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Investigating the value of and hindrances to servant leadership in the latin american context

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Investigating the Value of and Hindrances to Servant Leadership in the Latin American Context: Initial Findings from Peruvian Leaders

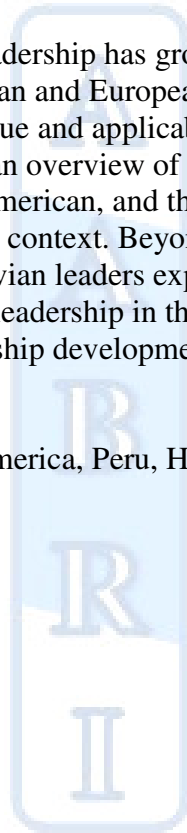
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Abstract

Since the early 1990s, servant leadership has grown as a discrete area of leadership studies, particularly in the North American and European contexts. While this is valuable, to date, little has been done to study the value and applicability of servant leadership in the Latin American context. The authors provide an overview of the literature surrounding servant leadership, leadership studies in Latin America, and the limited literature associated with servant leadership in the Latin American context. Beyond this, the authors present initial findings based in the Peruvian context from Peruvian leaders exposed to servant leadership theory. Based on these findings, hindrances to servant leadership in the Latin American context are discussed and recommendations for servant leadership development and further research in the Latin American context are presented.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Latin America, Peru, Hindrances to Leadership, Leaders, Peruvian Leaders



Introduction

The past years since the early 1990s have seen a dramatic increase in both the study and organizational practice of servant leadership in the North American and European contexts. Servant leadership, as a discipline of study, traces its roots to Robert Greenleaf's description and definition of servant leadership. In response the question "Who is the servant-leader?" Greenleaf (1977) provided his now frequently quoted response:

The servant-leader *is* servant first.... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first.... The difference manifest itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived (p. 27)?

While such formulations of leadership are becoming more attractive in the North American and European contexts, other cultural settings possessing a high power distance environment have seen less adoption and application of servant leadership theory. One such context is found in Latin America. In this paper, the authors present an examination of servant leadership literature and the literature associated with leadership studies in Latin America as a foundation for investigating servant leadership in the Latin American context. Additionally, the authors present initial findings from Peruvian leaders exposed to servant leadership theory and use these findings to discuss the value of and hindrances to servant leadership in the Latin American context.

Literature Review: Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's (1977) initial work brought the concept of servant leadership to the business world in the 1970s based on his work with AT&T. Since his 1977 work, a number of books and articles emerged through the mid-2000s: Graham (1991); Spears (1995); Quay (1997); Spears (1998a); Blanchard (1998); Buchen (1998); Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999); Laub (1999); Russell (2001a, 2001b); Russell and Stone (2002); Sendjaya and Sarros (2002); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Dennis and Winston (2003); Laub (2003); Ledbetter (2003); Patterson (2003); Rude (2003); Russell (2003); Sendjaya (2003); Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004); Winston (2003); Wong and Page (2003); Cerff (2004); Dennis (2004); Drury (2004); Hale (2004); Helland (2004); Hebert (2003, 2004); Irving (2004); Laub (2004); Ndoria (2004); Nwogu (2004); Page (2004); Parolini (2004); Patterson and Stone (2004); Winston and Hartsfield (2004); Smith, Montagno, and Kuzmenko (2004); Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004); Winston (2004); Barnes (2005); Bekker (2005); Carthen (2005); Drury (2005); Fenton-LeShore (2005); Irving (2005a, 2005b, 2005c); Irving and Longbotham (2007a, 2007b); Koshal (2005); Matteson and Irving (2006a, 2006b); Nixon (2005); Parolini (2005); Rennaker (2005); and Winston (2005).

