

Educating Managers through Service Learning

by Karen Ayas

Service learning is a form of experiential education in which participants engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote their development. Service learning projects can vary from a half day-limited engagement with a community to ongoing sustained business-community partnerships. Service learning provides its own rich mix of intellectual, emotional, and experiential stimuli that can aid in the development of managers. It opens managers' eyes to social and economic conditions outside their traditional realms of operation. Most managers, lacking formal power in this context, have to learn to listen to different points of view, exercise soft influence skills, and empathize with others if they are to be effective.

Service learning for executive development can contribute to leadership development through:

- Cultivating self-awareness
- Understanding others
- Dealing with diversity
- Connecting business and society

Cultivating self-awareness. Service learning is a particularly apt experience for executive self-development. Involving people in unfamiliar situations that stretch their understanding and boundaries often triggers self-reflection. For the young Asian leaders who meet biennially for the purpose of leadership development, the life story of the director of the VOH orphanage has been a source of inspiration. The VOH project in Vietnam has been an integral part of the leadership development program and has played a major role in sustaining the forum. Unilever's young managers have assisted in the physical upgrade of the facility, developed an IT infrastructure, and continued to meet regularly with the children to ensure their well being through the present day. Their annual project is to design and facilitate a day-long "birthday" celebration with the children. The dialogue between the young leaders, staff and children—sustained for five years—has yielded rewarding emotional bonds and deepened the young leaders' self-awareness.

Understanding others. Another way service learning projects enhance leadership development is in the way they can stimulate a greater understanding of others. Empathizing is integral to socialization and growth. Drawing on practices of whole systems intervention, community building, small group process, and individual development, the Unilever Best Foods (UBF) Asia top leaders program aimed to open eyes and minds, and stimulate heads and hearts. Two hundred travelers from seventeen Asian countries, stretching from Japan and South Korea to India and Pakistan to Australia, came to the little eighteen-hundred-year-old village of Xingping, sixty

kilometers south of Guilin, in the heart of China's wondrous Li River valley. Working on different projects alongside villagers for a whole day in rural China, they would be pushed outside of their comfort zone in many different dimensions. Reflection points and quiet times were built in to the program so as to create a "learning zone" wherein the UBF leaders could individually and collectively make sense of their experiences. In their various service learning projects in China, the leaders reflected on questions such as: "What has this person's life been like? Why do they see things the way they do? How am I reacting to this situation or this person? What are my reactions telling me about my own assumptions about life and people?" An Australian leader elaborated on the impact: "It's helping us develop empathy, to put yourself in the other person's shoes—that could be your customer, your colleague or one of your managers. Working alongside with villagers was a very good device for us to step outside of our own paradise and get a deep understanding that the way we do things is not the only way." "70% of our 140 million population is similar to the family of the man I met today" said a Pakistani leader, "while only 5% has a lifestyle similar to mine. I need to respect them and to value them for who they are and what they deliver to all of us." An Indonesian added, "I am Asian, 40 years old, living in a country that is 80% rural, but I have never planted a tree nor talked to rural people who buy our products every day. This is critical when we aim to improve their nutrition, their health, their happiness, life and future."

Dealing with Diversity. Developing cultural awareness and the capability for effective communication in a multicultural environment is a must for the executives who take on increasingly global assignments; however, dealing with the emotional conflicts due to differences in culture remains a challenge. Global managers need skills in cultural sense making, empathizing, and understanding culturally acceptable behavior. The service learning experience in Xingping encouraged the leaders to reflect on the differences in their own cultures and ways of communicating. A Malaysian admitted, "This was difficult for me because it made me do things against my norms. However, I am grateful that I was forced to face it and reflect on myself, my future and my job." After "getting into the skin" of the villagers in Xingping, the top leaders of UBF Asia also came to realize that intellect, wisdom and virtue were not the heritage or property of any particular nation or a group of people. Said an Indian, "Whilst there were differences in our appearance, speech and food, we were bonded by a feeling of friendship and caring. Said another, "We all have different backgrounds, so I have to look into that deeply and I have to open my mind up and be big enough to accept each one of you in my heart."

Connecting Business and Society. UBF top leaders spent two to three days in ashrams—spiritual centers, micro-enterprises and charities in India—to learn about community life. They tended to the needy, offered what help they could, and wondered how swamis, selfless caregivers, community entrepreneurs, and energetic dabbawallas (who deliver thousands of lunches prepared at home to workers all over Mumbai) are able to accomplish so much with so few resources. The purpose of these projects was for the leaders to experience communal living in its many forms and deepen their understanding of communities that they served. The expectation was set that as the leaders informed themselves about the people and circumstances of the communities they visited, they would also ponder the meaning and implications for their own leadership

body and business. After their community visits, the two-hundred plus leaders reflected together over three days. Ongoing dialogue brought them closer to the conclusion that organizations have to be driven by their missions rather than by numbers and processes. Unilever was stimulated by community service to reexamine the ways it does business in Asia. Through reflection on their experience, the UBF Asia top leaders came to the conclusion that they should serve the larger community by being relevant for them—not by just being providers of products. The case here could be just an exception, but the mind-opening and heart-rending experience of being connected to people who dedicate their lives to serving others sparked the desire of UBF leaders to build a business that serves a “higher purpose:” promoting the well-being of everyday Asians and reaching out to the poorest of the poor. The leaders also talked about the kind of organization they would need to fulfill this aspiration. Commitments were made to pursue a worthy mission that would emphasize the healthy, nourishing aspects of food—even though this would mean dropping several current offerings in the market. And it would lead to the launch of a children’s nutrition campaign to bring affordable foods to the “bottom of the pyramid.”

How to Design a Service Learning Program

Increased self-awareness, an improved ability to understand and relate to others, and heightened sensitivity to how social, political, and economic forces interplay in the service setting are to some extent organic byproducts of service learning projects. Programs where these are the learning objectives for executive development would therefore highly benefit from service learning. Paying attention to the design and facilitation of the service learning experience is critical. The consequences of poor design or implementation affect not only the executives but also the communities they intend to serve. The design of executive development programs that involve service learning is therefore more challenging. Consider these design elements:

Sense of Purpose. Perhaps the most crucial element in the design is a shared understanding of the intent of the service and clarity around learning objectives: “What are we individually and collectively striving for?” Certainly in considering the organizational impact of service learning, factors of purpose and fit to corporate strategy and culture must be considered. Unilever’s young leaders have made a strong connection to the orphanage and used their time spent in Vietnam to renew their own sense of community. The UBF top leaders have been “awakened” to a new corporate purpose by their connections to nature, villagers, and communities.

Leaders as Role Models. Needless to say, not all executives warm to the idea of service learning, nor are they comfortable with exercises in self-disclosure. However, when their superiors self-disclose and speak to the link between service and business, some of the resistance lessens. It is worth noting that, in the programs described, the very top leaders frequently joined in the service learning projects with their company teams.

Immersion in the Experience. Experiential learning is most profound when it stretches the imagination and takes people to the edge of their comfort zones. Stretching the “classroom” to rural villages and sublime nature with community leaders and indigenous

people as teachers creates the context for a whole new learning experience. In the design of such programs, attention must be paid to atmosphere, staging, and the flow of energy through the experience—all part of experience management. The aim is to create a multi-sensory experience that can stimulate leaders' heads and hearts. The design of these service learning programs should include individual, small group, and whole system activity. Service learning programs involving, say, house construction, painting, trash pickup, etc. are useful for stimulating informal interaction, building bonds, and vividly illustrating social and economic cleavages between business and society. They also demonstrate, substantively and symbolically, what can be accomplished when business and community people work together. The content of the service learning project can to some extent be themed to relevant issues in the firm's leadership development programs (e.g., self-knowledge, story-telling, learning from others, diversity) and, where appropriate and feasible, to strategic considerations of the business (e.g., corporate citizenship, consumer understanding, core purpose).

Reflections — Before, During, Afterwards. Many studies suggest that focus on effective reflection is a primary enforcer of the power of service learning. Where self-awareness and consciousness-raising are the intentions of service learning, it is essential to make personal as well as group reflection an integral and ongoing part of the program. There are a variety of tools that can aid reflection including materials and practice in journaling, “time outs” for note taking, and episodic group reflection. Certainly individuals can gain from service learning and make significant contributions to the service setting as solo participants. Learning as a group through collective reflection as described in the cases here has several advantages. First, otherwise reluctant individuals can be pulled into engagement by the group as a whole and in any case find safety in numbers. Second, peer learners can be a source of orientation, stimulation and social support, and aid in interpreting what's going on and considering any implications. Third, there is the cohort effect whereby a group begins to see itself and is seen by others as having a unifying identity. This is a prerequisite to taking common action. But time needs to be given to developing the collective's capacity to work together. Here an exercise in setting expectations and joint ground rules between the execs and service setting members can be useful. Third-party facilitation of collective dialogue and reflections is of benefit, too.

Communities of Practice. An additional design consideration in service learning programs, as illustrated by the two Unilever cases, is to ensure formal continuity of the programs to enable building communities of practice. In both cases, the continuity of the program has enabled meeting the learning objectives more effectively. More time together, practice with dialogue, experience in sharing personal stories and expressing vulnerability, and a degree of psychological safety established from past encounters are no doubt factors contributing to success.