**METHOD OF TRANSFORMING PROJECTS INTO SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

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**INTRODUCTION**

***Systemic Change is a process that favors a structural change of a whole system.***

***It is a change that leads to a radical transformation in the life of the excluded through specific strategies, needed to produce those changes***

During this workshop we have seen several examples of projects, the majority transforming or nearly becoming so. We, the members of the Commission feel very happy to see how the idea of Systemic Change, which a few years ago seemed very distant and sometimes inaccessible, slowly has been permeating the different branches of the Vincentian Family.

It has been very important for us, members of the Commission, to learn about your projects through the workshops, Trailblazing in Systemic Change. This has given us the possibility to augment our knowledge and to be able to talk about them in our future workshops and seminars. We are convinced he USA Vincentian Family is certainly on the right road towards transformation.

The evaluation of the different seminars and workshops given by the Commission has alerted us about a generalized question, which could be expressed as follows: “Our project, although it may not achieve a radical transformation in the lives of the excluded, is a necessary project. What should we do?

Before we talk about the method of transforming an existing project, I would like to express some proven facts:

**It is a fact that most people do not want to change.** There is a great resistance to change. If the implemented strategies of my project have given good results for over thirty years, why should I change them?

 What functioned 30, 20 or15 years ago, may not function today.

As members of the Commission and as Vincentian Family, we must be conscious of the following:

* A high percentage of our projects do not bring about a radical transformation in the lives of the excluded,
* Many others do not achieve any transforming effect, and what it is even more serious, we realize that even with the best of intentions, some perpetuate, and institutionalize the existing poverty, because they promote unjustified assistance that encourages self-contentment, apathy and lack of self esteem.
* Some people claim that the lack of resources is the reason their projects do not progress or remain static.
* Sometimes it is easier to start a new project than to transform an existing one.

This is generally true, but in reality what it is difficult to transform is the mentality, our mentality, in order to generate transforming strategies.

Very often, when we decide to improve our projects, we unconsciously employ the same mental models that are causing the problem we want to solve. Albert Einstein said: *“No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew”*

**THE MARILLAC CENTER: On the road towards transformation**

To illustrate the method of transforming a project in the systemic change optic, I have chosen a project that I know very well, a project in which I work. I am going to talk about the Marillac Center, a project on the road towards transformation.

This is a Vincentian Family project although in San Luis Potosí, my home town, there are not any other branches besides AIC. The Marillac project will continue and will improve thanks to the invaluable support of the five Visitatrixes of the Daughters of Charity of the USA, and that of Gene Smith, of the SVPS that you all know, a great Vincentian and a great friend. Their support and solidarity encourage me to present the road we have followed towards transformation, which may be applicable to any project.

**Background**

The Marillac Vincentian Center, located in a socially deprived neighborhood in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, for several years has carried out different activities in favor of the community. Initially it was targeted for young boys and girls, offering primary and secondary education, carpentry workshops, and spiritual formation. Later on, women integrated into the center, and they became our target group. Then we started arts and crafts classes, beauty skills, etc.

Through the experience of several years, the home visits and talks with the women, we detected that the activities offered in the initial project, did not bring about a real change in their lives. The activities, not having been planned with them, did fulfill neither their real, nor their felt needs. After realizing this, we decided to carry out a deep change, a radical change of policies, strategies and activities.

Our former Project ***“Training women to achieve their empowerment”*** did not produce real changes, radical changes to improve their lives. These facts convinced us of the need to change, leaving behind the old methods established years before. We left the existing classes to give rise to new activities and services and we therefore developed the following project:

***“Social co-responsibility for a world without violence.”***

***Meeting place for women***

**Process leading to transformation**

There are several methods of projects transformation, but I have decided to use a model proposed by Margaret Posig, PhD[[1]](#footnote-1), who talks about a model process for the flow of change, proposed by Kotter &Cohen. This proposal is guided by a specific methodology that develops in different stages, all important to achieve change. As you shall see, it responds to the strategies for Systemic Change, which are at the same time, the doctrinal frame, action lines and criteria for the project’s evaluation.

