“Cambia, todo cambia!” the group sang, “Change, all will change!” I was sitting in a large circle at the daily meeting of the staff of MAP International, a Christian development non-governmental organization in Chilimarca, Bolivia. The meetings could go on for several hours as the men and women discussed their work teaching school, caring for the sick and preventing illness, and training indigenous Aymara and Quechua to go back to their rural communities and teach others about “total health” — the spiritual, physical, economic, and political health of a community. The group spoke of local and national politics, sang songs, shared their thoughts on Bible passages, and enjoyed cake and tea on birthdays.

To a Western or Northern observer this would not seem to be “leadership development.” There was no PowerPoint presentation, no one noticeably running the meeting, no particular skills being taught, and very little use of the word “I.” In fact, those gathered would be unable to present an observer with any leader at all. For this community, the name of the power or force that they seek to be liberated from is leadership, and it is known by its effects: poverty, gender inequity, violence, oppression, and a culture of silence and fear that paralyzes change.

I spent several weeks one summer with the community to see what I could learn about “leaderless leadership.” I observed no utopia, but a messy, beautiful, and powerful corporate struggle for wholeness. Those people with whom I spoke credit their success to the leaderless leadership philosophy they share. Jose Miguel, who serves as one of MAP’s representatives in Chilimarca, reflected on this experience in a recent email:

Unfortunately we were trapped for several years trying to catch up with the magic recipe that was offered by the innovators of leadership. The proposition that human beings can get organized under the leadership paradigm (with “the one” that leads and “the others” that follow) has brought so much suffering, injustice, corruption, and oppression in this world. Especially in the gender relationships, the leadership paradigm reproduces social constructs that we males have been born to lead and females to follow, and this has legitimized the most pervasive and prevalent oppressions in all cultures and nations....

Team-based organizations without leaders in which each [member] is a full human being — a subject of rights and responsibilities — and [that are] highly committed to constructing a “we-ness” or “togetherness” are extremely creative and effective [at] writing their own history and achieving incredible results... We all are brothers and sisters with different functions and responsibilities to build up each other in harmony, love, reciprocity, complementarily, mutuality, and solidarity.

The gender equity component of the community’s development efforts came up repeatedly in my interviews and conversations. “Could it be possible,” I began to think, “that by modeling and empowering a community of equity, justice, and liberating education, such practice becomes modeled and reproduced continually?” I suggest this might be an image of what the West calls “leadership development,” when freed from the bondage of hierarchy and authority wrought by the power of darkness, the same power that Jesus notes at his betrayal in Luke 22:53. As his disciples wrangle over who is best only hours before this, Jesus warns them of the fruit of this power: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:25–27).

I wonder if our leadership paradigm might need some redeeming, and possibly — liberating — from the powers that have co-opted its praxis. Like Jose Miguel encourages, we could throw the concept of leadership out completely. But then we would be left with just a servant, and who in the West needs that?

Joanna K.B. Stanberry is a student in the Masters program in Organizational Leadership at Eastern University. She also works in the governance section of a large hedge fund in New York City and contributes there as a member of the leadership team of the Drucker Society. Joanna earned a BA from Claremont McKenna College and has been active with CBE since 1994.

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