

The Value of Volunteering in Leadership Development

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Sixty percent of corporations allow paid time off for volunteer pursuits, according to United Way. While many companies are doing it for the “corporate goodwill” it engenders with the community, they are missing the mark on how to use volunteering for leadership development.

Volunteering can develop both soft skills and technical skills that can be applied back on the job.

For example, Jake Lewis is a project coordinator with a small mid-Atlantic engineering firm. He aspires to become a project manager, and of course will need to take coursework and exams to achieve that, but how much of a project manager’s job is soft skills? A lot. And he can learn many of those skills outside of the workplace through the volunteering that he does with Habitat for Humanity.

Working with other volunteers (many of whom he meets for the first time at a job site), requires communication skills, collaboration, persuasion, planning, problem-solving, and more. At least once over the course of a build he finds himself in a leadership position coordinating trades, giving assignments, and inspecting work. His volunteer work provides him great insight into the role of a project manager as well as the interpersonal skills that will be required of the job. In the workplace these are skills that are built slowly, over time, but because volunteers are generally in short supply, many individuals get “fast tracked” into more responsible positions than they have at their jobs.

Erika Long works as a social media manager for a New York based construction management firm. She volunteers four days



a month as the marketing manager for her county foodbank. Her volunteer activities require her to think strategically, plan projects and see them through, manage a small budget, and more. As the marketing manager for the nonprofit, she has greater role responsibilities than she does at her job. One of her favorite activities is the year-end planning that is done for the campaigns she will manage the following year. This planning allows her to sit in on the strategic meetings of the non-profit’s paid executives and advisory board – giving her exposure to long-term strategic planning practices and insight into how the organization is run.

Look at the list of skills these two employees attribute to their volunteer activities:

- » Communication
- » Collaboration


- » Persuasion
- » Planning
- » Delegating
- » Problem-solving
- » Strategic thinking
- » Project planning
- » Financial management

In addition to the skill building, there are three benefits to allowing your employees paid time off for volunteer pursuits:

1. It's cheaper than training (and it includes real-world application). Sending someone out to training or bringing in a training facilitator will cost much more than the \$30 or \$45 per hour you'll be compensating your employee to be learning a multitude of skills (generally training programs focus on just one skill).
2. Gen Z, the youngest generation entering the workforce right now (the oldest of them is about 25 years old), is very concerned with creating a better world to live in and fixing society's ills. While the construction industry certainly contributes to both of those things, there are many volunteer opportunities that do so as well (see the above two examples) which allow your younger workers to feel as though they are making a real contribution to society.

Additionally, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) [reported this past summer](#) that young workers generally say they prefer to work for companies that have a commitment to corporate social responsibility. Many Gen Zers are interviewing you, your culture and values, and will choose their employer based on how they view the company's responsibility to the world at large. So, think about implementing this policy as a recruitment tool as well as a professional development tool.

3. Employees who participate in company-endorsed volunteer opportunities are five-times more engaged with the companies they work for. Volunteer time off, or VTO, is becoming an increasingly popular tactic to keep employees engaged while giving back to the local community.

There are a myriad of ways to develop leadership skills in your employees and volunteering is an approach that can be implemented easily and with minimal investment. Volunteers develop both technical and people skills, and the skills they learn while volunteering can immediately be applied back on the job. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for *Chief Learning Office magazine*, *Forbes*, and *MBA World* and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as *Inc. Radio* and *America's Workforce Radio*.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is *Future-Proofing Your Organization*.

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