Of these works, a majority are theoretical in nature: Barnes (2005); Blanchard (1998);

Buchen (1998); Carthen (2005); Cerff (2004); Drury (2005); Farling et al. (1999); Fenton-LeShore (2005); Graham (1991); Hale (2004); Laub (2004); Matteson and Irving (2006a, 2006b); Ndoria (2004); Nixon (2005); Nwogu (2004); Page (2004); Parolini (2004); Patterson (2003); Patterson and Stone (2004); Quay (1997); Rennaker (2005); Rude (2003); Russell (2001a, 2003); Russell and Stone (2002); Sendjaya and Sarros (2002); Smith et al. (2004); Spears (1995, 1998a); Spears and Lawrence (2002); Stone, Russell, and Patterson (2004); Winston (2003, 2005); Winston and Hartsfield (2004); and Wong and Page (2003). In addition to this, the number of research-based works is increasing: Bekker (2005); Dennis (2004); Dennis and Winston (2003); Drury (2004); Hebert (2004), Helland (2004); Irving (2004, 2005a, 2005b); Irving and Longbotham (2007a, 2007b); Koshal (2005); Laub (1999, 2003); Ledbetter (2003); Parolini (2005); Sendjaya (2003); and Winston (2004).

Since the early 1990s, servant leadership theorists have been refining the operational themes associated with servant leadership. The following authors—the servant leadership variables associated with each author are listed by their name—have been key in the theoretical formulation of servant leadership based on Greenleaf's (1977) initial framework: (a) Graham (1991)—inspirational and moral dimensions; (b) Buchen (1998)—self-identity, capacity for reciprocity, relationship building, and preoccupation with the future were essential themes; (c) Spears (1998a)—listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment, and community building; (d) Farling et al. (1999)—vision, influence credibility, trust, and service; (e) Laub (1999)—valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership; (f) Russell (2001a)—vision, credibility, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciating others, and empowerment; (g) Patterson (2003)—*agapáo* love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service. Following this season of theory development in servant leadership studies, an increasing number of empirical servant leadership projects are being conducted and presented in the literature. As this shift in the servant leadership literature is taking place it will be increasingly important that other cultural contexts be considered. In light of this, the authors now turn to a consideration of the leadership literature associated with the Latin American context.

Literature Review: Leadership in Latin America

In spite of significant leadership needs in the region, there is very little literature coming from Latin American authors on the subject, and this absence is even more keenly felt when looking into the empirical literature. Weatherby (1998) traces the many crises that Latin America faces to a lack of leadership and argues that only intentional steps to answer the leadership void will help the region's leadership needs. So far, the contribution of Latin American authors toward answering their own crises is minimal.

A historical review of Latin America reveals very few esteemed leaders that serve as models for leadership formation. The region's current situation demonstrates that in the majority of the countries this trend continues with many lacking confidence in the present leadership. For instances, during much of his four year term, Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo has had an approval rating lower than 20% with the percentage with it going as low as 8% during this time (El Comercio, 2004).

A review of the empirical literature on leadership in Latin America comes largely from three resources: (a) Hofstede's (1980, 1997, 2001) dimensions of culture, (b) the nine themes of Osland, De Franco and Osland (1999) and (c) the extensive research of the Global Leadership

and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program (GLOBE) (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta, 2004). All three studies had as at least one of its goals the understanding of the relationship between culture and leadership. Osland, De Franco, and Osland (1999) were the only ones that centered their research exclusively on Latin America.

One of the greatest contributions of all three lines of research is that they resisted the temptation to present a “one size fits all” theory of leadership. Evidencing this, House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) repeatedly state that the GLOBE study came up with no universally accepted leadership profile. While the research of Hofstede (1980, 1997, & 2001) and House et. al (2004) points to a clustering of tendencies along regional lines, they also point to a need to develop leadership profiles in each country, since the findings of these studies may then be applied to specific leadership needs. It is also important to note that each of the three studies cover only a cross section of the area’s countries, with about two-thirds of the nations left unstudied. For instance, Hofstede includes Peru while Osland, De Franco and Osland (1999) and GLOBE do not.

Hofstede (1980, 1984, & 1997) states that cultures consist of dimensions that predict behavior. His original study in 1980 used data from IBM managers and employees in 53 countries. He found four culture dimensions, (a) power distance, (b) individualism-collectivism, (c) uncertainty avoidance, and (d) masculinity-femininity. Hofstede (1997) added a fifth dimension of future orientation at a later point. Hofstede received criticism for his research being overly simplistic, concentrated on one company, inattentive to the considerable significant cultural differences within countries, and ignoring of the ongoing changes within cultures (McSweeney, 2002). Despite criticisms such as these, Hofstede’s work dominated the study of how culture affects leadership up to the time of GLOBE studies.

GLOBE is a ten-year research program that is likely to be at the center of cross-cultural leadership discussions for some time. House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) note that, “Thousands of doctoral dissertations in the future will start with these findings” (p.727). With over 150 researchers and 62 countries from all major regions of the world Dickson, Hartog and Mitchelson (2003) argue that it is probably the most extensive investigation of cross-cultural aspects of leadership to date.

In their research, GLOBE used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. A 735 question questionnaire measured nine dimensions of culture and six dimensions of leadership. The Alpha coefficient on the 735 item questionnaire was .85, indicating the instrument’s high reliability.

The GLOBE report uses nine cultural dimensions as opposed to Hofstede’s five. The GLOBE dimensions are, (a) assertiveness (b) collectivism (institutional), (c) collectivism (in-group), (d) gender egalitarianism, (e) humane orientation, (f) power distance, (g) performance orientation, (h) uncertainty avoidance, and (i) future orientation (House et al. p.13). The GLOBE study identified six global leader behaviors: (a) charismatic/value based leadership, (b) team orientated leadership, (c) participative leadership, (d) humane-orientated leadership, (e) autonomous leadership, and (f) self protective leadership.

The GLOBE findings concur with the Hofstede studies in indicating that one should be very careful in placing all the cultures of Latin America into one large stereotype. The GLOBE study found that there was high probability for clustering areas of the world into regions but significant differences remain. The Cronbach alpha probability for Latin America was .75. The study combined Spanish speaking Latin America with Brazil. The ten Latin American countries studied were Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador,

Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela. Clustering was broken down for various parts of the world by high-score, mid-score and low-score clusters. There were two classifications of clusters: (a) societal cultural practices (as is) and societal cultural practices (should be). The first dealt with practices in the society and the second with the values of the society; the conclusion was that practices and values of the societies did not match up in most of the clusters.

Osland, De Franco, and Osland (1999) give another break down of leadership styles, but with specific reference to Latin America after nearly two decades of work in the region. They explored nine themes: (a) “simpatia” (empathy), personal dignity, and classism; (b) personalism; (c) particularism; (d) trust; (e) collectivism and in-group/out-group behavior; (f) paternalism; (g) power; (h) humor and joy; and (i) fatalism. Their comments are directed to the expatriate doing business in Latin America but all who want to exercise leadership in Latin America should pay close attention to these themes.

All the works noted above are in English. Larson (1995), although not a Latin American, has written a book (only in Spanish) designed for use in an open university setting. It is the most complete original study on leadership in Spanish and includes references to leadership research, and points to the leadership of Jesus as the model leader in this work.

Literature Review: Peruvian Authors on Leadership

The best known Peruvian author on leadership is Fischman (2000, 2000a). He received both his bachelors and masters degrees in the U.S. To date, no Peruvian author who earned Peruvian degrees has done significant publishing on the area of leadership studies. Fischman’s first work in 2000 sold over 72,000 copies, which is the highest selling leadership book by a Peruvian in history. The most important contributions from Fischman (2000a) come from two studies. One involved the design of an instrument used to evaluate whether one is a leader or not and the other involved the design of an instrument to help leaders understand how particular leadership styles fit in with the team context. These may be important contributions but there is no information on the reliability or validity of either instrument. It would be very helpful to have published findings associated with these instruments. On an additional note, Fischman’s (2000; 2000a; 2002) references come exclusively from those who write outside of the Latin American context.

