

Salvador Alva: a legacy of transformation at Tec de Monterrey



In an interview with CONECTA, Salvador Alva shared personal and professional stories from his 8 years at the helm of Tec de Monterrey

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Cover photo: Alejandro Salazar

Salvador Alva put on a tie. He walked slowly across the empty campus until he reached the podium on the stage at the Borregos Arena.

Before him there were no students or parents in person, only the cameras that would transmit his message to the Tec de Monterrey graduating class of 2020.

This would be **his last graduation message** as president of Tec. He looked at the camera, smiled, and shared **5 key things he has learned about life** during his time at the university.

“I felt that Tec had to be an inclusive, diverse university that could attract the best talent.”

Eight years before, Salvador had also **written 5 key points on a card** that he would focus on to transform Tec.

Lorenzo Zambrano, Monterrey businessman and then chairman of the board at the Tec, had only given him **one hour to decide whether or not to accept the position.**

It was his wife who helped him decide, reminding him of the positive social impact it could have. *“I decided to join the Tec because, in the end, I could **influence 150,000 people**: the students,”* he told CONECTA a few days after standing down as president.

Salvador had a clear idea of what he would do. **He would seek to make the university more inclusive**, which would bring **the best talent** to study, work and teach there, regardless of socioeconomic level.

He would also **strengthen both altruistic and entrepreneurial sensibilities** in the education of students and in the operation of the university.

He also intended to promote a vision of collaborative work, with **more horizontal and fewer hierarchical structures**, open to global thinking.



THE BEST STUDENTS, REGARDLESS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC LEVEL

*"I felt that Tec had to be an **inclusive**, diverse university that could **attract the best talent regardless of socio-economic background**."*

*"Although **there were scholarships and grants, we did not have a project for bright but needy people**" he recalled.*

Salvador encouraged the creation of a **100% scholarship project for students with limited** financial resources but **great academic potential**.

"I challenged the team. And everyone was telling me why we couldn't do it."

So, one day I asked José Antonio** (Fernández - who was then chairman of the board at the Tec) for a favor. We were at the National Auditorium to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the university and he was going to say a few words: **he officially declared that we were launching the Leaders of Tomorrow

program.”

*I felt **we had a mandate compelling all of us to bring out the best in us**”.*

*“I was saying: **we have to show the world that we can be an academically elite university, not an economically elite university**”.*

The program took off, and today almost 1,200 young people have been supported by a **100% scholarship** at the Tec over the past five years. **In August, the sixth group will begin studying.**

When questioned about an outstanding moment, Salvador considers the launch of this program as a **turning point in his management.**

Salvador Alva's details:

- ***He walks for an hour every day***
- ***He likes documentaries***
- ***He listens to podcasts of discussions and analyses about the future***
- **He has written 5 books on strategic planning**



OFFICES: OPEN; TIES: OUT; SPACES: COLLABORATIVE

When Salvador Alva arrived at the Tec, he met with a group of students and **asked them if they would work at the Tec: “not a chance”** they all told him.

They began to tell him how they perceived the institution: **“that it was hierarchical, boring, and not very inclusive. That was the image that they had”** Salvador recalls.

He also discovered that many managers who reported to him **had** (as is usual in many organizations) **private meeting rooms within their office suites.**

“They were meeting rooms for that person. But, on average, they were used only 1% of the time. That meant that other people were unable to take advantage of those spaces as they provided an exclusive service to someone who did not use them much of the time.

Under Salvador's leadership, **Tec transformed many offices in** different parts of the country, **including the emblematic university Rectory.**

Now **there are no private offices** for anyone. **They are all open and collaborative spaces.** Meeting **rooms can be reserved digitally and used** by **any member** of the institution.

In the new open space offices in Monterrey, for example, they created spaces such as **snack areas, rest areas (for sleeping), children's areas, and recreation areas.**

In addition, **the requirement for all managers to wear ties on a day-to-day basis was removed,** as was the custom of calling them by titles such as "rector, president, or professor". **Salvador was simply 'Salvador', for everyone.**

Salvador also encouraged the efficient **digitization and modernization** of university services.

*"Being a university fragmented into campuses (26 across the country), all the services we provided were fragmented. **We needed fast, efficient processes, focused on our audiences,**"* he said. It was a big challenge.



THE POWER OF A TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

In the midst of an entrepreneurship festival, **Salvador approached some students** who were supporting outreach efforts.

Mara, **a girl from Sonora** who was on the Tec Storytellers program, **explained what she did and how she did it.**

Salvador then **took a bracelet from his bag and gave it to her. It said: “you make the difference”.** He explained that **he only gave them to people who were very important** for the university.

For Salvador, this was one of several ways to **recognize those who live and breathe the culture** that the Tec seeks to encourage.

Salvador tells CONECTA that during his life he has promoted a transformation process he calls **VOC: Vision, Organization and Culture** on 5 occasions (including

at the Tec).

But **before culture comes vision**, that's where everything starts. This important idea **began, for Salvador, on a personal level in his youth.**

*"Since I was **23 years old**, I have been inspired by the planning guru **George Steiner**; I learned how to make a **life plan** from him".*

That allowed him, he says, **to prioritize** what he **was passionate about**, what made him **happy**, and **focus on his strengths.**

At the Tec, he reassures us, he never tried to impose anything, preferring that the **vision was agreed upon** and then **changes consistent with it** were made at the pace of the organization.

"I like change and I'm not afraid of change".

