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Latino Leadership: Moving into the Future By Juana Bordas

Like a ripe avocado ready for tasty guacamole, Latinos are coming of age. Emerging from a fusion of different races, cultural experiences, and historical clashes, they are beginning to define their dynamic flavor and spread their cultural influence. For the Latino community to reach its potential, however, authentic and visionary leaders must come forth, unifying Latinos and forging a collective identity.

A viable leadership model based on Latino values and responsive to current challenges can serve as a rallying point to bring Latinos together. Furthermore, by being futuristic and visionary in its scope, it can urge Latinos to action while underscoring the distinctive contribution they can make to the American landscape.

Latinos, because of their inherent diversity and humanistic values, are strategically poised to help create a culturally accessible and compassionate society:

- A society that celebrates the unique gifts of every culture and glorifies the rich, colorful tapestry of the human experience.
- A society that values people and community before material wealth or individual achievement.

The following concepts lay a foundation for a Latino Leadership Model. The concepts influence and shape each other, producing a dynamic system that emanates from Latino values. This is a work in progress.

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Liderazgo Latino - Culture is Central

1. Cultura

With such incredibly disparate histories, what holds Latinos together? They are an ethnic group bound together by the Spanish language, colonialism, the Catholic Church, and common values that stem from both Spanish and indigenous roots.

The integration of Spanish and native cultures can be seen every day in rice and beans - a food staple in all Latino subgroups. The Spanish introduced rice. Beans are indigenous or Native American. So too, corn tortillas come from native cultures and flour for white tortillas from European ones.

"The Cosmic Race"

Perhaps because Spain was already a melting pot, surviving 800 years of Moorish conquest, the Latino culture has a permeability and capacity to integrate differences into a dynamic cultural core. This is most evident when noting that Latinos come in all colors - Anglo, African, Chinese, Native American Indian, and Sephardic Jews. Latinos have been called the "rainbow people." Miguel Unamuno, the great Latin American writer, referred to this fusion of God's people as "the Cosmic Race."

While diversity is one of the Latino community's greatest gifts, it is also the greatest challenge. Latino leaders must forge a common identity, vision and purpose from a conglomerate of people who are joined together like *picadillo* or *pico de gallo* - both Latino food favorites that include bite size pieces of a number of ingredients to make a spicy and tasty dish. A number of common values are worth noting that shape the unique ways Latinos lead.

Confianza - Trust

Because Latinos are people- and relationship-centered, being able to be counted on - being trustworthy and loyal - is highly valued. A person with this quality is said to be "*de confianza*" (literally, one can confide in him or her.) Furthermore, in a cooperative culture where people depend on each other, being trustworthy is crucial to Latinos.

The saying "*mi palabra es la ley*" (my word is law) emphasizes the importance of keeping one's promise. Honoring commitments and following through establishes a leader's track record. Building *confianza* and loyalty takes time. Many Latino leaders are not as mobile as their Anglo counterparts, choosing to stay in a geographic area or line of work that keeps them connected over time.

In the corporate sector, upper-level managers are moved every two years. Latino leaders must have a longer-term perspective and commitment. To establish credibility, Latino Leadership must "stay the course."

Personalismo

Latinos relate on a personal level, focusing on the individual, the family, where people are from, and personal preferences. This includes valuing a person's "inner self" and uniqueness. Conversation, story telling, and sharing personal experience are highly regarded. Latinos will only self-disclose when there is *confianza* and a personal relationship. Traditionally, this protected one's honor or pride - especially important to Latino males.

Latino Leaders must center on personal relationships first and then on the professional. This includes spending more time to build rapport before discussing issues; emphasizing personal dignity, honor, and one's reputation or "good name;" and being sensitive to a person's pride. Latino Leadership is a kinder, gentler form of engagement.

