



GIVING THOUGHTS

Building Leadership with Skills-Based Volunteering: The Nonprofit Opportunity

By Kate Efland and Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald

What motivates nonprofits and volunteers to engage in skills-based volunteering? Nonprofits use skills-based volunteering to strengthen their infrastructure in ways that better equip them to solve our communities' challenges. Many volunteers give their skills to help solve a challenge for an organization addressing an issue they care about or to feel connected to the community. In this *Giving Thoughts* article, Taproot Foundation and Team4Tech partnered to further the social sector's understanding of the leadership development benefits of skills-based volunteering—focusing exclusively on the nonprofit's outcomes of such initiatives.

Building Leadership Skills: The Volunteer Precedent

Pro bono service has emerged as a powerful way to equip leaders with essential but hard-to-train for skills like empathy, humility, and resilience. Practicing these competencies in external contexts is a “challenging assignment,” according to the Center for Creative Leadership, which finds that pro bono service is relevant across all five of the challenge types that most effectively drive leadership development.¹

To date, the growing body of evidence around how pro-bono service builds leadership has primarily focused on the volunteer’s development.² But developing up-and-coming leaders isn’t only for the for-profit sector. The same forces that create complex challenges for businesses—technology, globalization, current events—are affecting the social sector. Nonprofits leaders need opportunities to practice the skills necessary to develop collaborative solutions in increasingly complex structures, and pro bono offers those unique opportunities.

Taproot and Team4Tech interviewed 10 international nonprofits to learn more about how working with pro-bono volunteers built leadership skills among staff. The organizations interviewed primarily offer international development and education services in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. The global nature of their work offers a unique perspective into the opportunity for nonprofits to build leadership capacity for their staff within the context of pro-bono projects.

KEY FINDING #1

Experiences that build leadership among nonprofits align with the full cycle of a pro-bono project

Team4Tech works with global nonprofits through a three- to five-year engagement model. The long-term approach advances learning outcomes for the nonprofit’s constituents through the effective integration of relevant educational technology into teaching and learning. This type of long-term relationship helps ensure that technology can move from a sideline focus of digital literacy to an integral element of core learning for students. The nonprofit partners collaborate and drive results during three stages:

- Strategic planning
- Volunteer training and management
- Monitoring and evaluation

For each stage, the volunteer is called upon to practice unique leadership skills. But what about the nonprofit?

1 “Pro Bono Reshapes the Leadership Development Playbook,” Taproot Foundation, September 13, 2016 (<https://taprootfoundation.org/pro-bono-reshapes-leadership-development-playbook/>)

2 See, for example, Julie Clugage, “Reviving Professional Development: A New Approach for Millennials,” *Giving Thoughts* v2 n6, The Conference Board, 2018; and Amanda MacArthur, “The State of Global Pro Bono,” *Giving Thoughts* v1 n8, The Conference Board, 2014.

STAGE 1

Strategic planning requires nonprofit participants to use critical thinking and become more accountable for results

During strategic planning, each nonprofit participant develops key long-term and one-year programmatic goals. They also build their monitoring and evaluation strategy, outlining a plan to collect and report on their evaluation data.

Nonprofits interviewed reported that their participants typically built their own strategic and critical-thinking skills during strategic planning. Becoming more accountable for outcomes was also important, so they could build a sound monitoring and evaluation plan.

STAGE 2

Volunteer training and management requires creative problem-solving and immersive decision-making

In the lead up to project launch, each nonprofit participant contributes to weekly preparation calls with their team of volunteers prior to their in-country arrival and manages the on-site logistics of project implementation. During this stage, nonprofit participants learned the importance of creative problem-solving and immersive decision-making.

STAGE 3

Monitoring and evaluation encourage adaptability based on real-time program outcomes, and require effective communication skills to address problem areas

Team4Tech works closely with nonprofit partners to measure the impact of pro-bono assignments.³ Together, they assess the project's impact across five outcome categories:

- Improved learning outcomes
- Twenty-First Century skills development
- Increased engagement
- Improved efficiency
- Community development

During these types of projects, nonprofit interviewees reported that participants not only learned how to evaluate their programs more effectively, but also how to communicate better and become more adaptable.

