

FUERZA, CAMBIOS, E IDENTIDAD: Exploring the Impact of the MANA de San Diego Latina Success Leadership Program

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Abstract: Latinas have been systematically excluded from positions of leadership across industries and professions in the United States. As a result, they often lack role models, mentors, and sponsors to guide them effectively. Latina leaders overcome substantial challenges and obstacles to obtain their positions of leadership. Organizations use leadership development programs to enhance the skills and abilities of their leaders and Latinas are often overlooked and are not given access to these opportunities. A community-based, culturally tailored leadership development program, the MANA de San Diego Latina Success Leadership Program (LSLP), was created to address such challenges and obstacles. Findings from a qualitative study indicated that the experience provided a safe space for Latinas to develop a nuanced leader identity—a Latina space. By being around other Latina leaders where they shared stories of struggles and successes, participants experienced heightened confidence and empowerment that led to direct changes in their leadership behaviors and career trajectories.

Keywords: *Latina leadership, Latina leader, culturally relevant leadership development, leader identity*

Latinas, or Hispanic women as labeled by the federal census, are a growing demographic and economic force in the United States. Currently, one in five females in the U.S. is Latina, and by 2060, one in three females in the United States is projected to be Latina (Gandara 2015). In recent years, Latinas have experienced a surge in rates of entrepreneurship (Torres, Hurtado, and Tanzi 2019), participation in the labor force (Ramírez-Santos 2019) and attainment of higher education degrees (Anthony, Nichols, and Pilar 2021). A 2018 study by the Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative found that businesses owned by Latinas in

the U.S. employed more than 600,000 people and generated approximately \$66 billion of revenue annually (Orozco et al. 2018). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), Latinas accounted for a female surge in the labor force, with approximately twelve million, or nearly sixty-one percent of all Latinas, participating in the workforce in the U.S. This is higher than the national overall female rate of fifty-nine percent (Torres, Hurtado and Tanzi 2019). In the last few decades, the rate of Latinas completing college has also increased rapidly, doubling between 2000 and 2019 (American Association of University Women 2023). These demographic and economic gains are tempered by the fact Latinas are disproportionately underrepresented in leadership roles and are subjected to the largest wage gap in the country.

There are many Latinas in positions of leadership across industries at the local, state, and national levels in the United States, and yet, Latinas are still disproportionately underrepresented. Latinas face a myriad of systemic challenges trying to attain positions of leadership (Padilla, Lasley, and Nelson 2022; Rubio, Flores Carmona, and Hamzeh 2022). They are often first-generation immigrants, college students, and professionals. They constantly navigate social, academic, and professional settings without relevant or needed guidance, role models, or mentors (Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2016; Méndez-Morse 2004; Vasquez and Comas-Díaz 2007; Villarruel and Peragallo 2004). Irrespective of their level of education or years of experience, Latinas face the largest wage gap in the nation, making forty-nine cents to every dollar a white male earns (American Association of University Women 2022). In California—the state with the largest Latina population—Latinas make a paltry forty-two cents to every dollar a white male earns (Review of The Wage Gap by State for Latinas n.d.). The contributions of Latinas in the workplace are devalued and this has implications for how they access positions of leadership and their ability to create generational wealth.

Given these professional injustices, more research is warranted on how to equip and support Latinas for leadership roles. There is increased awareness of the need for “being culturally responsive in leadership development and in evaluation . . . though there is more work to be done” (Patterson et al. 2017, 153). Clearly, leadership development should be culturally tailored to the specific needs of Latinas. One such initiative, the MANA de San Diego Latina Success Leadership Program (LSLP), addresses this concern. By examining the impact that LSLP had on participants’ identity as leaders, this study used *pláticas* to understand the meaning-making participants engaged in during the leadership training. Participants shared they were empowered by connecting with a collective of Latina leaders and developed the confidence to make transformative changes that affirmed their leadership abilities. To detail this inquiry, we will situate this project in the literature on Latina leadership, summarize the mission, pedagogy, and history of the LSLP, detail our methodological approach, and then flesh out two themes that emerged from the *pláticas*. Finally, we conclude by arguing that the resulting data demonstrates the value of culturally relevant leadership development programs to provide a safe space for Latinas to affirm their ability to serve in a leadership role.

