



LATINA LEADERSHIP LESSONS

FIFTY LATINAS SPEAK

Edited by
Delia García

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all the women who shaped me, especially my three grandmothers, mother, sisters, nieces, goddaughters, Kappa Delta Chi Latina Service Sorority sisters, National Hispana Leadership Institute (NHLI) leonas and extended *familia*, especially those who were a part of my journey in writing this book. I dedicate this book to the women who have paved the way and I stand on their shoulders, and to our rising leaders who will create more ways using some of these lessons and sharing their own wisdom to make this world a compassionate place for those we love. My ancestors sacrificed their lives to make it possible for my sisters and me to have the life we have. I know it is my responsibility to do the same, using my God-given gifts for a purpose greater than myself, with God showing me how to take who I am and who I want to be and do for others what many have done for me, *con puro amor*, with pure love.

A special thank you to the women who opened their arms and homes to allow me to write this book, including my mother Carmen Rosales, sorority sister Sandra Chacón, cousin Diana Maldonado, NHLI sister Patricia Mejía and hermanas Teresa Nino and Lucero Ortiz. *Muchísimas gracias* to Rev. Andy Hernández, Dr. Ellen Clark, Sandra Cisneros, Angela Cervantes and Anel Flores for your advice and guidance on writing this book.



FOREWORD BY DOLORES HUERTA

Who is a Latina leader and what lessons can she share with us? In *Latina Leadership Lessons: Fifty Latinas Speak*, three generations of Latina leaders from twenty-four states and different corners of our country share their leadership lessons and wisdom. I have personally been with many of these women in various leadership gatherings and witnessed them fighting to protect our rights, our bodies and our freedoms.

Latina leaders have had to overcome racial discrimination and gender bias and have often been told by society and persons close to them that the roles they aspired to were “not for them,” that they were “not qualified.” They sought dreams that seemed illusive, opportunities that had to be discerned and discovered, goals that were too distant to perceive. In spite of all the barriers, they surpassed, survived and overcame disappointments and hurdles. They made sacrifices to reach their leadership positions. Now, these Latina leaders enact policies and implement programs to serve their communities and the public.

When we see the various obstacles they met on their path to leadership, it will help us to avoid, or copy, whichever style fits

the need in our own personal paths as we acquire our own leadership skills. We can learn from their experiences to avoid the pitfalls that they encountered, thus making our journey less arduous and difficult.

First: Latina leaders set a unique standard for “true women’s leadership.” The leadership lessons in this book are empowering; our women leaders show us not to hold ourselves back, to erase our self-doubts, to be courageous. These lessons will hopefully inspire more women to ascend to leadership.

Second: Latina leaders are hardly recognized. Women’s accomplishments are often overlooked. Thankfully, I had and have women in my life who have inspired my own leadership. They include women of all ages and backgrounds. My mother Alicia St. John Chávez was my first example of leadership. Others include my Girl Scout leader and feminists Gloria Steinman, Hilda L. Solis, Eleanor Smeal, Hillary Clinton and the author of this book, Delia García.

This book was written for various audiences. However, this book is for the Latina who wants to be seen and heard, while she connects to each word about herself. Ultimately, a Latina leader embodies servant leadership. By reading and applying the lessons learned in this book, you will increase your ability to develop and enhance your own leadership skills and pass them on to others. The young leaders I meet today are so inspiring. They are the change champions on the front lines and will accomplish more than we can ever imagine. As a leader, you will attain the ability to craft a culture that supports transformative leadership.

Moreover, we learn how to own our power from our sister leaders in this book. When we act in service and gratitude, we impact our world more than we could have ever imagined. When we witness our impact, the world becomes more beautiful, especially for those we love. Women’s leadership is desperately needed in our world today. Women are the hope for the future. I trust and know the women in this book will make this happen, especially the author and my dear sister, Delia García. *¡Adelante y sí se puede!*

INTRODUCTION

I compiled *Latina Leadership Lessons: Fifty Latinas Speak* to support our transformation into the leaders we must be, the leaders our country desperately needs now and in the future. Let us ask ourselves, “What was the purpose I was put on this Earth for?” If we do not know, then we need to listen and pay attention to the signs in front of us. If we are breathing on this Earth, we have a purpose. It is imperative to believe in and embrace our life purpose, and it is never too late to do so.

Let us wrap our arms around each other in a virtual or in-person loving embrace. This book attempts to do that in the sense of sharing lessons we learned to empower us to be the leaders we wish to have running our world. The women in this book are excellent examples of outstanding leaders who are like you and me. We can choose to learn from their lessons, or not. You do not have to be Latina in order to learn from these powerful lessons. We may see there are similarities with other groups of women; we may share many of the same challenges. There is also a learning opportunity for men to learn more about women leaders, and to share these lessons with their daughters, wives, sisters, nieces, aunts and all extended family.

