



Karla Monterroso is Interrogating the Language of Power

A personal leadership crisis shaped her understanding of how power is built and distributed. Now the leadership coach, strategist, and racial equity advocate shares how others can navigate the unique demands of leaders of color, and the work necessary to eradicate anti-Blackness in Latino communities.

Alicia Menendez:

What happens when someone who hasn't had systemic power is elevated into a leadership position, or power is then conferred onto them? As Karla Monterroso also tells me, that experience can be shocking. You probably know that either because you have lived it or you've watched another leader grapple with that same discomfort. It is one of the many uncomfortable truths that Karla, a leadership coach, strategist, and racial equity advocate manages to like no one else can, which is why I wanted to talk with her about the work she's doing to build a language around power to coach leaders who are trying to do both the work of their organizations and the work of dismantling workplace inequity, and what it looks like to get it right when it feels so easy to get it wrong.

Menendez: Karla, thank you so much for doing this.

Karla Monterroso:

I'm so excited to do it. Long-time fan of the podcast.

Menendez: First-time caller.

Monterroso: First-time caller, long-time fan.

Menendez: As you know, I am obsessed with your work, obsessed with you. You go to USC. Going through your LinkedIn, sort of watching those early years out of college, where it's like you know you want to be in the change space, you want to be in the nonprofit space, but you can sort of feel the early twenties trying to figure out what that is. And you land at Code2040. You spend more than six years there, about half of it as its CEO. Around the time you become its CEO, you find out that the organization is in a 3 million deficit. Can you take me back to that moment?

Monterroso: I think that when I got the organization, I was clear there was a lot of work that needed to happen. And I had had conversations about the cultural work that needed to happen in the organization. It wasn't just that we could not get through the year, that there were 3 million dollars less than we needed in the year, it's that we didn't have a pipeline of people that we were going to be talking to within the first six months of my time there, that would've helped raise that money in time.

Monterroso: And I remember healing of my stomach clenching when I understood the amount of money, in particular because we had been an organization with the reputation that we were just financially fine. And in the nonprofit space, a lot of CEOs of color will talk about

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the brand to budget differential. Like you have these huge brands that you're like, okay, people know me and reporters come and talk to me as an expert.

Menendez: You have a hundred thousand Instagram followers and no cash.

Monterroso: Yes, that's right. And it's the requirement, because if you are not known in that way, if you are not talked about in the conversation in that way, only 4% of all charitable giving in the entire country goes to Black and Latinx led organizations. And of that, only 0.6% goes to Black and Latinx women. So you're in a small minority over a small minority of people who are getting money.

Monterroso: So you know those things. And on the other side of that, you have this thing. Like at Code2040, we had this thing called the Fellows Program, and that was really successfully known. But the better we became at getting young people for what they said was there was no pipeline of young people of color to do this work. There was. And the better we became at it, the harder it got to get them into companies. And so we needed a complete readjustment of our model because scaling was not going to be the way that we did the work. And understanding that what we were fighting was the segregation of salaried work in America, not just the need to onboard people into the terms and the ways they interview, and skilling them from their university careers for this. It was the fundamental structural barriers that make it so Black and Latinx and Native people drop off in our ways to workforce after they make \$60,000. You see it in the data. After the \$60,000 mark, we disappear somewhere. We talk about it as diversity and inclusion, but it is the segregation of salaried work in America. And we do not have a nuanced conversation around that. And so we had to make a lot of really hard changes because we knew we were fighting structural barriers and not just prepping an eager workforce to be able to assimilate, which is really what the ask is all the time.

Menendez: We're in a moment where to be a responsible leader means that you are doing dual track work. You are both doing the work of disentangling workplace inequity, and you are doing the work of whatever your work is; putting on a television show, making sure there are more Latinxs in tech. Whatever the work is, whatever you were doing-

Monterroso: Whatever the mission is. I've been calling it a dual mandate. We've got to do both projects, which is the desegregation of salaried work, and our mission, vision purpose. And that is everything from artists and creators who all of a sudden have power, to nonprofit executives, to tech CEOs everywhere. The expectation is that we run a dual mandate. Because if we don't, what we're saying is we are okay with the subjugation of our own people in systems that have not retained them, have not recruited them. And I think that is causing, in the places where we have actual multiracial workplaces, we are living a future I think America is heading to where there are just different systems and conversations that are needed when you are managing a plurality than when you are managing a homogenous workplace.

