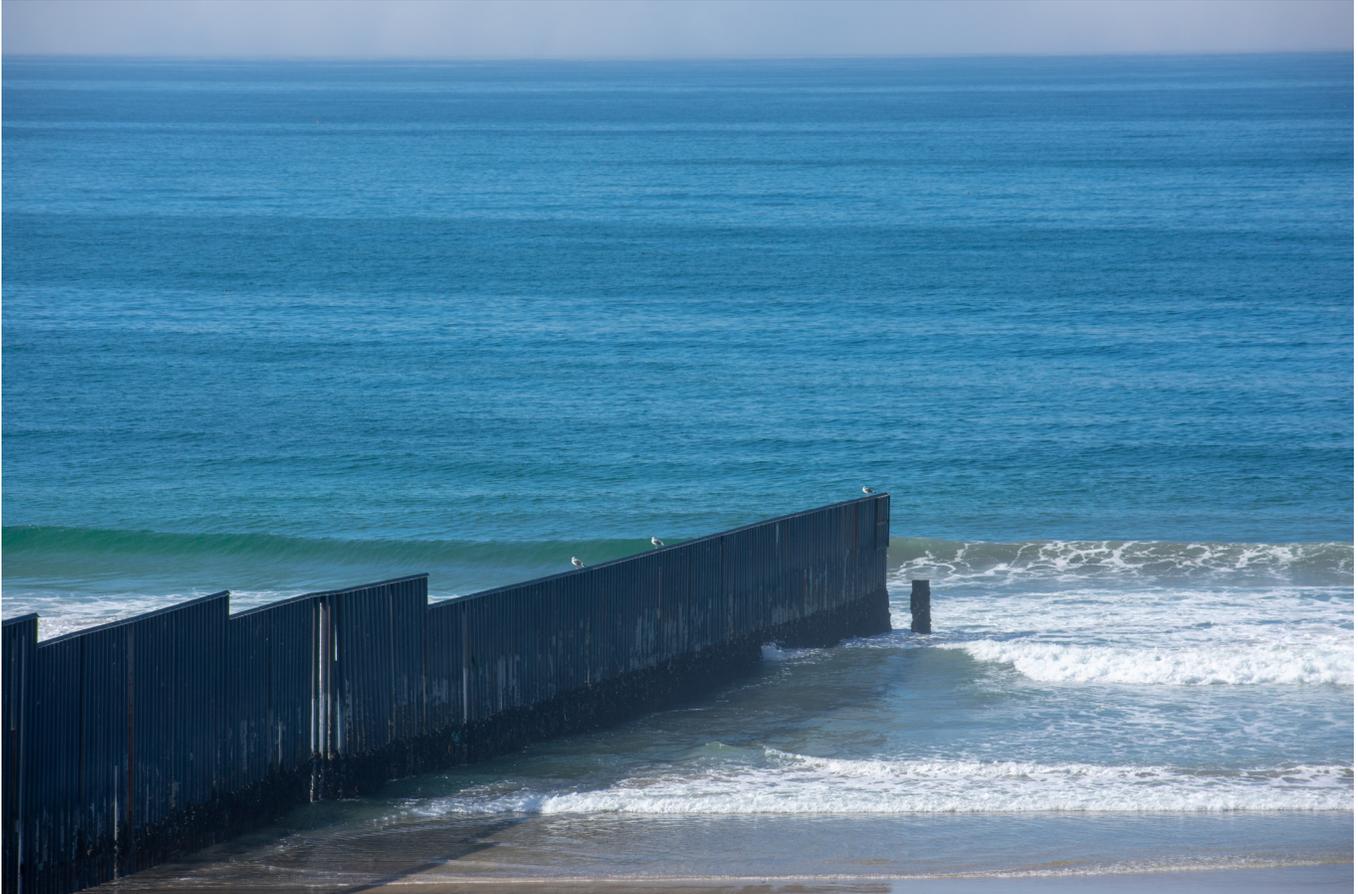


TRANSBORDER LEADERSHIP AND WHY IT MATTERS



BINATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SAN DIEGO-TIJUANA REGION: LEADERSHIP-IN-ACTION FROM AN UNCOMMON PLACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S.-Mexico border at San Diego-Tijuana is where global becomes local. With its own gravitational pull the border is a magnet where multiple currents intersect in actual space and real time. Human activity – commerce, migration, trade, recreation, entrepreneurship, politics, advocacy, security, culture, art – is manifested in an urban and natural ecosystem where varied interests seek to adapt and thrive. Any border is, by definition, an obstacle. It is the frontier, the end of the road and the start of the road. How people operate here – how they succeed or fail - gives us insight into the requirements, tensions and paradoxes that leaders everywhere face.

This exploratory study was conducted to address the question: *What makes a transborder leader?* Preliminary research indicates that transborder stakeholders fit a distinctive profile of leadership-in-action for our times. They are able to get things done across enterprises, agendas and jurisdictions despite extraordinary obstacles, barriers, and chronic uncertainty. In a time of global pandemic and disruption the nature of leadership itself is being called into question; ethics, actions, competence, and trust are in the spotlight as never before.

Survey responses come from a cross section of 43 binational stakeholders in leadership roles from business, industry, government, not-for-profit, and civil society in the San Diego – Tijuana region. Their perspectives on the region - given prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic - indicate a collaborative “*bridges-not-walls*” mindset for building a robust binational economy and community. Operating in complex, evolving, and contested spaces stakeholders convey what is likely to be required of leaders in a post-COVID-19 world.

Data reflects the diversity of stakeholders and the scope of their activities across a range of enterprises and sectors. Respondents are consistent in identifying keys to effective leadership, and five themes emerge that drive transborder leadership. In order of importance they are: 1. *Personal Attributes*: Openness, Optimism, Adaptability, Action-Focus, Empathy, Humility, Persistence, Resilience, Ability to Listen; qualities and values that represent the “Self.” 2. *Relationships*: Networks, Collaboration; “Self and Others” manifested in personal and professional bonds. 3. *Bicultural / Cross Cultural Sensibility* – Engaging with and caring to learn about other cultures, through lived experience or by choice. 4. *Regional Awareness and Vision* – Savviness, Advocacy and Affection for the borderlands. A Vision for the Future. 5. *Bilingual / Practical Skills* – Knowledge of multiple languages, as well as various kinds of functional expertise.

These overlapping themes are both a mirror and a lens for exploring the requirements of transborder leadership. They can serve as a roadmap to navigate other ecosystems where volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are the norm; where conditions

can signal both peril and promise. Respondents paint a picture that is both personal and professional, private and public, frustrating yet hopeful. Their common link is the border, yet by choosing to engage and collaborate they can transcend it to achieve results, create value, and build community. In so doing they reflect the essence of effective and purposeful leadership, whether in periods of stability and prosperity or in times of crisis and uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

What began in 2019 as an inquiry into the nature of leadership in the San Diego-Tijuana region has, in 2020, taken a different turn. In recent months a global pandemic has upended life as we know it. COVID-19 is an invisible pathogen previously unknown. A moving target, it is ten times more powerful than the common flu and is highly contagious. COVID-19 has set in motion a series of events not seen in recent memory: A public health crisis triggering a massive financial crisis which has, in turn, revealed a crisis of leadership. Its effects are global in scale and akin to a tsunami in its rolling impact across the world. How long this will continue is unclear. No one is immune and, at this writing, there is no known antidote. What is clear are the profoundly disruptive effects COVID-19 is having around the globe, and will continue to have in the months and years ahead.

Transborder stakeholders profiled here seem uniquely equipped to meet this moment. They represent a range of interests, projects and perspectives, yet their common denominator is one of operating within the same transnational ecosystem. They must all contend with the reality of an international border and the cacophony of its political, economic and cultural milieu. Transborder stakeholders operate on the nexus between sovereign nations, history and everyday life. They manage the border's contradictions and its shifting aperture of permeability. They are all too familiar with disruption. At their best, they find ways to build bridges and collaborate to improve the region overall. COVID-19 is putting this regional solidarity to the test. They are the focus of this study.

This report presents a profile of binational stakeholders from the San Diego-Tijuana region. They express their views on the regional ecosystem, the transborder experience, top issues up to 2025, and an imagined future up to 2030. This sets the stage for what respondents view as the "must have" leadership competencies required to be effective in this space. Their experiences and perspectives are particularly relevant at a time when the effects of a "VUCA world"¹ are being felt both globally and locally.

