

Changing A Country Through Transformational Leadership And Teacher Empowerment: Escuela Nueva

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Major Focus Of The Case

Transformational leadership is one of the most popular theories of leadership today. It combines a leader's charisma with an authentic focus on the followers. Followers are inspired and empowered, and together, leaders and followers are able to transform organizations and systems. This case illustrates transformational leadership through a focus on a leader who inspired elementary educational reform in public schools in a South American nation – a program that has since spread to many other nations. It illustrates how transformational leaders can, through the empowerment of followers, stimulate change in large institutions and on a grand scale.

Introduction

Prior to the 1980s, the scope and quality of education that Colombian children received was very low. Only one out of every five children in Colombia completed five years of basic education, with children in urban areas receiving the greatest amount of schooling. Urban children completed an average of 3.8 years of primary education, but children in the poor rural farming communities averaged only 1.7 years, putting the rural children into the category of being functionally illiterate. Since the 1960s, many attempts had been made to improve education, both by the Colombian government and international agencies such as UNESCO, but nothing seemed to work.

Today, Colombia is one of Latin America's leaders in basic education, with greater numbers of children continually enrolled in school, and improved test scores in language and mathematics. According to UNESCO's First Comparative International Study of Quality Education in 11 countries in 1998, (Laboratorio Latinoamericano de Evaluación de la Calidad de la

Educación) Surpassed only by Cuba, Colombia is the only Latin American country where rural schools outperform their urban counterparts except in large mega cities. In addition, the self-esteem and civic engagement of Colombian school children has soared. What happened to change things?

This amazing transformation is due to the efforts of Escuela Nueva (New School) , which began in the mid-1970s. Vicky Colbert is coauthor of the Escuela Nueva model, jointly with Oscar Mogollon and Beryl Levinger. She is the founder and Director of a Colombian non-profit that continues to innovate and sustain the model, both in Colombia and in many other nations. Vicky is a prototypical transformational leader. As a dynamic leader in the Ministry of Education she rallied exceptional teachers to develop the model that she co-authored. When she became Vice-Minister she continued to build a team of loyal practitioners who took the model to scale, making it national policy. As a Regional Advisor for UNICEF, she motivated her team to apply the model to other countries. Finally, building on the support she had carefully cultivated over time, she began the Fundación Escuela Nueva Volvamos a la Gente to give sustainability to quality education through a civil society organization.

The theory of transformational leadership is rooted in the work of presidential historian and political scientist, James MacGregor Burns (1978) and his distinction between “transactional” and “transforming” leaders. According to Burns, transactional leaders offer exchanges – pay for effort, praise in exchange for employee loyalty, and the like. Transforming leaders, on the other hand, spur followers to higher levels of achievement by focusing on the larger purpose. As a result, both followers and organizations are transformed.

Inspired by Burns, leadership scholar, Bernard Bass (1985), sought to expand on this theory and identified four key components of what he called “transformational leaders.” These four components are: *Idealized Influence* which involves the leader being a positive (and moral) role model for followers; *Inspirational Motivation* which is the ability to inspire and motivate followers by providing meaning and challenge. Taken together, Idealized Influence and Inspirational Motivation constitute what is commonly called leader “charisma”; *Individualized Consideration* is the leader’s attention to the needs and concerns of each individual follower, spurring their growth through coaching and mentoring; *Intellectual Stimulation* is the transformational leader’s emphasis on challenging followers to be innovative, creative, and to “think outside the box.” [see Table 1 for more detailed descriptions of the components of transformational leadership.]

Table 1: Components of Transformational Leadership and Definitions

Component of TL	Definition
<i>Idealized Influence</i>	Transformational leaders serve as positive role models for their followers. They emphasize the collective mission of the group or organization and demonstrate high standards of ethical conduct.
<i>Inspirational Motivation</i>	Transformational leaders are able to inspire and motivate followers through their display of enthusiasm, optimism and the articulation of attractive future outcomes.
<i>Individualized Consideration</i>	Transformational leaders pay particular attention to each follower's needs, concerns, and personal development and growth. The leader encourages the personalized development of each one through mentoring and coaching.
<i>Intellectual Stimulation</i>	Transformational leaders challenge followers in an effort to stimulate their creativity and innovation by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and encouraging followers to take risks and try new approaches.

Research on transformational leadership has sought to better understand the process by which leaders transform followers and organizations. Evidence suggests that transformational leaders enhance followers' sense of self-efficacy, so that they believe in their capacity to perform their tasks (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Typically, this is done through empowering followers, whereby the leader encourages followers to take on challenging tasks, and supports and coaches them throughout the process. This not only leads to greater levels of performance on the part of followers, but also the transformational leader builds leadership capacity in followers through the empowerment process.