Latinas and Leadership

There is a growing body of scholarship on Latinas and leadership in the U.S.—scarcity of such, however, is a recurring theme—as is the mention of Latinas in leadership positions (Gomez et al. 2001; Gonzales-Figueroa and Young 2005; Hernandez, Murakami, and Cerecer 2014; Méndez-Morse et al. 2015; Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and Garcia 2000). Latinas also lack representation in leadership positions across industries and within various management levels (Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2016; Martinez et al. 2016; Méndez-Morse et al. 2015). They lack role models, mentors and sponsors who can demonstrate

behaviors that others can learn from and see themselves reflected in (Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2016; Lynch Cruz 2019; Méndez-Morse 2004; Vasquez and Comas-Diaz 2007; Villarruel and Peragallo 2004). Observing role models is also associated with self-efficacy—a person’s ability to believe in their own capabilities—an important concept in forming a leader identity (Bandura 1986). Role models can also influence Latinas’ career selections (Rivera et al. 2007). Self-efficacy is also related to acculturation levels, or the extent to which they have acclimated to U.S. social mores, since having the ability to navigate dominant culture is an important factor in a Latina’s ability to contend with dual identities and “navigating the cultural divide” in the workplace (Lynch Cruz 2019; Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2019; 2016; Rivera et al. 2007). Navigating this divide is connected to Latinas’ experiences with systemic oppression in the form of discrimination based on gender and ethnicity (Godinez 2006; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) as well as cultural oppression, norms and beliefs that expect Latinas to be passive, submissive and humble (Anzaldúa 1987; Montoya, Hardy-Fanta, and Garcia 2000; Segura 1984).

Aside from the gendered norms named above, much of the literature on Latinas and leadership focuses on human service and social justice fields such as education, nursing, and community politics and activism (Hernandez et al. 2014; Jimenez 2012; Martinez et al. 2016; Peterson and Vergara 2016; Regua 2012; Torres 2019; Villaruel 2004; Vilorio 2018). Latinas seek leadership in the service of their community, either as agents of change or stewards of their communities (Bordas 2001) and yet, studies on Latinas in legal and corporate industries address having to navigate two cultures simultaneously while facing discrimination (Blancero et al. 2015; Lynch Cruz 2019; Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2016). To address these gaps in the literature, this study examined the impact of a leadership development program with Latina participants,

the MANA de San Diego Latina Success Leadership Program (LSLP). Specifically, the study examined how the LSLP impacted the participants' understanding of themselves as leaders. Leader identity is "the subcomponent of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (Day and Harrison 2007, 365). The development of a leader identity can be impacted by other intersecting social identities, particularly gender and culture (Lord and Hall 2005; Yeager and Callahan 2016). The LSLP is designed to take these intersecting positionalities into account.

Situated in the San Diego-Tijuana borderland region, the LSLP is a community resource that allows Latinas to unpack how their Latina identity or Latinidad in the context of the dominant culture in the U.S. impacts their development as leaders. Rodriguez (2003) defines Latinidad as "a particular geopolitical experience, but it also contains within it the complexities and contradictions of immigration, post neocolonialism, race, color, legal status, class, nation, language and the politics of location" (9-10). This study indicates that leadership development programs designed for Latinas attending to these complexities can create a safe space to foster the emergence of leader identities for participants.

The MANA de San Diego Latina Success Leadership Program

MANA de San Diego is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to empowering local Latinas at every stage of their development from the classroom to the boardroom through education, leadership training, networking events, community service, and advocacy. The name MANA derives from the Spanish word *hermana* (sister), mirroring their mission to create a local "dynamic sisterhood" of Latinas that empower and elevate each other (MANA de San Diego). Among the programs they offer are an *Hermanitas* mentoring program for high school students, higher education

scholarships, and a biannual Latina success conference hosted at San Diego State University, a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).