3 "Team4Tech Expanding Opportunity through Global Connections: NGO/NPO Onboarding Kit," Team4Tech (http://www.team4tech.org/sites/default/files/NGO%20NPO%20Onboarding%20Kit_1.pdf)

KEY FINDING #2

Exposure to global cultures, diverse perspectives and effective ways of working is a key leadership benefit for both volunteers and nonprofit participants

Team4Tech offers immersive volunteer experiences. This immersion exposes nonprofit staff and volunteers to global and diverse perspectives beyond their cultural norms. For example, Team4Tech volunteers working with CARE Cambodia brought to the project decision-making strategies based on their own company cultures, giving the CARE team exposure to different, non-hierarchical strategies for finding consensus.

KEY FINDING #3

Developing nonprofit participants' leadership can positively affect the strategic direction or programmatic success of the organization

Building the leadership skills of the nonprofit participant is a powerful outcome of pro-bono volunteering experiences. Connecting this development back to the programmatic success of the nonprofit is a double win, enhancing both participant experience and social impact for the organization.

Tad Kincaid, Program Director of Orphan Impact, wanted to build a perspective among his staff that was difficult to achieve through classroom-based learning. By talking about their work with Team4Tech volunteers, often in their second language of English, Orphan Impact staff learned about effective communication. Tad remarked: "All of it together expands their worldview, builds confidence, gives them a greater perspective and ultimately inspires them. They take that inspiration back to the workplace on the Monday after the team goes home. People feel exhilarated and input that exhilaration into their roles and responsibilities. We see their [individual] scope improve and take on a new level of success or performance."

CASE STUDY 1

Working with pro-bono volunteers yields increased responsibilities

Jeremiah Mubaiwa is the IT Director at [LEAP Science and Maths Schools in South Africa](#). LEAP schools provide student-centered math and science-focused education to economically disadvantaged eighth- to twelfth-grade students in South African townships.

Previously in a technical team lead role at a large corporation, Jeremiah did not have prior experience in strategic management of large-scale programs. At the time he started working with Team4Tech, Jeremiah worked as the regional IT lead for LEAP's four schools in the Gauteng region. After about two years of working with Team4Tech he applied and was selected as the national IT Director for LEAP, now responsible for managing the overall IT infrastructure for all six schools.

Through the work with Team4Tech, which paired him with volunteer teams from VMware and Pure Storage, Jeremiah had to move from a "process-driven" to an "open-minded" environment. He took full responsibility for envisioning and designing the organization's IT systems. Jeremiah had to expand his "thinking capacity" and put new skills immediately into practice. Jeremiah's experience working with skilled volunteers enabled him to grow in his position of influence and more strategically engage with senior leadership to advance his recommendations.

CASE STUDY 2

Human-centered design training transforms Orphan Impact's approach to teaching

Orphan Impact helps Vietnamese orphans prepare for their post-orphanage lives by teaching digital-literacy skills common in the modern workplace. Tad Kincaid, Program Director, was thinking about leadership development for his junior staff prior to their partnership with Team4Tech. Although each staff members had some leadership responsibilities, engaging with a pro-bono team offered a new opportunity for the organization, particularly in design thinking.

In March 2015, during a design-thinking training proposed by Team4Tech and led by volunteers from Box, Visa, and Facebook, Orphan Impact team members learned about human-centered design, helping them become more creative problem-solvers in their day-to-day roles. The team put these new skills into practice by using design-thinking among their teachers to improve the process for project-based learning and maker-space learning.

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Tad said the new way of thinking has been hugely impactful for the whole organization. In nearly every Orphan Impact classroom, the “empathize, define, and ideate” steps found in human-centered design are consistently used in various formats and curriculum. Similarly, the “prototype” and “test” steps are used in every maker class, which comprise nearly 25 percent of the classes taught.

