

Where Leadership Is Really Learned

According to Texas researchers Jaime Chahin and Rosana Rodriguez, we rarely look at where leadership is really learned—in the family. And one of the clearest examples of the power of leadership is found in immigrant families. Chahin and Rodriguez grew up in immigrant families, and both credit their mothers for instilling early lessons in leadership. “Our mothers were women who went far beyond their humble roots and small stature to inspire and encourage their family and others with their sense of presence and leadership,” they say. Chahin became a dean at Southwest Texas State University and Rodriguez is a division director at the Intercultural Development Research Association.

Based on their own upbringing and on discussions with Latino and Latina community leaders throughout the southwest, they say that the role of families and especially mothers is critical in developing leadership among immigrants. Says Rodriguez, “Our mothers were not

educated in the formal sense, but were very *educadas* in the Latina sense of having wisdom, and they knew they had to build capacity in their children and in their grandchildren and beyond, to be people of character.” Chahin adds, “Both of our mothers were good stewards who had a concept of engagement with community and nature. They both understood that it was their duty to nurture and develop interdependence.”

Holding immigrant families together and raising children well in a difficult—and sometimes hostile—environment certainly takes leadership. Navigating the challenges of being an immigrant, a

learned or a set of qualities to emulate. Leadership was an ongoing force, a dance, and part of who these women were and are: mothers, wives, sisters, aunts, godmothers, grandmothers, advocates, and community leaders. Leadership for these immigrant women of courage and strength was a necessity: it was life itself.”

These women helped raise their children and succeeded in inspiring most of them to a better life. In the immigrant communities of the Southwest, a “mother’s hands were always busy, working many jobs to earn a living as an immigrant,” the researchers say. “They were seamstresses, cooks, housekeepers, de-

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“border-walker,” meant learning to live successfully in both Latino and Anglo cultures.

Of course, these very traditional women did not give their children individual lessons in leadership. “Their overall gratitude and joy to be alive, despite several hardships, made them leaders without them even knowing it.” Chahin says. Rodriguez agrees: “Leadership was not an ‘add-on,’ not a skill to be

partment store clerks—or maybe they were migrant farm workers. Our mothers knew the value of honesty and a strong work ethic; their approach to any work was to do it well and with great love.”

“Our mothers always saw power and courage as something internal: a choice of thought and an act of will. We are the architects of our own destiny. Power and resilience come from within, and, when our

mothers were confronted with a dilemma, they would ask, “*Que podemos hacer?*” (What should we do?) They immediately sought creative solutions from whatever resources were at hand. This required a great deal of vision and imagination, and we never questioned that vision. Our mothers taught us that whatever we put our mind to, we could create. Focus on the outcome, and get courage from the power of that vision. Our mothers taught us that we can create a better reality only if and when we decide that we have the power to do what we need to do. This power is something we have to develop for ourselves.”

Immigrant mothers were driven by economic necessity and the well-being of the family. “Every action was to support the family and a reflection on our parents’ reputations, family name, and our community,” Rodriguez explains. “For our family, existence always was seen in connection to extended family and community. There was an ever-present consciousness that we lived within a community and that the well-being of that community was inextricably linked to our own.” The sense of extended family reached into the surrounding community, according to Chahin. “Children of other families frequently ate at our table. The sense of community also meant that even

though the needs of our family were never neglected, our mothers would frequently go out to visit a sick neighbor or care for a needy family. This time spent helping others was a given. We never questioned it—we learned from it.”

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The struggle of learning another language made both researchers sensitive to the fact that much of communication is nonverbal. “Our mothers knew that communication starts from within, with a clarity of intention to understand and to be understood.”

Leadership exercised within the extended Latino family did not always consist of every voice being heard, or every option taken into consideration, or even reaching consensus, according to Rodriguez and Chahin. “Group interactions and decision making were not always built on everyone having a voice. Rather, the interactions were built on trust. Leadership meant moving forward to make life happen in the best way possible. Whether leading or following, our mothers taught us that both positions require vision,

courage, and wisdom to know which one is needed and when. At times, leading and following were interchangeable. This delicate dance of leadership requires an agile, giving spirit that seeks the overall good. Unity, trust, and cooperation

were the fruits of this type of leadership in our families. Our mothers practiced this type of leadership by becoming very familiar with the thoughts, actions, and behaviors of others. Respect was the undercurrent of this type of leadership that inspired confidence and trust.”

They add, “The values our mothers taught us ultimately helped us attain self-respect. Although human nature may be flawed, the virtues our mothers taught us bring out the inherent good that helps us lead others. We need to preserve this part of our cultural heritage, because these virtues have universal applications we must pass to future generations as our mothers did. We’ve learned that a strong character has nothing to do with titles or wealth. Our ability to lead comes from within, and our commitment to one another is

vital to our survival. We rely on one another, and we are bound by our word and our sense of obligation. What we do and how we prepare ourselves will determine the opportunities and choices we will have.

Our mothers equipped us with the lessons in leadership that grant us these opportunities.”

While Jaime Chahin and Rosana Rodriguez draw from the Latino

experience, we can all recognize that their insights are applicable everywhere, in every culture. The nature of leadership is universal. Leadership is never an add-on, as they say. It must always come from within.