Leadership development is an engaging activity. When we think of leadership, we think representation matters, people mat-

ter and you matter. For example, seeing a reflection of myself in leaders inspired me to imagine possibilities for myself and for my community. Also, not seeing a reflection of myself in leaders inspired me to do something about that. One of my favorite prayers is the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This made me realize I could write a book that would provide the lessons learned by powerful leaders in our United States. *Latina Leadership Lessons* reflects what America looks like and will grow to look like, including you and me. It is my goal that this book serve as a symbol of what leadership looks like and can be, coupled with new ways to create more leadership guidance.

It is said that to empower a woman is to empower a community. *Latina Leadership Lessons* can empower us, no matter what stage of life we are in. In fact, words can empower us and others. This book intentionally uses words to empower us through real life examples. But first, it is important for us to acknowledge some of the challenges that women face. Sometimes, we have a tendency to be self-deprecating, dismissive of praise and overly polite when asking for something or giving instruction, possibly for fear of what others might think or out of a desire for their validation. I admit I have been, and try to discontinue to be, a user of filler words that include *just, sort of, umm . . .* which makes a speaker appear less confident and insecure. We must not be apologetic for having an opinion or daring to exist. Nor should we apologize too much or for the wrong things, because that is not the example of what we would want for our daughters or nieces to do or see. It is a good thing to examine one’s own behavior and practices, and to invite constructive criticism, but not to expect it all the time.

Like many of us, I am guilty of the imposter syndrome, where I have and still sometimes question my own abilities. This is so wrong on so many levels, because I know I am a *chingona*, a

strong woman leader—like author Sandra Cisneros, I am even reclaiming that word in the process.

It is tough being a woman leader, and even tougher being a leader as a woman of color. The powerful truth is we are used to working harder, and studies show that we are natural collaborators and listeners. On the other hand, studies also show women leaders are more challenged to communicate effectively about our own needs and goals. We know that practice makes *almost* perfect, so learning more ways to practice is important.

Leaders are continually learning ways to serve better. There are even some not-so-hard actions to begin practicing. A Washington University study states that a quick way to be more assertive immediately is to stand up. Standing up can automatically make you assertive, including walking and simply moving around. It also inspires creative thinking and collaboration. We can adopt body language, facial expressions, voice tone and gestures to demonstrate confidence and assertiveness. We shall stand tall (even if we are 5 feet tall), shoulders back, chin up, and adopt a power pose—hands on our hips—like our *abuelitas* taught us when we witnessed their fierceness. We can also stand feet apart with our hands folded together as if holding a baseball.

The face of our country is changing; it is now looking more diverse. For this reason, it is crucial we have leaders who look, think and act like us. At this moment in American history, there are many opportunities for us to participate in the ongoing process of making our nation. President Joe Biden appointed one Latina as a cabinet secretary in his administration, Isabella Casillas Guzmán, administrator of the US Small Business Administration; he also appointed other Latinas to key positions. These choices are a good start, and we expect to see this continue to be the case in future administrations. Meanwhile, it is imperative we prepare ourselves for those opportunities in government and elsewhere. We can leverage our growing energized voices to ensure representation on all levels of business, government, philanthropy,

education and every other sector. Our country's communities of color are always impacted disproportionately, and we must be at the table addressing the needed change to equitable policies in the years ahead. If we are not at the table, we will be on the menu. We must recreate our world, woman-by-woman, Latina-by-Latina, as it is ours to discover and recreate among others.

Women serve disproportionately in essential industries, including hospitality, travel, agriculture and domestic. This makes women of color vulnerable. They often serve as caregivers, cleaners and perform menial labor while also being mothers and heads of household. Women can be leaders in reforming occupational industries but they must be at the table to offer solutions they know personally would work. Small business owners, the majority of whom are women, lack access to credit and other support offered to large firms. For instance, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students did not have access to student aid relief. Women, especially Latinas also should have a seat at the table when discussing the development of policies for DACA and other plans that impact our families and friends. We need to make our voices heard about the insecurity of housing, food, domestic work and access to unemployment benefits.

Our country has witnessed families ripped apart at our southern border, and still many have not been reunited with their children. We continue to witness racial injustices on television, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods and within the criminal justice systems. All of it impacts us, but quite often we are not at the table to make decisions that will confront and correct these injustices. When we do engage, bringing along our personal experiences, better informed policies are made.

It is important to acknowledge that the US Census indicates that Latinas mainly make up a young population. Latinas are also first-to-third generation US residents, and they are part of the 51% female population that makes up 47% of the national work force. According to the Census, women are the fastest growing group of

entrepreneurs, and Latina women are at the forefront. Leadership Research Institute studies show that the increasing number of female leaders brings more success and profitability, acknowledging that leadership is about ability and not gender.