*"When **we developed the vision to train leaders with both an entrepreneurial spirit and human sensitivity**, I said 'wow!'"*

*It's a wonderful vision, because leaders are scarce: they are change-makers, and entrepreneurs are dreamers. **We cannot provide them with a traditional education. We have to change".***

*That is also why, **with Tecmilenio, it was exciting to put forward the vision and say we develop people with goals** and the ability to achieve them*

*I told everyone: go and do a survey of all the universities in the world who have 'life goals' in their vision. We couldn't find a single one. This is the **first university that focuses on people finding a purpose in life.**"*

Salvador **has not been working alone** in making these transformations a reality. He recognizes that it was key to involve others from the beginning.

*"You start by **bringing in people who are 10 times better than you**, you let them dream and try new things: those people have a skill and people want to work with them. This is **when you start to make meaningful change in an***

organization.”

Salvador reiterates that vision must guide change.

“A vision is a powerful idea that gives meaning and purpose to life, all summed up in an inspiring phrase. It allows many united beliefs to come together and move forward to a different place”.



THE ROAD HE TOOK: BETTING ON SUCCESS FOR OTHERS

In 1972, Salvador graduated from the UNAM as a **Chemical Engineer**. He ventured into new areas from the beginning of his professional career.

*"I **am an entrepreneur by nature**: I had a Christmas decoration factory and I had working capital problems because you produce throughout the year to sell at the end of the year.*

*"At that time, I accompanied a friend to an interview at **Cervecería Cuauhtémoc Moctezuma** and I ended up working there" he recalls.*

At that point he was not even 20 years old, but he became a pioneer of **strategic planning processes**.

Over time, he was able to learn and observe more: **he saw companies with hierarchical organization** models on the one hand, and **employees overwhelmed by work** or mounting debts on the other.

*"I decided that **I wanted to be a free agent, and then I composed my life goals** - which later inspired me to write the book '**Your life, your key business**'. This allowed me to manage my life and write my own rules".*

"(The Tec has been) the most important transformation project of my career."

Salvador was also a director of multinational companies such as **PepsiCo Latin America**, where he became aware of something that could make a big difference.

*"I did not own the companies where I was, but I realized that I had the ability to influence many people. So, I thought: 'What if I create a **better organization, more altruistic, and with real values** that will surely influence people's lives and their families?'".*

Salvador shared that in order to achieve this transformation in organizations, he has had to become **a person who is not afraid of change**.

*"I have prepared myself to **help people to go through the processes of change** , because the world changes and technology changes: it is something that we should not fear," he said.*

This was key for him in his career at the Tec.

*“What gives me the most satisfaction at the Tec is **human development**. Thanks to that, progress is being made, rankings have improved, and we have improved many other things too.”*

He claims it was *“**the most important transformational project of his career**”*.



THE RESULTS AND THE FUTURE

Salvador Alva leaves **Tec de Monterrey** ranked as the **28th best private university in the world**, according to the prestigious [QS World University Rankings](#).

In addition, **Tec is now the 155th best university in the world**, according to the same ranking, having moved up **232 places in the last 10 years**.

It is also the 8th best university in the ranking of **top universities for entrepreneurship studies** according to The Princeton Review (where it was included alongside US institutions).

In addition, the Tec has also **doubled the number of researchers in the National Research System (SNI)** in a decade, to 643.

When asked if he is **satisfied** with his work as **Tec president**, he replies **“yes”** with a smile. Then he emphasizes the important role that all its members play.

He also confirms that the transformation exceeded his expectations: **“Who would have thought that we were going to change the entire educational process?”** he says, praising the Tec’s courage.

*“The Tec is an organization that has been evolving for 76 years; I received it at one rung on the ladder and today it has gone up two rungs; it could be two or two and a half. Now **it’s up to you to keep going**”.*



WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Every day for the last 11 years, Salvador has gone for an hour's walk.

He shares that, in his free time, **he usually watches documentaries and movies** (he has a small list of recommendations with him). One of his favorite films is **Hotel Rwanda**.

Also, he likes to listen to music, although he is more interested in **podcasts** ([such as those produced by the Tec](#)) that address medium and long-term issues, **reflecting on and understanding the human being**.

Among his favorite books is **Wayne Dyer's 'Your Erroneous Zones'**, which includes a chapter on managing worries. It has helped him manage his own emotional burdens and fears of the future.

“In the end, you realize that you don't need to do much; what you have to leave is a better world than what you received ”.

He says that now that he will have 30 percent more time available for **personal projects**.

*“I’m working a project, which is still at the ideas stage, to create a platform for everything we’ve been talking about: a **purpose in life**, and to help people to find ways to manage their emotions.*

*“There is also a project to create a Monterrey brand, **a city brand**; it seems to me that the four northern states should unite with **Texas**. It’s a **larger economy than the whole of Mexico**. We should unite to create a **Silicon Valley**. Imagine it!”* he confides.

Regardless of the projects he is now working on, it is clear that whatever he does it must be something that contributes to the community.

*“When someone disappears from the world, you ask about that person, and people remember one or two paragraphs. Your strengths come out and they are what you leave as a **legacy**, what you chose to be: a great businessman or a great humanist.*

*“In the end, you realize that you don’t need to do much (to leave a legacy), but what you have to leave is **a better world than that which you received from your parents**,”* he concluded.

To the students of the class of 2020, he gave this advice:

- **Value your freedom to choose.**
- **Use the power of a vision to focus your efforts**
- **Persevere to achieve that vision**
- **Value diversity and surround yourself with the best talent**
- **Take advantage of the most valuable thing you have: your time.**

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