¹ VUCA is an acronym that originated in 1990 with students at the U.S. Army War College to describe the *volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity* of the world after the Cold War. The term relates to how people view the conditions of the external environment under which they must make decisions, plan strategies, manage risks, and solve problems. It is likely that new acronyms will emerge to reflect the conditions of a post-COVID-19 world.

Examples of binational stakeholders practicing transborder leadership include:

- Environmental advocates fighting for clean border beaches and waterways
- Tech entrepreneurs seeking binational funding to pilot a cross border app
- Community leaders working to protect, defend and shelter migrant families.
- Binational stakeholders seeking to improve border infrastructure on both sides
- Government leaders leveraging relationships to improve cross border trade.
- American real estate development firms partnering with investors in Mexico
- Binational marketing experts promoting medical tourism
- Philanthropists identifying multiple needs to attract vital funding for critical border projects
- Wedding planners promoting events in the Valle de Guadalupe wine country
- Community leaders promoting binational events to raise cultural awareness
- Trade association members on the hunt for foreign direct investment in Mexico
- Advocates working with binational policy makers on affordable housing options
- Craft brewers on the border tapping into new markets in San Diego-Tijuana
- Arts, culture and educational institutions forging cross border partnerships
- Medical and public health officials sharing information and resources in a crisis

THE BORDER CONTEXT

In the 1920's Tijuana was a playground for movie stars, mobsters and anyone looking to escape the tentacles of that era's American "reform movement" against booze, gambling, and carousing of every sort. After ten years of bloody revolution and civil war in Mexico, binational investors were eager to offer Americans a respite from the yoke of Prohibition. They did so by creating a garden of earthly delights for rich, famous, and regular people alike in Tijuana during that decade. The crown jewel of all this activity was the Agua Caliente Resort, Casino and Racetrack, opened in 1928 just eighteen miles south of San Diego - "Where the rainbow ends," promised the brochures. No expense was spared to attract wealthy and prominent notables to this luxurious "American Riviera" where sports gaming, fine dining and top entertainment could be experienced amidst classic architecture, spas, golf courses, swimming pools and private cabañas. Guests could arrive by motor car, railroad, steamship or airplane. On the international border every effort was made to speed the customs process and ensure that "no unpleasanties are experienced getting in and out of Mexico."² There were fortunes to be made at this world class destination.

² See: *Satan's Playground*, Paul Vanderwood, (2010).

At the time, the San Diego - Tijuana border was described by some as “the end of the road to hell.”³ Today it is often depicted as a place where good things seldom happen, where inconvenience is the norm and danger, crisis or tragedy are always a possibility. The reality is much more complicated, vibrant and hopeful due in large part to the people and enterprises who have a stake in the region. The “optics” of the border involve more than what meets the eye.

Permeability – the quality that allows for the ebb and flow of people, goods and forces of the natural environment – is a condition that is forever being tested, and contested, on the border. A magnet where multiple currents converge and intersect, the U.S.- Mexico border is not for the faint of heart. It is a place that distills the mutually complex realities of both countries and offers a field of play where stakeholders can promote their projects and make their case; whatever their enterprise, endeavor, or agenda. As one stakeholder reported, *“The border is a place where dreams are made or crushed.”*

The historically asymmetrical power relationship between the United States and Mexico is writ large on the border, and insinuates itself into everyday life. A living laboratory where culture, commerce and binational relations converge across a shared space, its vast ecosystem is both natural and urban. It is crisscrossed by a maze of local, state and federal jurisdictions from two sovereign nations, where political and economic winds can bring both havoc and promise to the reality on the ground.

During 2018 and 2019, the border reality was particularly tense, and sometimes chaotic as summarized in a Voice of San Diego article.⁴ Already a complex environment, late 2018 witnessed the arrival of a migrant caravan to Tijuana that precipitated a major shutdown of the international border crossing the day before Thanksgiving. Originating in Honduras, for over a month the caravan made its way through Mexico gathering nearly six thousand people who arrived in Tijuana. The humanitarian crisis that followed – with service providers scrambling to shelter migrants – challenged stakeholders and local leaders from both countries while they watched concertina wire being strung up on the border wall. One leader commented: *“We’ve worked so hard for this U.S.-Mexico relationship and now we have this visual of a militarized border. That’s not who we are. We’re here because we share – we share an environment, we share air, we share families, we share cross-border commerce.”*

Although the border closure lasted five hours, its occurrence at the start of the major holiday season generated nearly \$12 million in economic losses for both San Diego and Tijuana. The expanding militarization of the border also triggered unprecedented economic, political and social effects that rippled throughout 2019. In March of that

³ *Satan’s Playground*, Vanderwood.

⁴ <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/news/a-year-after-border-shutdown-local-leaders-say-the-chaos-strengthened-ties-with-tijuana/> (2 December 2019)

year the Trump Administration also threatened to impose tariffs that could cripple the Mexican economy, adding to simmering tensions that were acutely felt in the region.

Lessons learned during this period were not lost on local leaders. Said one: *“The silver lining of all of this is that we have been more united in our messaging and the importance of the border. Now we know we have to speak with one voice, and really one voice.”* The disruptions of 2019 underscored the importance of binational ties between transborder stakeholders who found common purpose. Said another leader: *“What we saw is organizations that typically work in their own silos figure out how to work together. Beyond that, I think we saw this awakening of people locally, of a compassionate human spirit, of good people asking, ‘What can I do to help?’”*

In 2020 Tijuana has the status of a global city. It is a magnet for manufacturing goods for export, such as medical devices and electronics, with multinational corporations, medical tourism, emerging innovation, and entrepreneurship of every kind. With daily international flights to Asia, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere, Tijuana is a gateway to Latin America and the 6th largest metro area in Mexico with a population of over 2 million people. The greater San Diego-Tijuana region is home to over 5 million people and represents nearly 40 % of the entire U.S.-Mexico border population. Three hundred and twenty thousand northbound and southbound crossings occur daily at regional ports of entry – including business owners, executives, employees, school children, college students, tourists, truckers and patients. Trade is critical to the region, with close to \$60 billion in exports and imports flowing across the international line. San Diego itself exports \$6 billion to Mexico each year, and one third of this goes to Baja California. Most of this trade is part of an interconnected manufacturing supply chain that has been developed over the past 50 years⁵. Tijuana has emerged as a vibrant cultural mecca recognized in education, music, the arts and gastronomy. It is a tourist destination gateway to northern Baja, including the Valle de Guadalupe wine country east of Ensenada - all within 50-75 miles of the California border. By every measure Tijuana has continued to pulsate with energy and opportunity into the 21st century.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Objective

The objective of this independent, self-funded study is to identify competencies – skills, attitudes, behaviors, characteristics – that make for effective transborder leadership.⁶ Understanding these competencies can offer a language and framework for dialogue,

⁵ *Smart Border Coalition, 2019.*

⁶ The nature of leadership has been explored throughout history. A working definition of leadership for this study is: *The art of influencing others to work willingly toward your goals.*

collaboration and action, on the border and elsewhere. How transborder stakeholders engage with one another, and with the complex requirements of the border ecosystem, is the focus of this investigation.

Research Question

This exploratory, grounded theory study⁷ was conducted to address the question: *What makes a transborder leader?* Preliminary research indicates that transborder stakeholders fit a distinctive profile of leadership-in-action for our times. They are able to get things done across enterprises, agendas and jurisdictions despite extraordinary obstacles, barriers and uncertainty. Particularly in the realm of cross-cultural leadership, transborder stakeholders illustrate the power of finding common ground, building trusted relationships, navigating ambiguity, and perpetual change. They are adept at leveraging cultural competence to achieve concrete results. Uniquely, they do so in an environment impacted by federal policies set in two national capitols thousands of miles away.

Methodology

In 2019 a 20-question online survey, in English, was sent to a non-random sample of individuals identified as transborder stakeholders from the greater San Diego / Tijuana region - people whose lives and livelihoods are influenced or shaped by the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border. These stakeholders, in turn, shape and influence the region.

Initial contacts were developed from networks of binational professionals who were invited to participate in an online survey in 2019. Snowball sampling yielded 43 responses from stakeholders of various enterprises and organizations in the private, public, not-for-profit sectors. Narrative responses to open-ended questions were analyzed, coded, then unpacked into themes identified in this study.