We are experiencing a transformation of the United States in the twenty-first century and there is a sense of urgency for fresh, new leadership. I chose to write about leadership because this is an area where we women naturally shine. Women have natural leadership abilities, including but not limited to collaboration, communication, compassion and active listening. Women leaders can be intrinsic to success. Women possess a blend of management styles, which make businesses stronger. Women inherently lead groups and organizations just as we do at home as mothers or as siblings in a large family. Women lead businesses, nations, households, public organizations, against incredible odds.

Only over the last one hundred years, more opportunities have opened up for women. Yet, double standards still exist. For example, to openly show emotion hurts women, yet it helps men in politics. However, women excel at transformational leadership by remaining to be assertive and demonstrating compassion and strong communication skills as natural strengths. Women continue to move forward, regardless of whether we receive accolades or not. Although there seems to be a shift to embrace women leaders, there are solid barriers for women of color. Women of color struggle to be heard as we continue to not be at the decision-making tables. This is where we as leaders can come in and flex our leadership muscle. We have solid solutions to offer from firsthand knowledge. Today, there is greater opportunity to be at the decision-making table, and we can create more ways for other women of color to join.

Latina Leadership Lessons is an attempt to share some of the best ways to live as a leader. Fifty Latina leaders across the United States share their best practices on how they became more powerful and created additional networks of leaders. Now the

focus is on you, as you are the most important person, reading this right now. You, we, have what it takes to be a leader, and extraordinary leaders take the responsibility seriously to develop and create more leaders, all while falling in love with the process of becoming the best version of ourselves. The fact of the matter is we leaders can all contribute something to make this world a better place for our families and friends. We each have different strengths, but when we use our strengths combined with our passion and joy, we will absolutely create a better world. When our personal identities become fully aligned to serve, we will experience our authentic power and purpose in life.

In compiling these lessons from this phenomenal group of Latina leaders (a national snapshot), I wanted to offer examples of real leaders and what is possible for us to achieve. Additionally, in these fifty Latina leaders, we can see there is a cultural concept to leadership. The lens in which we view leadership is influenced by our lived experiences. Primarily, these leaders operate from a unity group perspective instead of as individuals; they demonstrate transformative leadership that activates inclusivity as much as possible. There is a unique aspect to Latina leadership that is important to note: there is leadership among our undocumented women leaders. An example is a DACA student who looks over her shoulder every day and carries an immense amount of anxiety of her family possibly being ripped apart, but she nevertheless works and attends school. Another example is the DREAMer mother who organizes other mothers to fight for the children they brought to the United States to give them a better life while risking their own life and freedom in the process. This is a different type of courage and leadership. We own these powerful stories, but sometimes feel the need to keep this truth and ourselves in the shadows.

Our lessons begin with one of the United States' treasured civil rights leaders, one of my dear mentors, Dolores Huerta. She has demonstrated leadership for decades and continues to do so into her 90s. She has organized and led groups for human rights

and social justice over the decades, during which time she was arrested twenty-two times for participating in non-violent civil disobedience activities and strikes. She literally took a beating from a San Francisco police officer in 1988 during a peaceful protest; the baton-beating caused significant internal bleeding, broken ribs and the removal of her spleen in emergency surgery. She has often encountered criticism based on both gender and ethnic stereotypes. She had started her career as a teacher, but then decided that she could do more for the hungry and barely clothed farmworkers' children in her classrooms by helping their parents win more equitable working conditions. In the late 1950s she worked with César Chávez to organize farmworkers. In 1962, they co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, before it was the United Farm Workers. They organized the Delano grape strike in 1965 in California, and she was the lead negotiator in the worker's contract that was created after the strike. She is the originator of the phrase, "*Si se puede*," which has become a widespread anthem among civil rights activists and even politicians. We all stand on her shoulders.

In expanding our view of leadership, it is imperative to recognize the young leaders who are impacting real change for our communities. There are five powerful examples in this book, including Claudia Flores of Washington, DC, Hareth Andrade of Virginia, Lorena Tule-Romain of Texas, Barbara Gomez-Aguñaga of Nebraska and María Gabriela "Gaby" Pacheco of Florida, who walked 1,500 miles from Miami to the White House in Washington, DC to advocate for a pathway to citizenship for immigrant youth. When I served as the Executive Director for the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association in Washington, DC, I had the distinct honor to work with DREAMer mothers and farmworker families, including Karelia Harding of Oregon and interns: Eva Alvarez of Washington, who is now serving as a public policy coordinator in Michigan, and Yesenia Calderon of Florida, who is serving as an immigration attorney.