In 2015, long-time Chicana activist and local San Diego leader, Adela Garcia, approached the Center for Creative Leadership¹ (CCL) to customize and deliver a leadership development program for Latinas. Since then, the LSLP program is offered yearly to accommodate approximately thirty participants. The program consists of four half-day sessions on the topics of empowerment, branding and networking, resiliency, and civic engagement. The LSLP content was designed and has been facilitated by two Venezuelan immigrants at CCL, now-retired coaching talent leader and clinical psychologist Dr. Rosa Belzer and senior faculty Montse Auso. The design and facilitation of each session theme are centered around Latina identity and cultural context. The culturally relevant leadership learning framework they employ aims to “address the advantages and disadvantages difference creates” (Guthrie, Jones Bertrand, and Osteen 2016, n.p.). The LSLP includes many activities and opportunities for participants to reflect on their strengths and lived experiences. Faculty incorporate ample time in each session for participants to have meaningful conversations and share personal stories and testimonios—all via pláticas.

Latina Leadership Pláticas

In line with Chicana/Latina feminist methodological and research approaches, interviews with LSLP participants took the form of pláticas. Pláticas allow the researcher to be more informal and focus on establishing confianza (trust) and relational aspects through warmth and lightheartedness (Becerra and Zambrana 1985; Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016; Sherraden and Barrera 1995). Eleven pláticas took place with participants from the 2015 and 2017 LSLP cohorts. All pláticas were conducted in person and lasted approximately forty-five minutes

to an hour. The location of the pláticas was decided by the participant and took place in coffee shops, restaurants, a public library, or the respondent's work location. Participants were advised they would be given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and allow for open reflection of their experience in the LSLP. All pláticas were digitally recorded and transcribed.

At the time of the research study, there were approximately one-hundred and five potential candidates from a pool of past LSLP participants. A total of eleven participants self-selected to participate in the study after invitations were sent via email and a social media post on the closed LSLP alumni Facebook group. An additional participant responded but had to cancel her plática due to a family emergency. Study participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to mid-forties. Educational levels ranged from high school diplomas to doctoral degrees. They worked in a variety of fields and industries, including education, energy, finance, non-profit, public relations, and science. Two notable commonalities among the participants emerged from the pláticas. With the exception of a single participant, the LSLP was the first time they had participated in any kind of leadership development training. Most interviewees remarked that their participation in the leadership program happened at the "perfect" time in their lives. Secondly, most also noted they were in some sort of transition (e.g., new job, move, recent promotion, change of industry, or seeking to move on from a position). Transitions are significant in leader development because they lead to increased self-awareness and changes in self-identification (Hall 2004).

Plática prompts were prepared in advance to serve as a guide and focused on the respondents' experiences in the program and how, if at all, the LSLP impacted their professional and personal lives. The questions were designed

to stimulate their opinions and perceptions about the program's impact, relevance, and applicability. The questions were sequenced to flow from general to specific. The prompts allowed the participants to openly express their perspective, allowing them to take the discussion in the direction they felt was needed.

To gauge participants' perspectives of their participation in this specific Latina leadership program required "letting cultural understandings prevail" (Bhattacharya 2017, 64). In this vein, Chicana feminist scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) proposes that Latina researchers can tap into our "cultural intuition" (563) that stems from professional and personal experience, as well as our knowledge of the literature and research process to make meaning of the subtleties of the data. We, the authors, made use of our cultural knowledge as well as our personal and professional experiences to interpret the data and surface findings. With this approach, researcher reflexivity and acknowledgement of our positionalities is paramount as it allows for a more informal, organic exchange, and for Latina knowledge to emerge.