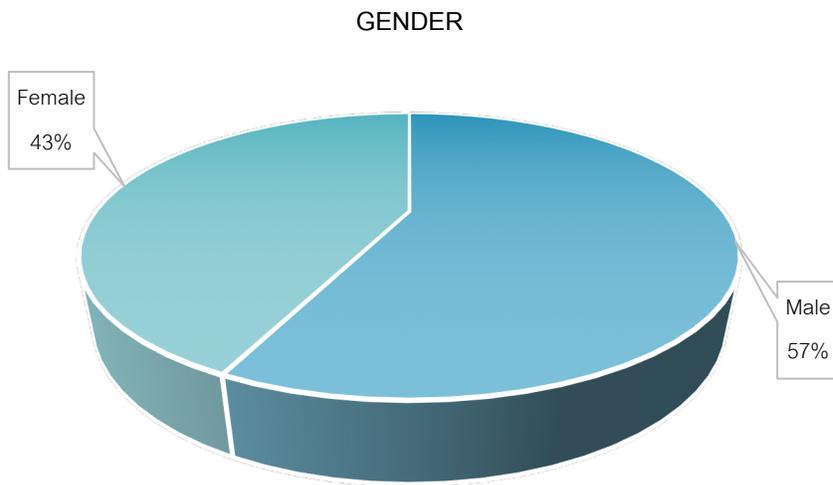
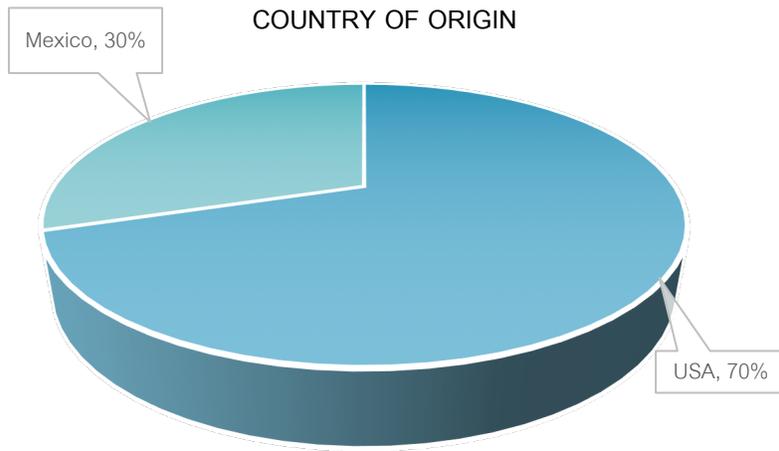
RESEARCH FINDINGS

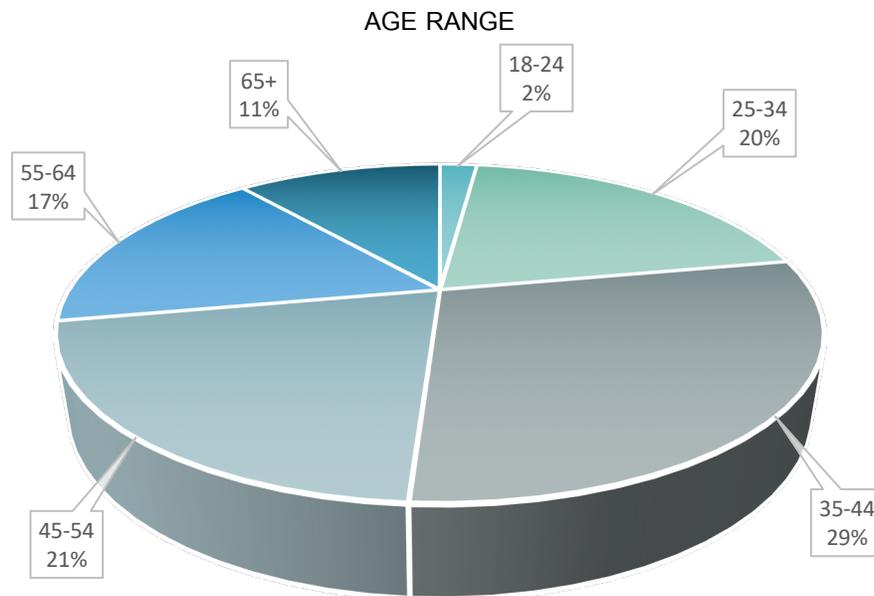
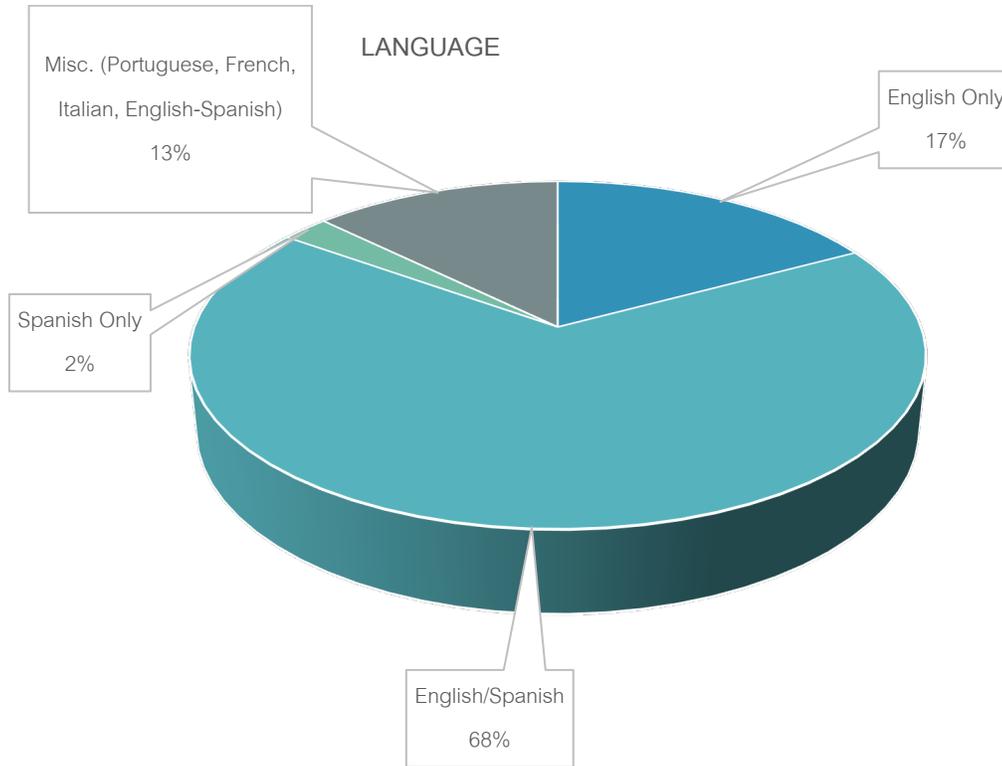
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Respondents – Who They Are

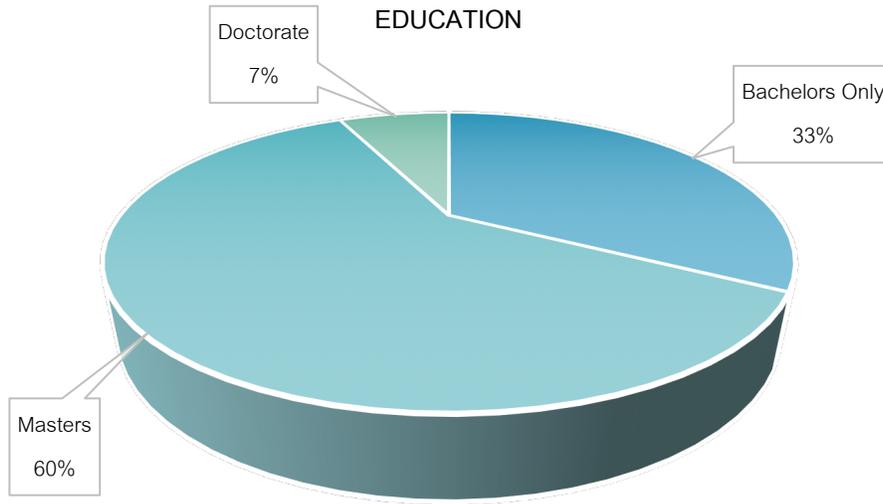
Nearly 70% of stakeholder respondents were USA origin, with 30% Mexico origin. Fifty seven percent of respondents were men; 43% women. San Diego, Tijuana and Mexico City are their primary cities of origin. Respondents also came from other California cities, plus the border cities of Mexicali, Nogales and El Paso. A range of cities in the West, Midwest and East Coast of the United States are also represented. Age: Respondents are multigenerational, from Gen-Z to Baby Boomers. Languages: 67% Spanish / English speakers; 17% English only; 2.4% Spanish only; Bilingual & Trilingual variations also included French, Portuguese and Italian.

