



CEO Brief | Leadership Conversion Imperative

BREAKING BARRIERS FROM THE INSIDE OUT



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Breaking Barriers from the Inside Out

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | AT-A-GLANCE

For organizations investing in diverse leadership pipelines, the most critical breakdown is no longer at entry or early career stages—it occurs at the director-to-VP transition, where proven leaders fail to convert readiness into recognized executive legitimacy.

While this research is grounded in Latino leadership cohorts, the findings point to a broader, systemic challenge: organizations are not consistently translating high-potential, underrepresented talent into visible, trusted enterprise leaders at the most senior levels. The implications extend across all underrepresented groups navigating advancement into executive roles.

Over the past decade, many organizations have made measurable progress in representation and early leadership development. However, this research highlights a less visible but more consequential gap—the transition from capability to credibility, where advancement depends not only on performance, but on access to sponsorship, visibility, and inclusion within decision-making networks.

Using a neuroscience-informed, mixed-methods approach, this study examines how advancement barriers emerge at the intersection of:

- Individual leadership readiness
- Organizational systems and sponsorship structures
- Social and cognitive dynamics in high-stakes environments

The findings suggest that high-performing leaders often arrive at critical transition points with strong technical and operational credibility, yet encounter environments characterized by:

- Ambiguity in advancement criteria
- Inconsistent access to sponsorship and advocacy
- Increased scrutiny during high-visibility moments

These conditions increase cognitive load and constrain clarity at the moments where leadership is most evaluated. As a result, readiness is frequently under-recognized—not due to lack of capability, but due to how leadership is perceived, validated, and sponsored within organizational systems.

This research reframes the “pipeline problem” as a transition problem.

KEY FINDINGS

Five core insights emerge:

1. The greatest leadership attrition occurs at the mid-to-senior transition, where expectations become less explicit and advancement pathways less transparent.
2. Executive advancement is determined by a leader's ability to perform with clarity and presence in high-stakes moments.
3. Belonging and cultural alignment directly shape visibility, voice, and influence at senior levels.
4. Organizational systems play a decisive role—either accelerating advancement through clear sponsorship and advocacy or creating friction through opacity and inconsistency.
5. Traditional leadership development models are insufficient, as they do not account for the dynamic interaction between individual performance and organizational context during executive transitions.

The findings point to a clear strategic imperative:

Organizations must move beyond building diverse pipelines and instead focus on how leaders successfully transition into executive roles.

This requires a shift toward:

- Intentional sponsorship structures
- Greater transparency in advancement criteria
- Leadership development models that reflect real-world decision environments
- Systems that actively reinforce visibility, credibility, and inclusion at senior levels

The opportunity is significant. Organizations that address this transition gap will not only retain high-performing talent—they will unlock stronger, but more representative leadership at the highest levels by also converting proven readiness into recognized executive leadership.

This research shows that advancement barriers are not driven by a lack of talent, but by the interaction between individual readiness and organizational conditions. High-performing leaders enter critical transition points with strong credibility, yet face ambiguity, uneven access to sponsorship, and heightened scrutiny in high-visibility moments. These conditions increase cognitive load and constrain clarity, presence, and influence precisely when leadership is most evaluated.

The implication is clear: the transition gap is not a deficit of capability, but a misalignment between how leadership is expressed, perceived, and validated within organizational systems. Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond traditional development approaches.

Organizations must focus on strengthening the conditions that enable advancement—reinforcing visibility, expanding sponsorship access, and aligning leadership expectations with diverse expressions of executive presence.

This is a strategic inflection point. Organizations that move beyond representation metrics and intentionally design for leadership activation will accelerate advancement, strengthen decision-making, and increase leadership diversity at the most consequential levels. Solving this gap requires more than development—it requires an ecosystem that activates leadership in real time. This is not a talent issue. It is a system design issue.

Organizations that solve this will unlock both leadership performance and growth.

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THIS WHITE PAPER AT-A-GLANCE

Part I | The Leadership Mobility Reality

The paper opens by reframing stalled Latino advancement as a leadership mobility challenge, not a pipeline shortage, grounding the issue in enterprise risk, AI-flattened hierarchies, and the middle as the capability compounding zone.

Part II | What the Evidence Makes Visible

The five executive findings translate the lived experiences of HACE alumni and leadership data into the recurring patterns shaping mobility: pressure performance, belonging, system friction, legitimacy, and transition complexity.

Part III | What Enterprise Leaders Must Redesign

The action section converts the findings into practical stewardship choices for CEOs, CHROs, boards, and talent leaders focused on transition architecture, sponsorship, fairness, and leadership system modernization.

Part IV | Why HACE Matters

The paper then positions HACE as the external mobility ecosystem that reinforces executive legitimacy, belonging, sponsorship conversion, and sustained leadership activation across career stages.

Part V | The Future of Leadership Mobility

The conclusion reframes the middle as the capability compounding engine, showing why organizations that transform middle-layer complexity into visible mobility signals will outperform in the next era of leadership.

MAIN WHITE PAPER FINDINGS

Across the survey data, executive interviews, and HACE alumni leadership ecosystem, five recurring transition patterns emerged that explain why proven readiness does not always convert into senior leadership mobility.

Finding One | Leadership mobility stalls at the legitimacy conversion point

The most consequential barrier is no longer pipeline strength, but whether proven middle-layer performance converts into visible enterprise legitimacy.

Finding Two | Performance under pressure shapes advancement

Advancement increasingly depends on whether leaders can sustain clarity, composure, and trusted judgment as visibility and evaluation intensify.

Finding Three | Belonging and identity shape executive presence

Executive presence strengthens when leaders can sustain authenticity, credibility, and trusted voice in the environments where promotion decisions are shaped.

Finding Four | Organizational systems regulate momentum or amplify friction

Sponsorship, fairness, visibility, and psychological safety determine whether readiness accelerates into mobility or remains trapped in structural ambiguity.

Finding Five | Legacy leadership models no longer fit transition complexity

Traditional competency ladders fail to reflect how today's leaders move through recursive cycles of pressure, recalibration, belonging, and recognition.

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

FINDING ONE: THE MIDDLE-MANAGEMENT INFLECTION POINT

The earliest leadership losses emerge where performance alone no longer converts into sponsorship, legitimacy, and visible upward momentum.



FINDING ONE

THE GREATEST LOSS BEGINS IN MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Insight Headline

Middle management is where executive readiness first encounters structural legitimacy friction.

The data indicate that the most significant leadership losses do not begin at entry or early management levels, but at the point where Latino leaders must convert demonstrated performance into broader enterprise legitimacy. At this level, advancement increasingly depends on access to informal sponsorship pathways, high-visibility assignments, and interpretive signals of readiness that are often less explicit than formal performance criteria. As a result, highly capable leaders may continue delivering strong outcomes while receiving insufficient legitimacy cues to translate performance into upward momentum.

From a neuroscience perspective, this transition layer intensifies **certainty disruption and fairness ambiguity**, both of which are strongly associated in the literature with elevated cognitive load, insula-mediated justice sensitivity, and more cautious strategic behavior. Under repeated ambiguity, leaders may over-index on perfection, over-preparation, and risk containment, reducing the visible decisiveness that organizations often misread as executive readiness. This creates a recursive friction point where the nervous system prioritizes protection while the system simultaneously demands broader visibility and strategic confidence.

Executive Implication

Organizational implication: Companies must redesign the senior middle-management layer to make sponsorship access, advancement criteria, and legitimacy signals explicit before high-potential Latino leaders disengage from the executive pathway.

