

Volunteer

R. Russell Rhinehart

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H. Leo Staples, former ISA President, gave the message, "Volunteer", to students in the new ISA Section at Oklahoma State University. It rang true to me, and I'm pleased to pass along my version of that message.

First note this contrast: A student gets recognized, honored, and accepted into the next student level by being a great student, by getting all their tasks done and done correctly. By contrast, you may have noticed that the coworkers who get promoted to levels of higher authority in business are not necessarily those people who have and demonstrate the best job prowess. Here's why: The engineer's supervisor plans, coordinates, budgets, interfaces with upper management, and coaches employees for improved performance. These are not engineering skills. The engineering employees do the technical work, not the supervisor. The people who rise into management were good enough at their prior job, but also have acquired the alternate skills to perform at the new level, and they are perceived to have the potential to acquire the additional skills necessary to perform at the next level up.

You don't acquire those next level management skills, or demonstrate your ability to perform at the next level, by focusing on improving technical skills at your current level. Of course, you should continue to improve the skill at your current job; but at the same time, you should prepare for the future jobs that you would like to hold.

How to prepare for the next level? One way is to volunteer. There are professional societies, civic organizations, religious organizations, youth sports teams, community service organizations, and some employers give employees a chance to volunteer for temporary leadership of initiatives within the company. There are many opportunities where you can volunteer, and thereby develop and demonstrate next level skills. Seek such.

One of my volunteer activities was to coach boys' and girls' gymnastic teams at the local YMCA; and, although it may seem odd, I credit that athletic work with children as developing essential management career skills. By investing to become the best coach possible, I learned a lot about getting people willing to push themselves to overcome setbacks, to venture into their scary places, and to become their personal best. Of course, there was a technical aspect; I had to understand the physics and dynamics associated with gymnastic 'tricks'. But as well I was immersed in safety, health, injury prevention and emergency handling. I had to understand gymnastic judging, so that I could ensure that my gymnasts' routines met the continually evolving criteria, and that they stayed competitive. I planned events for a year, or more, into the future, including all details associated with schedule coordination, team travel, chaperones, and funding. I interfaced with my team parents, and the "Y" Board of Directors to ensure those stakeholders that my influence on their children was consistent with their values. Voted by other coaches, I

became the State Director for several years, during which I hosted the three-state regional meet, in which gymnasts qualified for national competition.

In all of this, I learned and demonstrated ability to cope with diverse personalities (and hidden agendas), and to plan, budget, and ensure that everything was both on task and compliant. I was developing my next level engineering management skill, and demonstrating my ability to do the job. Although, coaching youth sports was not on my annual performance appraisal, my understanding of, and readiness for, managerial assignments became visible in discussions. Perceiving that I could become promotable, company-sponsored management training experiences were placed on my professional development plan.

My message has four aspects: 1) Volunteering to lead in any organization will complement your on-the-job training and will develop your potential. You do not have to volunteer in a discipline-associated professional society to develop your potential. 2) Volunteer for real. Don't just get your name on a roster. Lead programs that add value. It is by investing your focus, time and effort, and by risking failure to create success, that you develop skills. 3) The joy of success and accomplishment, and the appreciation by others will be personally satisfying. The joy will spill over into your professional and personal life. And 4) You'll leave the place better than you found it. You'll add value to the community.

Russ Rhinehart started his career in the process industry. After 13 years and rising to engineering supervision, he transferred to a 31-year academic career. Now "retired", he enjoys coaching professionals through books, articles, short courses, and postings on his web site www.r3eda.com.