⁷ Glaser & Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Grounded Research* (1967)

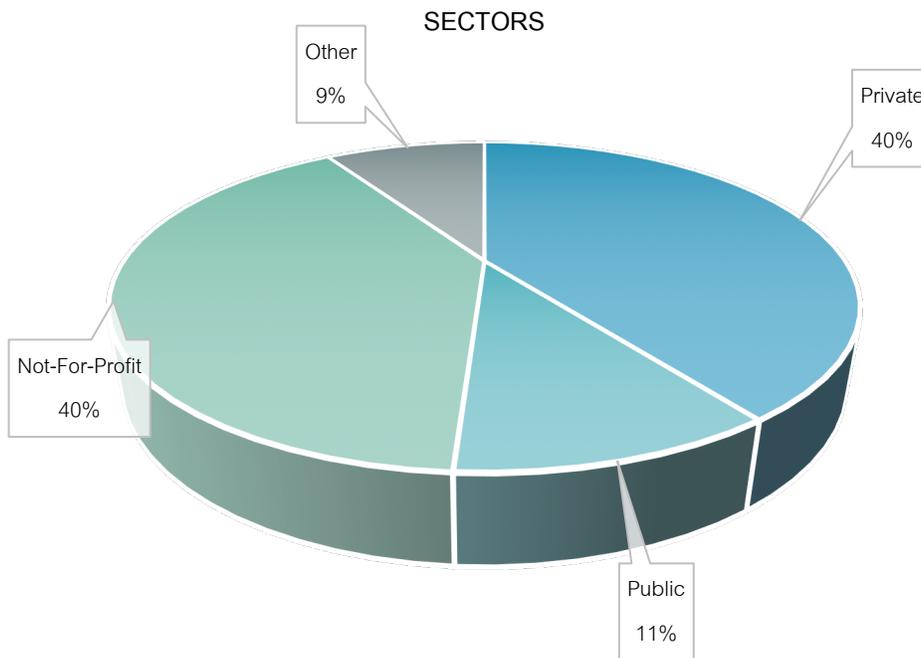




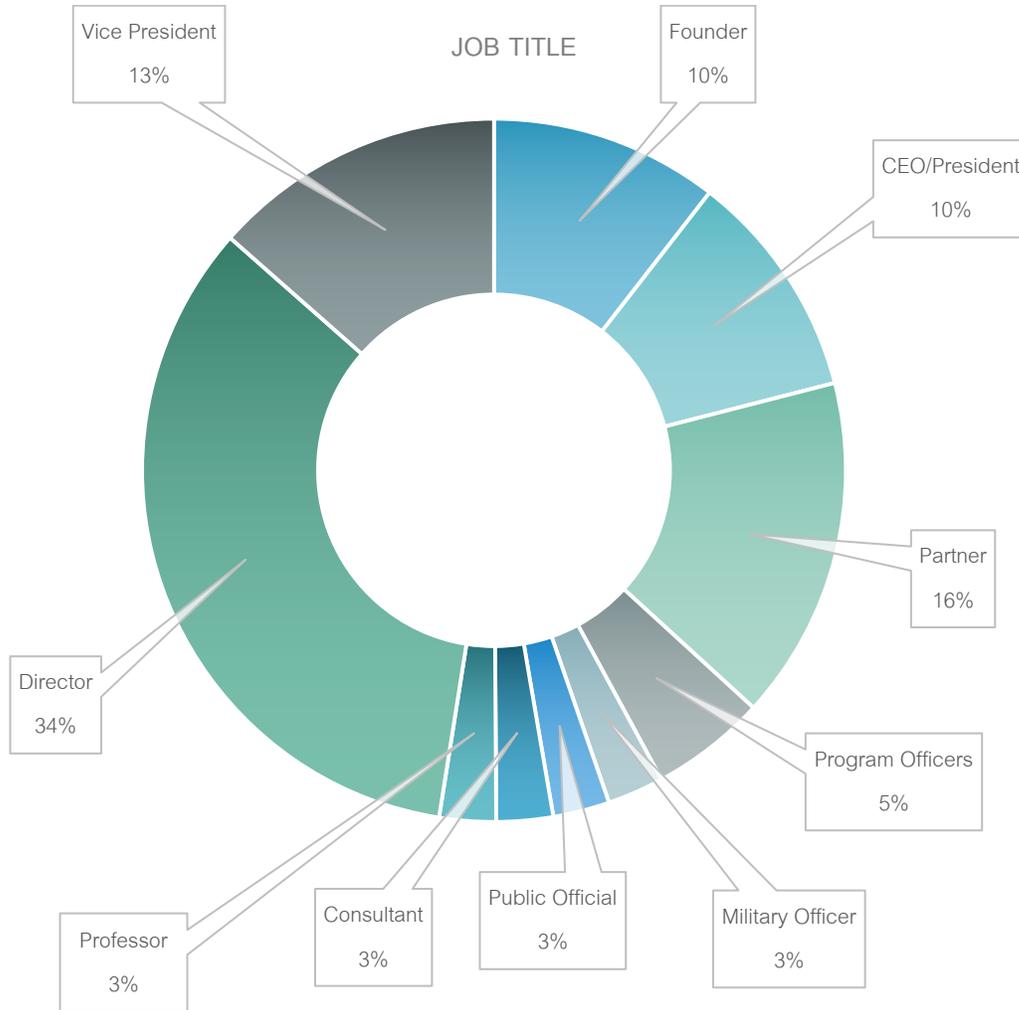
This is a group of highly educated respondents: 33% hold BAs. 60% hold MAs. 7% hold Ph.D.s



What They Do



40% respondents operate in the private sector; 40% in not-for-profit; 11% public sector; 9% Other. 34% are Directors; 13.2% Vice Presidents.



They represent the wide range of enterprise activities found on the busiest international border of the Western Hemisphere, including:

- Entrepreneurs
- Commercial interests
- Promoters
- Political / Government interests
- Non-profits / Foundations
- Educators
- Environmental advocates
- Social service professionals
- Education and training
- Strategic planning
- Tourism
- Real Estate Investment
- Economic Growth Partnerships
- Public Office Holders
- Import/Export/Manufacturing

Respondents participate in the following associations from the region: Smart Border Coalition; International Community Foundation; Border Trade Alliance; ScotiaBank; Tijuana Economic Development; SANDAG (San Diego Association of Governments);

COBRO (Committee on Binational Regional Opportunities); San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, among others.

Summary of Stakeholder Profiles

Stakeholders are uniquely positioned to be successful in a multicultural arena, whether due to family history, bilingual abilities, or other factors that help them thrive here. Professional roles allow for visibility in a multinational context, making it essential to know the nuances of the entire border ecosystem and its links to global markets, trends and issues.

Stakeholder profiles reflect a commitment to civic engagement and a concern for the community, economy and environment. Almost all business sector individuals are actively involved in multiple associations focused on community issues. Enterprises in this space require stakeholders to be actively engaged with the dynamics of a robust cross cultural, binational environment.

2019 BORDER SNAPSHOT

To understand what it takes to be an effective transborder leader, context is critical – knowing the “playing field” where leadership happens. Survey respondents were asked to list three words that come to mind when they think of the greater San Diego and greater Tijuana region. The word cloud technique offers a visual representation of responses manifested within the image; the more mentions the larger the word in the overall picture of what they see. These are then clustered into themes.

Potential Opportunities

There is a strong sense of *economic opportunity* felt by stakeholders, illustrated by an *entrepreneurial spirit* that seizes *possibilities*. The region is described as having *limitless potential* and being a *global platform with competitive advantages that are a model for the world*. It is a place of *renaissance*.

Attributes / Characteristics

The view of one region interconnected, ripe with opportunity, is powered by human-generated attributes and characteristics stakeholders use to describe its energy: *Dynamic, Vibrant, Innovative, Complex, Competitive, Creative, Forward-looking, Tolerant*.

Commerce

The region is also described as *a booming market economy; an entrepreneurial and strategic showcase where tourism, production sharing and innovation operate in tandem*.

Quality of Life and Culture

Stakeholders mentioned *the region's quality of life and cultural diversity*, framed by the paradox of straddling two nations. *A beautiful Mediterranean climate, beaches, sunshine, with an urban environment that is crowded and messy*.

Division and Dissonance

Stakeholders also reported on the *division and dissonance* that came with the territory in 2019, and the notion of a *bifurcated reality*. Global attention to the region often highlighted *fear, uncertainty and misunderstanding*, with anger about *"the Wall" and the Border Patrol*. In recent years the region has become a flashpoint for antagonistic rhetoric and restrictive policies by the current administration in the United States; particularly on immigration and border security.

