

LEADERSHIP with a difference



The purpose of this article is to encourage you to consider leadership in a broader sense —as a leader in your community, in and beyond the workplace. The benefit of thinking more broadly about the meaning of leadership is to create the capacity for all of us to discover our potential. We can be leaders as individuals, by finding a sense of purpose in our communities, and as employees we can encourage our employers as organisations to take up leadership opportunities.

To achieve leadership in the fullest sense, employees and employers must go beyond building their organisation's capital and embrace social responsibility in ways that can be challenging and perhaps confronting, but ultimately benefit all concerned. Individuals can undertake a leadership role by becoming involved in volunteerism whilst also enhancing their career development.



What is a leader?

The first step to being a leader is to get involved. The philosophy behind the University of Melbourne's Student Ambassador Leadership Program (SALP) is that students develop their leadership skills through volunteering in the University and in the community. This interpretation of leadership argues that by developing personal skills in team building, ethical decision making and critical thinking, students will gain the confidence and courage to become leaders and active citizens with an enhanced social awareness.

This is achieved through an intensive training program featuring a series of seminars and workshops, as well as an active service component. An example of encouraging students to consider their role in a local community is the *Urban Seed Melbourne Walk* workshop. Students begin by analysing their responses to urban poverty and associated issues while learning about the role that local businesses can play in contributing to the solution. For many, this is a challenging way of thinking about their future employers. For some employees, financial reward is no longer enough - personal reward and a sense of achievement extending beyond their salary are important.

The SALP leadership philosophy can continue to apply to graduates and employees at any stage of their career. Leadership is not out of reach of any of us if we care enough to make a contribution to our community.

Information about SALP can be found at <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/live/salp>

Community: what does it mean?

The standard dictionary definition of community is 'the people who live in a particular place or region and usually are linked by some common interests'. We can all think of the different communities we belong to —our families, friends, social clubs, political parties, ethnic or religious groups, and workplaces, to name a few. These communities help define us and give us a sense of purpose. In a multi-cultural country such as Australia, we pride ourselves on the fact that we can respect each other's differences and live harmoniously with one another. But do we really know one another?

With the focus on creating better career outcomes or getting the edge in a competitive job market, where does responsibility to our communities come into the picture? Who has the time to get to know or build our community when we have become so pre-occupied with getting our work right? The current education climate forces universities' clients/students to become more focused on career outcomes. But as we all belong to communities, we do have a responsibility as individuals, employees and employers to take a leadership position on this issue.

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Leaders in the community

Leadership begins when you make the decision to take action. As individuals there are many opportunities to take on leadership roles through involvement in our communities. Volunteerism is a key strategy for creating active and mutually beneficial relationships. Volunteering can take many forms and range from a one-off commitment such as *Clean Up Australia Day* to ongoing local programs which assist the elderly or youth, honorary positions on school committees, cultural organisations or unions. Given the huge diversity of volunteering opportunities, there is inevitably a match for your skills and interests. In terms of your career, volunteering contributes directly to increasing your networks, professional development and organisational knowledge.

Workplaces building community

Working in collaboration with your workplace, you can become a catalyst to encourage a sense of corporate citizenship. Some organisations are adopting the 'triple-bottom-line' approach, incorporating economic, social and environmental considerations. As an employee you use your own volunteer experience to create networks and opportunities with local organisations. You can start encouraging creative partnerships between your employers and the community, based on your knowledge and networks as a volunteer.

One organisation playing a major role in assisting corporations and their employees to contribute to their wider communities is United Way in Geelong. Each year, United Way raises money for over 50 vital health and human care agencies within the region. More than 60,000 people within the Geelong region benefit from a United Way funded charity each year, including children, youth, the elderly, families, people with disabilities and people in crisis. Their role in supporting the Geelong community requires the collaboration and involvement of business, professional and community organisations. Business organisations have the option of signing on to United Way's payroll deduction scheme (where employees contribute \$4 of their pay per month) or by becoming involved in the Loaned Executives Program. The Loaned Executive visits Geelong workplaces to thank current payroll contributors to United Way and encourage non-contributors to consider commencing workplace giving.

The role of Loaned Executive is an example of the way that volunteering can contribute to the development of your professional skills, including

public speaking, selling, time management and team building. Loaned Executives are exposed to a diverse range of community and business networking opportunities during a 13-week campaign, which helps them to grow in confidence and ultimately, leadership ability.

Practical ways you can get involved

- Take some time to reflect on what you want out of your volunteering experience and what you want to contribute to your local community. What community issues do you feel strongly about? Which sections of the community would you prefer to work with?
- Establish a business case for the introduction of a volunteering program in your workplace. As a volunteer, an employee will need to be vocal about the potential benefits for business, such as a more positive corporate image, improved staff morale and new skill development opportunities.
- Speak with your local volunteering agency, such as Volunteering Australia, to help guide the planning and implementation of a volunteering program within your workplace.
- You are a role model. As a committed contributor to your local community it will be your determination, commitment and passion that may lead your organisation to follow.

Encouraging your colleagues and employers to actively contribute to the community not only enhances your leadership skills but allows you to contribute to your organisation's reputation. There is also the added benefit to your organisations' 'triple-bottom-line' as new relationships with the wider community may translate into new business partnerships. As an employee, you will have the unique opportunity to enhance your leadership skills whilst also gaining a new and perhaps more positive perception of your career and its direction.

References

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Last updated June 2008