

An Interview with Odir Pereira: Leadership from a Brazilian Perspective

By Adele Bergstrom, Claremont McKenna College '05

Odir Pereira is president of the Leadership Institute of Brazil, or Instituto de Lideranca do Brasil (ILB). He founded and directs the non-profit organization aimed at fostering leadership development in the governmental, private, and social sectors. Mr. Pereira received his B.S and M.A. in Management Sciences and Engineering from UCLA. A former director and international consultant for Booz Allen & Hamilton, he later worked as executive and CEO of prominent Brazilian companies in the fields of healthcare, publishing, engineering/construction, and banking.

Question: *Leadership Review*

What are the key challenges and opportunities for young leaders in Brazil currently?

Answer: *Mr. Pereira*

To me, the major challenge is accessibility to effective leadership education. In business and management courses in Brazil today, a very high emphasis is still being placed on the conventional management skills expected of a “good” leader. They have yet to focus on the broader picture. For instance, the Brazilian corporate market complains that new graduates and potential leaders are unprepared to make decisions that require interpersonal skills. Organizations are just starting to develop an awareness of the high relevance of leadership development as a key component of their overall strategic plans, but still tend to focus on conventional classroom teaching. The importance and the concept of mentoring, for instance, is not clearly understood yet, plus the fact that there are cultural barriers to be overcome in order to properly benefit from this key leadership development dimension.

In terms of opportunities, I highlight the fact that Brazilian organizations tend to favor young leadership. The average age of Brazilian corporate executives is much lower than in the USA and Europe. Further, the Brazilian business environment is typically crisis-ridden, frequently chaotic, and uncertain in a context that is highly multicultural. It is, therefore, an environment where young leaders have the opportunity to season their skills quickly. Because of this, multinational companies are increasingly sending their young leaders to Brazil for training. This also opens a door of opportunity for successful, young Brazilian executives to enter the international market due to their multicultural experience and abilities. U.S. universities are also intensifying their presence in Brazil through visits and internship programs, particularly for MBA program students.

Q. How can universities and other schools in Brazil better prepare young people to assume leadership positions?

A. They can start by doing a better job in understanding what the market is really in need of (particularly interpersonal and social skills), rather than just continue to respond to what the students (direct clients) are demanding – seemingly technical skills. This suggests the need to revise their curriculum and put a stronger emphasis on effective leadership training rather than maintain the current focus on conventional management education, which tends to put the emphasis on technical skills. The ILB, the Leadership Institute of Brazil, has a commitment to promote and reinforce this kind of awareness.

Q. What progress has the ILB made in the education area?

A. ILB is still a new leadership institution, only one half year old. We do, however, have a strong commitment to fostering leadership development in the private, government, and social sectors. Our commitment is oriented to the transformational leadership style, in an environment where a top down leadership style still prevails. A recent study on leadership styles involving 62 countries showed an increase in the authoritarian leadership style in Brazil. It is interesting to note that on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents the democratic style and 100 represents the authoritarian style, over the past three decades Brazil has gone from 69 to 75.

ILB is, however, witnessing a high and almost unexpectedly positive receptivity to our message. In spite of our very short history, we have already exposed over 3000 people to the transformational leadership concepts we profess, including executives of over 400 major Brazilian corporations and key government and social sector organizations. As an example, we are currently structuring, and trying to raise funds to support, a solid leadership training program for 1000 community leaders in a joint effort with the military police. Both the government and the social sector should be involved. ILB is also starting a special training program on leadership and diversity in the context of the Brazilian culture, oriented to European companies operating in Brazil. The idea is to enhance and promote the development of leadership approaches and models that can serve as a reference to European companies worldwide. ILB has also developed interesting studies on Brazilian leadership styles and competencies.

Q. What qualities in leadership do you think are most universal? That is, what qualities do good leaders possess that transcend countries?

A. The first quality to me is moral quality. This will allow the highest form of leadership, i.e., moral leadership. A leadership that reflects balanced character and competence in a way that produces impacting value added to society. With this in mind, good and effective leaders should be able to demonstrate four fundamental qualities set forth as the “leadership diamond” by Peter Kostenbaum in his book *Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness* (Jossey Bass, 1991). First, sound ethical values (sustained by universal values that transcend national boundaries and cultural and religious differences, especially those of justice and love to one another). Second, the ability to read and interpret reality. Third, the ability to come up with and articulate a compelling vision. The fourth one is courage, which is not the absence of fear but the predominance of a leader's commitment and action sustained by faith in his values and an impacting vision. Evidently, in today's

world of intense interdependency and diversity, emotional competencies are complimentary and indispensable for an effective leadership.