REALITY CHECK

An unvarnished view of stakeholder worries and frustrations in pre-COVID-19 is a testament to the struggles facing the region, and those in leadership roles. Stakeholder comments illustrate concerns:

- *Interference of national politics mostly from Washington, but also from Mexico City, which is generally uninformed about the local and regional issues of our area. Volatile rhetoric from the current U.S. administration which creates more fear about the region.*

- *Violence, bad governments and no interest on the San Diego side.*
- *Migrant humanitarian crisis. The Wall. Militarization of the border. Environmental degradation.*
- *Border fence expansion, bifurcating environmental corridors. The border fence as a metaphor for hardening US / Mexico relations. CBP / governmental attitudes about migrants and Mexicans. Tijuana elected officials who don't want to "think big" on improvements in infrastructure, security, economic development and education.*
- *Key issues that worry / concern me are as follows: 1. Negative perceptions held by Americans with little or no knowledge of the border - related to the region overall, migrants and the Mexican people. 2. Lack of understanding by some elected officials and appointed officials of the cross-border interdependencies that exist between the U.S. and Mexico. 3. Failure to proactively address growing cross border challenges (migration, economic development, security, and the environment (especially climate change impacts) in a truly cooperative way with Mexico.*

These and other stakeholder concerns are felt both locally and across the 2,000 mile-length of the U.S.-Mexico border. The impacts of these issues are felt in multiple ways; commercially, financially, politically, environmentally, personally and psychically. Whether external or internal in nature, transborder stakeholders must contend with a remarkable set of challenges, extending beyond their own particular enterprises or endeavors. In the best of times decision-makers are informed and influenced by a range of dynamic factors. In times of crisis stakeholders rely on the power and purpose of standing together to maintain the health and viability of the region.

TRANSFRONTERIZO / TRANSBORDER

Beyond the context of issues facing stakeholders on the border, comes the initial challenge of describing this unique reality to others. The border region is a study of contrasts and paradoxes that influence the notion of identity itself. It is a place *"where demographic characteristics provided by a social context inform our sense of self, sense of being, and sense of interaction with others."*⁸

Stakeholders were asked to consider *"What does TransFronterizo / TransBorder / Bi-National mean to you?"* They offered a range of perspectives to describe who they are, where they live and work per the following themes:

⁸ Erickson, E.H. (1959) *Identity and the Life Cycle (Vol. 1)* Psychological Issues Monograph 1.

Regional State of Mind / A Concept

Bi-national – A broad relationship at a superficial level, and a formal recognition of a region. Transborder – A symbiotic relationship with an understanding of its intricacies.

A State of Mind Identification, with a formulated “Strategic and International Sense of Place” – particularly where countries first meet.

TransBorder means there are no borders. Nationality is simply a construct built to categorize individuals and to determine who is authorized or unauthorized. Coming from the border region it is often difficult to define yourself or place yourself within one category. When a nation’s lines change how does one define themselves? The answer “where are you from” is difficult to answer, and this is the epitome of BiNationalism, TransBorderism, and being a world citizen. It is a beautiful thing, yet difficult for many to comprehend.

What does it mean to be from two places at once?

Best of Both Sides – Personal and Professional Participation

It means a person who understands both sides of the border and is able to take advantage of that fact to benefit himself or others.

Developing projects, business enterprises, collaboration and community initiatives on both sides of the border. Having friends, family and business partners on both sides. Living on both sides, taking advantage of the “best of both worlds” opportunities, from professional to cultural.

To be TransFronterizo you have to be bi-cultural. It doesn’t matter where you were born. You have to participate in both communities to understand the cultures. It’s a lot to be done, we’re getting there.

A company or an individual who has learned, assimilated, practiced and combined the best of both worlds in terms of cultural, social, values and best practices to contribute to society and humankind’s betterment.

Someone who has one foot on each side of the border. Someone who has their heart and thoughts on both sides of the border. Someone who can seamlessly thrive in a border region, crossing back and forth as if there were no borders.

Identifying with both sides of the border (personally and/or in some other capacity, i.e., professionally, economically, artistically, etc.)

One who takes advantage of the best of both worlds – whether you live on one side or the other; live on one side with family on the other; live on one side and shop or vacation

frequently on the other; live on one side and get medical treatment on the other; or have residences on both sides.

Transcendence

Transcending borders (physical, psychological) towards cooperation, to address complex relationships between communities, institutions, and the environment ... unique challenges and opportunities arise within this space.

To me the concept means that I could have my ordinary life on both sides of the border, but living in my own place. The border is not a barrier, it's just some other street.

It means someone who transcends borders, and lives back and forth and in between

TransFronterizo – Beyond the border.

Experience, Identity, Personal Mindset

It's my way of living, my way of life.

Trans-Fronterizo is a mindset and a way of life. My life, my work, my binational family is an embodiment of what it means to be Trans-Fronterizo.

Everything. I grew up in it, I live in it and I work in it.

As an adult I have continually lived a transborder life, working in Latin America and the Caribbean, traveling for fun and business to all these places. It has enriched my life so much I cannot imagine not having the border be a part of my life.

A way of life. A sort of cultural capital. An ability to “code switch” effectively between two countries in daily life.

It depends on the setting and where I choose to use my identity. I refer to the Border region. I don't use the term Bi-national = business setting. TransFronterizo / TransBorder = academic, used together. I would like the term Cali Baja region to be used in business consulting.

Putting up with long lines and grumpy CBP. Patience and commitment. Privileged enough to be able to earn dollars and spend pesos, or at least go enjoy the best that both sides have to offer. Not everyone in the region can claim to be transborder / transfronterizo.

Savvy – Awareness, Understanding

A person who lives and works in a cross-border community, who has understanding of business, civic and political issues, who is typically bilingual and bicultural.

A person extensively aware of the realities in adjacent border communities and engaged in various ways on both sides of the border. I am not a complete transborder person because I do not speak Spanish. But I am connected through business, public issues and culture.

It means someone who crosses the border on a frequent basis for business, social, cultural, humanitarian, governmental or non-profit endeavors, and who understands the context in which things happen. Transfronterizos do not think of the border as an obstacle. It is merely another stop on the road to fulfilling a purpose or concluding a task. In a deeper sense, a transfronterizo understands how both sides of the border operate at several levels in order for him / her to thrive. It means to have the ability to see the border as an opportunity to leverage the best of both countries to fulfill different activities.

Great understanding of being equally a part of both sides of a border's communities through time tested experience.

One Region

It encompasses the entire San Diego-Tijuana region.

Being a part of a single region, which is bilingual and bicultural.

Connections, Openness, Shared Interests

Regional sovereignty.

An open community focused on making the border region an open community with shared interests and goals.

It means connection. No walls.

Two countries working together. Living and working on both sides of the border. Engaging willingly in both English and Spanish in both the US and Mexico on a regular basis.

Business, Policies, Practices - Collaboration

TransBorder to me means the business dealings between the US / Mexico; specifically Baja and San Diego.

I directly think about the San Diego – Tijuana region and its many opportunities in many areas.

Of major importance to San Diego County business and life.

To me this is working with our Regional neighbors to be stronger together, and making the border policies and strategic practices stronger for both countries' citizens.

It means opportunity. Building companies beyond this region and using the resources of this mega-region.

I have been working to help develop the Mexican economy. That was the original purpose of building a company.

Working together. The future.

Stakeholder responses reflect the complexity, pragmatism, and fluidity required to describe the transborder experience with one word. For some it's a state of mind, for others it's a geographic, cultural or aspirational designation. Respondents grapple with the complexity of a transborder identity. Transaction and transcendence operate simultaneously on the same plane – the border.

TOP ISSUES FOR 2025

The San Diego-Tijuana region continues to evolve with a multitude of challenges on the horizon. Stakeholders were asked *“What are the top issues you want to influence over the next 5 years to improve our region?”* In order of importance the following four themes emerged as priorities for stakeholders up to 2025: 1. *Bridge-building*; 2. *Cross-border flow*; 3. *Commerce / Trade and*; 4. *Ecosystem – natural / urban*.

Bridge Building

Stakeholders view themselves as de facto “bridge builders” - regardless of their various endeavors. They recognize the contributions and benefits that can result from *promoting cultural awareness, breaking down stereotypes, misunderstandings, and educating the interiors of both Mexico and the United States on the importance of binational relations*.

Bridge building is a local priority too, as *raising awareness among key civic leaders in San Diego* was mentioned as an area that needs constant attention. Stakeholders see this as ongoing and fundamental to *strengthening relationships that can drive collaboration and practical outcomes for the region*.