Additionally, managing the Team4Tech volunteers gave Orphan Impact staff new responsibilities. Employees had to adapt to the volunteers’ working practices, personalities, and American culture while making rapid, real-time decisions to make the project a success. The staff had to put into practice immersive, collaborative decision-making to maximize the volunteer’s time at their organization.

CASE STUDY 3

Learning to question established behavior demonstrates leadership and adaptability

CARE Cambodia serves ethnic minority girls and boys in the rural province of Ratanakiri, located in the northeast of the country. The organization has worked with Team4Tech to integrate its Know & Grow project in five middle schools.

Jan Noorlander is Assistant Country Director and is responsible for the oversight of CARE Cambodia’s urban and rural programming. During Team4Tech’s project, the volunteer team gave feedback to Jan that CARE policies around staff development and growth established at the central office were not well-practiced or understood in some field offices. This feedback helped CARE Cambodia understand its opportunity to re-emphasize the growth of remote employees.

As a seasoned leader, Jan was receptive to the feedback and open to the change. He communicated to his staff that it was healthy to question and amend their established practices and to incorporate feedback and make necessary changes. Through this experience, Jan demonstrated core leadership skills, including self-awareness, adaptability, and an increased capacity to learn.

Building Leadership Skills for Nonprofits: Moving Towards Intentional Design

Leadership skills are practiced throughout pro-bono projects and the development of these skills among nonprofit participants improves staff performance and organizational success. Drawing from feedback from nonprofit interviewees and expert advice on maximizing leadership learning, Taproot and Team4Tech suggest three ways to design a pro-bono experience to build or expedite leadership training at nonprofits:⁴

1. Make it a process: Set leadership objectives upfront and assess on-going progress

Following best practices for how to use pro bono as a leadership development strategy, we can begin to incorporate components of leadership development into the nonprofit experience as well as the volunteer experience.⁵ This creates a space for assessment, feedback, and support and includes:

- Setting individual leadership goals at the beginning of the engagement.
- Adding reflection and moments for self-analysis throughout the experience.
- Providing ongoing feedback from colleagues and volunteers to nonprofit participants.

Incorporating these leadership components into the expectations and scope of work for the nonprofit can greatly increase learning outcomes.

2. Plan for transition: Increase opportunities for critical thinking and ownership

The organizations interviewed had organically increased their staff's responsibilities throughout the Team4Tech partnership. Responsibilities for strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, and volunteer management provided staff with leadership development opportunities. Nonprofits can consider:

- Bringing in staff during strategic planning to envision the broad project plan and draft the project scopes, utilizing staff's critical thinking and accountability.
- Offering regular feedback to staff growing their responsibilities. This follows the best practices of giving feedback and enables staff to course-correct as needed.

Purposefully increasing staff responsibilities throughout a pro-bono experience can be a less formal, but highly impactful, way to develop leadership.

4 "Pro Bono Reshapes the Leadership Development Playbook," 2016.

5 *Pro Bono + Talent Development Program Design Roadmap: Maximizing Your Talent Development Strategy by Integrating Pro Bono Service*, Taproot Foundation, 2016

3. Be patient: Develop a leadership approach over time

Using skills-based volunteer projects to build nonprofit leadership skills is a new approach. Nonprofit interviewees were asked what advice they'd offer about using pro-bono volunteer projects as a leadership opportunity for organizations new to this approach. A key theme of this advice noted that the organization needed to experience the leadership benefits of pro bono before believing in the concept.

A solid, trusting relationship between the volunteer team, pro-bono provider, and nonprofit are critical. It takes time to build the trust necessary to build skills in this type of context.

- For nonprofit leaders, consider the culture of your organization and where you can create space for staff to confidently share their professional aspirations and goals for development.
- For corporate partners, recognize that it may take multiple projects before nonprofit staff feel comfortable enough sharing their true challenges and development areas. It is helpful to design a longer-term pro-bono engagement to maximize leadership benefits for nonprofit staff.

It can often feel daunting to a nonprofit staff member to add an additional layer of "work" to any project. Creating space for these types of discussions in a trusted environment can enable them to consider the benefit of seeing this project with the added layer of leadership development.