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

FINDING TWO: PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE SHAPES EXECUTIVE ADVANCEMENT

Executive advancement strengthens when leaders can preserve cognitive clarity, composure, and trusted judgment under intensified visibility and evaluative pressure.



FINDING TWO

PERFORMANCE UNDER PRESSURE SHAPES EXECUTIVE ADVANCEMENT

Insight Headline

Executive advancement strengthens when leaders can preserve clarity, composure, and trusted judgment as visibility and evaluation intensify.

The findings show that executive advancement for Latino leaders is shaped not only by capability, but by how effectively leaders sustain strategic clarity and visible confidence in high-stakes moments. Across the HACE cohorts, participants consistently pointed to senior stakeholder meetings, enterprise decision forums, and periods of heightened scrutiny as the moments where readiness was interpreted in real time. In these environments, advancement depends less on technical expertise alone and more on whether leaders remain decisive, composed, and trusted as pressure rises.

"I was fully capable of making the decision, but the stakes made me weigh every word because I knew the room was also evaluating readiness."

A clear pattern emerged across the data: as visibility increases, the ability to sustain directional judgment becomes a defining differentiator. Leaders who preserve composure, communicate with conviction, and reinforce trust are significantly more likely to convert strong performance into promotion momentum. Without sufficient support, however, even highly capable leaders may become more risk-calibrated or delay visible decisions in ways organizations can misread as readiness gaps rather than disciplined judgment.

Executive Implication

Organizational implication: Build performance-under-pressure systems through executive simulations, senior-room rehearsal, and sponsor-backed visibility opportunities that strengthen clarity, confidence, and trusted judgment in promotion-critical moments.

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

FINDING THREE: BELONGING AND AUTHENTICITY SHAPE EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Executive presence strengthens when leaders can sustain authenticity, credibility, and trusted voice in the environments where advancement decisions are shaped.



FINDING THREE

BELONGING AND AUTHENTICITY SHAPE EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

Insight Headline

Executive presence strengthens when leaders can sustain authenticity, credibility, and trusted voice in the environments where advancement decisions are shaped.

The findings suggest that executive presence for Latino leaders is not simply a matter of communication style or presentation polish. Rather, it is shaped by the degree to which leaders can remain visible while sustaining cultural authenticity, emotional steadiness, and relational trust. Across the HACE cohorts, many participants described the subtle tension between sounding “executive” and sounding like themselves, revealing that presence is often influenced by whether authenticity feels safe under increased visibility and scrutiny.

“I needed to be more visible, but every step toward visibility also made me more aware of how much of myself I was editing.”

A consistent pattern emerged across the data: belonging and identity safety materially shape how leadership presence is expressed and interpreted. Leaders who can sustain authenticity, speak with confidence, and remain relationally grounded are significantly more likely to reinforce trusted executive presence and enterprise-level influence. By contrast, when environments implicitly reward assimilation or penalize difference, even highly capable leaders may moderate their voice, over-manage perception, or reduce spontaneous contribution in ways that can weaken visibility and promotability.

Executive Implication

Organizational implication: Organizations must intentionally design cultures, sponsorship practices, and executive forums that reinforce belonging, identity safety, and authentic leadership voice rather than rewarding narrow legacy norms of executive presence.

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

FINDING FOUR: SYSTEMS THAT ACCELERATE OR STALL MOMENTUM

Organizational systems either convert leadership readiness into upward movement or amplify friction through opaque access, fairness, and sponsorship signals.



FINDING FOUR

ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS EITHER REGULATE MOMENTUM OR AMPLIFY FRICTION

Insight Headline

Systems determine whether readiness converts into momentum or remains trapped in structural ambiguity.

The evidence makes clear that Latino executive advancement is not shaped by individual readiness alone, but by the degree to which organizational systems translate readiness into visible opportunity. Sponsorship pathways, promotion criteria, fairness signals, and access to enterprise-level assignments either accelerate movement or quietly stall it. Across the HACE leadership cohorts, leaders repeatedly described moments in which their performance was strong, yet the surrounding system remained opaque, making it difficult to interpret what advancement actually required.

The neuroscience literature strongly reinforces this systems-level finding through insula-based fairness processing, ventral striatal reward signaling, and psychological safety as a prefrontal-enabling condition. When access pathways are unclear and justice signals remain inconsistent, the brain can sustain a low-grade vigilance state that narrows experimentation, increases impression management, and weakens visible risk-taking. By contrast, transparent sponsorship, fairness consistency, and psychologically safe advancement conversations activate reward expectancy, motivation persistence, and broader strategic engagement.

Executive Implication

Organizational implication: Companies must redesign sponsorship ecosystems, succession conversations, and fairness signaling so that high-potential Latino leaders can clearly interpret how enterprise legitimacy is built and reinforced.

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

FINDING FIVE: THE LIMITS OF LEGACY LEADERSHIP TRANSITION MODELS

Linear leadership frameworks fail where advancement depends on repeated cycles of visibility, belonging, legitimacy, and system recognition.



FINDING FIVE

LEGACY LEADERSHIP MODELS FAIL TO EXPLAIN TRANSITION COMPLEXITY

Insight Headline

Linear leadership models break down when advancement is shaped by repeated cycles of visibility, belonging, legitimacy, and system recognition.

The strongest cross-cutting insight is that traditional leadership models do not fully explain how Latino leaders convert readiness into senior advancement outcomes. Across the HACE cohorts, participants consistently described leadership transitions as nonlinear experiences shaped by evolving expectations, changing standards of executive presence, shifting sponsorship dynamics, and repeated proof points under increasing visibility. These realities extend beyond static competency frameworks and reveal a far more adaptive transition process.

A consistent pattern emerged across the data: advancement is shaped not by skill accumulation alone, but by adaptability and cultural-emotional integration as leaders and organizations navigate repeated cycles of pressure, belonging, legitimacy, and system recognition. As leaders move into more visible enterprise roles, each transition requires renewed interpretation of readiness, influence, and executive fit. Organizations that continue to rely on linear pipeline models risk misreading adaptive leadership behaviors and under-converting high-potential talent at the most critical advancement points.

Executive Implication

Organizational implication: Companies must replace static competency and pipeline models with adaptive transition architectures that reflect how visibility, sponsorship, belonging, and legitimacy interact across repeated executive advancement cycles.

