Developing Socially Responsible Global Leaders Through Service Projects

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In 2007, IBM was immersed in a period of great change. The CEO at the time, Samuel Palmisano, expressed the desire to advance the company into the new era of globalization. IBM was a multinational company, but it needed to act as a globally integrated enterprise, not simply an American company with offices scattered in other nations, and it needed to function in a more globally savvy and responsible way. Palmisano initiated several programs to further IBM’s globalization goals, but felt there was still more to be done. He consulted the Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs team (CC&CA) about possible additional efforts. Led by Stanley Litow, this internal group develops strategies to further business goals in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. They pinpointed the need for a corporate citizenship project where employees could develop skills and have global experiences while advancing business objectives. The group reached out to IBM’s employees and asked how globalization affected them. A large amount of feedback and suggestions were generated but none as promising as the Corporate Service Corps.

In its simplest form, the Corporate Service Corps involves a small group of IBM employees from around the world getting to know each other and gaining training and development virtually through social media and online learning for a three-month period. This primary
Kevin Thompson, a thirty-four-year-old manager at IBM, came up with this dynamic idea that fit CC&CA's tall order. He envisioned a program where exceptional IBM employees traveled to developing countries to share their skills in short-term service projects. The idea was primarily inspired by two programs Thompson had taken part in. The Peace Corps, a nonprofit organization that sends Americans to remote locations globally to serve communities in need, was the first major source of inspiration for Thompson (Mirvis, Thompson, & Gohring, 2012). Their mission is to achieve world peace and make friendships; this mission helped to generate the global service aspects of the new IBM program. The Outdoor Leadership School inspired the leadership development aspect, which would become central to the new program’s mission. The Outdoor Leadership School is an organization that companies send their employees through to promote leadership skills. Participants are sent into nature for a few days and are expected to work together, make decisions, do activities, and explore. The natural environment and uncertain terrain is perfect for leadership development. Team building is strong because participants spend all their time together. The “no electronics” rule gives participants peace and clarity to reflect and think forward (Kanengieter & Rajagopal-Durbin, 2012). These two innovative programs were the major inspiration behind the Corporate Service Corps. This cultivation of leadership in a socially responsible and business minded way was the innovative idea IBM needed to help pursue its mission of becoming a globally integrated enterprise.

From the inception of his idea, Thompson worked hard to put the Corporate Service Corps into action. Initially, there was the challenge of figuring out how to convince the leadership team of a publically traded company that a program with no immediate economic benefit was a good use of shareholder dollars. It was the popularity of the program that eventually sold itself. Thompson convinced the rest of the company that the Corporate Service Corps was essential to leadership development at IBM, and this bottom-up approach was successful and led to upper management accepting the idea. After Thompson figured out plans such as the format, selection process, NGO partnerships, pre-work, and logistics, the program was announced in July of 2007. It was geared to the youngest third of IBM’s workforce. They expected approximately five hundred applications for the first assignment in 2008. In the end, 5,500 people applied, which was the first sign of the great success the program would have.

**Program Design**

In the program, ten to fifteen high-performing IBM employees are placed into developing parts of global growth markets to share their knowledge and skills in the betterment of
Developmental Experiences: More Intentional for More People

the community. For instance, people have been sent to Calabar in the Cross River State of Nigeria, Davao City in The Philippines, and multiple areas across Ghana. Each project extends six months in three parts. The first part involves three months of prep work. Teammates are introduced and encouraged to get to know each other through social media and videoconferencing. Biweekly meetings are held to plan and prepare for their task. Fifty hours of materials are allotted with information on the culture of the community, nature of the project, travel plans, team building, and consulting tactics. These are received through a learning software delivery platform (Mirvis, Thompson, & Gohring, 2012).

The next step is the in-country portion of the assignment, which lasts one month. Typically, two weeks are used to gather information from stakeholders, and the remaining two weeks are spent making plans and executing them. The team is usually sent to the client location to work among the clients for the month they are in country. The ten to fifteen IBM employees are broken into groups of two or three people, with their own assignments and client sets. At the end of the thirty days, the small teams each make presentations to their clients on their recommended actions.

The final step of the full assignment consists of two months of follow-up where employees share what they have learned with their peers and begin to enact the skills they have acquired and sharpened. These two months generally lead to a lifetime of impact on each of the potential future leaders selected.

Benefits

The list of benefits that result from instituting a program like the Corporate Service Corps is extensive, with one of the main rewards being the cultivation of future leaders. The demanding situations these employees are put into are ideal for the development of many leadership skills, including:

- **Dealing with uncertainty:** For instance, consider the uncertainty of being placed in a remote village with a team of people you just met and with the task of bettering a community. This kind of situation pushes people out of their comfort zones. They learn to make decisions in ambiguous situations and to be comfortable taking risks. They also learn from the inevitable mistakes made in such situations. And the situation encourages teammates to learn to lean on each other.

- **Team skills:** Participants undergo living, working, and eating with other team members. This element of the experience fosters bonding among them. The global networks they build will serve them well in future roles and leadership positions at IBM.