Menendez: Okay, so that's a lot of high-level talk. What does it actually mean? What does it actually look like?

Monterroso: It's like when you are making decisions about where you are giving your resources within an organization, I think all workplaces should be thinking about where are the places that people of color have been pushed out because the system actually was designed for that, or people of color haven't been able to come in because the system was for that.

Monterroso: And while all workplaces need to be doing that, really the only people being held accountable for that are leaders of color. And I think because representation, we've talked about representation so much in a way I think was necessary and one part of our journey, but it leads people to believe that a person just by being Black, Latinx, Native, or Asian knows more about creating equitable workplaces than a white person does, when really you're in the discovery of all of the ways in which it has been inequitable.

Monterroso: You will be working on something and you're like, "Oh, I'm going to change our recruiting process. We're going to say we're not going to judge anyone by pedigree in this workplace." So you're like, "We're taking off at what university you went to in every system." But literally every applicant tracking system in the world has it for you to put in. So the systems fix actually takes a lot of diligence and a lot of commitment to execute on. And people will name drop in a cover letter. To manage that out, you have to look at all of the places in which you are using that.

Monterroso: And that sounds easy, but ends up being incredibly hard, and a process that takes an incredibly long amount of time. Meanwhile, you have people on your team that are annoyed and angry that those things are not changing, and fast, or that they didn't change actually the day that you, a leader, determined to make something equitable, took charge. It should have been automatic that I, as a leader of color, was able to change all of these things on day one. And our young people, our junior level, entry level, mid-level people are not wrong. They are seeing some really important things that we need to change. And our ability to communicate to each other and being in a solutions-oriented space around that inequity is really hard, and I think is causing internal struggles across progressive-leaning organizations across the country.

Menendez: So part of your work is that you're a coach. How do you coach leaders of color through that exact challenge?

Monterroso: I've been doing a few different things. So I'm a coach, so I coach both individual leaders and executive teams. And I'm a strategist, so I'll go in and help a team navigate a really tough moment, and help people start to think about the execution of these things not just from the idea or insight, but what does it mean operationally to tackle all of this stuff. And the identity shift that happens for leaders of color. Because I think for a lot of us, we see ourselves as the first, and don't understand the level of power we are carrying the moment that becomes true.

Menendez: For a long time, power was equated with money. Money got you information, money got you access. Part of what you argue is that the digital revolution, the internet has changed our access to information. And as you said to me, you take that piece, which is the digital revolution, you take demographic shift. Where those two things meet, what then happens?

Monterroso: Yeah. It's explosion.

Menendez: I forget sometimes that Latina to Latina listeners can't see my hands, just make the gesture that that articulates.

Monterroso: It's an explosion. So I think up until now, we got power through institutions. So if I was going to get power, and I define power as like the ability to change my life and another person's life through access to money, information, decision-makers. So my ability to influence to people who have decision-making rights. Megaphone, so the ability for my ideas to carry. And decision-making rights. And I think those things came in a package that you got with enough seniority at a place, network connections that put you in a place,

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money that allowed you to enter it. And in some places like the performance of whiteness and the performance of patriarchy. And that's workplaces, that's churches, that's like the VFW, volunteer associations, HOAs. That's how people got power. And the internet made it so we could access one of those things and not all of those things.

Monterroso: And so also a ton harder for people to be like, "Oh, I have power right now." They do not feel powerful because power has been equated to access to luxury more than it has all of those mechanisms and tools that we have. So they're like, "I'm not in luxury. So it must mean that I don't have power." Which is not accurate.

Monterroso: And then you've got people coming into institutions that have some level of power. So I'm a COVID long hauler. I got sick in March of 2020, and I'm still on heart medication today. I got sick at a time when there was no name for why I was not better from COVID. And I had the experience of convening with other people on the internet who were also having this experience. We were looking at medical journals in the absence of having medical degrees or having to go to medical school. And then we meet disability advocates who have been in this fight for a really long time. And we are able to start to influence decision-makers that they need to address our problem. And that dynamic is playing out in a number of different things. In that instance, it worked to our benefit. I think the Black Lives Matter movement in a world which was gate-kept by white media men would have been stifled. But social media allowed people to find each other and create a megaphone that allowed their ideas to carry.