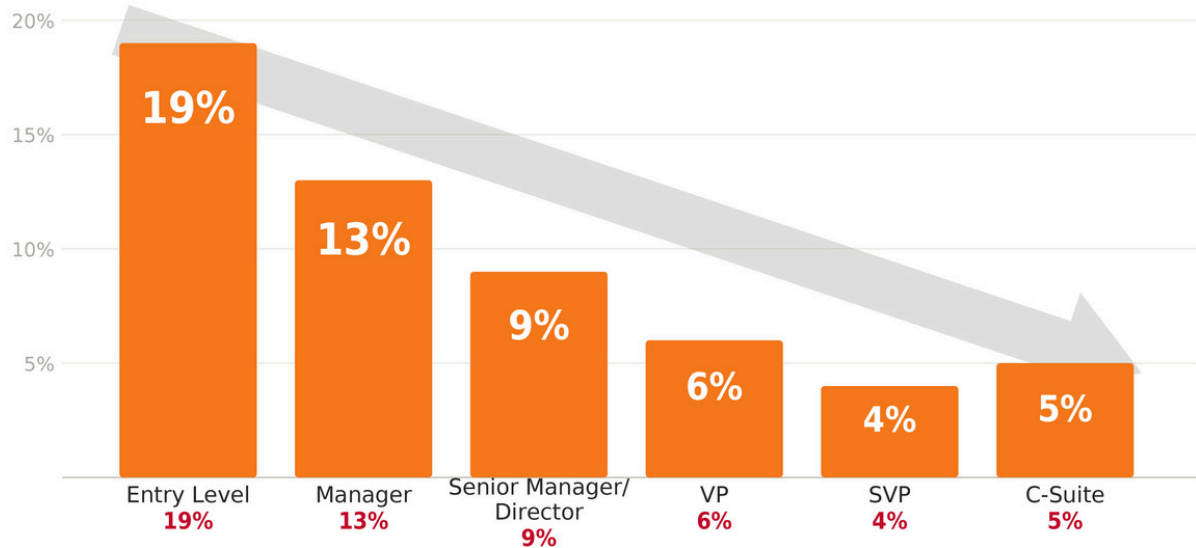
WHY THIS IS A STRATEGIC BUSINESS RISK

The challenge is not that Latino talent fails to enter the workforce. The challenge is what happens as leadership pathways narrow. As Figure 1 shows, Latino professionals enter the workforce at meaningful scale and remain visible through early management roles. But as organizations move toward director, vice president, and C-suite positions, the number of available roles naturally compresses, competition intensifies, and advancement standards become increasingly shaped by sponsorship, visibility, and interpretive judgments of executive fit.

FIGURE 1

LATINO LEADERSHIP REPRESENTATION

Latino talent enters the workforce at scale, but advancement stalls at higher levels.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; McKinsey & Company; Latino Corporate Directors Association; KPMG Board Diversity Reports; analysis b

This compression alone is expected. What should concern CEOs, CHROs, and board talent committees is that the distribution of advancement outcomes is not proportionate across race, gender, and cultural identity, even when readiness and performance remain strong. At the highest-value leadership thresholds, visibility, legitimacy, and sponsorship are often distributed through informal pathways that can unintentionally privilege familiarity over proven leadership capital.

The business consequence extends beyond fairness: organizations risk under-recognizing the bicultural leadership intelligence increasingly required to lead multicultural markets, diverse workforces, and enterprise decisions shaped by multiple stakeholder realities.

In this context, the strategic issue is not simply fairness, nor pipeline volume. It is whether organizations are building senior leadership systems capable of recognizing performance, cultural intelligence, and market-relevant leadership judgment at the points where roles become fewer, more competitive, and more consequential.

1. THE LEADERSHIP CONVERSION REALITY

For more than two decades, organizations across corporate America have invested in Latino talent through leadership development, sponsorship, ERGs, and DEI initiatives. Yet senior representation has not advanced at the pace expected, particularly at the transition from middle management into director, vice president, and enterprise leadership roles.

This is not a pipeline deficit. It is a leadership conversion opportunity—the ability to translate proven readiness into consistent executive advancement. It is the point at which proven leaders must convert performance credibility into executive visibility, sponsorship access, and enterprise legitimacy in an environment where roles become fewer, expectations more interpretive, and advancement decisions increasingly shaped by high-visibility proof points.

At this level, the transition challenge is shaped by both leader behavior and enterprise design. Visibility pressure, legitimacy scrutiny, and system ambiguity can influence how confidence, decision timing, and executive presence are expressed in the exact moments where advancement outcomes are determined.

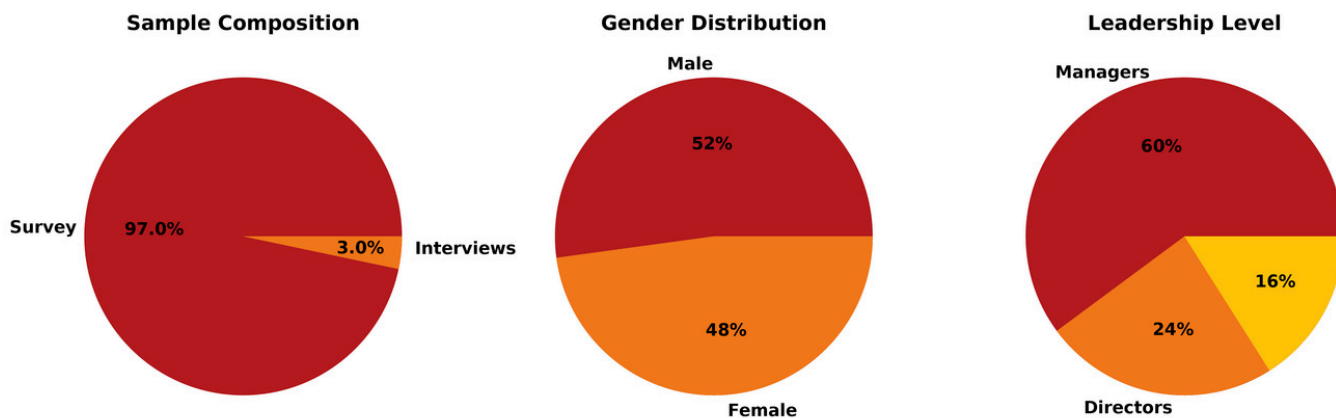
Traditional leadership models have focused heavily on capability development and role readiness. While still valuable, these models often underweight the interaction among visibility, belonging, legitimacy, sponsorship, and system recognition that ultimately determines whether readiness converts into senior advancement.

2. WHAT THE EVIDENCE MAKES VISIBLE

This section examines how Latino leadership advancement slows at the senior transition by integrating enterprise-scale leadership patterns with the lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes of leaders across the HACE ecosystem. Grounded in participant voice, the analysis reflects how leaders interpret and navigate advancement, as well as the strategic stewardship recommendations they articulate regarding how organizations must more effectively support leadership transitions. It shifts the focus from talent readiness to how advancement actually occurs within organizations—through visibility, interpretation, and legitimacy in high-stakes moments. The purpose is not only to identify where progression slows, but to clarify the conditions that determine whether leadership readiness is recognized and converted into senior advancement, and to surface the organizational actions required to address this conversion gap.

FIGURE 2

RESEARCH SAMPLE



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Figure 2

The evidence integrates insights from 518 Latino middle managers within the HACE Latino Leadership Program alumni network of more than 4,000 professionals, complemented by a qualitative sample of 16 participants (12 middle managers and 4 senior executives) engaged through 45 in-depth interviews. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on defined inclusion criteria, including full-time employment in U.S. corporate environments and direct or retrospective experience navigating leadership transitions. The qualitative sample size is consistent with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) requirements for idiographic depth, within a convergent mixed-methods design. Participants also completed the Insights Discovery assessment to support comparative insights. All participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained, and strict confidentiality protocols were followed, including anonymization and redaction of identifying information. This integrated dataset captures the lived realities behind leadership transitions, as illustrated in Figure 2.