The mission oriented strategies are the doctrinal frame that sustains the Marillac Center. These must guide all the Vincentian projects any place in the world. We are certain that poverty, violence and exclusion, are the product of unjust situations that can be changed, that we have to be faithful to our Christian and Vincentian values and mission, and that we have to evangelize and inculturate Christian and Vincentian values and charisma, by maintaining a profound respect for the local culture. Most of the other Systemic Change strategies have been applied in the changing process.

**Stages that generally take place during the process of change:**

**1. Establishing the urgency to change**

It is a fact that most people do not want to change. The consciousness of the need to change cannot be achieved in twenty four hours. It is very easy to convince ourselves that our project is excellent. We fall in love with what we do, and concerning the beneficiaries of our project, they need us, they love us, they are grateful for what we do for them.

*People will be more committed to changing if the change speaks to their hearts. The primary challenge is to change behavior. This may be best accomplished by enabling people to see a truth that influences their feelings.* [[2]](#footnote-2)

To establish the urgency to change, we must respond in a very objective way to the following questions:

* Is the Project still needed?
* Does it respond to the present needs of the population?
* Which are the problems that have been detected?
* What are the reasons for changing, the risks for not changing?
* Why the project has not transformed the lives of the poor?
* What results do we expect to achieve with the project?

After answering all these questions in a very objective way, we came to a conclusion: Our project did not respond to the real needs of the beneficiaries. The women’s lives had not improved in spite of all our efforts and good intentions.

The analysis revealed several problems we had not detected before:

* Very frequently, these women cannot achieve a full participation in their lives and in their children’s education and even so, their empowerment, because they are victims of different forms of violence, mainly family violence that they endure silently.
* Women hide their problems, because they are ashamed to recognize their dignity being destroyed and always threatened. Fear is always present in their lives. The lack of affection becomes evident and increases their suffering.
* There is a great void pertaining to the psychological problems women endure, above all the poorest. These manifest themselves in chronic depressive states, of fear and anguish, not being taken into account, not even being perceived in their environment, in spite of the fact that they require immediate attention.
* These women and their partners, submerged into a vicious circle of violence, perpetuate the acts of violence in their children (repetition of conducts)
* Among the young population, those acts of violence are repeated, and are reproduced in their relationships, engagements, where they promote women’s submission, through different forms of psychological violence, such as jealousy, until they get to physical violence.

**2. Create a transformational vision**

First we created a Listening Center, cared by AIC Volunteers, in which the women express themselves freely, in an atmosphere of confidence and affection. Based on their felt needs, we decided to promote programs and activities that help the person become autonomous and be geared to attack the causes of poverty and violence. Working together with the Marillac women, we renewed the vision according to an updated analysis of the needs and aspirations of the population. A clear vision, shared by all the people involved in the project, including the beneficiaries, was needed to direct the effort to change, so that the possible “futures” may be seen. Where transformation is desired, there should be effective strategies to achieve strategic changes. All of us were convinced that unless we discover and attack the roots of poverty, it would be impossible to achieve a truly transforming effect.

To do so it is important to introduce here a Systemic change strategy which, in my opinion, is indispensable to achieve change and that is closely related with the Vision:

* Have a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs --- individual and social, spiritual and physical --- with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development

Needs of personal attention will be taken care of, attention will be given to their physical and emotional health, spiritual needs, preparation for work, education in basic studies, but also the Marillac Project will provide them with tools to progress in their lives.

**Inclusion of subsystems**

Global vision also implies working with the different subsystems that affect and have an impact on women’s lives. The main focus of the project is to promote a culture of gender equality. Gender equality is indispensable to eradicate violence. It is impossible to work with women in an isolated way. We must include in the project those who are part of their lives and their environments:

* Their husbands or partners,
* Their children
* Young engaged couples, an ideal stage to initiate the process *of “love without violence”*
* Other women of nearby neighborhoods interested in joining the project
* Inhabitants of several socially deprived settlements of the city of San Luis Potosi.