Very little literature on leadership comes from other Peruvian authors. In a detailed search of the libraries of five major universities in Lima—Peru’s capital city of over nine million—as well as looking online and through the most prominent bookstores in the city, very little was turned up regarding Peruvian authors. Of the resources identified, (a) Aliaga (1996) stresses leadership in guiding social causes and is one of the few that deals with topics that are specifically Peruvian, (b) Valenzuela, J. (2001) looks to the future in writing about fundamental patrons of leadership for the next century, (c) Espinoza (1990) deals with the golden rules for being a leader of excellence, (d) Bravo (1996) takes theories from other cultures and proposes them without any specific application to Peruvian culture, (e) Ortiz de Zevallos (2000) writes of leadership applied to the business world but there is nothing specifically Peruvian in his work, (f) Campoverde (1993, 1996) writes about quality control but his work borrows almost exclusively from the Anglo work, and (g) Pucci (2000) deals with leadership philosophy to the greatest extent. As helpful as these resources are, unfortunately there is little in these works that seeks to contribute something that is uniquely Peruvian or even Latin American.

Literature Review: Servant Leadership in Latin America

While servant leadership has become more prominent in the North American and European contexts, the study of servant leadership in the Latin American context has received very limited attention. Commenting on servant leadership in a changing culture, Marinho (2005) provides some introductory reflections on servant leadership in the Brazilian context. Marinho notes that while the Brazilian corporate environment recognizes that the principles of servant-leadership have “an incontestable appeal” (p. 115), at the same time, the term *servant* is not terribly attractive to people from the Brazilian culture due to associated religious and historical factors.

It is significant that the three major studies in the literature review section on Latin America do not deal with servant-leadership. Due to a significant absence of original works on servant leadership more study is needed. As a consequence, an overwhelming number of works in Spanish on leadership in general and servant leadership in particular are translations from English. Many of these tend to be popularized versions of leadership reflections as well. As an example of this, there are at least twenty-nine translated books in Spanish by the popularized leadership speaker John Maxwell.

Original works in Spanish include the work of Batista (1998), who looks at servant leadership from a Puerto Rican perspective. In his work, he mentions that a leader's motives may be an obstacle to obeying what he sees as Christian kingdom principles (p. iii) and he laments the fact that many leaders are not consistent with their beliefs and values when they adopt particular leadership theories (p. 23). Although brief and sketchy, what Batista offers is one of the best original works in Spanish on servant leadership from the Christian perspective.

Beyond this, three recently completed Ph.D. dissertations have contributed greatly to the study of servant leadership in the region Anderson (2006) researched the barriers to servant leadership in Latin America in evangelical organizations. Anderson interviewed more than 20 key church leaders in Latin America and found that only one believed he had ever seen a model of servant leadership.

Serrano (2006) reported that there was a favorable attitude toward servant leadership in Latin American. Her research may be the first that shows a positive predisposition to servant leadership in the region.

McIntosh (2008) researched how Peruvians define and practice leadership. His research showed that Peruvians were anxious to experience new models of leadership, having tired of the authoritarian, *caudillo*, model. Dealy (1992) stated that Latin America is a *caudillaje* culture where one or few hold the power. Aljovin (2002) showed how the caudillaje culture was present in the formation of the new Peruvian government after independence in 1821. McIntosh found that Peruvians believed that their leaders could be more effective if they were characterized by:

1. Integrity
2. Team leadership
3. Ability to communicate
4. Servant leadership
5. Participatory leadership

Value of Servant Leadership in Latin America

In an endeavor to encourage continued reflection on and learning about the study and practice of servant leadership in the Latin American context, the authors participated at a conference in Lima, Peru entitled “El Lider que Peru Necesita” (The Leader that Peru Needs). This conference, hosted by Seminario Evangelico de Lima (SEL; The Evangelical Seminary of Lima) in Lima Peru, included over 175 attendees and represented a cross section of Christian leaders in the country. In addition to introducing attendees to the theory and practice of servant leadership, the authors were able to collect survey data from the participants regarding their reflections on servant leadership following the primary related presentation. The findings related to servant leadership from attendee feedback indicated that the participants both recognized the value of servant leadership but wrestled with how servant leadership may be adopted within the Peruvian context

In the participant feedback, many conferees defined leadership in servant-leader terminology. In the focus group discussions following the main presentation on servant leadership, it was typical to hear conferees define leadership in a manner consistent with the language of servant-leadership theory. For instance, one group reflected on how the servant-oriented dimensions of the Christian faith relate to leadership, noting that, “Leadership is humility and service to the Lord,” and that the power of leadership was always under God’s watch. Several groups indicated that Jesus, as servant-leader, was the model for all leaders. Additional feedback indicated that, “In order to be a leader one must first become a servant,” a reflection paralleling Greenleaf’s (1977) definitional understanding of servant leadership noted in the introduction of this paper. Another comment was, “The servant considers it a gift to serve and gives assignments according to what people can handle and increases them accordingly rather than overloading people.” Such descriptions are consistent with Laub’s (1999) servant leadership attributes of valuing people and developing people.

