DEVELOPING SINGAPORE'S FUTURE BUSINESS LEADERS THROUGH VOLUNTEER WORK

August 2015

DESIGNING LEADERS, LLC
Great Leadership Only Happens by Design

As Asia's business opportunities continue to grow, the need for effective leaders grows as well – and that need is not being met. Manpower Group's 2013 Talent Shortage Survey reported that only 7.2% of Asian businesses say they have leaders who are "very prepared" for the challenges of the evolving business environment. "Leadership is a journey but the current demand for leaders in Asia means this journey needs to be taken by an express train," said Jeffrey A. Joerres, Manpower Group's Chairman and CEO. "Companies in Asia must deploy holistic leadership programs customized to local needs to meet these compressed development timelines."

Singapore's government has recognized the need for new approaches to development. Rather than focusing only on traditional methods, the government has introduced the SkillsFuture program in recognition of the idea that "mastery is more than having the right paper qualifications and being good at what you do currently; it is a mindset of continually striving towards greater excellence through knowledge, application and experience." Singapore has realized that the "express train" to leadership involves more than just sitting in a classroom.

At the same time, Singapore's non-profit community could benefit from a larger volunteer pool, both on an operational level and on boards of directors. Changing demographics, including both a more diverse society resulting from immigration and a shift toward an elderly-dominated population, will likely increase the need for non-profit services. Meanwhile, Singaporeans' growing professional demands, demonstrated by the country's ranking near the top of the global list for average annual hours worked and by an incredibly low unemployment rate, make it difficult to get enough volunteer manpower to meet all the needs of this changing society. A January 2015 insight article by Sebastien Lamy and Usman Akhtar of Bain & Company reported that, "The growth in volunteerism and donations hasn't been matched by an equal rise in the number of talented individuals available to serve as NPO executive directors or board members."

Is there a way both of these could be addressed? Could Singapore's rising business leaders learn from volunteer opportunities? Would companies benefit by incorporating volunteer experiences into their leadership development programs? Could non-profit organizations (NPOs) enhance their own capabilities by adding high-potential employees to their volunteer teams and boards of directors?

The answer to all these questions is, quite simply, yes.

LEADERSHIP NEEDS

Singapore's home-grown multinational companies continue to expand not only regionally but also around the world. As they move into new markets and new lines of business, the demand rises not just for more leaders, but for new types of leaders. Small and medium enterprises also see growth opportunities they can take advantage of, but only if they have the right kind of leaders. The civil service faces similar needs, as the PS21 concept overseen by the Public Service Division attempts to reshape the way government employees provide the services that help Singapore grow. Western multinationals that oversee their APAC

operations from their Singapore offices are also looking for leaders who can work comfortably with multiple markets and a diverse workforce.

What do they need from their leaders? As their customers' and clients' expectations change, as they face new talent concerns, or as they move into new markets, some common leadership needs are emerging for enterprises in Singapore.

Skills mastery is more than having the right paper qualifications and being good at what you do currently; it is a mindset of continually striving towards greater excellence through knowledge, application and experience.

From the SkillsFuture website

VUCA

This acronym, in danger of being overused, describes the operating environment for private- and public-sector enterprises in Singapore: Variable – Uncertain – Complex – Ambiguous. Leaders in Asia, and especially in Singapore, do not face a stable environment, but instead are trying to grow while encountering disruptive technologies. That means facing new challenges as they emerge, trying to see opportunities before competitors do, and developing new ways to respond to, or to create, change. Gone are the days when what was successful yesterday will also be successful tomorrow. Leaders need to be able to recognize and adapt to a changing environment, which is hard to teach in a classroom.

Diversity

Firms that operate only in Singapore, with a local workforce and local customers, have not traditionally been too concerned about diversity. Any organisation that is growing, though, or going through significant change in the way it does business, will operate with a more diverse collection of employees and vendors, and provide goods and services to a changing customer base. Understanding the needs of, and being able to work with, people from a wider range of backgrounds – ethnic, religious, income-based, and more – will be an essential skill for future leaders who need to cast a bigger net for talented employees and who are looking to be effective in more markets.

Collaboration

Modern talent challenges that make it hard for an organisation to grow its workforce, combined with the pace of change that requires a faster flow of information and ideas, mean that collaboration will become increasingly important. Singapore's educational systems and broader social culture have traditionally encouraged individual work and competition over group work and cooperation. Rising leaders need to learn not only how to collaborate effectively themselves but also how to create a collaborative environment where one has not historically existed.