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Respecto

Latinos respect someone who is older, possesses knowledge, or holds a position of authority. Traditional Latinos also show a greater deference and respect toward certain powerful groups of people, such as doctors, priests, and teachers. *Personalismo* encourages a greater awareness of the way a person lives, how he or she acts, contributions made, and past history.

Latino Leaders must center on personal relationships first and then on the professional.

Latinos show respect through their body language, voice tone, deference, and manners. They tend to offer profuse thanks, praise, and apologies. They may communicate indirectly, which may seem evasive, but intend to be courteous and respectful.

For Latino leaders showing *respecto* (respect), deference and being *humilde* (humble) is an integral part of establishing credibility. Julio Iglesias, an international superstar from Spain, came backstage after a sold-out concert in Red Rocks, Colorado. A throng of beautiful women gathered to pay respects to their singing idol. Julio headed for the crowd and began to hug and kiss the grandmothers first.

Being Simpático

Getting along with people and having smooth, pleasant social relationships is extremely important to Latinos. They tend to acquiesce to the wishes of others and agree with them in order to be regarded as *simpático* (easy to get along with/congenial). Being polite, respectful, and courteous, making small talk, and taking a personal interest in people are ways to be *simpático*.

In surveys, for example, Latinos respond that they tend to carry out socially desirable actions and attitudes and avoid reporting less desirable ones. Being *bien educado* (well-educated) in the Latino culture does not mean holding degrees from universities. It means knowing how to act towards others and taking their feelings into consideration.

Latino leaders understand that "Yes" does not always mean "Yes." People will be *simpático* and courteous to avoid hurting another's feelings. Furthermore, having good manners and being polite and gracious are just as important as having many achievements.

Personalismo - Preparing Oneself

2. Conciencia - Awareness

Confianza, personalismo, respecto, being simpático and bien educado - all of these attributes point to a critical question for Latino leaders: What kind of person are you? Unlike in cultures that identify leaders by position, wealth, or status, Latinos look to personal example, core values, and overall conduct of one's life.

This leads to questions such as: Why do you do what you do? Many cultures believe that a person's intention - the why - is the nucleus from which integrity and power flow. For Latinos this question underlies a leader's credibility and authenticity. Because most traditional Latino leaders have sprung from public service and the community, there is also strong correlation between service to the people and leadership.

Destino -- Mission Focus

Conciencia implies that Latino leaders have done some soul searching and have an awareness of who they are and why they are called to leadership. The belief in *destino* (destiny) suggests that outside forces govern one's life and a greater power guides one's efforts. How people tap into this force and comprehend the direction it is pointing in determines how in sync she is with her *destino*.

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Destino also relates to a leader's personal purpose, which determines the content or exact nature of what a leader does with his or her life. This is the existential core - the "overarching purpose" - that Robert Greenleaf notes in *The Servant as Leader*.¹ Knowing one's purpose is developing *conciencia*, and can assist a leader in charting the course of his or her life's work.

Destino is in sharp contrast to the Euro-American belief in individual effort and self-determination. Latinos believe that, try as one may, it is impossible to control chance, serendipity, or unplanned events. Life is a dance - a balance between individual efforts and the lesson and experiences that life brings.

These concepts imply a different approach to leadership preparation. Reflecting on one's past, significant events, talents, and *done*s (inherent gifts or positive attributes), the circumstances of one's birth and early experiences can steer the way to a deeper understanding of one's "call to leadership." Latinos must reflect on their intention, understanding that service is a key dynamic to leadership.

Saber es Poder -- Knowledge is Power

Latinos believe there is power in personal knowledge. Knowledge, however, does not always come from books or formal education, but from experience and life's lessons.

This is not to say that Latinos do not value education. The concept of knowledge, however, is more akin to wisdom or an integration of information with practical life skills. Mentoring or learning traditionally came through apprenticeship or studying with someone who had experience or specific abilities.

Leadership, therefore, should have concrete and practical applications. It has to work and produce results. Latino leaders must also be able to digest and synthesize conceptual and complex information and bring it back to the community in an understandable and useable form.

