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volunteering

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CORPORATE EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING

– a disruptive tool for professional and leadership development?

Corporate employee volunteering has been touted as a tool for employee professional and leadership development. This is rooted in the idea that corporate employee volunteering, and volunteering more broadly, provides a powerful space for experiential learning – “learning through reflection on doing”.

Corporate employee volunteering, it is argued, enables employees to test and develop soft skills in environments that disrupt the typical day-to-day routine of employees, helping staff to tap into their interests, creativity and capabilities. It also allows employees to reflect on their relationship to others, and their roles in work, family and as citizens of South Africa.

Soft skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, problem solving, teamwork, resilience and leadership are sought after by employers in South Africa and internationally. A study conducted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills with 2 115 managers and other executives of the American Marketing Association member and customer companies in the United States found that respondents value soft skills but are not satisfied with employees’ performance in this area.¹

Writing recently in the Mail & Guardian, Puleg Makhoalibe, Head of the School of Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship at Henley Business School, emphasised the centrality of one soft skill in particular for South African business: “Creativity in business is integral to the future growth of South African managers. But most businesses remain reluctant to be creative for fear of failure. But for those who do, the potential exists to create business growth and enhance employee satisfaction and retention.”²

The South African Board for People Practices (SABPP) recognises the potential for employee volunteering “to make a positive difference to many factors of the employer-employee relationship and organisation performance”.³ Noting this, the SABPP has built employee volunteering into its National HR Competency Model, creating a framework for the promotion of corporate employee volunteering as a mechanism for individual and institutional professional development.

Skills-based volunteering, in particular “improves communications skills, strengthens accountability and commitment, and helps individuals develop strong character, all traits that respondents identified as leadership “must haves”.⁴ This is a key finding of the 2016 Deloitte Impact Survey, which is the 10th report in a series of publications on corporate employee volunteering.

Numerous corporate and NGO practitioners have spoken at Beyond Painting Classrooms events about the positive contributions of corporate employee volunteering to professional development among corporate employees. Establishing corporate employee volunteering as a cost effective and successful mechanism for professional learning and development requires more than persuasive stories, but compelling evidence from the South African context.

Columba Leadership, a youth development organisation, published two exciting studies this year which help to build the evidence base in South Africa on the value created through corporate employee volunteering for volunteers.

Using a value-based peer-to-peer model, the organisation seeks to “instil a sense of grit, purpose, determination and 21st century skills” into youth leaders, preparing them for further education, to enter the workplace or start their own enterprises. In operation since 2009, the organisation has been nominated for an ‘Investing in the Future and Drivers of Change Award, an initiative of Mail & Guardian and the Southern Africa Trust.

The two studies, conducted by Jonathan Cook of Thornhill Associates, looked at the self-reported impact of corporate employee volunteers from two corporate partners that participated alongside young people in the Columba Leadership’s Youth Leadership Programme. The study employed an online 360-degree evaluation approach. This enabled colleagues of corporate volunteers to also provide their perspectives on the impact of the programme, which was used to check the self-reported impact of volunteers.⁵

¹IANYS (2010) 9th Global Conference on National Youth Service: Final Report.

²Makhoalibe, P (2016) Fostering Creativity in Business. Available at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-09-16-00-fostering-creativity-in-business> (accessed online at 20 November 2016).

³SABPP (2015) FACT SHEET. Number 2015/06.

⁴Deloitte (2016) 2016 Deloitte Impact Survey: Building leadership skills through volunteerism. Available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/citizenship-deloitte-volunteer-impact-research.html> (accessed on 27 November 2016).

⁵Cook, Jonathan (2016) Report on the findings of research conducted into impact on staff of Merchants who participated in the Columba Leadership Programme; and Cook, Jonathan (2016) Report on the findings of research conducted into the impact on staff of Company Two who participated in the Columba Leadership Programme

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Both surveys involved a small sample size. The first involved 16 corporate volunteers and 64 colleagues (or observers), while ten corporate volunteers participated in the second study, along with 32 colleagues. The study looked at the impact of participation in the programme between 2013 and 2015, and was both qualitative and quantitative. Participants were asked to answer questions about the programme's impact using a 7-point scale from "not at all" to "significant" as well as to respond to open-ended questions.⁶

A key finding of both studies was that "the Columba experience has a positive effect on the participants, translated into more effective and better leadership on the job." With both studies, colleagues reported an even greater positive impact on participants than the participants themselves.⁷ Additionally, respondents from both studies thought that the impact of the programme was as great if not greater than other leadership interventions.

In the first study with corporate partner Merchants, volunteers gave an average score of 6 or slightly higher to statements which indicated growth in work productivity, leadership skills, self-awareness, empathy and the value of integrity. Colleagues rated the participants an average of 6.11, out of the 7-point scale for being "a better leader/employee/advocate for the company as a result of the Academy".⁸

Qualitative feedback from the study indicated that the volunteers demonstrated better interpersonal skills, better understanding of others, greater self-confidence, improved ability to generate positive teamwork and better problem-solving skills, among others. For example, one colleague shared, "this experience has had a very positive impact on 'X colleague' as I can see the change in her attitude towards challenges and how she handles them. X colleague is more open to different opinions and ways of working."⁹

In the second study focused on another corporate partner, volunteers gave the highest ratings (6.10 – 5.90) to statements related to developing awareness about self and others, understanding young people's challenges, having more empathy, being committed to integrity and being more engaged in service to others. Colleagues gave high ratings (5.73- 5.65) to statements that benefits such as greater perseverance, more empathy and being "a better leader/employee/advocate for the company".¹⁰

One volunteer participant had the following to say about the programme: "It made me aware of my environment – how I live/work/play. It gave me insight and exposure to the plights of others – not just the learners but my colleagues." Being able to empathise and relate to South Africans of diverse backgrounds is undoubtedly a critical success factor for effective leadership and management in the South African context.¹¹

While more research is needed to further understand the relationship between corporate employee volunteering and professional and leadership development, the Columba Leadership studies provide exciting insight into the self-reported impact of volunteers, underscoring international research in this area.

To learn more about this research or how to get involved with Columba Leadership, please contact **Tracy Hackland (CEO) at tel +27 11 440 5790.**

Note that corporate volunteer engagement at Columba Leadership is only available to companies that fund the organisation's core programme.

To learn more about the Beyond Painting Classrooms initiative and/or to share any research with us on the impact of corporate employee volunteering or to share information about an exciting initiative you are involved with contact: **beyondpaintingclassrooms@firststrand.co.za**

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Cook, Jonathan (2016) Report on the findings of research conducted into impact on staff of Merchants who participated in the Columba Leadership Programme.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Report on the findings of research conducted into the impact on staff of Company Two who participated in the Columba Leadership Programme.

¹¹Ibid