Innovation

Another cultural and educational issue facing Singapore's business community is the traditional lack of emphasis on innovation. New challenges demand new ideas. However, students have often been encouraged to memorize information without challenging the lecturer, or each other, and failure has customarily been viewed as a negative rather than

as a learning opportunity. Rising leaders need to become comfortable with managing the risk of failure associated with innovation while also developing the ability to spot new opportunities and develop new ways of using existing or original techniques to address business problems.

Motivating Employees
Gallup's 2013 "State of the Workplace" report found that employee engagement in Singapore is among the lowest in the developed world. Productivity is relatively low, while attrition continues to be higher than companies would prefer, and these factors ultimately reduce revenue while increasing costs. Leaders need to increase employee engagement without incurring dramatic additional costs. Fortunately, as Daniel Pink explores in his book *Drive*, internal motivation can be much more powerful than external incentives such as higher salaries. Rising leaders need to learn how to tap into employees' internal motivation.

DEVELOPING LEADERS

Organisational development specialists often focus on the "10-20-70 approach" when it comes to learning: 10% comes through formal training opportunities, 20% comes through mentorship and coaching, and 70% comes on the job. Many companies are interested in blending their formal development with on the job learning through a concept known as *action learning*.

Action learning involves working on real problems, taking concepts from the classroom and applying them to situations that are not necessarily part of the day-to-day job but that still have real implications. Students demonstrate increased engagement in their development when the results will actually be put to use, rather than sitting on an instructor's hard drive. Action learning is usually most effective when it involves a team of students from different specialties, but it has been effectively used for individuals as well.

One challenge of using action learning in a company or government agency is that, with the growing need for leaders and the wide range of skills they need to develop, there may not be enough action learning opportunities to go around in-house. While organisations may face many challenges, not all of them are suitable for action learning; in many cases, the cost of failure may be too high, and since this is a training exercise there may be a higher risk of failure involved.

Action learning can help companies address the new leadership challenges they face, and the non-profit community offers opportunities for such learning.

WHAT CAN VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES OFFER?

Non-profit organizations can provide leadership students with action learning experiences. Though NPOs do not face the same profit-making goals as private firms do, they still focus on making the best use of their resources to maximize the value of their contributions to society, and they do so in an environment that offers students a chance to develop the same

THE BUSINESS BENEFITS OF ACTION LEARNING

1. **Problem Solving**
2. **People Development**
3. **Team Development**
4. **Organisational Learning**

World Institute for Action Learning

competencies they need in their workplace. This is clearly a win-win situation: NPOs will be better positioned to meet their goals with additional volunteers, and rising leaders will be able to build the skills they will need in their next role and potentially at levels beyond that.

NPOs may choose to use student volunteers in project management roles; they could lead teams of volunteers in carrying out the group's mission, or they could be responsible for individual projects and events. They might also use volunteers as individual contributors, participating in activities and projects led by others. Of course, they could also offer a pool of qualified board members, if they already have some leadership experience under their belt. The learning in each role will be beneficial but somewhat different, and decisions on how best to use student volunteers will depend on such things as the nature of the NPO's activities, the amount of experience necessary to be in a leadership role, and the needs of the students themselves. Regardless of the role they play, there are some common lessons that student volunteers can learn whether they are leading an activity or merely experiencing it as a volunteer.

Dealing With Complex and Evolving Situations
NPOs address a variety of issues, many of which are beyond the life experiences of their volunteers. Taking on unfamiliar challenges forces a student out of the "comfort zone" and helps them learn how to be innovative while also building the self-confidence necessary to be comfortable dealing with the unknown. The situations a leadership student will face while volunteering will help that student deal with unexpected situations at work and meet the challenges of disruptive technologies that affect their market or their workplace.

Employing Team-based Approaches
To make the best use of their limited resources, many NPOs need the synergy that comes from an effective team-based approach. Students learn how to collaborate better themselves, but also can practice bringing together a team of people with diverse backgrounds. Since a group's volunteers have not gone through a typical hiring process that you would see a company, they do not fit into a single style, but instead bring a variety of skills and limitations. This requires a student volunteer – whether in a leadership role or simply contributing as a member – to find the best way to get the most value from a group.