Background on Escuela Nueva

Vicky Colbert was a young, energetic public servant in the Ministry of Education charged with coordinating projects of rural schools. It was clear that the children in rural schools in remote villages were performing poorly and completing fewer years of elementary education than their urban counterparts. Vicky began visiting these rural schools and she discovered teachers in remote areas who were applying innovations in the Unitary School Program, promoted by UNESCO worldwide since the 1960s. Vicky met Oscar Moggollon, one of the outstanding teachers at a UNESCO demonstration school and together, with Beryl Levinger,

a USAID professional, they designed and coauthored the new model, which they named Escuela Nueva. Vicky worked hard to combine best practices and to form a team of practitioners who gradually created a national consensus to implement the model. They were successful because they created strategies to make the model technically, politically and financially viable. From the outset the design took into consideration the possibility of scaling up to other regions and nations and eventually led to replication on a large scale.

The traditional education system in Colombia at the time consisted of the teacher as a presenter of facts in a single grade classroom. In the small remote rural schools there was just one teacher handling all of the grade levels in the same classroom. This was commonly known as the unitary school, known today worldwide as multi-grade schools where one teacher handles multiple grades in the same room. Although the unitary school gave teachers techniques to handle several grades simultaneously, teachers were characteristically overburdened, and students were not getting age-appropriate attention. In addition, much of the traditional learning was theoretical and irrelevant to rural children. Therefore, compared to students from the cities, rural students were less engaged, performed poorly, and were less likely to continue the following year. There were difficulties in reaching the goal of providing universal primary education for all children. Vicky and her colleagues concentrated on leading the change from the unitary school to the Escuela Nueva model that introduced a more comprehensive and systemic approach to improve quality learning in all schools.

The Escuela Nueva model that Vicky Colbert and her colleagues developed is designed to improve the quality of basic education through the use of proven educational practices that encourage active participation in the learning process, cooperative and self paced learning and enhancement of self-esteem and civic engagement. The curriculum promotes practical examples from the students' local environments and strengthens and promotes participation of parents in the learning process.

Teachers take on the role of guide and learning facilitator rather than the more traditional presenter of information, and teachers are encouraged to engage families and the local community. Instruction is personalized and child-centered, and peer-to-peer learning is also encouraged. Teachers are trained and provided with learning guides and instructional materials that are tailored to the students' needs and their local environment. Follow-up programs are used to support teachers, to keep them engaged, and to provide ongoing training.

Not only has the Escuela Nueva boosted the educational attainment of students in Colombia, but has spread to other countries in Latin America, mainly through governments and to some African and Asian nations, including Vietnam, East Timor and has inspired many innovations in the Philippines. The program is a great success, due largely to the efforts of its leader and primary advocate, Vicky Colbert. By recognizing teachers' abilities and promoting them as leaders and innovators themselves, the model has earned worldwide notoriety.

Transforming the Educational Process:

An Analysis of Vicky Colbert's Transformational Leadership

Vicky Colbert began the Escuela Nueva program within the Colombian Ministry of Education. She realized that it would be a challenge to persuade the government to explore alternatives to existing educational structures and practices, but the poor results in rural schools required trying a different, more systemic approach.

Vicky was a very high-energy professional in the Ministry of Education. It was a combination of her charisma, coupled with her dedication to the vision of implementing a better educational system, which helped her persuade the Ministry of Education and school district officials to try Escuela Nueva.

As Vicky tells it, "I was young, vibrant, and had lots of energy." She realized that part of the problem was that the remote, rural schools were "invisible" to many in the Ministry, so she began bringing successful teachers from the provinces to the national and ministerial level. Simultaneously, she took Ministry officials and other politicians into these remote villages to see for themselves why the traditional education process was not working and why the Escuela Nueva approach was the solution. She started the Escuela Nueva program within the Ministry and organized the first national team from Escuela Nueva. As a variety of teachers were recognized, their loyalty proved to be indispensable. With their help, Vicky set up demonstration schools in some of the rural communities. Vicky continued to promote some of the teachers, who became professionals and moved into different spheres -in the Ministry, in bi-lateral agencies and educational institutions. Many of them make up the core of her team in the Escuela Nueva NGO that she later founded. She was able to make the best practices of successful teachers visible to education officials and others.

Two key components of transformational leadership - Inspirational Motivation and Idealized Influence - represent the leader's charisma.

Vicky Colbert's high energy and inspiring vision for transforming elementary education made her a much-noticed figure in the Education Ministry. Her commitment to the cause was evident and she took every opportunity to inspire those in the Ministry to get behind her educational reform efforts. By taking officials to the remote demonstration schools, Vicky became the "face" of the educational reform movement.

