

Volunteering: A Key to Leadership Success

By Steven J. Hudoba

As a frequent speaker to student accounting associations, and in staff development seminars, I am often asked “How can I become more successful? How can I become a good leader? What can I do to set myself apart from my peers?” One key answer is to step forward as a volunteer, and not just as a participant, but as a leader of volunteers. As a volunteer, you’ll be helping others and you’ll be helping yourself! While helping others always has inherent benefits, through persistent contributions as a volunteer leader, you will inevitably develop valuable leadership skills that you may not be able to develop simply on the job and you will set yourself apart.

Through volunteer efforts, someone will benefit. Charities, for example, provide lots of opportunities to help those in need. Student and professional organizations help to share valuable information among their members and provide opportunities for networking and meeting other key contacts. Social clubs, Boy Scouts, churches and a wide variety of other special interest groups work on the behalf of their constituents to provide services, activities and information. As a volunteer in almost any organization, you will have the opportunity to help others. For many people, this is the essence of why they volunteer; to simply help other people. And this is an extremely rewarding purpose for volunteering.

Further, when you volunteer to help others, either directly or indirectly, they will be better off and they will be appreciative (generally speaking). What a terrific way to make friends and extend your network! Not only are they better off, which you feel good about, but they too feel better and most likely will be interested in returning the favor in the future.

Now, most everyone will agree that volunteering and helping others with any sort of expectation of getting something in return is kind of shallow. On the other hand, providing truly altruistic efforts for others will generate goodwill, loyalty, and possibly very helpful benefits when sometime in the future the favor or good deed may get repaid in some unexpected way. It never hurts to have people looking out for you when you’re between jobs, looking to hire a rare talent, or in need in some other way.

Intrinsic benefits aside, the opportunities to build leadership skills through volunteering and helping others provide justification on their own to get involved in these roles. As a volunteer, you participate through a different set of rules than you find in a work environment. You may find the volunteer organization to be formal or relaxed, much like a work environment can be. However, you will not find the autocratic rule that is often common in a workplace. That is, when you’re in a work environment and the boss says jump, everyone jumps. When the boss says we’re doing it this way, everyone starts doing it this way. In a work environment, the boss directs the operations and employees follow the directions.

In most volunteer organizations, since everyone is a volunteer, a leader who issues directions in this way may find himself or herself volunteering alone. No one likes to be told how to do something, but we tolerate it in a work environment. In a volunteer organization, more subtle skills are needed to actually accomplish things. Effective volunteer leaders must be adept in many areas including having clear, organized and reasoned thinking; generating good ideas; speaking articulately and persuasively, as well as exhibiting enthusiasm and a sincere interest in other people and their outcomes. These skills definitely enhance a leader in a work environment as well (although obviously not all business leaders have learned these skills).

Conversely, individuals who commit themselves to leadership roles in volunteer organizations may struggle as they grow personally and learn these skills, sometimes the hard way. However, with patience and persistence, anyone can learn to be an effective and empathetic leader. Working with others in

volunteer roles will build self-confidence, consensus-development skills, and the ability to communicate more clearly. With experience you learn that if you want to lead others, you must have good ideas and you must learn to communicate them clearly and persuasively to get a favorable response. Further, to actually get other volunteers to act on your ideas, enthusiasm and morale-building skills become necessary. Respect, goodwill, sincere interest in others, and altruistic leadership efforts can generate terrific results from others in a group setting. These same skills brought to a work environment can lead to outstanding performance in a business setting as well, and generally develop respect and loyalty among the workforce.

Lastly, and although I don't have empirical evidence to support the following comments, I believe this to generally be the case: that in any established business organization, the CEO, CFO and other key leaders are ALL volunteers or have volunteered sometime in their career. Look at key business leaders in your community—their resumes show they all participate in business organizations, civic organizations, charities and other volunteer activities. Certainly, participation as a leader of a volunteer organization does not guarantee that you will become a CEO or CFO. However, the absence of volunteer activities in your background will be a disadvantage as you may not have the leadership skills, the professional network, and the support of others in your profession and community.

So, what are you waiting for? The reasons to volunteer and help others are overwhelming. But more importantly, your career is waiting for you to build your leadership skills. Pretty much any volunteer role can contribute to your self-development, but taking on a volunteer leadership role or working your way up through different volunteer leadership roles over time will make a huge difference for you. Pick an activity or organization that you enjoy and volunteer as a leader. You'll have a great time, you'll help others, and you'll help yourself. You'll become a leader and not just a boss. You'll set yourself apart from your peers and you may find yourself at the top of the organization chart too.