Both of us, the co-authors of the study, identify as Latinas who have struggled with our Latina and leader identities. One of us is a former undocumented Mexican immigrant. Both of us pursue research agendas that center Latinas, Latina cultural values, Latina leadership, and leadership identity development. We both remained conscious of our biases and subjectivities throughout the research process. This entailed maintaining openness and self-awareness and adopting a reflective stance throughout the research process (Sundler et al. 2019).

The data from the pláticas were examined multiple times to manually code the transcripts using the participants' own words. This type of coding is called *in vivo* coding (Saldaña 2016) and is appropriate for studies that

involve cultural identities (Manning 2017). As patterns in the data emerged, these were isolated and grouped into categories to describe the meaning of the participants' lived experience of the LSLP (Saldaña 2016; Sundler et al. 2019). Both researchers separately identified themes and analyzed the plática data as a means of validating emerging findings.

Two overarching themes emerged from analyzing the pláticas and will be expounded in the next two sections. They are as follows: (1) participants felt fuerza (strength) from being in the company of professional Latinas and sharing experiences overcoming adversity, demarcating a Latina space that fueled their leadership identity and (2) this empowerment propelled Latinas to make numerous cambios positivos (positive changes) in their personal and professional lives. As a result of participating in the program, the participants developed a leader identity. Together, these findings demonstrate that LSLP creates a safe space for Latinas—specifically, a Latina space—to develop as leaders and affirms the importance of culturally relevant leadership training for Latinas.

Fuerza y Empoderamiento: Finding Strength from Shared Stories

During the program sessions, local influential Latina leaders came and spoke to the participants about their journeys. These guest speakers spoke about their humble origins and the struggles they had to overcome to reach their leadership positions. The participants saw themselves reflected in the struggles and stories. They were therefore inspired. They began to visualize themselves as leaders. For example, Katia recognized the kind of leader she wants to be:

They were all amazing, and after each one I said, 'I want to be that one day.' The way they reflect on their struggles and admit that they're still struggling. That the struggle never ends. That's what I want to become.

Amalia was inspired by the now-retired Mayor of Chula Vista, California:

What impacted me was Mary Salas' testimony where she had started her bachelor's degree around the same age that I had moved to the United States. She had small kids and had just divorced. That's when I said, "If she could, why can't I?"

The participants felt and saw themselves represented by the guest speakers and the environment created by the program is significant in this process. Being surrounded by participants, staff, facilitators, and guest speakers—all of whom are Latina—created an extraordinary experience for the participants. In professional settings, Latinas are typically the only Latina-identified individuals in their work settings; in this environment, the opposite holds true.

Because the program's curriculum encourages participants to also share and listen to each other's personal stories and life journeys, LSLP participants felt empowered by the vulnerability expressed and validation gained from these types of exchanges. Several exercises required creative contemplation of their own life journey, including obstacles and achievements. For Angelica, a seasoned finance manager:

[the life journey exercise] was very profound It reminded me of my accomplishments—how much adversity I've already been through and how I had already been so successful. It made me realize you don't have to be stuck—you're just at another road bump that you need to go over. I remember going home feeling like, 'I'm awesome. I'm great.' I just felt like patting myself on the back for getting to the point where I was in my life. I felt liberated after that, so that was huge for me.

For Luisa, a vocational education administrator, the opportunity to reflect on her immigrant upbringing allowed her to realize the impact of her parent's sacrifice:

I grew up living on a farm and my parents worked in the fields. We wouldn't see them Monday through Friday. We would see them only on Saturday. On Sunday they had to take off again to work in the fields and bring money back. I think to myself, 'I really didn't have any support from my parents,' but then I reconsider. They were never there because they were busy working to bring food to the table.

Being able to reflect on their lifelong leadership journeys and share with their peers gave participants the ability to be vulnerable and feel validated. This vulnerability allowed participants to see the depth of the adversities they had overcome. The emergence and witnessing of these stories among Latina participants allowed a collective strength to emerge. Amalia, a nonprofit professional, realized:

Everything that I had to experience to get me here, everything we have lived through has not been so easy. All that has made us develop our character and skills as leaders. That impacted me greatly. I realized that I am stronger than I thought I was.