According to Arroyo (2005)—one of the attendees who wrote a paper based on Irving’s (2005d) conference presentation for a subsequent course at SEL—servant-leadership is “extremely positive” and possesses three associated benefits: (a) servant-leadership not only is Biblical, it is effective; (b) servant-leadership increases the satisfaction of the workers; and (c) servant leadership increases team effectiveness. Arroyo defined servant-leadership as, “the understanding and practice that the leader puts the well being of those he is leading over his own interest,” and indicated that Peru needs leaders who look for opportunities to serve rather than seeking places of prominence. Additionally, Arroyo indicated that leaders should never ask something of a follower that they are not willing to do themselves.

While showing Biblical support for servant leadership Arroyo (2005) showed the tension that exists in his own philosophy of leadership, which is probably a reflection of a region wide tension, by closing his paper with the question, “Does servant leadership work?” Such tension is often played out in the Peruvian church context when leaders give intellectual assent to the-Christ like servant-leadership stance but take an autocratic or dictatorial posture in the daily practice of ministry.

Hindrances to Servant Leadership in Latin America

While the indications are that Latin Americans recognize the value of servant-leadership in the Latin American context (Serrano, 2006) there are still obstacles. Anderson found the

following barriers which impede the effective implementation of servant leadership in Latin American evangelical organizations:

1. Perceived barriers grounded in specific negative character traits of man
2. Socio-cultural elements
3. Family dynamics
4. Pressures impinging upon female leaders which create a barrier for women\
5. Disobedience of scriptural principles
6. Spirituality issues of particular concern to evangelicals
7. The inherently difficult issues associated with servant leader terminology and practice
8. Differences in the area of academic and intellectual preparation.
9. Lack of vision
10. Detrimental acts and conditions precipitated by a leader's followers.

Hofstede (1984) categorizes Latin Americans as scoring high on the power distance dimension, which arguably works against the practice of servant-leadership. Hofstede indicates that the main issue with power distance is inequality. A society with a high power distance rating is one that tolerates a great deal of inequality, that is, power concentrated in the hands of the few. Hofstede notes that there is always a battle between two forces in such socio-cultural contexts: status and overall equality. A high power distance society, such as the Peruvian context, does not see anything wrong with the power concentrated in a few, or even one central leader. Furthermore, such cultures often hold the value that centralized forms of hierarchal power are the most effective forms of leadership.

The recent GLOBE studies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta, 2004) provide a wealth of data affirming the tendency toward high power distance in Latin America. Their studies rate Latin America as by far the highest power distance region in the world with a score of 10 followed by the Anglo world at 7. In a high power distance society, the important thing is for the leader to do whatever it takes to maintain power. With such an approach to power and leadership, the idea of serving others first is seen as a weakness.

Long established patterns in Latin America may work against the idea of servant-leadership. House et al. (2004) point out that Catholicism is the dominant influence in Latin America. It is important to note that the ecclesiological structure of the Catholic Church is centralized and hierarchical in nature, providing a societal structure that reinforces traditional forms of leadership associated with high power distance cultural settings. In light of this ecclesiastical structure, Perez (1992) observes that there is a lack of hope among some Latin American Catholics leading some to abandon the Roman Catholic Church due to the impression that as members of the church they are incapable of influencing parish life. While the high power distance nature of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Latin American culture may make the Roman Catholic Church feel like a familiar place for some Latin Americans, Perez feels that, paradoxically, when people see more opportunity to serve they go to religious groups that facilitate such an opportunity.