Vicky Colbert also exhibited the two other components of transformational leadership, Individualized Consideration and Intellectual Stimulation. By promoting a child-centered, participatory model, she allowed teachers to do what they do best: to engage and encourage children to flourish in school. This required that teachers received peer support, relevant training depending on their specific needs and appropriate materials. Vicky also pushed teachers to take ownership of their classrooms and to involve local communities - extending their influence beyond the classroom. Multiple stakeholders - children, teachers, communities and local school administrators - benefitted when teachers were empowered. It is this concern with the specific needs of followers, and challenging them to expand their horizons and think creatively that are key characteristics of transformational leaders.

The key to success for Escuela Nueva was consistent with the dynamics of transformational leadership theory. In transformational leadership, leaders empower followers, in this case, the teachers, to take ownership of their jobs and their classrooms. They are challenged to be innovative and are provided the needed support in order to improve their work (curriculum) and their teaching. In addition, transformational leaders build followers leadership capacity, and many of the teachers went on to leadership positions in the educational ministry and elsewhere.

The Challenge of Sustainability

Vicky Colbert established the Escuela Nueva program working within Colombia's Education Ministry, but she realized that such an innovative program might get lost in the government bureaucracy. Therefore, she began a non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO), the Escuela Nueva Volvamos a la Gente in order to ensure the sustainability of the model. A number of her original collaborators accompanied her in this new endeavor and as a team they continue to innovate and apply the model. The program also became highly recognized with other countries wanting to adopt the Escuela Nueva model and materials. The World Bank, UNICEF,

Interamerican Development Bank have supported Escuela Nueva and provided additional funding to expand the program.

During the early nineties, however, dramatic changes in the Colombian government led to decentralization of education programs, resulting in the transfer of many teachers and a loss of funding for the program. As Vicky Colbert explains, "We had to essentially start all over again." With support from international organizations, and from private sector alliances, such as the coffee growers associations, the Escuela Nueva program was revived. As Vicky tells it, "the teachers kept it going. The program is decentralized and is continuing to thrive and expand." The teachers are the main force of change and, in essence, continue to innovate and apply the model and to lead educational reforms, fulfilling the transformational leadership concept of developing followers into leaders.

Discussion

- 1. Visionary, transformational leaders can accomplish great things.**
Vicky Colbert was a young employee in the Columbia Ministry of Education with a commitment to improving education in Columbia. Describe the educational situation in Columbia before she pursued her vision, what her vision for the future was, and what she was able to accomplish.
- 2. To motivate significant change, it is important to have a compelling and understandable plan and to reach the hearts and minds of influential leaders. What did Vicky Colbert do to prepare herself, organize a vision and easy to understand plan, and convince the Ministry of Education to fund her project?**
- 3. Discuss the four major components of Transformational Leadership shown in Table 1 and how Vicky Colbert practiced each one.**
- 4. Who were the various stakeholders Vicky Colbert identified and how did she engage and involve them in the change process?**
- 5. Changes often regress and unravel if there is not a plan for sustaining them. What did Vicky Colbert do to sustain the program she developed with Oscar Mogollon and Beryl Levinger so the program would not be dependent on political and economic conditions in Columbia?**
- 6. Are there present or future possibilities, large or small, where you could be a transformational leader?**

Key Lessons In Leading Change

1. Transformational leaders who understand how to lead, manage, and sustain changes can accomplish far more change than most think would be possible.
2. Although a leader's enthusiasm, zeal, and charisma helps get others' attention, and can be a source of inspiration and motivation, transformational leadership theory goes beyond charisma and examines how leaders AND followers can work together to create organizational and societal transformation.
3. Some of the elements of transformational leadership involve empowering followers, challenging them to be creative, innovative, and to take ownership of their work. Transformational leaders also understand individual follower's needs, desires, and their strengths, providing the support that each follower needs in order to thrive and grow.
4. Transformational leadership is a relationship-centered approach to leadership, involving leaders and followers collaborating to lead the group or organization.
5. Vicky and her team were able to reframe the problems of rural basic education in Colombia and provide new solutions based on best practices. This has been a dynamic process that includes continuous input and innovation from multiple team members. A key to transformational leadership is providing opportunities for innovation and for the continued development of followers' leadership capacity.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D. is the Henry R. Kravis Professor of Leadership and Organizational Psychology and former Director of the Kravis Leadership Institute at Claremont McKenna College. Professor Riggio is the author of over a dozen books, and 100 book chapters and research articles in the areas of leadership, assessment centers, organizational psychology and social psychology. Recent books include *The Art of Followership*, *The Practice of Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2008, 2007), *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd ed., coauthored with Bernard M. Bass (Erlbaum, 2006), and *Leadership Studies: The Dialogue of Disciplines* (Elgar, 2012). He is the leadership blogger for *Psychology Today* magazine.

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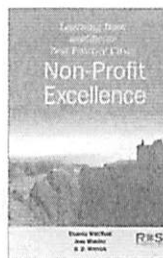
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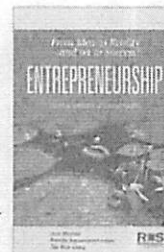
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