Relationship Building
An important skill for rising leaders is the ability to develop relationships and build networks, not only within the organisation but also among peers, vendors, partners and others on the outside. As the pace of promotions moves faster and faster, emerging leaders are missing out on the experience of developing those important relationships. Action learning in NPOs helps student volunteers first by putting them into situations with new people so they can practice the art of establishing new relationships and learn how to do it well. Second, it actually helps with the development of relationships themselves, whether

with others from their company engaged in the same program, or with the broader range of people outside their organization with whom they are volunteering side-by-side.

Managing the Tradeoffs in Planning and Budgeting
As people make the move from rank-and-file employee to a leadership role, they often come with new ideas about how things should be done, with no experience in how to actually make those things happen. Volunteering in an NPO gives them the experience of trying to match ideas with resources, forcing them to prioritise activities and allocate resources between different needs. Since most NPOs rarely have the resources to do everything they would like to do, this requires student volunteers to be more creative in their problem-solving.

Making Use of Internal Motivation
Volunteers are not motivated by salary and benefits, nor are they focused on promotions and titles. They come to an NPO because they have a high degree of internal motivation, and this offers student leaders an opportunity to learn how to engage others' internal motivation rather than using an external carrot-and-stick approach. While it is true that volunteering to do something you think is important is different from working at a job in return for a paycheck, this experience does allow rising leaders to find whatever it is that motivates someone internally and then use that to encourage doing value-adding tasks.

GETTING CORPORATE BUY-IN

This is a somewhat unusual approach to leader development. NPOs who want to work with companies on something like this need to be able to show the benefits of their program, and be ready to answer questions even before they are asked. Of course, any useful program typically has some challenges associated with it, and the use of volunteering in leadership development is no exception. NPOs will have an easier time of getting corporate buy-in if they anticipate, and propose ways of overcoming, these concerns.

Right from the start, NPOs need to present their ideas in the language of the business. It is important to speak to the business challenges companies face, and be able to show not only what skills a volunteer program can develop, but also how those skills translate into business value. This will take a little research into the nature of a business and the market and talent challenges they face, but the time spent doing that little bit of research can pay off handsomely. Traditional companies may not view volunteering as being on par with "normal" methods of development, so to overcome this challenge of business culture, the presentation of ideas in business terms becomes very important.

Next, they need to show their proposal fills a development gap for the company without incurring additional financial costs. While a company should be providing some time away from work for volunteering, the investment of time that they make is less than the investment of time and money that would be necessary for a more formal training program. One concern companies may have is that, for many, they can take advantage of various government programs, such as the Productivity and Innovation Credit and the Workforce development Agency, to subsidize the costs of formal training. It would be

helpful if a similar training subsidy could be offered to firms to minimize the costs of the time away from work, perhaps through SkillsFuture.

For many companies, the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is growing. Whether it is to boost their company's brand in the marketplace, improve their employment brand within the talent market, or simply to meet the leadership's desire to give back to the community, CSR is becoming more important to Singapore companies. The concept of blending leadership development with volunteer opportunities has the added benefit of supporting a company's CSR goals, and this "two-for-the-price-of-one" advantage can be an important selling point in gaining corporate buy-in.

For companies to see both the development and the CSR benefits, they need to know that the NPO is ready to make good use of the volunteers. Non-profit organisations need to develop and be ready to present a plan for using their new volunteers. This plan should be specific, not just a general idea, and should be able to show the particular skills that volunteers will develop. This goes back, in part, to the idea of speaking to the business in business terms; corporate leaders are used to seeing specific plans, and they will want to know such a plan exists before turning their people loose.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional development methods can be very useful in typical, stable settings, but these days Singapore's business environment is anything but typical or stable. As companies look to grow, they face considerable challenges from Singapore's relatively low birth rate and the evolving limits on foreign employees, both of which contribute to a very tight talent market. Subsequently, the creation of new roles within companies and the high turnover rate among talented employees mean that companies often have to promote people faster than traditional development programs can produce leaders. The situation calls for new methods of learning, methods that address not just the next level of leadership but the level beyond that as well.

At the same time, Singapore's non-profit organisations will face increasing demand for their services as the nature of the population evolves. The nation's workforce may be hard-pressed to contribute the necessary manpower unless a way can be found to blend work and volunteerism in a way that benefits both companies and the larger society.

Singapore will grow economically if it has stronger leaders in business, and will grow socially with a non-profit sector that is prepared to address emerging challenges. Incorporating volunteer efforts into leadership development programs helps to accomplish both goals.

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