Developing a conceptual base has been a challenge for Latinos leaders. In the first place, there are myriad critical issues to address. Second, as a community, Latinos are still in the formative stage, forging their identity, and developing a collective consciousness. Finally, leaders must build the capacity both of individuals and the community as a whole. Community organizing and development demand concrete action and results, the addressing of identified needs, and ongoing shepherding of community progress.

3. Compasión y Servicio

When Latinos meet someone they say, "*A sus ordenes*," which, loosely translated, means "At your service." Being *simpático* implies being willing and ready to help others. Unlike cultures that emphasize individualism, Latinos emphasize belonging and group benefit. Mutualism and reciprocity typify the preferred interaction.

A traditional Latino custom was to give another person anything he or she admired of one's own. The emphasis was not on accumulation, but on sharing. The giving was not just material, but included being generous with one's time, listening and being compassionate, and trying to understand.

Latinos do not make the distinction between a professional life and a personal one. The concept of *personalismo* - valuing people for who they are - supersedes any formal role or position. This adds a new dimension to a leader's "walking the talk" and living the values he or she espouses.

Servicio

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Latinos have a long tradition of servant-leadership reflected in their values of sharing and cooperation, family and community, reciprocity and mutual assistance, generosity, and the natural tendency towards inclusiveness. In looking at their indigenous background, the concept of service to the community stands out.

The Nahuatl language of the Mexican Indians had no concept for the word "I." Their sense of relatedness and helping others was the basis of their worldview. So too, the Golden Rule of the Mayan Indians - "I am another Yourself" - reflected their belief that human beings are one people and what one does to another affects oneself.

The Iroquois Law of Leadership - "In any deliberation the great leader considers the effects of his decision on his children, his children's children, and unto seven generations" - reflected the leader as a trustee of the future. Certainly a leader would be guided by selfless service as a caretaker of the dreams of tomorrow.

Latino leaders are expected to be of service to their community. Personal gain is to be shared and to benefit the family and others. Furthermore, due to the deep sense of community and identity as a "people" (*La Raza*) and the value placed on cooperation, a leader motivated by self-promotion or gain will not be highly respected and honored.

Sentimientos -- Emotionality and Closeness

Latinos value their feelings, are encouraged to express them, and have fewer restrictions about showing emotions. This may make cultures that are more intellectually oriented and self-contained uncomfortable, or generate a feeling that Latinos are volatile or prone to overreacting. Ideas and opinions may appear emotionally charged, leading to misunderstandings. The urgency of the critical issues facing Latino leaders may also add to the feeling that Latinos want action now.

Latinos are a contact culture and feel comfortable when physically close to others. They stand closer when they converse, use a louder tone of voice, talk with their hands, and are more likely to touch each other during a conversation. This preference is related to their close, mutually dependent relationships and their frequent expression of warm feelings.

In a world where many feel isolated and alienated, expressions of warmth and feeling are a special contribution Latinos can make. Latino leaders can model appropriate ways of expressing feelings and emphasize the role validating one's emotions plays in health and well-being.

Generosidad

In traditional families, it is embarrassing to "have more" or to advance ahead of the group. Cooperation, sharing resources, and helping one another is expected. The familiar mantra "*Mi casa es su casa*" ("My house is your house") reflects this value. Latinos always serve food and reserve special treats for guests.

The saying "*Siempre puedes poner otra taza de agua en la sopa*" ("You can always put another cup of water in the soup") means that no matter how little people have, they can always find the resources to give to another.

Latino community leaders know the hard and fast rule of Latino organizing - always serve food and allow time for socializing and sharing! A leader must also gain a reputation for being generous and kind. This includes taking time to help people with personal needs, contributing to Latino causes, and attending events such as baptisms, weddings, birthdays, and special celebrations.