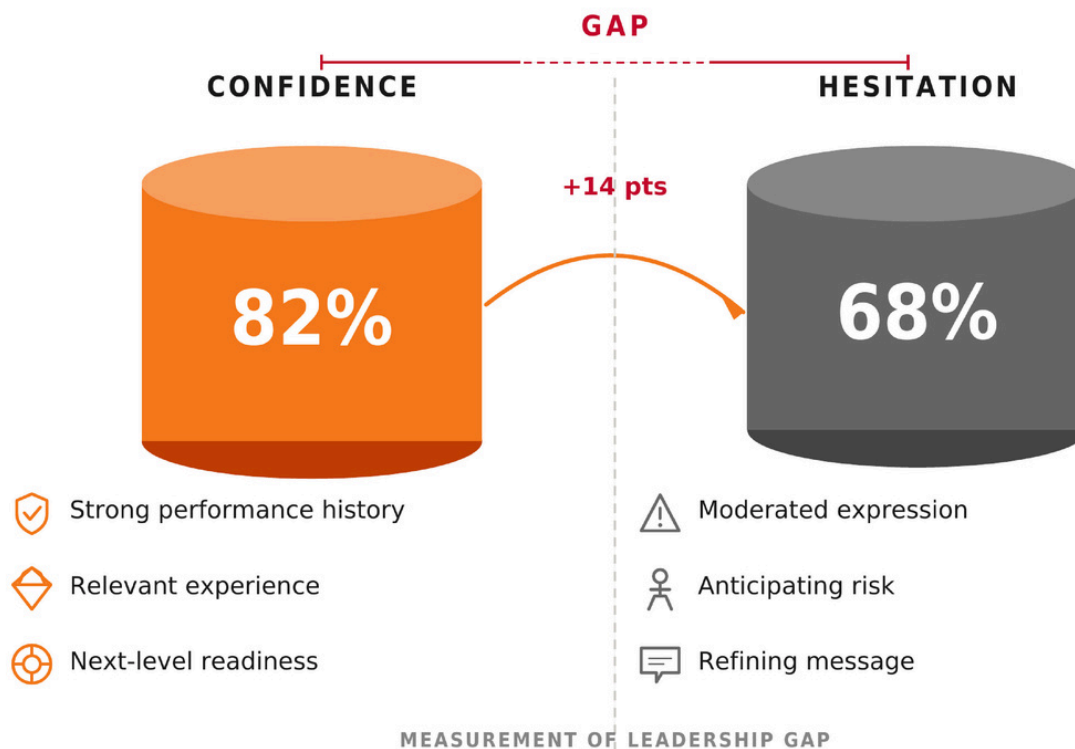
Across both the quantitative and qualitative evidence, one pattern emerged with unusual consistency: Latino leaders reported strong confidence in their ability to perform at the next level yet described hesitation in the exact moments requiring immediate executive visibility, directional judgment, and enterprise influence.

What is often labeled hesitation may in fact reflect adaptive intelligence operating inside systems with implicit rules, uneven sponsorship signals, and narrow interpretations of executive fit.

As Figure 3 shows, the central challenge is not preparation. It is the gap between **internal readiness and external leadership expression in high-stakes moments**.

FIGURE 3

THE LEADERSHIP CONVERSION GAP



Latino leaders navigate the gap between internal readiness and external expression of leadership.

This pattern is not unique to Latino leaders. Prior research indicates that leaders from other underrepresented groups—including women, Black, Asian, and LGBTQ+ professionals—experience similar dynamics during advancement transitions. These include heightened visibility, ambiguous evaluation criteria, and increased reliance on informal sponsorship and legitimacy signals, which shape how leadership is expressed and recognized in high-stakes environments.

This distinction reframes the problem from a capability question to a conversion question. While this research is grounded in Latino leadership experiences, the underlying transition dynamics identified in the study—particularly visibility, legitimacy, sponsorship, adaptive regulation, and organizational interpretation—demonstrate broader applicability across leadership populations and organizational contexts. As such, the findings provide a transferable framework for future replication, comparative leadership research, and enterprise-level leadership transition design.

3. STRATEGIC CHOICES FOR ENTERPRISE LEADERS

A corporate responsibility agenda for CEOs, CHROs, boards, and senior leadership teams

The evidence points to a broader leadership responsibility: organizations can continue to rely on legacy promotion norms and accept uneven senior advancement outcomes, or they can treat leadership

mobility as part of their broader corporate responsibility to build fair, trusted, and future-ready institutions. Similar patterns have been documented across diverse leadership populations, reinforcing that these dynamics reflect broader organizational system conditions rather than group-specific limitations. As senior roles become fewer and more consequential, the systems that determine who is seen, sponsored, and advanced increasingly shape not only succession depth, but employee trust, leadership legitimacy, cultural resilience, and credibility in multicultural markets. In this context, Latino leadership advancement is no longer solely a workforce issue. It is a question of **institutional stewardship and enterprise responsibility**.

The strategic choices that follow are designed as **CSR-aligned governance pathways** that leaders can bring into CEO, board, talent committee, and social impact discussions. They focus on how organizations can strengthen equitable access to leadership opportunity, expand the definition of executive credibility, and ensure advancement systems reflect the diversity of the workforce, communities, and markets they serve.

3.1 MAKE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY TRANSPARENT

Stewardship question

Are advancement pathways clear enough to reflect the organization's commitment to equitable opportunity?

As senior roles narrow, advancement decisions become less about formal eligibility and more about how organizations interpret visibility, judgment, sponsorship, and executive fit. When those signals remain implicit, leaders are left to decode unwritten norms around stretch assignments, senior-room participation, and what "readiness" actually means beyond performance. Over time, this ambiguity can erode trust in advancement pathways and weaken confidence that leadership opportunity is being distributed in ways that reflect the organization's values.

For enterprise leaders, transparency at this level is no longer simply a talent process issue. It is a stewardship responsibility tied to workforce trust, cultural legitimacy, and the organization's broader commitment to fair access to opportunity. The objective is not to remove the competitiveness of senior roles, but to ensure the pathways into those roles are sufficiently visible, interpretable, and consistently applied.

Recommendations

- Publish director and VP advancement expectations internally
- Make sponsorship and stretch-role access criteria visible
- Require transparency around enterprise-critical assignment distribution
- Create promotion rationale reviews after VP decisions
- Align opportunity pathways with CSR and workforce trust goals

Stewardship outcome: Fairness becomes a visible leadership practice rather than an informal promise.