Conclusion

There is a great opportunity to use pro-bono volunteering to build leadership skills that increase individual performance, team outcomes, and organizational success at nonprofits. Designing skills-based volunteering experiences that focus on leadership learning can be a way to strengthen the organizations responsible for solving our greatest challenges, as well as the leaders they need to make that happen.

As summarized by Tad Kincaid from Orphan Impact: "Every nonprofit project is going to be better if the on-the-ground team has sound and practiced leadership skills and empowers their individuals to be strong leaders."

We share the insights in this publication to encourage more nonprofits to use pro-bono service to develop their leaders. Currently, there is an untapped opportunity to develop the leadership skills of nonprofit participants who are the recipients of pro bono. We make recommendations so that nonprofits, and providers, can design experiences that maximize these leadership development benefits, utilizing a medium like pro bono that requires only the cost of time.

METHODOLOGY

Through interviews with Team4Tech partner nonprofits working internationally, Taproot Foundation and Team4Tech aimed to understand how nonprofit participants developed core leadership skills during their pro-bono projects, and to hone in on the unique leadership competencies that participants most commonly developed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kate Effland brings nearly 10 years of diverse fundraising and nonprofit management experience to her work at Campbell & Company. She understands that data-driven strategies paired with sound fundraising operations are critical pillars for any successful organization. Kate is passionate about helping organizations unearth the resources they need to make a difference in their community. Prior to Campbell & Company, Kate held several leadership roles with the Taproot Foundation in Washington, DC, and New York City, culminating with her role as Director of Philanthropy and Community Engagement in the San Francisco Bay Area. In this position, Kate was responsible for fundraising, market-building, and community engagement efforts for Taproot Foundation's capacity-building programs and corporate consulting division. She also worked for the Center for Youth Wellness as a development staff member, focused on building the fundraising system to grow the organization's operations beyond start-up fundraising. Kate started her career in fundraising at the University of Maryland—College Park, where she spent several years as a fundraiser and administrative assistant for the Maryland Fund for Excellence.

Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald has worked with companies, intermediaries, and nonprofits in building, leading, and advancing the pro bono movement since joining the Taproot Foundation in 2009. With increasing demands on our nation's nonprofit sector, Elizabeth is dedicated to bringing together corporate professionals and nonprofit executives to solve the infrastructure challenges that keep organizations from achieving full programmatic scale. During her tenure at Taproot, Elizabeth has served as both the Executive Director for the Chicago office as well as the Vice President of External Affairs prior to taking on her current role as Chief External Relations Officer. In addition she has

launched Pro Bono Week, a worldwide celebration of pro bono, brought the impact of pro bono to bear on critical issue areas facing our communities via new collaborations and partnerships, and introduced new programming on pro bono readiness and nonprofit capacity building.

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ABOUT TAPROOT FOUNDATION

Taproot Foundation is a nonprofit organization that connects nonprofits and other social change organizations with skilled volunteers. We pair nonprofit staff with qualified, skilled volunteers for high-impact, high-quality pro-bono service. Since 2001, Taproot's skilled volunteers have served 6,450 social change organizations providing 1.6 million hours of work worth over \$180 million in value. We power collaboration between business professionals and nonprofits that has created a new definition of civic engagement—one driven by a commitment to community service, and in recognition of the missed connection between critically needed resources and the abundant supply of skilled professionals ready to serve in areas like marketing, IT, strategy management, and human resources.

ABOUT TEAM4TECH

Team4Tech is a social enterprise that works to advance the quality of education in developing countries by connecting technology volunteers and solutions with high-impact nonprofits.

Team4Tech volunteers implement customized training and technology solutions for nonprofit clients, while being stretched to build their own leadership skills. Through short-term, immersive service learning opportunities, Team4Tech creates space for assessment, feedback, and reflection in order to enhance volunteers' learning. Volunteers consistently report increases in skills like working with diverse stakeholders, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and an expanded global mindset that they can bring back to their day jobs.



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