Consistent with Perez' observations, Marinho (2005) notes that, "the concept of *servant* as represented by Biblical and ethical values is not as clear for a Catholic cultural as it seems to be for an Evangelical culture," and that, "in a Catholic culture there seems to be no clear distinction between the concept of *servant*...and the concept of *slave*" (pp. 116-117). As such, Marinho notes that, "the semantic confusion between the terms *servant* and *slave* in the Brazilian

culture presents a significant challenge to engaging in servant-leadership as a way of life” due to the 73.8% (2000 census data) dominance of Catholic religiosity in the Brazilian context. This observation from the Brazilian cultural context is relevant for the Peruvian context as well due to the similar prevalence of Catholicism in both settings.

As Nida (1974) notes, the stereotype of Latinos is that they emphasize people over events. However, is that stereotype always accurate? Latin American culture emphasizes personalism, particularism, and paternalism (Osland, De Franco, and Osland, 1999). Personalism is a sense of connection while avoiding affronts to personal dignity (Albert, 1996). Supervisors attend family events of workers and are concerned for those family members if a worker loses his job. Particularism is the legitimacy of using personal connections for one’s particular benefit. There is a constant reinterpretation of laws depending on particular facts. Paternalism manifests itself in the life long responsibility of the family patriarchs to take care of the rest of the family. The further someone is removed from the family of origin, the more distrust and less loyalty there is in the relationship. The paternal guides carry out their responsibility to maintain their position of importance in the family structure. Personalism, particularism, and paternalism do have aspects of caring for others, but these concepts also have a self-serving motive that runs contrary to servant-leadership.

Recommendations: Servant Leadership Development in Latin America

While the body of literature and interest in general in servant leadership is growing in the U.S and other parts of the world, there is very little literature and formal discussion of servant leadership in Latin America. In order to promote servant-leadership in Latin America we propose the following:

1. Continue to examine why the servant leadership model is not popular in Latin America.
2. Provide avenues for mutual learning by forming a Latin America organization that could serve as a “think-tank” for exploring ways of incorporating servant leadership in the region.
3. Encourage partnerships between universities and seminaries specializing in servant-leadership studies outside of Latin America and similar institutions in Latin America. These partnerships would be established in order to promote pilot projects involving the teaching and implementation of servant-leadership principles.

These and other initiatives will need funding from organizations and educational institutions concerned with the advancement of servant leadership in the Latin American context

Recommendations: Servant Leadership Research in Latin America

While the development of servant leadership practice is likely the primary goal for those interested in seeing servant leadership practiced in multiple cultural context, encouraging original research on servant leadership in the Latin American context will likely serve as the most strategic means for accomplishing this primary goal. In light of the limited research on leadership and servant leadership in Latin America, this need becomes even more keenly understood. In light of this need, we propose the following:

1. Retest servant leadership instruments used in contexts outside of Latin America to determine if they will be found to be reliable when translated into Spanish and/or Portuguese.
2. Utilize these instruments to evaluate whether the conclusions found in other contexts will hold true in the Latin American context.
3. Further the research done regarding the hindrances and obstacles to servant leadership in Latin America.
4. Examine and compare the effectiveness of servant leadership and other forms of leadership that are more commonly found in Latin America.

Summary and Conclusion

While the vision of servant-oriented leadership is attractive to many in the Latin American context, the obstacles to its practice and effective implementation and development are substantial. Such challenges are not only noticed at the level of practice, but are also noticed at the level of research and writing. While servant leadership research is still in the beginning stages in most parts of the world, the infant nature of servant leadership research is keenly felt in contexts such as Latin America. This reality provides both great challenge and great opportunity for those interested in the study and practice of servant leadership. It is our hope this paper will provide both the necessary encouragement and initial direction for those desiring to engage in future research in this area. We believe that Latin America is ripe for thoughtful work aimed at the examination of servant leadership in the unique cultural context of Latin America, and that such work would be of great benefit not only for those disenchanted with current leadership models in Latin America, but also with those of other regions of the world who are increasingly engaged in business and other forms of cross-cultural interaction with the Latin American region of our world.

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