

Collective leadership work and learning

In deze serie, waarin ik CEO's interview over hun bijdrage aan leren, een interview met de Nicaraguaanse minister van Landbouw en Bosbouw, Ariel Bucardo Rocha. Deze opmerkelijke man was in 1979 tijdens de omverwerping van het regime van dictator Somoza door de Sandinisten onder leiding van Daniel Ortega een belangrijke revolutionair. Langzaam begint het democratiseringsproces onder nu president Ortega vorm te krijgen. Het ministerie van Land- en Bosbouw speelt hierin een belangrijke rol. Bucardo heeft aan de wieg gestaan van belangrijke hervormingen in de landbouw. In dit interview spreekt hij over zijn leiderschap tijdens de revolutie en wat leiderschap betekent in zijn rol als minister van een ontwikkelingsland.

INTERVIEW

Robert van Noort

Het is 9 uur in de ochtend en al bloedheet en vochtig in Managua. Ik ben de avond ervoor aangekomen. Mijn koffer is zoekgeraakt. Ik moet in mijn reiskleren bij de minister op bezoek, met een jetlag. We wachten onder een slecht functionerende ventilator op de vertraagde vertaalster. De kabinetschef raakt zenuwachtig; ook aan hem is te zien dat het een erg warme dag is. Leuke start.

About Bucarda Rocha

Bucarda Rocha has an agricultural background. For many years he has worked to improve the quality of peoples' livelihoods. During the Sandinista revolution he fought for land rights for farm workers. After 1980 he led the establishment of collectives and cooperatives in the rural areas.

At a certain moment he helped people to take the land. What he did was supporting the revolution by saying: 'Take the land, then you survive.'

The ideal was both that 'people should own the land they work on' and improve the quality of the products and create a better life. So he created a situation that people stood up and said: 'I want the land and I want to produce myself.'



When you support people to organise themselves and produce on their own land, what do they need to learn?

I should point out that during the '80s there was a revolution that turned over a great deal of land to people who may or may not have had experience as a producer or farmer. This land came from different owners or different ownership patterns. Some was state land and the rest was land that had been expropriated from large private owners. We believed our first task was to get people organised in cooperatives. They have the means to finance technical assistance, they have access to machinery and equipment and are experienced in training people to use and maintain equipment. However, there was still conflict in the country, therefore resources were diverted to the war front. Although we learned a great deal in this process, a new government in 1990 decided to restore ownership to the previous owners. Not many cooperatives survived.

You said in the beginning that you were for almost 30 years the leader of the peasants in different roles. Why do they trust you and keep you in that position? What are your qualities?

I'm a dictator...hahaha... No, in this process I wasn't the leader, I was a leader. Not in a single organisation or role the entire time. Before '79 I organised the peasant and farmer resistance to the dictatorship. And then in the '80s I was a strong believer in the cooperative movement. I think that is the best way for small farmers to organise and strengthen themselves.

So at some point in your personal development you found out how to gain

trust and lead people and how to help people to learn. How did that work for you?

That is a tough question. I think I have tried to always find new ways of organising people and to find the mechanisms of organisation that help people to confront difficult situations.

Under the dictatorship we couldn't say that the best way to organise farmers was how to get access to own the land. In the 80s we were able to organise nearly 6,000 cooperative groups, including almost 4,000 in the agricultural sector.

So you were able to mobilise people and organise things in a clever way. That lead you to what you are now.

I wouldn't put it in those terms because I don't see it as an individual effort from my side. There have always been communities and groups of resistance and struggle. Some of these supported people's initiatives to resist. We took the opportunity to mobilise because there were already things going on.

As people came together, they spoke about how they could organise themselves. I remember that the greatest links between people were the working camps. In rooms as small as this, people were closed in, there were bunks, people were near to each other, bad conditions, hot, dark. And that is where people started talking and taking their faith in their own hands.

You said that it was more a collective leadership. How would you describe your leadership style?

I think that persons who try to defend the interests of others must go beyond their personal interests to be able to look

out for the collective interest. I like being part of a leadership team. I'm a founding member of the National Union of Farmers and Rangers but I have never been the president, I was the vice president. So I have worked with all the presidents who came through this organisation.