Monterroso: So we are, as people of color, in a place now where we have enough, just enough power to be agitators, really potent agitators, but not enough power to shape the moment that we are in the middle of. And if you're a leader in the middle of that, then your people are looking at that and they're like, "Well, why don't you do X?" You're like, "Well, I don't have that power." And that is not what our people want to hear. And it's also a complex story that we're not telling, and we're not grappling with.

Menendez: It's tempting for me to put your work in sort of the bucket that we've talked about and then another bucket, which is anti-blackness in our community, in Latinx communities. The work is not separate and apart. There is tremendous overlap in this work. I want to talk about this a bit, but I want to start by what brought you to not just anti-blackness, but anti-blackness within our community specifically as an area of change work?

Monterroso: So I think first there is no me that becomes a first generation college student, a first generation salaried worker without the Black leaders. I am not here in being able to do work I love in the absence of Black people. And I would say that my experience of Latinx leaders in the very first parts of my life were that a lot of the men in our community also blocked me out of opportunity, and were in many ways, not in my corner when it came to forward movement and progress, in the ways that Black leaders were. And then I look at the coalition-building opportunities that we need to create. And we are just the weak piece of puzzle all of the time. First of all, way to forget after Latinx people. And second of all, it takes so little for that competition to get kicked up. I can't tell you how many times I've been in a room with a Latinx leader that is like, "Oh, I just wish we had this thing that Black people have."

Monterroso: I don't think that we recognize that as the internalized anti-blackness that exists in our community. The story of the Latinx community is one of erasure and invisibility, absolutely. But often the story of Black folks is one of hyper-visibility and violence. I see in the Black

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community, an absolute advocacy for rights. And I see in our community an advocacy for acceptance. And those two things are fundamentally different things. And I want for us to want rights more than we want acceptance.

Menendez: What does it mean for Latinx leaders, what does it mean for Black leaders, what does it mean for Latinx leaders some of whom are Black, that they're going to be running up against this work and running up against these standards, and then inevitably failing?

Monterroso: I think one, we have to be clear both for ourselves and for the movement, that we do not have all the answers. We're really bad at that. I think in part, because of that brand to budget gap, we have to create the aura of success to get any fragment.

Menendez: I also think part of it is the experience so many of us have had that we do not have the luxury of saying I don't know, less white people than assume that we're not sufficiently competent.

Monterroso: For sure. For sure. I think-

Menendez: To me, this is the flip side to fake it till you make it, which is you fake it till you make it, you make it, and then what?

Monterroso: I think one of the things I realized as I became an executive almost a decade ago was, yeah, yay we made it, but to what ends. I think so many people's dreams have been limited to attaining the thing rather than doing the thing. It's why so much of my work focuses on our personal journeys and identities, and how all the ways in which we got our needs and values met, our value met, get in the way of good leadership. Because unless we can reckon with those ghosts, we will constantly sacrifice our people for our own gain. And I think that there's a real gap right now in our understanding of the difference between collective liberation and personal success within these systems.

Monterroso: I don't actually begrudge anyone creating the conditions for themselves to be successful in what has been a very broken America. I do not think it is right for us to mix that up with collective liberation. Because the system's working for everyone, and being safe in them is different than a few of us getting luxury and comfort.

Menendez: That's a perfect note to end on, but I am going to ask you what I missed.

Monterroso: I think we are in the most acute war on people of color that we've experienced in recent memory. And what I'm clear about is that war almost killed me twice in the last two years. I look at COVID and I am clear that there are many of us that will not make it to the other end. And for me, the goal right now is to truncate the amount of time that we spend in the dark place, and see the tools that we need for the next version of what we are going to become. And if we're going to do that, we have to learn to be in community together, even through disagreement, conflict, and difference. And we do not currently have the language for that, but all of us need to be working to create it.

Menendez: Karla, I am so grateful to live in the same moment with you, as dark as that moment is, because your clarity is exactly the thing that I have been craving and looking for. So thank you for all of the thought and work you have put into everything you do. Thank you.

Monterroso: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our marketing lead. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMS on Instagram. Tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise

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CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Karla Monterroso is Interrogating the Language of Power." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. May 2, 2022. LatinaToLatina.com.

Produced by:

