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**S**TRATEGIC thinking. Communication skills. Project management. Business acumen. Risk management. Resource management. Networking. Entrepreneurship.

Aren't all these leadership skills that every organisation would like to develop in its talents? And haven't a lot of investments gone into training, programmes and initiatives to instil and build these skills? Every talent development leader is also constantly looking for new and innovative ways to develop his or her people in these areas.

**Consider this seriously. Get your leaders/talents involved in community service!**

**TELL ME WHY**

Engaging with the community may not seem like a typical approach of leadership development, but it has been embraced by a few organisations globally that have found it to be an effective alternative channel to develop leadership skills amongst corporate and business leaders.

The concept of developing leaders through community service involves taking employees in a business environment who are identified as potential future leaders and making them lead a community project out of their comfort zone, with the main intention of honing their leadership abilities.

Consider this: when hiring a candidate, would you choose someone with only straight As, or someone with relatively good grades but with a lot of leadership in extra curriculum activities and community work?

Most recruiters would choose the latter, as there is a huge leadership value put on people with extensive community involvement.

Research by Reed Executive, one of UK's largest employment, recruitment, training and human resources (HR) consultancy agencies founded in 1960, shows that among 200 of the UK's leading businesses:

- 73% of employers would employ a candidate with volunteering experience over one without. Ninety four per cent of employers believe that volunteering can boost leadership skills.
- 58% of employees claim that voluntary work experience can be more valuable than experience gained in paid employment.
- 94% of employees who volunteered believe they had benefited from the experience, and that it either helped them secure their first job, improved their salary, or contributed to their promotion.

So much recognition is given to the leadership abilities of a candidate who has voluntary experience during the hiring process, yet, once the candidate is hired, the organisation forgets this very factor and fails to leverage community involvement as a great tool to develop leadership.

**Business environment vs Community/NGO environment**

You might wonder, how does getting involved in community service help develop leaders for businesses? Aren't they two completely different worlds?

While it is true that both the business world and the NGO world have different goals and targets to meet, the leadership skills required to lead both the business and the NGO/Community work is the same if not harder in the community service arena.

# DEVELOPING LEADERS THROUGH COMMUNITY SERVICE

In fact, taking on leadership roles in the community arena might be a tougher ground to develop true leaders. It is a test of leadership not by position, title or authority. It is a test of leadership through influence, trust, credibility and service.

**In serving any community or NGO, one must:**

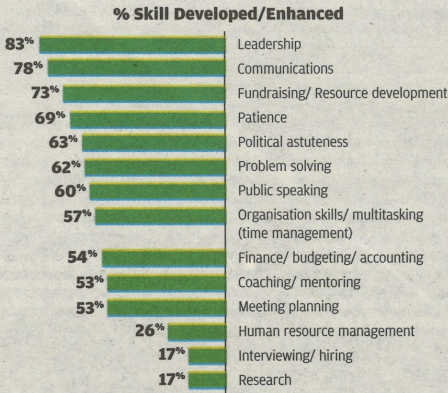
- Look at the entire organisation from above (not simply one's particular division).
- Consider the stakeholders and the mission.
- Understand the funding model of the NGO and its vulnerabilities.
- Identify and assess sustainable models for funding.
- Revisit the mission and its relevance.
- Articulate the compelling value of the organisation.
- Assess and understand community needs.
- Identify and evaluate other service providers.
- Determine the core services that have the greatest impact.
- Explore strategic alliances.
- Envision the future.
- Build consensus.
- Lead through persuasion, and
- Develop and mentor new volunteers.

Although profit-making may remain the core mission of profit-driven businesses, as opposed to most non-governmental organisations which are rooted in an idealistic mission and a strong volunteer spirit, the core traits of a community leader illustrated above are the very same competencies which a CEO or business leader in the corporate sector ought to build upon.

**Leadership skills developed/enhanced in volunteerism**

According to Deloitte's 2008 Volunteer IMPACT survey, 91% of corporate respondents agree that contributing business skills or expertise to an NGO can be an effective way to develop leadership qualities.

The table below illustrates the findings of research conducted by Power Skills, one of Asia Pacific's leading executive search firms, on a group of corporate leaders who were involved in leading community projects. It shows that a high percentage of enhancement in various leadership traits has been recorded from these leaders.



Some organisations have already seen the benefits from this channel of leadership development and have gone on to institutionalise this through formal employee volunteer programmes. Some have gone even as far as incorporating community service involvement as a requirement for performance and promotion appraisals.

Take for example UPS Women's Leadership Development Programme. As part of the leadership development of women in the company, the programme incorporates community projects as part of their formal curriculum.

Westpac embarked on the community Organisational Mentoring programme, where they leverage the skills of their leaders in creating sustainable organisations for the communities.

The Organisational Mentoring programme is a skills transfer programme designed to help build and drive continuous improvement, innovation, collaboration and long term sustainability in the not-for-profit sector.

The benefits to the Westpac Group are two-fold. The organisational mentoring programme not only builds capacity for our not-for-profit partners, but provides a development opportunity for employees, allowing them to further develop their influencing and coaching skills, change management and continuous improvement practices. It also creates greater employee engagement.

In the United States, Suzanne Sutter, CEO of Things Remembered, a leading retailer of personalised gifts with more than 600 stores in the United States and over 30 stores in Canada, was tasked with the assignment to turn around the "Make A Wish" foundation which was in financial distress in 2003.

This assignment was bestowed upon her by the board of directors as part of her leadership development assignment, of which she testified was an amazing platform to develop several strategic aspects of her own



Leaders who are involved in the community have the desire to make a difference and have a high degree of involvement and ownership in their work. That same desire could be brought into the corporate world to contribute to business growth.

**3 Business generation**

Involvement in community service activities enhances a company's image and increases name recognition. It also contributes towards the expansion of professional and personal network to develop new markets and relationship building.

**THINGS TO CONSIDER**

So what's next for organisations keen in embarking on leadership development in the NGO context and culture? Consider some of the following tips for the development initiative to smoothly take place.

- First and foremost, the CEO must walk the talk and be actively involved.
- Source for credible organisations to partner with.
- Management ought to recognise the value of this unconventional leadership training and give their commitment by allowing allocated paid service time-off for community work.
- Structure the community service initiatives to suit the development needs of your people.
- Look into systems and structures that need to be put in place to give recognition.

On one hand, businesses seek tough learning environments to cultivate their leaders, something different from their normal workplace.

On the other hand, non-profits are in dire need of leaders from the corporate arena with business acumen – in strategy, finance, public relations, human resources, law, real estate, accounting, and other core areas.

Combine the two needs, and we find that the community service arena actually provides a unique breeding ground for leadership development if you know how to leverage the right organisation and make it a win-win partnership.

By involving your leaders in community service, they will learn lessons they cannot get anywhere else. Service learning is hands-on learning that will last a lifetime.

And most of all, true leadership grows out of an attitude of service to others. If we can cultivate this leadership attitude in our leaders, these leaders will be making a difference for many years to come, changing their world and ours!

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leadership abilities and her second liners.

Alia's Sustainable Agriculture Project in Wuxi tasked its leaders to create a social business model to aid the income generation of smallholder farmers through a comprehensive agricultural supply chain.

The leaders came up with the strategic roadmap on building a trustworthy brand of Wuxi food products which could command a higher price in the market and meet the growing demand for safe food in China, greatly enhancing their business acumen and entrepreneurship skills in the process.

Whilst leveraging community development projects to develop leadership skills amongst corporate professionals seems like an interesting alternative platform, it is important to know that this does not replace classroom learning. Rather, it is a compelling complementing method for the application of the skills learnt through formal classroom/training settings.

**ADDITIONAL BENEFITS**

Besides acquiring the typical competencies commonly associated with NGO leadership, another compelling reason why organisations should adopt this alternative channel is the cost effective opportunity to develop leaders while doing good for the community.

With 70% of HR leaders professing to have flatter training budgets this year than last, it makes sense to look to a corporate volunteer programme for opportunities to develop leaders.

**Other pertinent benefits:**

**1 Human resource management**

It provides a good platform to identify, evaluate and assess leaders against those core competencies and recruit leaders based on their leadership capabilities.

**2 Culture building**

It builds a class of culturally-sensitive, service-oriented and cross-functional leaders who are able to lead in a multicultural and diverse environment in moving towards a high-involvement culture.