So could you say that you're at your best in second position.

I'm a supporter. I don't believe that there is just one person who is *the* leader, just because of his or her skills. Effective leadership depends on an effective supporting team. I have also played a part in founding certain organisations. From the moment they are up and running and can continue on their own, I step down. And I step out with good working relations, I think one shouldn't wait until being pushed out, hahaha.

So that's the way you keep it sustainable.

Yes, that's what I believe. Once, I was setting up a savings and loan cooperative system as a response to the lack of financial resources from the formal system for farmers. It was a new challenge. Thirty eight of us came together to set up this system; the same cooperative now has 30,000 members. Also in this case I stepped back as a president when it worked. It is now the largest Savings and Loans Coop in Nicaragua. Then we created an umbrella network that the other coops could feed into. I was the first president. And again, once it was running, I stepped down.

What are you doing now in your position as a minister to get people skilled?

I still have the strong believe that when you are trying to solve problems, answers don't fall out of the sky. Organising people is a key central feature. The major effort must come from the level of decisiveness of the people themselves and confront the government with challenges and demand supportive policies.

The government could play a supportive role in the entire process, but if people really aren't clear about what they want and where they're heading to, in an organised fashion, it wouldn't be of much use for the government to insert huge amounts of resources, because it isn't sustainable.

And what does this mean?

The important learning issue for the public sector is that government intervention needs to support existing sustainable initiatives. We do this by funding all kinds of

learning programs. From teaching how to gather as a group and take decisions how to move on, to technical skilling, marketing assistance, how to become an entrepreneur and how to negotiate.

There are of course people who are not organised, due to the extreme poverty or to the geographical isolation. So in that case we need to support programs that identify the sources of the problem so that they can also take initiatives. In these cases the government has a more supporting role.

What are the main things you have learned yourself with respect to leadership?

The most important thing for men and women who try to exercise a leadership role is that you have to be able to fully emerge yourself in the problems of others, because you can't help and bring solutions unless you are feeling what they are experiencing. If you want to defend something, you have to defend the interests of those groups that you are supposedly representing. And to represent these group doesn't mean that you're always off to make demands to third parties, but ask the question: 'What can we do ourselves to address these problems?' So I don't think it's only the rule to make demands on third parties. It's more the other way around: find your strengths, find out what you need most. Depending on where you can find the complementary strengths, you have to determine the best way to acquire that: through negotiation? Or taking a position of strength? You have to identify the key way to pursue it.

What is your key way?

I think it's not just the leader who's taking that decision. I think the decision has to be made by the group. The leaders help to identify it, but the interest group has to be well aware of what they are getting into. I think that the groups and the organisations should try to avoid getting their organisations involved in conflict. If it is too much of a fight from the beginning, it is clear that you have got nothing to gain. I think that you should avoid allowing mechanisms of severe struggle. It would damage the economic and social interests and kill productivity and organisations. After the war, where we learned to disagree and to fight for our point of view, we need to depolarise and be aware that politics has become part of organisational life. We are not there yet.

We verlaten het kantoor van de minister. Het was niet gemakkelijk hem te verleiden persoon-

Nicaragua

Het Spaanstalige Nicaragua ligt in Centraal-Amerika en telt ongeveer 5,6 miljoen mensen op een oppervlakte bijna vier keer zo groot als Nederland. Nicaragua is na Haïti het armste land van het westelijk halfrond. Het grootste deel van de bevolking leeft van de productie en export van koffie en vlees. Ecotoerisme is in opkomst. Het land heeft een jarenlange guerrilla-oorlog gekend tegen de dictatuur van Anastasio Somoza, die uitmondde in een omverwerping van die dictatuur in 1979. Sinds 1987 is een democratiseringsproces op gang gekomen. Het is een vriendelijk land, met één van de laagste criminaliteitscijfers van Latijns-Amerika.



lijke uitspraken te doen. De grote Ortega zou mee kunnen luisteren. Niettemin geeft hij een beeld van de balans tussen economische wetten van produceren en het benutten van de kracht van de gemeenschap. In deze 'ruimte' vindt hij zijn leiderschapsrol. «

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