

Paper #4: Wendy Kopp, Founder of Teach for America

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Wendy Kopp founded the nonprofit organization, Teach for America. She started this venture as a senior at Princeton University when she discovered the inequities in education, and decided to write her senior thesis paper on the topic. She credited the opportunity gaps in education to a shortage of qualified teachers in low-income areas, and decided to start a nonprofit that would train high-achieving college graduates to teach for two years, similar to the Peace Corps. Wendy Kopp was an effective leader in the early stages of Teach for America, but as her career progressed, she became less focused on her mission and more on the metrics and corporate dealings.

Early Life

Citizen Leader:

At the end of her senior year of college, Kopp displayed qualities of a citizen leader because she was focused on serving the common good and solving education inequity. Kopp still needed an idea for her senior thesis and a job for after graduation. She was searching for a job that would “offer [her] significance and meaning” but could not find it.¹ Kopp decided to pursue her interest in education inequality and write her thesis on her plan to create a two-year teacher corps that would go into urban and rural areas.² For her paper, she researched why where someone is born affects his/her educational life. In Cheryl Mabey’s, “The Making of a Citizen Leader”, she states, “A citizen leader must obtain knowledge that citizen leaders need to become competent...in what they advocate”.³ While Kopp was writing her thesis, she was gathering information about the flaws in the American education system. She even organized a conference of student leaders from across the country in the beginning of her senior year to discuss social issues and in a workshop about education, she came up with the idea for a teacher corps.⁴ Kopp saw a problem in society and immediately acted on it. Mabey also pointed out in the excerpt that “action marks a significant leader” and “knowing is insufficient without action”.⁵ After Kopp researched the societal problem, she immediately came up with a solution to fix it.

Kopp took action as soon as she finished her thesis paper, which took the form of a proposal for a nonprofit organization that would create a teacher corps. She knew she needed \$2.5 million to fund her corps so she sent her proposal to prominent politicians, like Ross Perot, and the CEOs of thirty major American corporations.⁶ She then called every company to follow up on the letters. Kopp did not wait for companies to come to her, she reached out to them to

¹ Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children--: the Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned along the Way*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Mabey, Cheryl. “The Making of a Citizen Leader.” *Leader's Companion*, pp. 310–317.

⁴ Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children--: the Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned along the Way*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

⁵ Mabey, Cheryl. “The Making of a Citizen Leader.” *Leader's Companion*, pp. 310–317.

⁶ Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children--: the Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned along the Way*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

create palpable change, making her a citizen leader. She spent the summer after she graduated traveling around the country to meet with donors, visit schools, and create a board of directors. Kopp actively pursued her goal and was able to gain support because this goal contributed toward the greater good.

This made Kopp an effective leader because she cared about the population she was serving, and she did not have selfish intentions. She saw a problem in the country and took it upon herself to try to solve it. Kopp changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of children with her work. Furthermore, she transformed the lives of the college graduates who volunteered their time for Teach for America because she opened their eyes to the opportunity gaps in this country and gave them the chance to change that. Kopp was able to help so many children and improve the education system in this country because of her selfless leadership style.

Servant Leader:

Wendy Kopp exhibited servant leadership in the beginning of her venture because she simply wanted to create a national teacher corps to aid children in low-income schools—not to make money or gain notoriety. Robert Greenleaf defines servant leadership as “making sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served”, which Kopp did without worrying about her own material needs.⁷ Kopp stated in 2013 that she “definitely [does] not like the spotlight”, even if she is often in it.⁸ In the beginning of her venture, Kopp did not worry about making a large salary for herself, she just needed enough money to sustain herself. Kopp’s professor kept asking her, “How are you going to sustain yourself?” but she continued to worry more about her project than herself.⁹ When she started working in New York City, Kopp worked in a donated office all alone which she described it as “somewhat lonely but I loved the independence”.¹⁰ Kopp did not have time to focus on herself, she worked all summer from “nine in the morning until well after midnight”.¹¹ Kopp’s goal was to serve low-income children and she only focused on solving that. Because of this goal, Kopp was an effective leader. She did not have visions of running for public office and took this venture as a launching point, rather she put all her energy in Teach for America and made it her life’s work. This is Kopp’s passion project and because she loved her work she was able to lead her organization successfully.