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Latino leaders are challenged to integrate strategic thinking and analysis with emotional caring and a real concern for people. Part of their vision for the future can include building a world where peoples' feelings can be validated and shared openly.

Tejiendo Lazos - Weaving Connections

4. Comunidad - Building Community

"*Que viva la Raza*" ("Long live the Race!") was a frequent cry of the 1960s when Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta were organizing the United Farm Workers. It is paradoxical that Latinos are so diverse and are struggling to find unity, yet have a collective identity as "*La Raza*." In addition is the concept of "*El Pueblo*" or "the people," which is related to the unique history Latinos share.

A 1999 poll of Latinos by *Newsweek* found that 83 percent of respondents reported that being Latino was very important to their identity. The poll also found that unlike groups who have assimilated in the past, Latinos are reversing this trend. Those under 35 years old were more likely to identify themselves as Latino than those over 35.

An important factor in building Latino unity is geographic concentration. Half of all Latinos in the United States live in California and Texas. They are the most urbanized minority in America, with 45 percent residing in Los Angeles, New York, Miami, San Francisco, San Jose, and Chicago. To build a political base and influence, Latino leaders must concentrate their work in populated areas, dealing with critical issues that proliferate in urban settings.

Latino leadership is most akin to the field of Community Action Leadership that seeks to build community by collective action. Community Leadership principles such as utilizing issues to grow local capacity, purposeful learning, honoring diversity, sharing responsibility, and fostering collaboration are all factors that must be addressed for Latino Leaders to harness the growing Latino numbers into a viable and united economic and political force.

La Familia

Deriving both from their Spanish ancestry and that of native people, the heart of the Latino culture is the family. This includes a large extended family of *commadres*, *padrinos*, *tías* y *tíos*, and trusted *amigos* who function almost as a tribe.

Trusted Latino leaders are regarded as part of "the family." Continuity is important here, as is *personalismo*, and the ability to form long-term relationships. Just as family relationships are life long, so leadership is not a one-time odyssey. Leaders are expected to stay true to the community.

Latino leaders must also rally around a viable and compelling vision of what could be- a vision steeped in the collective Latino experience and underscoring the unique contributions Latinos will make in the future

Latinos are not comfortable dealing with institutions or large organizations. Support and assistance are sought from the family first. In this collective culture, mutual assistance is expected. Latino leaders are challenged to build organizations that remain "user friendly" - keeping relationships and personal connections central.

Mi Casa Women's Center was established in Denver in 1976 as a "home" where Latinas could feel comfortable and relate on a personal level. The service delivery system was called "*la familia*." The logo was the feminist symbol in the home, symbolizing that women's progress included the advancement of the whole family.

Today *Mi Casa* is one of the most successful Hispanic women's organizations in the country

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and has four separate locations, all keeping the spirit of the original concept. *Mi Casa* has continued to build a "family of supporters" and to utilize this Latino value to keep people connected and involved.

5. Continuación - Continuity

Historical Perspective -- Tradición and Roots

With an immigration rate of over 40 percent and twenty-two different countries of origin, cultural roots are still a recent and cherished memory of Latino people. The respect for tradition and age, which values how things were done before, nurtures a historical perspective that honors the past. The present is seen as a continuation of what has come before.

Unlike dominant culture leadership that emphasizes acting in the present, understanding one's past is a key dynamic of Latino Leadership. From this vantage point, the present can be understood and addressed. The distinctive backgrounds of Latino people make this connection to history a rich and necessary antecedent to current action. Consider the following diverse historical precedence of America's dominant Latinos groups:

- One third of the United States was once part of Mexico. Many Hispanics trace their ancestry for generations. Contrast this with current immigration patterns, which reinforce cultural values while creating political tension and resurfacing racial discrimination.
- Mexican-Americans are a Southwest rural land-based group with connections to Native American traditions. Because of colonization, many have lost the Spanish language, developing a spicy Tex-Mex dialogue that blends the *ranchero* - the original cowboy of the Americas - into a rich subculture.
- Puerto Ricans are an island people swaying to the strong rhythms of the African beat. While many have migrated to the "mainland," they frequently return to their beloved island reinforcing a strong cultural identity and keeping Spanish fluency.
- The influx of Cubans seeking political asylum in the 1960s shaped