**This is the vision that resulted of our analysis:**

In the future, (five to ten years) people who participate in the center’s activities, particularly women, will have a dignified life, healthy and without violence, they will have achieved a transformation in their lives, that of their families and their environment.

Many unjust situations regarding violence shall be transformed, and we will have a positive impact on public policies and laws regarding gender equality

With a happy life, free of violence, they will have access to opportunities and job sources, having thus obtained their empowerment.

***“It is not enough to do good, we must do good well”****,* Saint Vincent said. This means that we must be assertive, to obtain not only good, but optimal results. This can be considered like a utopia, but we trust that the utopia can become history and that Systemic Change gives us the tools to do it.

**(18) 3. Build the guiding team**

According to the new vision the new team should have the abilities to respond to the detected needs and be capable to promote transformation. To achieve the desired impact, it is indispensable to focus on the integration, formation and training of those responsible for the project. Credibility, skills, connections, reputations and formal authority are needed.

It was indispensable to form a new work team, capable of responding to the needs. We had to change the coordinating team, as well as part of the staff. The new team should include, among others, a lawyer, an expert in mediation and two auxiliaries, two psychologists, a social worker, instead of the six arts and crafts teachers we had before.

Convinced of the need to change, the team assigned a significant amount of time to planning. A good system of strategic planning gave place to the birth of a new infrastructure for change and led us to a new and better model of work.

**4. Communicate the vision for buy-in**

Sensitizing society at all levels and the construction of a shared vision have been fundamental, because without the support received it would have been impossible to continue with the project. To communicate the vision, leaders are needed. Leaders may be coachers, listeners or providers of information if that is what is needed by their followers. Without communication, the commitment that comes from buy-in would not occur. Every vehicle should be utilized to continuously communicate vision and strategies.

The message should be kept simple and heartfelt in order to develop understanding, commitment and energy towards attaining the vision. Leaders should role model the behavior necessary to achieve this vision, and communicate emotionally with followers.

We made all possible efforts to communicate the vision and one of the best ways we found was the creation of an important network in which we promoted socialco-responsibility sensitizing society at all levels --- local, national and international --- about changing the unjust conditions that affect the lives of the women that suffer from violence and injustice. It was indispensable to sensitize diverse stakeholders: poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, the private sector, unions, the media, international organizations and networks, etc.

**5. Empower others to act according to the vision**

Empowerment means providing others with the responsibility and authority to implement the vision. Self confidence should be built by providing recognition and rewards. Commitment towards goal achievement and participation of the poor are keys to empowerment. Information is indispensable and must be transmitted by the leaders.

Exemplary leaders, like Vincent, Louise, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Ozanam and many other Vincentian models, use their power in the service of others and enable them to act by strengthening them and developing them into leaders.

We became aware of the necessity to form community leaders. One young woman is responsible for the reception of the participants, and to supervise the logistic aspects of the Center. We have started to form a group of women that in the future can become multiplying agents of the talks and the workshops. This is not an easy task; it is often easier for us to do the work, than to teach someone how to do it. We empower people by delegating tasks and responsibilities, showing confidence and promoting self esteem among the people

**6. Create short-term wins**

Long term visions may be broken down into short terms sub goals. Incremental change and small wins build confidence. These contributions toward change should be celebrated

In order to be able to give quality services, we got new backings to reconstruct the Marillac Center, very deteriorated by time and by the strong rains in the city. The reinauguration of our installations has been a great starting point for the new project.

To reach the Marillac Center’s objectives, we elaborated a plan and made a time table of all the work to be done. Based on these we set ourselves long and short time goals. To this day we have tried to improve the quality of our services, to promote the participation of the poor, to promote self esteem among women, to organize workshops and talks to prevent violence against women, to do net working and to create a shared vision.

**7. Don’t let up**

The vision must be supported by all systems, structures and policies. If one part of the organization changes, other parts of the organization need to be examined for ripple effects.

