through human resources. During my career in banking, I became somewhat of a poster boy for the gay community in my region. I won several local and national pageants, including King of Boston Pride and Mr. Gay Rhode Island; served on several LGBT Boards, including Boston Pride; and was featured on MTV’s hit show MADE. These were huge wins for me personally, but in my professional life, this side of me wasn’t always welcome. There were times I was told my haircut was “too much,” or that I was too tan, or – even worse – that my personality and demeanor were not what people thought of or wanted to see when they came into a bank.

A wise manager of mine, witnessing me grappling with each side of my life, finally gave me some sage advice: “Rocky, you are too dynamic for banking.” It took 10 years for me to internalize and act on these words, leading me to eventually leave the world of banking and find a new role in the tech sector where my “differences” were embraced. It was an entirely new experience: colleagues loved my energy and passion; I was encouraged and even celebrated. With the support of company leadership teams, I developed a passion for diversity in the workplace, establishing and leading Diversity Affinity Groups and starting a very popular storytelling series that featured employees from all walks of life (which I still receive notes about to this day).

Of course no journey is ever perfect. A couple of years ago, when looking for my next role, I was told by an interviewer to “tone down” before I met the executive who’d soon be entering the room. The difference this time was that I didn’t mask who I was; in fact, I “showed out” to that executive and, by all accounts, blew the interview out of the water.

To quote one of my favorite icons, RuPaul, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?” Those words couldn’t be truer: until you love and respect the person in the mirror, you will never be able to show up and show out. I’m proud to bring my whole self to work at Cerence each and every day – and I am encouraged, praised, and appreciated for all that I am. I’m talking cheers and applause as I lip-synced and danced to Whitney Houston’s “I Wanna Dance With Somebody” at that same onsite lunch I mentioned before.

As we reflect on this year’s Pride month and celebrate each other for who we are, I encourage anyone reading this to find a company where your entire, authentic self is valued and appreciated – and where you, too, can bring your whole self to work every day.