Cultivating regional development takes many forms, according to respondents. *Connecting and uniting both sides of the border* - despite its divisions - is seen as

emerging from *cross border dialogue, consensus and solutions around shared prosperity and natural resources*. For some it involves putting effort into *strengthening binational ties commercially and politically*. Others aspire to *build a multicultural and multiethnic society by promoting peace, justice, and security*.

Specific efforts mentioned include the *creation of binational parks, exchanges of best practice; strengthening the non-profit sector in Tijuana and identifying funders for cross-border philanthropy*. Others include *the promotion of cross border commerce and mobility; and seizing opportunities in binational education, biotech; the expansion of cultural events that celebrate this as being one region*.

Taking a more global view, some stakeholders seek to put their efforts toward *strengthening ties with Pacific rim countries; with Tijuana-Tecate and Rosarito becoming more linked to the California economy and society overall*.

By and large, stakeholders express a resounding “bridges-not-walls” mindset when it comes to where they want to put their energies over the next five years. Manifested in a variety of ways this sentiment transcends sectors, enterprises and endeavors, as well as the international border itself.

Cross-Border Flow

A second key area stakeholders seek to influence pertains to the nuts-and-bolts of improving cross border flow, and a search for creative ways to think about this issue. The international border serves 300,000 people daily, including thousands of commuters who must often wait hours to cross. It is no surprise that stakeholders consider this a priority issue:

- *Making cargo and people traffic safer and more fluid*
- *Addressing border crossing delays, traffic and wait times are a priority*
- *More creative border crossings so that it's a pleasant and efficient process, both ways*
- *Reducing friction affecting movements at all ports of entry*
- *Focusing global experts on the use of technological and management innovation at ports*
- *Create value-added innovative / creative industries within walking distance to POE's*
- *Otay 1 and Otay 2 upgrades and improvements*
- *Upgrade La Media southbound truck route*
- *Create a visa free / duty free zone around the border*
- *Transborder meeting places with easy access for stakeholders from both countries*
- *Open border*

Commerce / Trade

Commerce and trade, the economic lifeblood of the region is seen as a third key priority stakeholders seek to influence into the near future. This reflects a range of perspectives and degrees of specificity, including:

- *Economy*
- *Increased Trade*
- *Completely open free trade policy*
- *Less taxes or no taxes*
- *Tourism*
- *Working trade*
- *Economic growth for Baja*

Ecosystem – Natural / Urban

The practical implications of a highly populated international border on a river valley that flows into the sea are immense. Stakeholders conveyed an acute environmental awareness and commitment to improving the overall transborder ecosystem:

- *Reducing air and water pollution at the Border*
- *Improving environmental resilience and overall health of the region*
- *Addressing cross-border solid waste and sediment*
- *Waste containment*
- *Improving infrastructure to stop contamination; protect water quality in the Tijuana River Valley*
- *Climate change*
- *Cross border environment and pollution*

In addition to these key areas, stakeholders also mentioned other related priorities to influence over the next five years. Among these were optics, migration, and education.

Optics

The notion that “perception is reality” is also on the minds of stakeholders. Comments on optics highlighted issues they would like to address, including:

- *Improving the image of Port of Entry communities*
- *Bad press*
- *The violent way immigration is perceived in the United States*
- *Perceptions of the region*
- *Bad perceptions*
- *Stigma*
- *The way Mexico presents itself to U.S. counterparts*

Migration

Migration – coming to a head in 2019 with a migrant humanitarian crisis, harsh enforcement and a global spotlight – emerged as a hot button human rights issue that stakeholders expressed a desire to influence:

- *Immigration*
- *Reform the immigration system*
- *Integrating migrant populations*
- *Cross border migration for sending communities from Oaxaca*
- *Treating everyone with dignity*
- *Protecting the dignity and human rights on both sides of the border*

Education

There are long-time binational ties in the realm of education in the region. Thousands of people, from school children to college students, cross the border daily in pursuit of education – as have some of the respondents. Stakeholder priorities include:

- *Binational education*
- *Better academic integration*
- *Transborder education – Kids live between the lines*

Other

Stakeholders mentioned additional areas to influence, including fundamental inequalities between both countries that are manifested on the border:

- *Reducing economic inequality between TJ & SD, and within each*
- *Poverty*
- *Safety and security*
- *Better trained border guards*
- *Public health*

In identifying these key issues - general and specific - stakeholders mirror not only their priorities and commitments but also an image of the region itself. The dynamic interplay between bridge building, improving cross border flow, commerce and trade within a natural and urban ecosystem, all speak to the broad scope of activities respondents engage in. Whatever their enterprise, stakeholder priorities are defined by the unique complexity of the border itself, and the larger dynamics between Mexico and the United States.

2030 BORDER IMAGINED

Respondents were then asked “When you imagine the Greater San Diego / Greater Tijuana region in the year 2030, what three words come to mind?”



This picture of an imagined future in 10 years rests on a foundation of *connectivity, integration, fluidity and unity; bridges, not walls*. Stakeholders envision a *cohesive region where border tensions have calmed down and smart decision making supports a quality of life that is culturally, environmentally and commercially attractive*. They desire a region that is well administered with better coordination of strategic development; *efficient, clean and cosmopolitan, mutually interdependent*.

Stakeholders imagine a *peaceful region* in 2030, one that is *innovative, vibrant, booming, and competitive*. Indeed, the region is viewed potentially as a *global model for a unified and permeable transnational space – “best in class.”* In 10 years, the region is seen as living up to its potential of being *economically robust, able to leverage its unique cross border assets to stimulate growth and development on both sides of the border*. Powered

by investment, the region is imagined as a center of innovation in everything from medical tourism to electric cars. Possibilities for the region seem to be endless.

REQUIRED QUALITIES FOR TRANSBORDER LEADERS – THE BOTTOM LINE

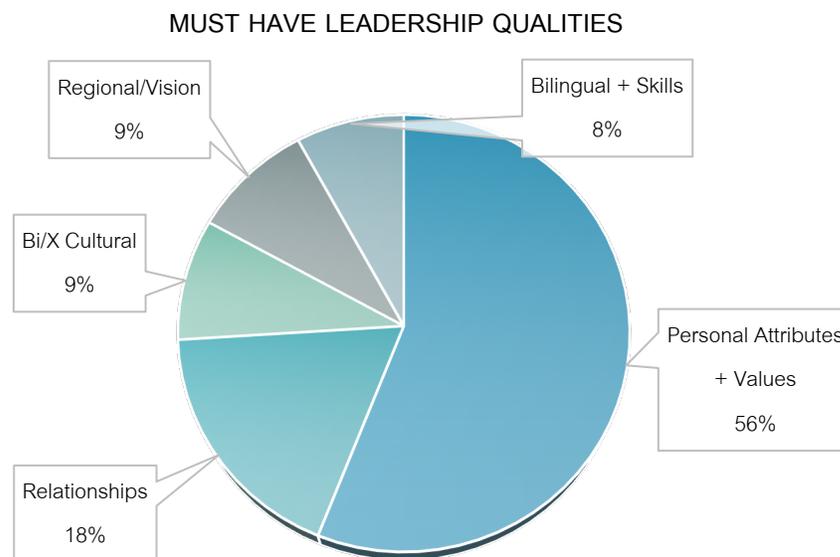
Across this complex and dynamic environment what will it take to make these visions and aspirations a reality? Leadership research suggests a spectrum of key factors that drive outcomes within a well-established framework of skills, attitudes and behaviors – or “competencies.” Respondents view these as “must have” qualities to thrive in the transborder region.

Within organizations competency models evaluate leaders by defining desired and required leadership qualities, then measuring individual leaders against those qualities. To identify competencies a 360-degree, or multi-rater survey instrument, offers anonymous and confidential feedback to individuals in leadership roles.⁹

In lieu of that option, the approach of this research was to ask transborder stakeholders from a wide range of enterprises, organizations and endeavors to consider:

“What personal and professional skills, attitudes and behaviors do you feel make for an effective and relevant TransBorder leader?”

They reported out key competencies that clustered into 5 general theme areas:



⁹ See Appendix: *Polaris Global Leadership Competency Dictionary*, Bruce Griffiths, Organization Systems International, 2008

Personal Attributes/ Values	56%
Relationships / Collaboration	18%
Bicultural / X Cultural	9%
Regional Awareness/ Vision	9%
Bilingual / Learned Skills	8%

Personal Attributes / Values - Self

Personal attributes and values account for a clear majority (56%) of the narrative responses to this question. Identifiable personal qualities and values, collapsed by themes in order of mentions, are:

Openness – *Openness and an open-minded, positive, optimistic mindset* are cited as the most important attributes by transborder stakeholders. They also cited an *open heart* and a *tolerant attitude* as being essential.

