

Service Learning: Informing the Science & Art of Leadership



Groundbreaking research highlights ways to partner with students to strengthen nonprofit leadership.

By Mark Jordan & Bob Orwig

What do graduating business students and nonprofit leaders have in common? In many cases, each lacks something the other could provide. Business students have academic and theoretical leadership training but lack real-world experiences that inform the theory. Leaders of nonprofit organizations live the experiences on a daily basis but lack the cutting-edge leadership theory that could give them better tools to answer day-to-day issues.

In a recent article, Shari Lifland highlights the deficit of skills that college graduates bring to the workplace. Most employers (63%) confirm that college graduates lack essential skills such as good communication and analytical thinking.¹

At the same time, leadership is one of the top areas in which nonprofits need more training.² To cre-

ate an organizational culture in which people are eager to learn, grow, and change, leadership skills are imperative.³

What if students and nonprofit leaders could team up to fill the gaps in each other's knowledge? As it happens, there is a way to do so, and it's called service learning.

What Is Service Learning?

Service learning is an educational strategy that gives students hands-on experience working as volunteers for nonprofit organizations. A service-learning project gives nonprofits access to a highly motivated group of volunteers while teaching civic responsibility and strengthening the community. A growing number of university courses are using service learning to translate academic concepts into real-life application.

Service learning is the perfect medium to show how students and nonprofits can enrich each other's leadership skills. Our premise is that leadership is both science and

art. The *science* of leadership focuses on studying the theoretical conclusions of scholars and researchers. The *art* of leadership occurs in the trenches, through the daily experience of leading.

Thus, we created a service-learning project to address deficiencies in students' experience (lack of art) while giving nonprofit leaders theoretical tools (science) to expand their leadership capacities. Our university partnered with nonprofit organizations in three surrounding counties to conduct the research.

What Skills Do Nonprofit Leaders Need Most?

College students in a leadership course conducted a needs analysis with over 100 nonprofit organizations (see Table 1). The results: Nonprofit leaders said they needed the most help in the areas of:

- organizational change
- teambuilding
- emotional intelligence
- creative problem-solving.

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Table 1. Leadership Needs Analysis Results (N = 56)

Leadership Area	# Votes	Leadership Area	# Votes
1. Organizational Change	32	6. Organizational Culture	21
2. Teams/Teambuilding	31	7. Transformational Leadership	21
3. Emotional Intelligence	29	8. Verbal Communication	14
4. Creative Problem-Solving	26	9. Mentoring	12
5. Motivation	24		

Table 2. Creative Problem-Solving Team Module

Time	Activity
12:00 – 12:15	Theoretical Presentation on Creative Problem-Solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is creativity? • Creativity video • Who is creative? • Four phases of creativity • Creativity deterrents • Improving creativity • Managing creativity • Brainstorming as a creative tool
12:15 – 12:25	Table discussions on creativity (led by student table facilitators)
12:25 – 12:40	Experiential exercise <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team chief leads (with guitar) two verses of Johnny Cash song (Folsom Prison Blues) • Each table creatively develops third verse tying in all leadership concepts covered in workshop • A representative from each table sings their verse
12:40-12:55	Table discussions on experiential exercise
12:55 – 1:00	Wrap-up and Q & A

How Did the Sharing Take Place?

The students (upper-level business students) split into four main teams, based on nonprofit leaders’ most pressing needs (creative problem-solving, teambuilding, emotional intelligence, and organizational change) and two supporting teams, logistics and technology. Students in the four main teams developed one-hour modules on their leadership areas, which were

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then put together for a five-hour leadership development workshop. Those on the logistics team were in charge of setting up the workshop tables and coordinating the lunch and coffee breaks, while technology students created a Web site for the project, recruited workshop participants online, and videotaped the workshop.

With guidance from their instructor, the students invited leaders of nonprofit organizations in the community to attend the training session. Nonprofit leaders interested in the workshop were di-

rected to the project’s Web site to register online.

The training was limited to 32 participants, and over 40 nonprofits expressed interest, so the leaders on the waiting list were invited to attend a “dry run” conducted a week before the actual workshop.⁴

On the day of the training, six nonprofit leaders and two student facilitators sat at each table. The students guided the discussion for each of the four topics, sharing the theory behind the topic and encouraging the nonprofit leaders to relate real-life experiences.

Each module included 15-20 minutes of academic presentation on the leadership topic, 5-10 minutes of table discussion using scenarios or discussion questions, a 15-minute experiential exercise, 10 minutes to process the exercise, at least one video clip of 3 minutes or less, and a 5-minute wrap-up. Table 2 shows how the training progressed for one of the modules (creative problem-solving).

How Did Students and Nonprofit Leaders Benefit?

Hearing about real-life experiences from nonprofit leaders was enlightening for the students. Developing and conducting the workshop helped them understand the connection of science and art in

leadership. Some representative comments: “I have learned so much more doing this project than I would have ever learned in just a class lecture environment” and “After this class, I feel much better about stepping out into the real world!”

An additional benefit was networking. Several students gained valuable contacts through the workshop. One has graduated and now works for a nonprofit organization represented at the training. Another was selected for an internship at the Chamber of Commerce because of relationships made at the workshop.

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Nonprofit leaders indicated on their assessments that the workshop will help them handle day-to-day situations in different ways. Comments included: “Best workshop I’ve been to in the last four years”; “Learned a lot by interacting with students”; and “Loved the interactive environment!” They

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rated the workshop's usefulness at 4.86 on a 5-point scale.

What Have We Learned?

Our experience suggests that students and nonprofit leaders can benefit from projects that bridge the gap between art and science in many fields. This research found that practical experience, effective teamwork, interpersonal and communication skills, increased leadership development, and networking opportunities are all benefits of service learning projects.

Consider teaming up with a college or university near you. You can help prepare students for the workforce while harnessing their energy, knowledge, and insights. You're sure to learn a great deal in the process. ■

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One student has graduated and now works for a nonprofit organization that was represented in the workshop.

FOOTNOTES

¹Lifland, Shari, "New Grad Hires: Ready and Willing, But Are They Able?," American Management Association, www.amanet.org/movingahead/, e-Newsletters, Vol. 3, No. 6.

²Morris, Michael, Susan Coombes, Minet Schindehutte, and Jeffrey Allen, "Antecedents and Outcomes of Entrepreneurial and Market Orientations in a Non-Profit Context: Theoretical and Empirical Insights," *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4.

³Matsumura, Naohiro and Yoshihiro Sasaki, "Human Influence Network for Understanding Leadership Behavior," *International Journal of Knowledge-based and Intelligent Engineering Systems*, Vol. 11.

⁴Nonprofits involved included the March of Dimes, United Way, Public Library, Lanier Technical College, American Cancer Society, Girls Scouts of Historic Georgia, Literacy Coalition, Mentor Me, and Chamber of Commerce.

The Next Step: Learn More & Put these Concepts to Use

Websites to Visit:

- National Service Learning Clearinghouse, www.servicelearning.org
- Charity Guide, www.charityguide.org
- Campus Compact, www.compact.org
- National Service Learning Partnership, www.servicelearningpartnership.org
- Roots & Shoots, www.rootsandshoots.org

Articles to Read

(www.snpo.org/members):

- Volunteering 101: Service Finds a Home in the Classroom (Vol. 16, No. 6)
- Universities Offer Marketing Research Key (Vol. 4, No. 1)
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