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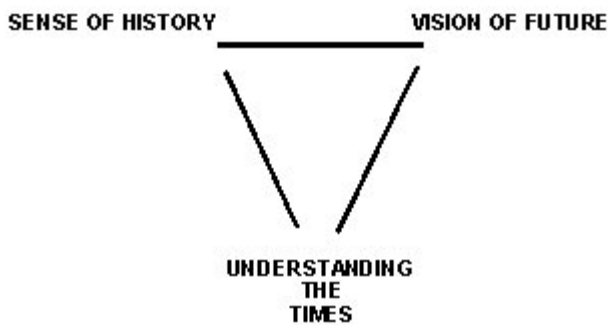
Miami into an international, bilingual city and the heartbeat of a vibrant Cuban community. Many Cuban immigrants were highly educated. They continue to have the highest educational and economic levels and tend to vote more conservatively than other Latino subgroups.

Latino leaders, therefore, must traverse the varied landscape of Latino histories and backgrounds. They must nurture an open space for integrating and learning from the past as well as celebrating different traditions.

Understanding the Times

Knowing one's history personally and collectively offers a sense of stability and place, a long-term perspective, and lessons to learn. As important as this is, leaders must also be in sync with the times in which they lead, feeling the pulse of their communities and understanding the critical challenges that loom ahead.

**LATINO LEADERSHIP:
YESTERDAY, TODAY & TOMORROW**



LEADERS: CARETAKERS OF THE FUTURE

Latino leaders today face complex and grueling social, political, and economic issues. While demographics herald a new influence, statistics indicate that population growth concentrates in lower-income families and teen pregnancy continues at an intolerable rate. There is also a cultural lag between the tradition of having large families and the current need to educate children for a technological and global future. The statistics below illustrate challenges Latino leaders must address for Latinos to advance collectively:

- Latino poverty rate is 38 percent higher than Anglos;
- 40 percent of Latino children live below the poverty rate;
- Approximately 25 percent of Latinos drop out of high school;

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- Female heads of households exist in 27 percent of all families.

El Futuro - Visión

Grounded in the past and wrestling with the present, Latino leaders must also rally around a viable and compelling vision of what could be - a vision steeped in the collective Latino experience and underscoring the unique contributions Latinos will make in the future.

By 2050, one out of every five Americans are predicted to be Latino. If indeed "Demography is Destiny," then the growing popularity of Latino *salsa* has just begun spicing up the American palate. One key factor is that Latinos on the average are nine years younger than other American groups. This will continue driving the growing Latino influence well into the next century. These statistics emphasize the importance of youth leadership development, including youth perspectives at all levels of Latino organizations.

The rapid growth and the under-education of the Latino community presents additional leadership challenges. If Latino strength is based on numbers, leadership can only be realized if a large percentage participate in the political and economic process.

There is evidence that some gains are being made. For example, the Latino community led the nation in new voter registration in the 1996 presidential election and was the only group to increase voter participation. This was accomplished largely through the grassroots efforts of the Southwest Voter Registration Project and the "Latina Vote!" initiative.

Latino Leaders must focus on the grassroots, spurring community efforts that mobilize large numbers of people. At the same time, they must foster organizations that set strategic direction at the national level, while staying in touch with the needs of local communities.

6. Celebración - Celebration Fiesta/Gozar La Vida

When people think of the Latino culture, they often picture bright flowers, music, spicy food, and people talking and having fun. Latinos celebrate life. They love having *fiestas* where people gather together to enjoy one another, converse, dance, and sing. Latinos celebrate many occasions with parties and enjoy groups of family and friends.

A clear illustration of the value placed on being together: the National Park Service in Puerto Rico built lovely trails through the Rain Forest where people can hike, enjoying the solitude and quiet of nature. When Puerto Ricans use the park, however, they gather with families and friends down by the river to eat, talk, and play music. A festive gathering makes nature more enjoyable.

Unlike Euro-Americans, who tend to focus on production and "getting things done," Latinos focus on the process and the people. Enjoying the journey is as important as getting there. *Gozando la vida* literally means "enjoying life." In a stress-filled world, where people feel over-extended and overwhelmed, this Latino value can bring

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balance and fulfillment to communities and organizations. Southwest Airlines has tapped into this concept and is leading its industry in customer and employee satisfaction.

Through incorporating "enjoying life" and creating a work or community environment that is fun and energizes people, Latino leaders can enhance personal satisfaction by increasing commitment and motivation. This is particularly important today, since studies on civic participation indicate that involvement has been declining for the past two decades.

As people-centered, collaborative, and team leadership is emerging, Latinos can contribute their natural tendency to recognize and value people first and their unique sense of enjoying life to this process.

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Desarrollando Abilidades - Developing Skills

7. Cambio Social - Social Change

Because Latino leaders represent people who do not have power and are struggling economically, they must be advocates for change and embrace a leadership model that does not promote the status quo.

Forging a *collective identity*, however, is the first step to accessing the economic and political power needed to promote mutual advancement. This lesson is evident when looking at the Jewish community, the Asian family collective, and African Americans' recent emphasis on unified economic progress.

Furthermore, Latino leaders cannot utilize the strategic tactics of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Times have changed. Today they must build partnerships with other groups - attempt to gain "crossover" support for common issues - and mainstream an agenda that will appeal to non-Latinos as well. These types of strategies were evident during the last years of Cesar Chavez's work when he focused on insecticides in the fields that were poisoning all of America's people, not just migrant workers.

I Don't Speak English Only

Although Spanish was the first European language spoken in this hemisphere and is still the primary language of a majority of people today, there is a strong movement to make English the official language of the United States. This backlash against bilingualism runs in the face of globalization. Speaking English and another language has been identified as one of five key skills for corporate success in the twenty-first century.

Underlying the English Only Movement is a dark cloak of prejudice against differences. Above all, Latino leaders are ambassadors of cultural diversity and through their own histories embody the positive traits that cultural interchanges can produce.

The English Only Movement is just one example of a public policy and political issue that Latino leaders must contend with in order to be an authentic voice for their people. It is a critical one, however, since language is key to the survival and transmission of culture.

8. Comunicación

Perhaps because of the indigenous nature of the Latino culture, where information was passed on through stories rather than in writing, Latinos have long cherished the oral tradition. Lively

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and animated conversation and gestures emphasizing content are valued, not only to transmit information, but as a way of entertaining people and building relationships. Being able to *chalar* - taking the time to banter back and forth about ideas, plans and possibilities - keeps people engaged, shows respect, and is considered *simpático*.

Charismatic leaders who communicate with passion and conviction are especially revered. Perhaps because of the value Latinos place on emotions charisma has been a highly valued leadership trait. John F. Kennedy was loved throughout Central and South America because of his charisma and ability to connect with people.

Conciencia and the integrity of the leader should temper this special talent that moves crowds into action and inspires people. Being clear in one's intention, putting service first, and having a vision that includes the well-being of people are all criteria that ensure that a leader's charisma will be beneficial and steer people in the right direction.

In a people-oriented culture, communication it is absolutely critical on both a personal and a collective level. On a personal level, Latinos must build individual relationships. When a Latino enters or leaves a room, for example, the polite thing to do is talk and "connect" with each person there. On a collective level, since the Latino community is still in the process of formation, leaders must be able to communicate with the growing numbers, bring them together around mutual goals, and encourage them to work together for mutual advancement.

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