Hard Power:

Kopp often credits her naivete as her biggest asset in creating Teach for America because she was not afraid to use hard power when dealing with donors. More experienced people might be afraid to ask for \$2.5 million right out of the gate, but Kopp knew what she wanted to accomplish so she tried to get there any way she could. In 2013, Kopp called her college self, “naïve and inexperienced, with no real understanding of what wasn’t possible”.¹² Kopp met with

⁷ Bolman, Lee G, and Terrence E Deal. “Community and the Cycle of Giving.” *Leading with Soul*, pp. 105–120.

⁸ Dillon, Sam. “2 School Entrepreneurs Lead the Way on Change.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 19 June 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/19/education/19teach.html>.

⁹ Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children--: the Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned along the Way*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Teach For America Founder Wendy Kopp: ‘Education Is the Tool to Get Kids out of Poverty.’” *Generation Progress*, 3 Oct. 2013, <https://genprogress.org/teach-for-america-founder-wendy-kopp-education-is-the-tool-to-get-kids-out-of-poverty/>.

executives from major companies and in her meetings she, “described the idea and why it had to happen”.¹³ She then said that she was looking for a seed grant and \$2.5 million within the first year. Kopp later stated, “I wasn’t feigning confidence, I *really* was confident”.¹⁴ This illustrates that Kopp was able to use coercion and hard power techniques to get what she wanted. She was not looking to compromise or adjust her budget, she knew what she wanted and she had to put on the hard push to get it. Kopp’s vision allowed her to use hard power because she knew what she wanted Teach for America to look like and she knew the only way of getting there was by asking for what she needed. Kopp never beat around the bush, and this direct way of asking for what she wanted made her a more effective leader. If she had been more timid or waiting around for people to help her, Kopp would not have created such a successful nonprofit organization so quickly. She was not afraid to fail and thus put everything she had into getting all the resources that would make Teach for America an effective organization.

Current Situation

It has been over 25 years since Kopp wrote her senior thesis which started Teach for America, and now, Kopp seems to be more focused on the corporate aspect of the organization than the people. Her leadership has shifted from a grassroots effort to a product-focused venture. Teach for America members “often find her aloof, seemingly more interested in courting corporate scions than sharing their classroom stories”.¹⁵ Kopp is a diligent list maker, sleeps five hours a night, and wrote a memoir during her maternity leave. Her critics say that “it often seems as much about reaching the goal as the goal itself”.¹⁶ Kopp lost the eagerness to accomplish a goal that she once had as a twenty-two year old. She is now more focused on corporate statistics and profits than she is on the outreach she is providing for low-income students.

Kopp is no longer the servant leader she once was. She still has the same drive she had when she was a college senior, but her priorities have changed. Therefore, Kopp is the effective leader she was when she started Teach for America. As Kopp climbed the corporate ladder in her nonprofit, she lost the vision she had about solving educational inequities in this country through providing more teachers for low-income schools. She no longer sees Teach for America as an organization that changes children’s lives and futures, rather she sees her role as a corporate CEO. Although this style may produce results when it comes to corporate metrics or efficiency, it is not as successful when it comes to helping individual children. Kopp’s drive used to help her get tasks finished quicker, thus bringing her closer to creating her organization, but now her drive is much more selfish. She has forgotten the dream she once had that made her create Teach for America in the first place and therefore is not as effective of a leader anymore because she does not have that same “change the world” mindset she originally had.

Conclusion

¹³ Kopp, Wendy. *One Day, All Children--: the Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned along the Way*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Strauss, Valerie. “A Letter to Teach For America’s Wendy Kopp - and Her Response.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 22 Apr. 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/02/01/a-letter-to-teach-for-americas-wendy-kopp-and-her-response/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Wendy Kopp went from a socially-minded college senior to a corporate hound. Her diligence once contributed to her drive to make change in society but now it is redirected to her wanted to make money and have high metrics for her corporation. This illustrates how someone's leadership style does not stay consistent throughout his/her life and power can get to people's heads.