- **Diversity sensitivity:** Learning to work with and for people with diverse backgrounds is another major leadership skill honed in the Corporate Service Corps.
Corps. Being a leader at IBM requires global knowledge and experience. The time spent with such team members and in emerging market cultures is extremely beneficial for a future leader to call on.

- **Getting to know the business:** With 400,000 plus employees in IBM, it is difficult to know what every corner of the company is responsible for. This program helps expose future potential leaders to some of the other work that takes place globally in different parts of the organization.

Another critical aspect of the program is that there is no defined leader in the project groups, which is based on an aspect of the Outdoor Leadership School that forces every member to take responsibility and step up at different times and in different ways. Participants also learn when to divert leadership to another person, a skill that becomes clear in times of uncertainty and should be replicated in day-to-day business. Because participants are less connected in terms of texting and reliable Internet, they have the ability to be in the moment with greater clarity (Kanengieter & Rajagopal-Durbin, 2012). This is a gift that many participants will not experience again in their lifetimes.

Aside from the extensive benefits in leadership development, the Corporate Services Corps positively impacts IBM, the community, and the individual in other ways. Across the world, remote parts of growth market countries receive free IBM services. A few examples of projects include the implementation of free health care to reduce the mortality rate in the Cross River State of Nigeria, the development of an online marketing service and a potential investment database in The Philippines, and the realization of an eco-tourism industry in Tanzania. These projects have changed and saved lives.

IBM employees get joy and a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment from knowing how meaningful their efforts are. Participants are able to experience new cultures, serve others, and make new friends in addition to the important goal of developing skills essential for future leadership. IBM as a company gains more than just great leaders. They are giving their employees an experience that makes them appreciative and more loyal, which leads them to stay at IBM longer. Not only does IBM retain talent through the Corporate Service Corps, but the publicity of the program attracts new talent (Gordon, 2011). IBM is promoting their brand name in emerging markets, critical areas for potential future business. Many villages where projects occurred hadn’t heard of IBM until the team arrived. Furthermore, IBM is showing the world that they are a socially responsible company. For the children whose lives were saved with the help of Corporate Service Corps volunteers in the Cross River State, potential was instilled in those children to do great things for their villages or country. Someday they may join IBM and participate in their own Corporate Service Corps assignment. The Corporate Service Corps costs IBM around $250,000 to $400,000 per project (Gordon, 2011), however—as we have illustrated above—its benefits far outweigh the costs. We hope other major corporations will follow IBM’s successful model to develop their own leaders in a socially responsible way.
Advice for Others

The Corporate Service Corps initiative demonstrates that developing leaders can be done in a socially responsible way, with business objectives in mind. However, careful selection and preparation of participants and the selection of reliable partners are critical to the success of the initiative.

One of the major success factors of the program is the strong application rate. Every year, up to ten thousand IBM employees from more than sixty countries apply for only a few hundred spots (Gordon, 2011). This large pool allows the acceptance process to be highly selective and rigorous. Globally, there are nine application review boards that are responsible for their respective regions. The selection process needs to be rigorous to ensure the right people are sent on the mission, since it is a cost that must be explained to the shareholders. These are future potential leaders who will represent IBM in each of the areas they enter, which is a big responsibility. In order for an employee to be considered, he or she must have been at IBM for at least two years and have received consistently high performance ratings. Those chosen have leadership potential, previous predilection for service, and are extremely motivated (Weiner, 2013).

Taking effective selection one step further, it is also important to ensure the selected candidates are given the appropriate tools, skills, and knowledge needed for the in-country experience. The three months of preparation prior to leaving is critical to success on the mission. This time gives participants an opportunity to get to know each other prior to spending twenty-four hours a day for thirty days in close company. Additionally, it is critical to get to know the country or region the group is being deployed into—the political context, cultural customs, language, etc., in order to effectively work with the local people. Logistical training increases bonding among team members, preparedness, and the understanding of the type of situation they are entering into—immunization shots, work visa needs, living arrangements, etc. Last, some basic consulting, negotiation, and team development skills help with any of the assigned missions.

A somewhat sensitive area of the program design is choosing nongovernment organizations to partner with. These partnerships are crucial to the success of each project. NGOs help with logistics like lodging, travel accommodations, and visas. The Corporate Service Corps partners with NGOs like CDC Developmental Solutions, Digital Opportunity Trust, and Australian Business Volunteers. It is important to pick these organizations carefully to ensure the safety of the participants and the fluidity of the projects. The logistics partner should be an organization recommended by others, and a group with a global presence, a positive track record, and local contacts in the country the employees are entering. (For additional advice on choosing partners, see Corporate Volunteerism as an Avenue for Leader Development on page 99 of this book.)

We believe that many more organizations can reap the benefits of adapting programs similar to the Corporate Service Corps. Leadership development, talent retention and
attraction, publicity, and service are just a few of the advantages to this corporate social responsibility initiative. In creating your own program, you will be one more organization working toward a mission of creating the next generation of global citizens.

**References**


**Resources**


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