Adaptability & Action Orientation – Being *flexible* and *adaptable* are critical attributes in a transborder environment. Effectiveness also depends on being *dynamic, assertive* and *decisive*; conveying a *can-do attitude*, showing *initiative* with an *execution and results orientation*.

Empathy, Humility, Respect – The ability to convey *empathy* and *be empathetic*, on a *human-to-human* level. Stakeholders also mentioned *humility, a humble understanding* and *respect for others* as being essential.

Patience and Persistence – Unique challenges come with the territory and often require situational responses. Stakeholders cited *patience* as a key attribute. Yet they also cited *persistence, perseverance* and *stubbornness*.

Curiosity, Passion, Leadership Philosophy - *Intellectual curiosity* and an *interest in learning of other cultures* are identified as fundamental attributes. *Engaged leaders* who manifested *passion* and a *servant leadership philosophy* were also cited by stakeholders.

Listening – The ability to *truly hear people*, being a *good listener* and having *strong listening skills*, are cited as essential.

Creativity – Stakeholders found the ability to *think different*, be *innovative* and generate *good ideas* as valuable. *Creativity* was also cited as an important quality to have in a transborder environment.

Diversity & Inclusion – The ability to *work with diverse stakeholders across all classes and cultures* was cited. So too was more specific *diversity knowledge*, the *ability to*

understand differences and, significantly, the *welcome involvement of new generations* to the table.

Goal Directed & Resilient – Stakeholders cited the importance of *establishing clear goals*, and maintaining their *endurance and resilience* to achieve their goals.

Awareness of self with others – Stakeholders cited the importance of behaving with *civility, reasonableness, and diplomacy* as fundamental personal qualities.

Integrity – Acting with *integrity, ethics, transparency and honesty* were cited by stakeholders.

Risk taking & Complexity – A *willingness and ability to take risks, deal with complexity and engage in cross-discipline problem solving* were cited by stakeholders as key qualities.

Relationships / Networks / Collaboration – Self & Others

Relationships -the second most mentioned theme- are a driving force behind effective transborder leadership between self and others, accounting for 18% of the responses to this question. Initiating, cultivating and maintaining relationships is key to getting things done among respondents.

People Skills – *The ability to connect with anyone and everyone* captures the essence of *people skills*. The *ability to build trust-based relationships* was identified as key to being an effective transborder stakeholder.

Networks – Being a *connector of people and organizations*, being able to *cast a wide net and build networks across business, public issues and the culture at large* were cited as a significant competency. *Networks drive opportunities in academic, business, social and cultural spaces* along the transborder region.

Collaboration / Cooperation – Stakeholders cited the importance of being able to *convene people with different resources, priorities, and capacities* to achieve their goals; *working with others on common interests and shared solutions; collaborating with those who love the cross-border dynamic*.

Win-Win – Respondents reported the best outcomes as having a *win-win focus, where all stakeholders are engaged, and alliances are created with a collaborative spirit*.

Bicultural / X Cultural

A cross cultural sensibility is fundamental to operating in a transborder reality. This can come from one's upbringing, life experiences, or the curiosity to learn. As previously

seen in the range of responses on how stakeholders define and relate to the notion of *transfronterizo*, this too falls on a spectrum and is a dynamic process.

Stakeholders are clear on the importance of *caring to learn about other cultures*, working to build *cultural competence*, *cultural awareness*, and a *bicultural sensitivity*. For stakeholders from outside the region this is a work in progress: *I enjoy the adventure of being here*. For others this is a lived experience and an integral part of who they are in the world: *I live it, breathe it and do the work. This is who I am*.

Regional Awareness / Vision

Knowing the regional ecosystem and having a vision for how it evolves was the fourth theme stakeholders identified as key to being an effective and relevant transborder leader.

Strategic Understanding – Being able to *understand the region* and being savvy about how it works; having an *extensive awareness of the realities in adjacent border communities*, and *being engaged in various ways on both sides of the border*, are required for transborder leaders.

Advocacy & Affection – Being a *fierce border advocate* with a *love of the cross-border dynamic*, a *desire to promote equal conditions*, and a *commitment to change the status quo to improve the region* were cited by stakeholders.

Vision – Stakeholders recognize the importance of being a *visionary*, with an ability to anticipate trends that may influence a preferred future state; and having a *long-term vision* overall.

Bilingual & Practical Skills

The most important skill identified by transborder stakeholders is the ability to understand and communicate in *English and Spanish*; an ability that nearly 70% of respondents indicated they had. For some this ability comes from living a bicultural or multicultural life; being binational or having exposure to other cultures via life experiences. For others, being *bilingual* or multilingual is the result of study and practice. For most this is a key element for how one navigates the transborder environment with awareness and agility.

Additional practical skills cited by stakeholders include: *proactive project management*; *functional / topical expertise*; *analytical skills*; being able to *spot opportunities*; and *being well-spoken in any language*.

This spectrum of five theme clusters and their associated “must have” competencies are best understood in the context of the border region itself. To be effective, relevant, and high- performing, transborder leaders must display a set of distinctive personal qualities

and values, across cultures. These reflect who they are, how they operate in the world, how they choose to lead, and their view of human nature itself. They must also grow strong relationships and build wide networks to expand their power base. Together these are supported by a bicultural sensibility, and a strategic understanding of the region with bilingual (and other) skills to effectively engage with fellow stakeholders.

TRANSBORDER LEADERSHIP

Transborder leadership takes many forms and utilizes multiple competencies, depending upon context and circumstance. Competencies exist on spectrums, not dichotomies. Their effectiveness depends on having the awareness and experience to know which ones are required when, and by how much. It is a matter of degree and inflection, situationally.

Stakeholders in this space convey an unwavering commitment to their enterprise, whatever its focus. They have clear values, often stubborn opinions, and the tenacity to reach their goals. Their project, cause or agenda can bleed into work and life because of the blurred lines between personal and professional – *“it’s who we are”* rings true for many. An affinity for openness and collaboration, cultivated during formative years and life experiences, is an indispensable asset in this universe.

Respondents are acutely aware of the barriers imposed on this ecosystem, yet are persistent in reaching their goals. They use their bicultural experiences to navigate the transborder region fluidly. Some stakeholders report they create an internal psychic space within which to operate; one that rejects limitations imposed by others and frees them up to imagine new possibilities. They choose to operate “as if” there are no barriers.

This environment can be unpredictable, yet respondents are equipped to adapt and pivot with agility. Their experiences and temperaments seem to fuel their optimism, resilience and tenacity. They believe in their mission, whatever it may be. Because external factors are constant, personal and professional networks are the critical lifeblood for getting things done. Relationships with other stakeholders generate energy and inspire action that creates results.

The tapestry of stakeholder activities in the region is both broad and overlapping. Some groups are natural allies, others not. Yet stakeholders who in other settings may never cross paths are bound together by a common reality. Defining moments – such as humanitarian crises, economic downturns, security concerns, political tensions, natural disasters or pandemics – help break down silos through shared experiences between human beings on the border. All help to forge a regional identity and manifest the potential for collective action expressed by many voices speaking as one.

SUMMARY

The San Diego-Tijuana region is a living laboratory for understanding leadership-in-action. How the region is described, experienced and understood is as varied as the stakeholders who participate in it. Multiple and competing demands come with the territory and must be negotiated.

History shows that the region is lifted when stakeholders seek common ground and find common purpose to build transborder community, commerce and culture. Despite inherent tensions, the undeniable reality centers on the monolith of the border itself. The energy that percolates around and through it is manifested by these stakeholders and their various activities. The border is their common denominator. It is also a metaphor for the complexity and velocity of change leaders face within and across enterprises, both locally and globally.

The 43 people surveyed here represent a cross-section of men and women from Mexico and the U.S., from diverse backgrounds, enterprises and sectors. They reflect a kaleidoscope of issues, priorities, concerns and aspirations. What is required of them - given the context - is formidable.

Respondents are both optimistic and realistic in their assessment of the region today. Their aim is to build bridges not walls, to seize opportunities that realize the region's potential, to advance their own interests and objectives – and to build community. They are also clear-eyed on the epic forces and issues swirling around the region. These challenges will not subside anytime soon, and underscore the need to craft an enduring regional perspective and voice. This will take leadership.