The participants also reported that it was powerful and inspiring to be in a large gathering of like-minded professional Latinas who shared similar struggles and aspirations. Milli, a graduate student, captured the collective strength she felt:

Wow! I thought I was the only one that needed this. I felt like I was the only woman or the only Latina who's trying to make it in the

world. I feel like there's this need. I feel like you're so alone and you don't see other Latinas around you but then when you put them all in one room, it turns out that we kind of add up... I was in a pack, at a bigger scale. It allowed me to look at these struggles from a broader perspective and not experience the isolation on such a micro level. I was able to feel accompanied by the fact that there were so many of us.

Milli stated further, "one of the reasons why Latinas need these programs is that we are always seeking validation because we're not given that validation by anybody." In professional spaces, Latinas are often the only woman of color in the room. Katia, a scientist, mentioned, "The number one thing was being amazed by how many successful Latina women I was around... the overabundance was a really, really good thing to see. That, to me, was breathtaking."

Indeed, Latina peer networks can become a valuable resource. Viviana, who had recently received a promotion as a community college administrator, spoke to the newfound confidence she derived from sharing different stories during the LSLP program:

At that time, I felt I didn't know what I was doing with my life. I think we were all there, but as the time went on, I just noticed I was getting more confident. And we were opening up more and talking more about our experiences and we were all at different places in our life. Accepting that helped me appreciate the experience even more.

Latina leadership author and scholar Juana Bordas (2012, 2013) emphasizes that storytelling and sharing personal experiences is integral for leaders of Latino origin, noting that "knowing one's history personally and collectively

offers a sense of stability and place, a long-term perspective and lessons to glean” (Bordas 2001, 122). The program provided participants not just the physical space and community for Latinas to share their stories but also a culturally and emotionally safe environment. These stories validated their own accomplishments and illuminated that they were not alone.

This environment embodies Hall’s (2004) recommendations for spaces of support or “holding environments” that promote self-awareness and identity development as they contain “psychological safety, acceptance, and challenge to nudge the person along in his or her development” (169). Hall (2004) also noted that, “the effects of developmental relationships can be multiplied if a whole environment of support can be created” (169). In essence, LSLP fostered a “Latina space” (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016; Flores and Garcia 2009) as the participating Latinas shared their thoughts and opinions in ways that were “incredibly valuable to their identity development and their sense of belonging” (Torres 2018, 133). Ultimately, this setting nurtured participants into leaders. As a result of this critical mass of established Latina leaders sharing their stories, participants did the same, enabling the LSLP to function as a “Latina space,” one that facilitates the growth and development of emerging Latina leaders.

Cambios: Changes in Careers, Confidence and Communication

Throughout the pláticas, participants identified positive changes in their behaviors and mindset that they attributed directly to their participation in the LSLP—namely, becoming more confident, strategic, and assertive. These qualities benefitted the subsequent course of the participants’ careers. Participants spoke about the confidence they gained from their participation in the program. Some described an immediate change, and others experienced a gradual shift. They felt a general sense of empowerment that

permeated both their personal and professional lives. Amalia stated, “The program changed my life. It was like a parting of the waters for me from before to after I completed the program. It opened an enormous panorama of the opportunities I had.” For Viviana, this translated into applying for positions she previously would have not felt sufficiently qualified for:

I did apply for positions that were way above me, that I knew I needed a couple more steps to get up there. I did gain confidence in being able to say, this is what I’m offering.... I went in for an interim supervisor interview, and all that was said about the power pose, about being confident and finding your vision and values, contributed to me getting the position.

A 2019 study corroborated that women are less likely to apply for positions that rank higher than their current role and that they apply for fewer positions than men (Tockey and Ignatova 2019). The LSLP generated a mindset change for the participants. The participants credited multiple factors, including (a) the program content, (b) the feeling of camaraderie with fellow Latina participants, and (c) the inspiration from local Latina leaders telling their stories. Angelica expressed, “I just felt so empowered. I mean, really empowered to take action.”

Julie, an editor, explained her inspiration to switch careers. After completing the program, it “empowers you to make decisions that you wouldn’t have done before.” Priscilla, an education researcher with a doctoral degree, began attending conferences again. Previously, she felt she had plateaued at her organization as a director, but the program made her realize “I see I can go beyond. I can be a CEO, a COO.” Others noticed the participants’ transformations as well. Two participants with careers in STEM commented

that their superiors had taken note. For both, the session on branding allowed them to stand out in male-dominated industries. Katia reflected on being intentional with her brand:

For me, it was always about branding myself. During the program, I wrote that I wanted my brand to be the 'yes-person.' The consistency definitely paid off with our customers and projects I had been working on. To this day, my supervisor gives me work just knowing that he can count on me. The other piece is being confident enough to make sure that people know it's me. I'm still going to have imposter syndrome and I think I've kind of accepted that I'm never going to get rid of it. I'm pushing it to the side and working on the things that I'm actually good at.

Katia added, "I started becoming more confident in my ability." Micaela, an analyst at an energy firm, also credited the branding session for giving her the agency to embody her authentic self:

What I really liked about it was the advice to be true to yourself. Working with such a large company, you try to project being unique. I do feel it made me think about things in a way that I hadn't. My bosses are already trying to make me supervise people.

In other words, her participation in the LSLP enabled Micaela to bring out her true self. A 2016 Coqual study found that seventy-six percent of Latinos in the U.S. are not able to be their authentic selves in the workforce. In an attempt to fit in, Latinos will suppress their appearance and communication styles (Allwood and Sherbin 2016). The program addressed this dilemma by having participants focus on their personal brand and request feedback.

Through various activities, participants also became aware of their communication styles and drew on their emboldened sense of confidence to develop more strategic, assertive and effective skills. For instance, prior to their participation in the program, some participants were hesitant to speak up at work. Indeed, Katia's initial motivation for taking part in the LSLP stemmed from her "need to have a stronger voice" and "speak up more." In fact, "speaking up" was a phrase that surfaced repeatedly. Participants spoke of finding their voice after their participation in the program. Sara, a communications specialist, learned to be more assertive in her interactions: "In this job, I have had to be more vocal with my ideas. I really have had to prove why this or that works and why we should do things this way." Latinas contend with cultural implications when they consider the idea of speaking up in professional settings. Latinas "bridge a cultural divide" and face stressors, including perceived discrimination and social and cultural isolation in the workplace (Lynch Cruz 2019; Lynch Cruz and Blancero 2016). The LSLP provided the impetus for participants to use their voice. Vivian, for example, reflected:

I speak up more. I always tried to be in the shadow, to not have people judge me, or to over analyze what I said. 'Did I say it right? Did I offend someone?' Always questioning myself. Now I'm more open. This is how I feel. I need to say this, and especially being the only Latina in my department, I need to give my own perspectives, so they know what someone like me could be feeling. I have definitely noticed a lot of that. I've surprised some people. I'm more open to making suggestions or saying, 'change this or you might consider this other point, this other view.'

LSLP gave participants not just the tools to communicate effectively but the agency to speak up. Participants learned to assert themselves and feel

the power that comes from that. Amalia described how this plays out at work and home:

Even though it may sound trite, I definitely feel more empowered. I feel that it has been gradual. It's not like I completed the LSLP and 'watch out world!' It has been very gradual, that rising spirit of being able to say, if someone is being rude to me, I can put a stop to it. I can now voice my discontent about how my community is being disrespected. At previous jobs, I felt I couldn't speak up for fear of being punished. I do feel that is something the LSLP planted in me. Even in my personal relationships, it has helped me become more assertive.

Latinas face a cultural tension of “speaking up” because generally speaking, Latinas are socialized to be humble, respectful, and deferential—having to bridge a cultural divide (Lynch Cruz 2019) while climbing the corporate ladder. Juana Bordas (2012) concluded that it is a “rare feat” (110) for Latinas to be able to successfully navigate academic and professional settings to reach positions of leadership. For other participants, the program allowed them to polish their communication skills. Rebecca stated that she made sure she was strategic about who she was talking to and learned to “continuously change the tactics of my delivery.” Ultimately, the program transformed the participants. It served as a catalyst to boost their self-confidence, assert themselves, and have increased agency.

The confidence and additional skill set they gained from the program translated into perceived benefits and tangible outcomes such as promotions. Angelica, who works in finance, observed that her biggest takeaway from the program was that it was “my responsibility to speak up for myself and

not wait to be noticed. So I did. I did ask for a job and I was promoted after the program. I took more ownership of my career.” Angelica added that previously, she was, “working like a mad woman, waiting to be acknowledged. And I would work crazy overtime. Now I never work overtime and I shine more now. I’m more effective than before.”

Prior to her participation in the LSLP, Angelica’s leadership practice entailed working long hours, being humble, and “waiting to be acknowledged.” The program guided her to be strategic and work smarter, not harder. There are “prevalent cultural influences underlying the leadership practices” of Latina women (Pedroza and Méndez-Morse 2016, 70) which can help explain Angelica’s prior approach. For instance, Latinas’ work ethic is characterized by hard work and respeto/respect (Benitez and Gonzalez 2011; Bordas 2013; López-Mulnix, Wolverton, and Zaki 2011) which can be unappreciated and undervalued in the workplace. According to Benitez and Gonzalez (2011), “if hard work takes the place of smart work, then Latinos can box themselves into a corner and they won’t advance” (64). However, the LSLP participants’ increased confidence allowed them to strengthen their leader identities.

Identidad: Intensified Leader Identities

Based on the meaning-making provided by the program participants, the environment engendered by the LSLP functioned as a Latina space. Flores Carmona and García (2009) describe Latina spaces as places where “the voices, stories, and testimonios of Latina women are acknowledged” (155) and note that “the need to come together and collectively share experiences, while establishing a sense of community is strongly needed for underrepresented Latinas” (155). According to this definition, study participants substantiated the notion of the LSLP as a “Latina space” where their identities as leaders were strengthened or intensified. They recounted how emotionally impactful

it felt to be in a room full of professional Latinas and marveled at the ease of feeling culturally understood and having their experiences validated, since this was a rare occurrence for them.

Luisa spoke candidly about her insecurities and professional challenges, “I’m always fighting with ethnicity and the language barrier.” The LSLP provided the inverse effect: “I’m here among all these [Latina] leaders and educated women. You see them and it feeds you. It’s a really good feeling. It really helped make a difference in what I’m doing.” Similarly, Katia spoke about being a Latina scientist in an industry dominated by men:

I think the number one thing was being amazed by how many successful women I was around. It was very intriguing to see all these different roles. When I’m in a room of just women, it feels really, really good.

Milli, a grad student, mentioned various times throughout her plática feeling “alone” in organizational settings. In contrast, her attendance in the LSLP made her feel part of a “pack:”

In my experience in the LSLP, I learned that there was more Latinas in the professional world than I anticipated. It taught me that we’re all living a similar journey and we’re probably all experiencing similar glass ceilings. That made me feel at ease that I could confide in them. I wasn’t swimming alone.

For Angelica, being able to fully express herself while developing leadership was empowering:

All the women that were there seemed so confident. You feel like they are your cheerleaders. They've been there, they know what it's like. They made us feel that it is possible to work through these challenges. That's really empowering because we are not allowed to talk about these topics in the workplace. I think it's really empowering when you meet a group of women that can relate to you, that have been there, and that look at you and say 'I know it's possible.'