3.2 BUILD RESPONSIBLE SYSTEMS FOR HIGH-STAKES LEADERSHIP READINESS

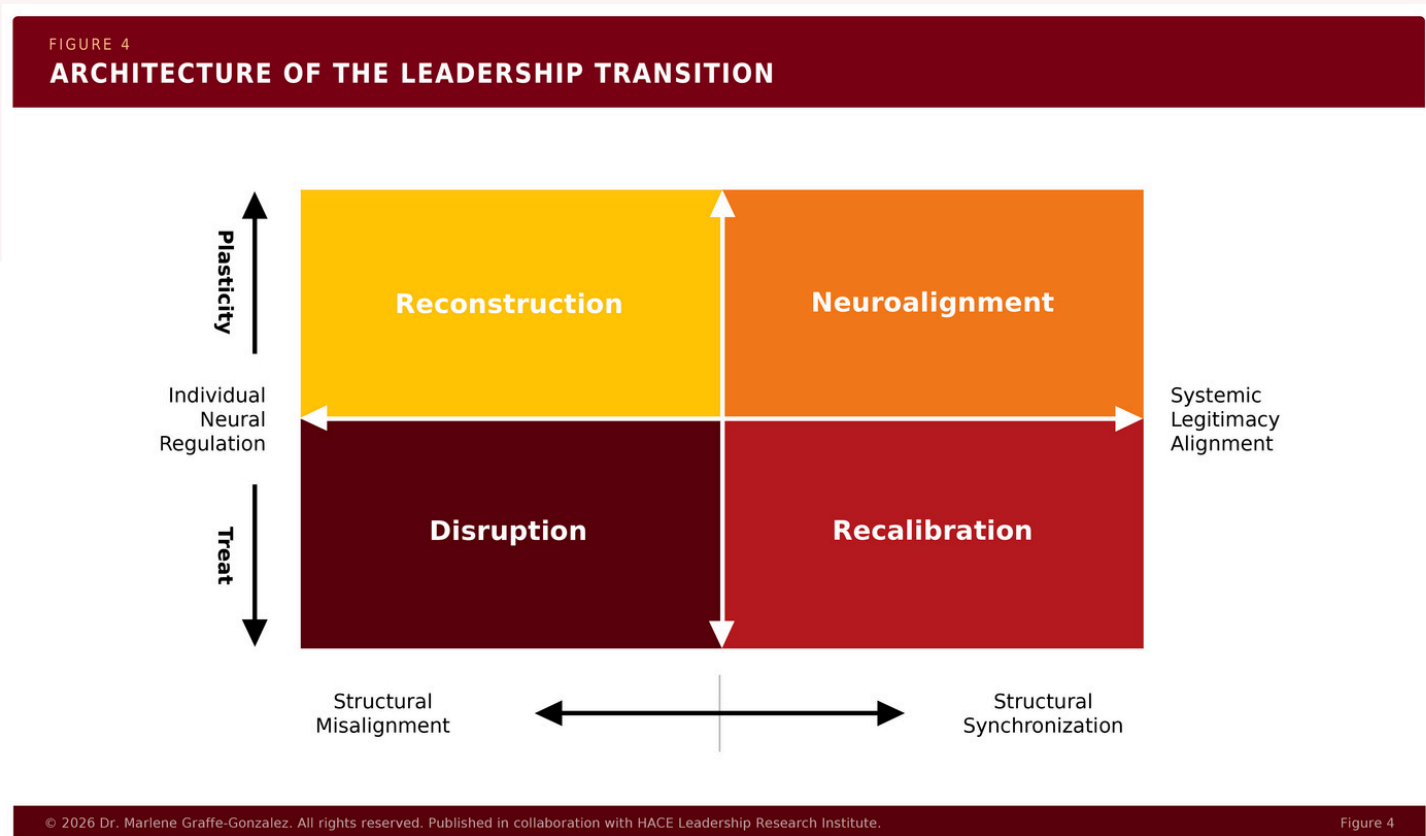
Stewardship question

Are leaders being prepared fairly for the moments that most shape advancement outcomes?

One of the most practical outputs of this study is the **Leadership Transition Architecture shown in Figure 4**, a diagnostic framework that emerged directly from the evidence on how Latino leaders navigate pressure, visibility, legitimacy, and organizational recognition at the senior transition point.

Across the five findings, a consistent pattern surfaced: advancement outcomes are shaped not only by leader readiness, but by the interaction between how leaders regulate decision-making under pressure and how organizational systems reinforce legitimacy, sponsorship, and visible trust. Figure 4 translates that evidence into an operating model leaders can use to identify where advancement momentum accelerates, where it slows, and where systems may unintentionally amplify friction across repeated transition cycles.

“Leaders do not move through transition once. They cycle through disruption, recalibration, reconstruction, and neuroalignment as expectations and recognition continue to evolve”.



The model maps four recurring transition states that emerged from the study: **disruption, recalibration, reconstruction, and alignment**. These states reflect the repeated movement leaders experience as they navigate high-visibility meetings, ambiguous sponsorship signals, and promotion-critical decision moments. For enterprise leaders, the value is practical: it enables boards, CEOs, CHROs, and talent committees to diagnose whether their systems are preparing leaders equitably for the moments where legitimacy and advancement are most often decided.

Strategic stewardship recommendations

- Build executive decision labs around real enterprise scenarios
- Create sponsor-backed rehearsal environments before high-visibility forums
- Use Figure 4 as a diagnostic in succession and talent reviews
- Identify where leaders stall between recalibration and alignment
- Design repeated pressure-based readiness experiences tied to advancement milestones

Stewardship outcome: Advancement-critical moments become intentionally designed leadership experiences rather than informal tests of readiness.

3.3 REDEFINE EXECUTIVE PRESENCE THROUGH BELONGING

Stewardship question

Does the organization create the conditions for leaders to experience belonging across self, team, enterprise, and community?

As organizations become more multicultural—in workforce composition, customer base, and stakeholder expectations—the meaning of executive presence must evolve beyond narrow legacy norms. Presence is strengthened when leaders can sustain credibility across **four levels of belonging: self, team, organization, and community**. At the individual level, leaders need internal coherence between identity and voice. At the team level, they need trust and psychological safety in the rooms where decisions are shaped. At the organizational level, they need legitimacy pathways that signal they belong in senior leadership spaces. At the community level, they need continued connection to the workforce, customers, and multicultural markets their leadership is meant to serve.

This is not only a culture issue. It is a **corporate social responsibility and stewardship issue**. Leadership systems communicate whose voices are recognized, whose cultural fluency is valued, and whether the organization's leadership model reflects the communities it serves. When these belonging pathways are strong, leaders are more likely to contribute spontaneously, exercise sound judgment, and build trusted executive presence. In simple neuroscience terms, belonging reduces social threat and strengthens the trust, clarity, and cognitive flexibility required for visible leadership under pressure.

This is also where **HACE plays a distinctive role**. As the community layer of the belonging framework, HACE helps leaders sustain identity continuity, external legitimacy, and culturally grounded confidence that organizations alone may not always provide. This external community reinforcement strengthens the leadership voice leaders bring back into their teams and enterprises.

Recommendations

- Broaden executive presence definitions beyond legacy communication archetypes
- Create belonging-safe sponsorship environments
- Recognize multiple communication and influence styles
- Develop identity-safe visibility pathways
- Strengthen community-based leadership reinforcement through HACE and peer ecosystems

Stewardship outcome: Executive presence becomes the visible expression of trust, identity coherence, and community-connected leadership credibility.

3.4 REDESIGN SYSTEMS FOR CLARITY, FAIRNESS, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Stewardship question

Do advancement systems build trust, clarity, and safety at the moments where leadership momentum is most vulnerable?

Organizational systems do more than process promotions—they shape whether leaders trust the pathway ahead. Sponsorship structures, succession conversations, fairness signals, and access to visible stretch assignments either reinforce momentum or quietly amplify friction. When expectations are clear and advancement pathways feel consistent, leaders are more likely to pursue visible risk, contribute decisively, and sustain confidence through high-stakes transitions. When systems remain opaque, leaders often shift into caution, over-calibration, and self-protective decision patterns that can slow advancement momentum.

This makes system design a **corporate stewardship and social responsibility issue**, not simply a talent management one. Organizations communicate their values through the fairness and clarity of their advancement pathways. In practical neuroscience terms, clarity and psychological safety reduce the mental load of uncertainty, allowing leaders to focus on strategic contribution rather than decoding informal rules. This is especially important in multicultural enterprises, where trust in the legitimacy of systems directly influences retention, leadership aspiration, and confidence in the institution's broader commitment to equitable opportunity.

Recommendations

- Conduct sponsorship audits across leadership levels
- Map fairness signals in promotion and succession decisions
- Build succession equity dashboards by race, gender, and role layer
- Make stretch opportunity access transparent
- Include psychological safety diagnostics in talent reviews

Stewardship outcome: Advancement systems become trust-building leadership infrastructure rather than hidden sources of friction.