Transfronterizo identity continues to evolve and mirror the binational experience. Stakeholders report on the multiple ways they consider the meaning of a transborder designation: conceptual; psychological; state-of-mind – both regional and personal; border savvy; connections; collaboration; and the best-of-both-worlds.

The border is complex with many priorities cited by stakeholders as areas to influence up to 2025. Bridge building activities top this list, followed by a focus on easing cross-border flow, promoting trade and commerce while protecting and preserving the ecosystem – natural and urban. Migration and the optics surrounding the region remains a front-burner issue. Beyond these, issues will emerge over the next decade that bring new challenges and opportunities to stakeholders.

2030 represents an imagined future for respondents. They desire a smart and cosmopolitan region that is connected, fluid and united; commercially and culturally attractive, well administered with coordinated strategic development, strong economic drivers and attention to the needs of a vibrant social reality. Stakeholders want a region

where tensions are dialed down, and potential is achieved. They seek a “new normal” for an improved quality of life on both sides of the border.

A systems view is essential to spot trends and build alliances. While particular interest groups can fall prey to the gravitational pull of protecting turf and creating silos, this space demands an awareness of the overall forces at play. Within the ebb and flow of power dynamics, political agendas, economic cycles and larger social cross currents, transborder stakeholders are tested in ways similar to counterparts in other high stakes environments. Critically, they do so largely on a volunteer basis as members of an informal “regional commonwealth.”

The key for turning regional dreams into reality lies with the stakeholders themselves. On multiple fronts they engage to find support, mutual interests and common ground. This is noted by the array of associations, coalitions, advocacy groups, chambers of commerce, and other cross border forums and events that exist to promote binational initiatives. Bolstered by their knowledge of and affection for the borderland itself - plus a bicultural sensibility reinforced by bilingual abilities – stakeholders have the tools needed to get things done.

Smart leadership relies on quality networks and strong alliances to move agendas forward. Being alert to a silo mentality, maintaining moral clarity and integrity during defining moments are essential attributes. These flow from a foundation of self-awareness that informs decision making; a willingness to explore one’s own values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, knowledge, and limitations.

Mastering effective transborder leadership begins with a spectrum of personal qualities; the 56% of “must have” core competencies cited by stakeholder respondents as being most critical:

- Openness above all, with an optimistic mindset, and tolerant attitude.
- Adaptability with an action orientation.
- Empathy, humility and respect for others.
- Patience and persistence, with the ability to know when each is required.
- Curiosity, passion and interest in learning about other cultures.
- Listening, and the ability to truly understand other people.
- Creativity, and the ability to think in ways that generate ideas and innovation.
- Diversity, and the ability to understand differences, similarities and to work across classes and cultures. Inclusiveness to all stakeholders.
- Goal directed; resilience and comfort taking calculated risks.
- Civility and diplomacy.
- Integrity, transparency and honesty.

How are these personal competencies developed, and what leadership philosophies and “styles” do they reflect? How does one learn to be open, adaptive, a good listener,

empathetic, creative, inclusive, persistent, and so forth? How does one become an effective transborder leader?

Leadership research is extensive and a good place to begin. Qualities cited by transborder stakeholders are broadly consistent with those of “best leaders” where commitment to a goal is desired over compliance – typically approaches that are egalitarian rather than autocratic in nature.¹⁰ Transborder leaders are unique in that their domain is not limited to a particular enterprise or agenda, but rather to a binational region. It is in their interests to display attitudes and behaviors that foster relationships and build consensus.¹¹

Leadership matters today more than ever. It can be learned and it takes practice. To prepare and grow emerging leaders for this region, transborder stakeholders would benefit from adopting the tools, technologies and processes from the field of organizational behavior. In 2018, organizations in the U.S. alone were estimated to invest \$166 billion on leadership development initiatives.¹² In turn, the rest of the world invests an additional \$200 billion per year.¹³

Stakeholders and enterprises can help grow the talent of emerging transborder leaders by recognizing the value and power of key competencies identified here, and how they shape the region. At this critical moment on the U.S.-Mexico border, developing leaders must not be an afterthought but rather a priority to ensure the viability of the region for years to come. How do regional stakeholders currently identify and grow their talent?

CONCLUSION

The past 100 years have witnessed the emergence of a complicated, gritty, sometimes turbulent but always compelling binational border region. Along the way a varied collection of transborder stakeholders have emerged who shape, influence, and reflect the character of what has become the San Diego / Tijuana region – “CaliBaja.” These are people who, in their respective enterprises and activities, work to create a robust and enduring transborder economy and community. They do so locally and with allies along the length of the U.S.- Mexico border, and around the world. No strangers to “defining moments” they embody the beating heart of the binational region.

¹⁰ Khan, Zakeer Ahmed, Nawaz, Allah, Khan, Irfanullah (2016). Leadership Theories and Styles: A Literature Review in *Journal of Resources Development Management*, Vol. 16, 2016.

¹¹ Illustrated by research and writings on emotional intelligence; servant leadership; cross-cultural dynamics; transactional, transformational and situational leadership; diversity /equity & inclusion; among others.

¹² Chief Learning Officer Business Intelligence Board (21 March 2019)

¹³ TrainingIndustry.com. *The Leadership Training Market* (18 March 2019)

The global pandemic of 2020 is a defining moment of unprecedented scope and scale. It knows no borders and brings into sharp focus what we are made of, what we believe to be true, and what our responses to this situation reveal about us - our character, values, and priorities. COVID-19 has emerged as an existential threat for how it puts both our lives and “our way of life” at risk. We have come to a fork in the road as this crisis reshuffles the deck we call “society” – regardless of what country we call “home.”

While decisionmakers scramble to respond to the gravity of the pandemic, we are witness to distinctive leadership approaches in both word and deed. One is an individualistic, “go it alone” philosophy that reflects a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” rationale. The other is a collective “we’re all in this together” mindset that supports “the greater good” as the key to enlightened self-interest. The dynamic tensions between these two approaches have deep roots. Confusion and disruption triggered by the pandemic have revealed both a contrast and a conflict of leadership philosophies.

Transborder stakeholders have historically put their stake in the ground on the side of “bridges-not-walls.” This choice is now being put to the test as the pandemic exacts its toll on human life, the economy, and the social fabric itself – especially among the most vulnerable and those with the fewest resources. Local governments and states are also competing for resources within the limitations of today’s political and economic realities in the United States and Mexico. As always, this continues to be contested terrain.

It remains to be seen how transborder stakeholders rise to the challenge of the COVID-19 crisis, long-term, and what they learn from the experience. At this writing they continue to demonstrate the grit, agility, and resourcefulness needed to reclaim, rebuild and reimagine the future of the region. At their best, stakeholders display a genuine spirit of regionalism and a commitment to mutuality in support of sharing information, resources, ideas, and good will.

The future of this binational ecosystem will be determined by how rhetoric meets reality, and the efforts of those stakeholders who choose to step up and work together. Leadership-in-action will demonstrate once again that the vision of “one region” endures in both good times and bad.

In a “place where dreams are made or crushed,” transfronterizo stakeholders aspire to the “must have” leadership qualities required to navigate and prosper in a VUCA world by putting “community before self.”¹⁴ The profound challenges on the horizon – known and unknown – will require nothing less.

¹⁴ See: *Community Before Self: Seventy Years of Making Waves*, Malin Burnham, 2016

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For over 30 years Rick has specialized in helping develop leaders and teams, leverage strengths, clarify objectives and implement learning strategies for diverse industry sectors. His interest in leadership and organizations was initially sparked by sociological investigations into public policy issues, leading to work with a broad range of national and international firms. Rick co-developed a highly regarded leadership program for Latino professionals linking multi-world dynamics with issues of power, change and identity in enterprise settings, as well as developing its executive coaching protocols.

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APPENDIX

Survey Respondents Represent the Following

Multinational investment bank and financial services company

International Grant Making

International Business Development and Consulting
Environmental Services / Advocacy

Education/Community Partnerships

Mentorship Management Services
Relationship Development Services
Strategic Advisory Services

Film and video enterprise specializing on the U.S.-Mexico border region

Real Estate Investment/Industrial real estate company operating in Mexico

Non-profit community organization

Cross Border Smart Growth Initiative

University / Research Institute

Military/Government / Public sector

Binational membership organization

Public Relations & Communications

Civic / Economic Development

Multinational Law Firm

US Customs Brokers

- Global Logistics
- Warehouse & Distribution
- Transportation

Mexican Customs Brokers

- Systems Support

State / Federal - Mexico

Commercial ventures / Entrepreneurs

Polaris Global Leadership Competency Model



Developed by Bruce Griffiths, Organization Systems International