Priscila, a health researcher and PhD, also referred to the LSLP as a safe space where she felt validated:

I felt comfortable in that group, especially to address certain issues that deal with personal baggage, and you need a safe space. You don't do that with strangers. It's good to know that there's peers, hermanas, that others could also relate to your story, and not necessarily feel like an outsider...The program was amazing because it was organized and facilitated by professional Latinas, and with us, and in that location, it was the perfect package.

Micaela, an energy industry analyst, described her initial exchange in the LSLP as "an automatic camaraderie." Participants characterized the space created as a place where they experienced being "understood." Micaela continued, "Everyone had a different upbringing but there is always that underlying understanding. If you didn't go through it, you knew somebody who did."

In work settings Latinas are often confronted with either having to mask aspects of their identity to fit in or explain their cultural background. The

LSLP provided a space where neither of those two conditions hold—they can be their authentic selves. Rebeca, a non-profit development director “identified with the Latina portion of it.” She surmised that people perceive her as a “Latina before a professional” and that being around other Latinas gave her “that sense of comfort to be understood.” Latinas yearn for understanding and belonging in professional settings. Sara, a communications specialist, thought the program was “relatable personally and culturally...There are things I can tell some of my work friends or coworkers that they can’t relate to. They can try to understand, but they don’t.”

For Amalia, the understanding she found in the program converted into a community post-program. She stated, “The women I was chatting with during the program have embraced me after the program. That has had a very large impact for me. They helped me understand that my weaknesses were not weaknesses, but strengths.” The LSLP facilitated a safe physical and psychological environment where participants were surrounded and sustained by the presence of like-minded, emerging Latina leaders. The process of developing or strengthening their leader identity was facilitated by this space where participants were able to bring their authentic selves and feel validated—indeed uplifted.

The Case for Culturally Relevant Leadership Development

Training for Latinas

Research on the impact of leadership development programs and leader identity development indicates that participants should engage in identity work through self-reflection and heightened self-awareness that allow them to reflect and expand upon their capabilities. Such programs also change the way participants understand what it means to be a leader—strengthening their own identification as leaders (Miscenko, Guenter, and

Day 2017). For underrepresented minorities, particularly for bicultural individuals, the exploration and integration of social identities into leader development is essential to facilitate self-awareness (Hall 2004). Based on the reflections of the participants, LSLP created this opportunity for the women enrolled in its program.

The insights resulting from this study have important implications for leadership programs developed specifically by/for Latinas. These new understandings can be used to better meet the needs and complexities of Latina leadership development. Several key discoveries surfaced. First, the findings indicate that Latinas participating in the LSLP were empowered by being surrounded by and engaging with professional Latinas, effectively creating a “Latina space.” The cultural, emotional, and psychological safety was created by the critical mass of professional Latinas coupled with the opportunities for interacting and sharing stories with each other. Second, participants attributed LSLP for their positive career and behavior changes, including increased confidence, career advancement, and assertive communication. Ultimately, participants strengthened their identification as leaders.

These findings contribute to the scholarship on how Latinas can be effectively equipped to develop a robust leader identity. As Latinas continue to navigate the professional world, they should have access to opportunities to become decision-makers in their fields, therefore redefining the ways in which leadership is enacted. More quality, culturally tailored leadership training programs are warranted for Latinas across the country to meet shifting demographic needs and address their underrepresentation in leadership roles. The model used by LSLP has the potential to be replicated and funded by organizations, corporations, and communities. Demand for existing

programs needs to be created by Latinas as well. With increased demand, culturally tailored leadership programs can continue to provide a safe space and platform for Latinas to explore and safely share their challenges, concerns, and ideas with others who share similar experiences.

Notes

¹ An offshoot of Vicks VapoRub brand, the Center for Creative Leadership is a global non-profit organization founded in 1970 and dedicated to leadership development, training and research.

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