3.5 REPLACE LEGACY MODELS WITH THE HACE MULTILEVEL LEADERSHIP TRANSITION FRAMEWORK

Stewardship question

Do current leadership systems support Latino leaders across the full transition journey—from internal regulation to enterprise legitimacy and community-connected leadership?

Traditional competency and pipeline models no longer reflect the realities of nonlinear leadership transition. The four transition states identified in Figure 4—disruption, recalibration, reconstruction, and alignment—describe the recurring movement leaders experience as they navigate pressure, visibility, and legitimacy under increasingly competitive senior pathways. These states are the dynamic precursor to a broader leadership transition framework.

Building on this evidence, the study introduces a Multilevel Leadership Transition Framework developed through this research with HACE alumni, supporting leaders across four interconnected levels: self, team, organization, and community. Together, the transition states and multilevel support architecture reflect the lived realities Latino leaders face: adaptive regulation under pressure, bicultural communication, sponsorship ambiguity, executive presence, and the need to remain connected to community roots while building enterprise authority.

This is where HACE's ALZA Leadership Development Program can create differentiated enterprise value. By integrating the multilevel framework into ALZA, executive roundtables, and learning labs, HACE can help corporate partners move beyond traditional professional development toward leadership systems that strengthen transition health, belonging, multicultural fluency, and sustained executive legitimacy. The community layer—where HACE plays a distinctive role—ensures leaders continue to build confidence, identity continuity, and culturally grounded leadership voice even when organizational systems remain inconsistent.

For corporations, this creates a measurable benefit: stronger succession depth, improved transition confidence, better sponsorship conversion, and leadership models that more accurately reflect the realities of multicultural enterprise growth.

Recommendations

- Embed the multilevel transition framework into ALZA curriculum design
- Use Figure 4 states as diagnostics in executive roundtables
- Build learning labs around self, team, organization, and community challenges
- Strengthen sponsor and manager capability across all four levels
- Align corporate partnership outcomes to transition health and promotion momentum

Stewardship outcome: Leadership development evolves into a multilevel enterprise and community ecosystem that strengthens sustainable Latino executive mobility.

4. WHY HACE, WHY

From Leadership Development to Leadership Activation at Scale

The findings in this report make one reality clear: organizations are not facing a shortage of Latino talent. They are facing a conversion challenge—how to translate proven readiness into visible senior leadership outcomes at scale.

This challenge is becoming more urgent as senior roles become fewer, expectations rise, and AI-enabled organizations flatten traditional hierarchies while increasing the complexity of middle-management and director-level transitions. In this environment, organizations need more than traditional Latino professional leadership development programs or internal succession systems alone. They need an external activation ecosystem that reinforces visibility, sponsorship, belonging, and enterprise influence across multiple transition points.

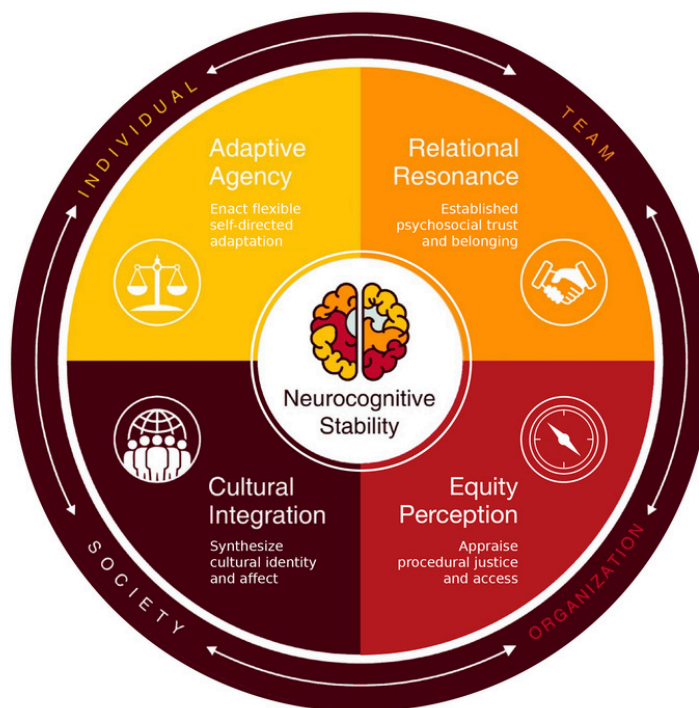
This is where HACE is uniquely differentiated.

HACE is not a program—it is a leadership ecosystem that supports advancement across the full career lifecycle. Unlike traditional consulting firms that focus primarily on competency models, leadership assessments, or episodic workshops, HACE operates as a leadership activation ecosystem designed to strengthen advancement across the four conditions that most influence Latino leadership transitions: Adaptive agency, relational resonance, equity perception, and cultural integration, all anchored by neurocognitive stability.

Figure 5 illustrates why Latino professional leadership development programs are most effective when they extend beyond skill-building and intentionally reinforce the individual, team, organizational, and cultural conditions that shape visibility and promotion outcomes. This ecosystem perspective is what allows HACE to amplify movement from readiness to recognition at scale.

FIGURE 5

THE LEADERSHIP TRANSITION ECOSYSTEM FRAMEWORK



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Figure 5

How this comes to life in HACE programs.

Within HACE's leadership ecosystem, this activation model is translated into practice through executive simulations, sponsor matching, senior-room rehearsal, multigenerational mentoring, and alumni activation circles. Participants are not only building capability; they are repeatedly practicing the exact behaviors that shape senior advancement—**speaking early, influencing under ambiguity, strengthening executive presence, and building legitimacy through visible participation across leadership forums.**

This programmatic reinforcement is what differentiates HACE from episodic development models. Leaders move beyond classroom insight into **repeated activation cycles**, where visibility, sponsorship, belonging, and decision confidence are strengthened through real organizational and community-based leadership experiences.

With more than two decades of experience and a network of over **4,000 Latino leaders across industries**, HACE extends development beyond the classroom into real-time practice, sponsorship networks, executive exposure, and sustained reinforcement across career stages.

This creates three advantages that most consulting approaches cannot replicate:

1) Ecosystem reinforcement beyond the organization

HACE enables leaders to practice visibility, influence, and executive presence in a broader leadership community, reducing over-reliance on a single internal system for validation and sponsorship.

2) Network effects that compound advancement

Because leaders remain connected through mentorship, sponsorship, peer learning, and alumni access, advancement accelerates through **relational capital and opportunity visibility**, not isolated development events.

3) A research-backed activation model

The HACE partnership integrates evidence-based leadership transition insights with practical interventions focused on pressure performance, identity-safe executive presence, psychological safety, and transition system alignment.

For organizations, this is not a replacement for internal development. **HACE acts as a force multiplier** that strengthens the fit between how Latino leaders naturally operate and how leadership is interpreted, recognized, and advanced within the enterprise.

The strategic advantage is clear: organizations that combine internal succession systems with HACE's activation ecosystem will strengthen retention, accelerate senior Latino representation, and improve the diversity of judgment at the most consequential decision levels.

“Readiness alone does not get you promoted. Visibility, legitimacy, and action under pressure do”.

5. CONCLUSION | FROM READINESS TO MOBILITY RELEVANCE

The evidence across this report makes one reality unmistakable: stalled senior representation is not the result of insufficient capability, ambition, or leadership potential. Latino leaders are already demonstrating the adaptability, bicultural fluency, relational intelligence, and strategic resilience required for enterprise leadership.

What this study makes newly visible is that the most important leadership growth often occurs in the middle layers of the organization. The middle is not merely a waiting zone between manager and executive roles—it is the **capability compounding zone**, where leaders build the cross-functional exposure, stakeholder fluency, decision complexity, and adaptive range required for top-level roles.