The urgency at the beginning of the change effort needs to continue, even after small wins are achieved.

**How is the project seen for the future?**

Women are the best multiplying agents who have a great influence in their family, friends and environment. Change a woman and you change all her world.

We shall prepare some women to turn into facilitators of the workshops and promote the implementation of the project in other places. Upon finishing the first cycle and the corresponding evaluations, a modified project could be implemented with new groups of women. One objective to achieve is that the women that participated in the initial project, with the counseling of the promoter’s group, become responsible for carrying out the new projects,

We have contemplated the multiplying and generating effect of the project, because as a pilot project it can be easily reproduced, complete or in part, by the different AIC groups in San Luis Potosí and by other groups of the Vincentian Family in Mexico and in other countries.

Since this is a formation project, it is difficult to achieve monetary independence. Small recuperation fees will be charged and an effort will be made to obtain personnel, professional and social service workers. This will be possible when the project has shown its effectiveness. This will be done through successful objective indicators. The didactic material produced through systematization and evaluation of the project will have an important multiplying effect in the diverse centers, particularly Vincentian centers, which work with women, more than 80% of the existing centers in Mexico.

The follow up of the Project can only be guaranteed if creative and constant methods of evaluation are applied regularly.

**8 . Institutionalize new methods, policies and strategies**

Any new culture that is working well for the organization should not only be “frozen” into place but continuously nurtured.

Role modeling on the part of the leaders and key individuals will constantly remind organizational members of the higher purpose values and behaviors that keep their culture strong.

Motivated by these conditions and convinced of the importance to achieve gender’s equality, this project has been launched with the intention that it can serve as a model for other groups that work with poor women.

One of our objectives is the systematization of work done and the publication of didactic material. so the project can be replicated in other places, particularly where there are Vincentian volunteers.

We must not forget that evaluation must be an essential part for the success of the project.  **Several kinds of evaluations must be carried out:**

* Permanent evaluations at the end of each activity, periodical evaluations, every three months, at the end of each cycle and yearly evaluations.
* Evaluations at the end of the year or at the end of a cycle are indispensable to plan the following one, reinforcing together the areas of opportunity.

The evaluations must be done with the participation of the population concerned and with the coordinating team and with people in charge of each area. Occasionally it is important to include the institutions that backed the project.

It is also very important to establish measurable indicators of the success of the project.

**Activities derived of the systemic change approach**

I am going to present different activities that have been implemented at the center to obtain the project’s objectives and to approach the vision. After evaluating each one of them, we decided to make them part of our curricula, and to continue with them in the future.

**CONCLUSION**

All along this last stage of our Marillac Project, we have tried to give birth to a new infrastructure for change. We have tried to implement systemic change processes, aimed, not only to modify some aspects of the prevailing reality, but to change the structures, to alter the whole system that affects the lives of many women and entire families that cannot be happy because of violence.

If we want to walk towards transformation, the first step is to work on ourselves to arrive, with a new mentality and wider perspectives, to transform ourselves in order to transform others. If we want to transform our projects, we have to become servant leaders, not only fulfilling other’s needs, but also enabling people who are poor by strengthening them and developing them into leaders. New values, behaviors and attitudes, and a greater consciousness of our Vincentian identity must be interiorized by all the participants in the projects.

To conclude this presentation, I would like to express a personal feeling. The Vincentian Family has given me the strength to live and proclaim my faith, to defend with arguments and concrete actions, the rights of the excluded. I do believe the heart of change is in emotion. People who are poor, and specially the women, have given me the drive and the emotions needed to maintain hope, to try to achieve, for them, and with them, better life conditions and a peaceful, dignified and happy life, more in accordance with the values of the Gospels.

Thank you so much.

1. Saint Vincent de Paul as a Leader of change:

The key roles of a higher purpose and empowerment.

Margaret Posig Ph.D (Vincentian Heritage 23-25) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Margaret Posig. Op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-2)