The strategic challenge is not the middle itself. It is whether organizations and leaders can transform accumulated complexity into visible progression signals strong enough to sustain motivation, legitimacy, and forward momentum. When breadth of responsibility expands without corresponding sponsorship, recognition, or mobility cues, capability compounding can begin to feel like stagnation.

This insight is especially relevant for Millennial, Gen Z, and 2nd- and 3rd-generation Latino leaders, who increasingly seek careers that combine growth, relevance, authenticity, and community connection. For this generation, leadership mobility is sustained not only by promotion velocity, but by meaningful exposure, identity continuity, multilevel belonging, and visible pathways into enterprise influence.

This is why leadership mobility is now both a business and **corporate social responsibility imperative**. Organizations that create fair, transparent, community-connected transition systems strengthen not only succession depth, but also workforce trust, next-generation retention, and credibility in multicultural markets.

The organizations that will lead in an AI-accelerated and demographically evolving economy will not be those with the broadest pipelines alone, but those that most effectively convert middle-layer capability compounding into recognized enterprise legitimacy.

The future belongs to organizations that treat the middle not as a bottleneck, but as the leadership compounding engine that powers sustainable executive mobility.

"The middle kept expanding my range, but there were moments when growth felt faster than recognition."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible through the trust, partnership, and leadership of Patricia Mota, the HACE leadership team, staff, and the 4,000+ alumni community, whose commitment to Latino leadership advancement continues to shape the future of enterprise leadership.

Special gratitude is extended to the 16 accomplished leaders who generously shared their lived experiences through in-depth interviews, leadership profiles, and thoughtful follow-up engagement. Your openness, reflection, and willingness to make visible the realities of leadership transition created the foundation for the insights in this report.

Your voices, experiences, and contributions extend far beyond this study. They help illuminate a pathway for the next generation of Latino leaders navigating the journey from readiness to enterprise influence.

Your time, trust, and contribution will not be forgotten.

ABOUT HACE

The Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement (HACE) is a national nonprofit whose sole mission is to enhance career development from a cultural posture — culture as a superpower, not a tax. HACE delivers high-touch, high-impact leadership development programs that produce three measurable outcomes: acceptance, promotion, and loyalty.

Patricia Mota is the President & CEO of HACE, contributor to this research, who is a leadership development coach, curriculum designer, keynote speaker, entrepreneur and innovator focused on closing gaps for underrepresented talent – helping them connect with access and opportunity via HACE programs and beyond.

How HACE Partners:

- Talent Pipeline/Workforce Development Strategies
- Customized Leadership Development Programming & Coaching
- Thought Leadership & Branding

www.HACEonline.org



ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Dr. Marlene Graffe-Gonzalez is an executive neuroscientist, leadership transition strategist, researcher, keynote speaker, and published author whose doctoral work on Latino leaders navigating promotion-critical transitions in Corporate America informs enterprise leadership architectures, sponsorship ecosystems, and neuroplasticity-based strategies that help organizations transform readiness into sustainable executive mobility.

How We Partner With Organizations

- Leadership development and transition architecture
- Neuroplasticity-based executive coaching strategy
- Succession and sponsorship operating models
- Executive team coaching and psychometric diagnostics
- Keynotes and enterprise leadership labs



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This white paper is a strategic synopsis of key findings from the doctoral dissertation, Neuroadaptive Leadership Transition Theory: A Multilevel Examination of Identity, Regulation and Systemic Legitimacy Among Latino Middle Managers in U.S. Corporate Contexts, completed through the Ph.D./DBA Combined Program at UGSM–Monarch Business School Switzerland and housed in the university repository by author permission.

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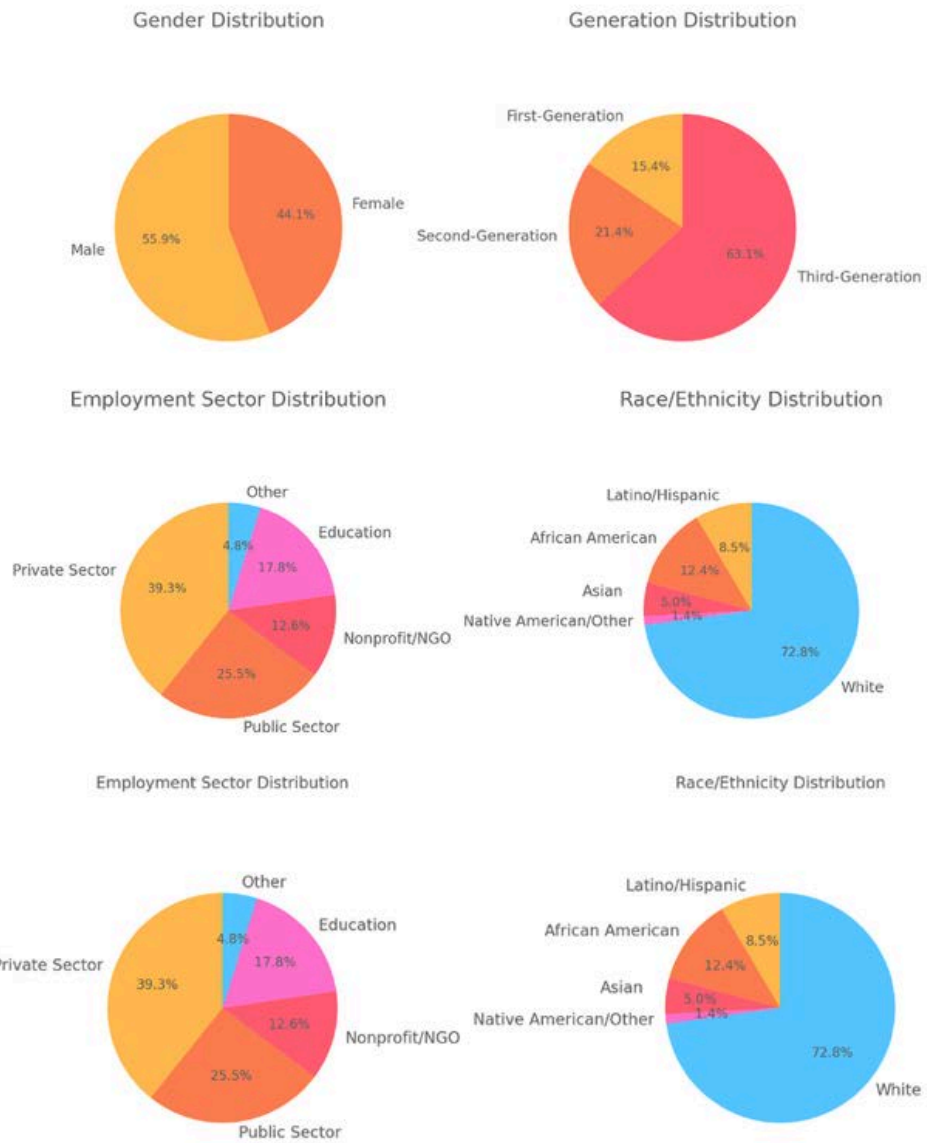
APPENDIXES

TABLE 4.4.1A
Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Number (%)
(a) Gender	Male	289 (56%)
	Female	228 (44%)
(b) Generation	First-Generation	80 (16%)
	Second-Generation	111 (21%)
	Third-Generation	327 (63%)
(c) Age Group	<25 years	46 (9%)
	25–35 years	145 (28%)
	36–45 years	122 (24%)
	>45 years	204 (39%)
(d) Race/Ethnicity (within Latino/Hispanic sample)	White	377 (73%)
	African American	64 (12%)
	Latino/Hispanic (selected as race)	44 (8.5%)
	Asian	26 (5%)
	Native American/Other	7 (1.5%)
(e) Education	High School Diploma	166 (32%)
	Associate Degree	102 (20%)
	Bachelor's Degree	148 (29%)
	Master's Degree	64 (12%)
	Professional/Doctorate Degree	38 (7%)
(f) Industry	Technology	86 (17%)
	Healthcare	72 (14%)
	Retail	69 (13%)
	Construction	52 (10%)
	Finance/Education	47 (9%)
Source: Graffe-Gonzalez, M. (2025)		

APPENDIXES

FIGURE 4.4.1B
Demographic Group Distribution of Research Participants



Source: Graffe-Gonzalez, M. (2025)

APPENDIXES

Table 4.5.1 Latino Leaders Demographics (Micro Level)

TABLE 4.5.1 Latino Leader Participant Demographics							
Participant ID	Gender	Age Bracket	Cultural Identity	Generational Status	Education Level	Industry	Leadership Transition
Participant 1	Female	25-35	Latino/a/	1st generation	Bachelor's degree	Retail	Middle Management to Director
Participant 2	Male	25-35	Latino/a/	1st generation	Bachelor's degree	Food Service	Entry-Level to Middle Management
Participant 3	Male	46-55+	Latino/a/	2nd generation	Associate degree	Financial Services	Other (significant appointment)
Participant 4	Male	46-55+	Latino/a/	1st generation	High school diploma	Hospitality	Senior Leadership to Executive Role
Participant 5	Female	46-55+	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Manufacturing	Middle Management to Director
Participant 6	Female	36-45	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Financial Services	Senior Leadership to Executive Role
Participant 7	Male	46-55+	Latino/a/	2nd generation	Bachelor's degree	Transportation	Senior Leadership to Executive Role
Participant 8	Female	36-45	Latino/a/	2nd generation	Bachelor's degree	Commercial Real Estate	Middle Management to Director
Participant 9	Female	46-55+	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Manufacturing	Middle Management to Director
Participant 10	Female	46-55+	Latino/a/	1st generation	Professional degree	Healthcare	Middle Management to Director
Participant 11	Female	46-55+	Latino/a/	2nd generation	Bachelor's degree	Financial Services	Middle Management to Director
Participant 12	Female	36-45	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Financial Services	Senior Leadership to Executive Role
Participant 13-Ex 1	Female	36-46	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Entertainment and Media	Senior Vice President
Participant 14-Ex2	Male	36-47	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Financial Services	Senior VP /General Manager
Participant 15-Ex3	Female	36-47	Latino/a/	1st generation	Master's degree	Financial Services	Senior VP /General Manager
Participant 16 CEO	Male	46-55+	Latino/a/	1st generation	Doctoral PhD/DBA	Healthcare	Executive Role to CEO

Source: Graffe-Gonzalez, M. (2025)

TABLE 4.4.4A Regression Predictors of Leadership Transition Variables			
Leadership Transition Variable	Key Predictors (Significant)	Primary AQAL Quadrant	Interpretive Insight
Perceived Readiness	Gender (p = 0.015), Education (p = 0.0377), Interior-Individual (p < 0.0001)	Interior-Individual	Psychological readiness shaped by identity and self-regulation
Satisfaction with Transition	Exterior-Collective (p < 0.0001)	Exterior-Collective	Satisfaction strongly driven by organizational support and inclusion
Adaptability	Interior-Individual (p < 0.0001), Exterior-Individual (p < 0.0001)	Interior- and Exterior-Individual	Adaptability rooted in emotional regulation and behavioral agility
Cultural Integration	Age (p = 0.0002), Generation (p = 0.0229), Cultural Identity (p = 0.0319), Education (p = 0.0444)	Interior-Collective	Cultural integration influenced by generational identity and systemic context

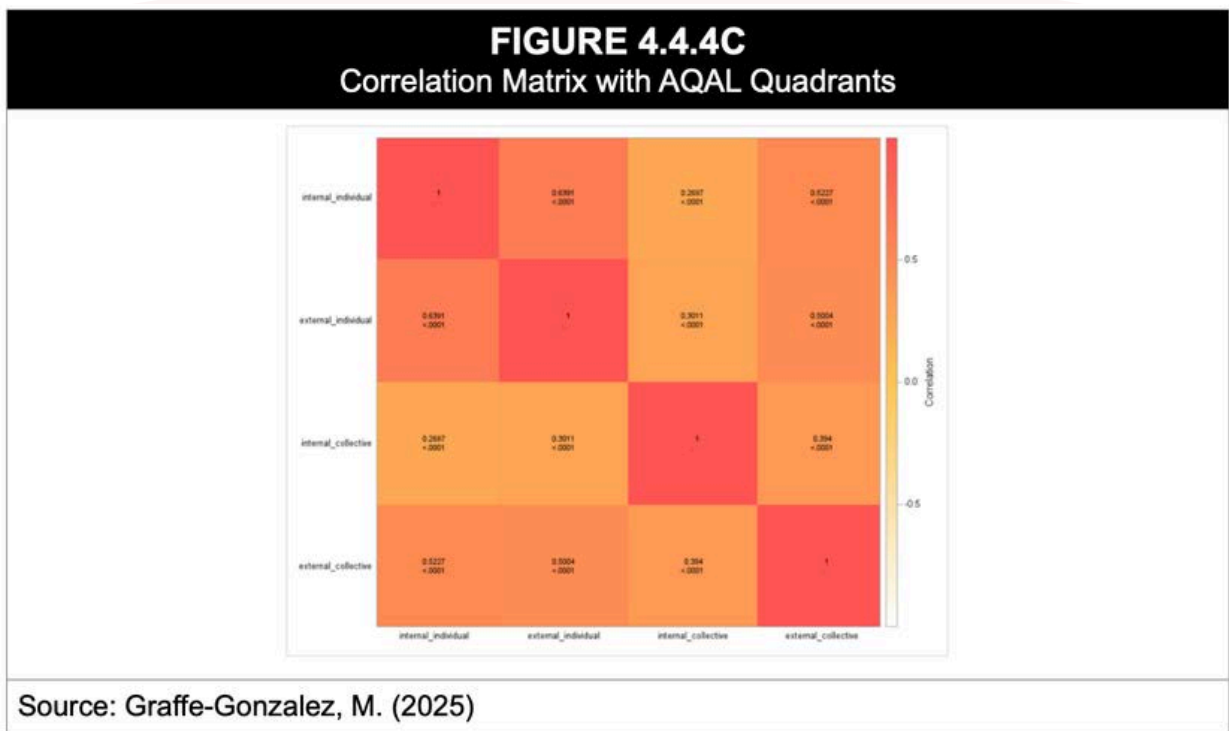
Source: Graffe-Gonzalez, M. (2025)

APPENDIXES

TABLE 4.4.4B
Correlation Matrix of Leadership Transition Variables

Variable Pair	Pearson's r	Strength of Relationship
Perceived Readiness and Adaptability	0.67	Strong
Perceived Readiness and Satisfaction	0.52	Strong
Adaptability and Satisfaction	0.46	Moderate
Satisfaction and Cultural Integration	0.56	Strong

Source: Graffe-Gonzalez, M. (2025)



APPENDIXES

