



2010 Construction Leadership Kickoff Dinner Feb. 20, 2010

Construction Leadership

By Bob Miller

I've been asked by the Leading Edge Committee to speak to the projected shortfall in leadership over the coming years as Habitat works to expand the number of homes we build... and to help us realize what we each can do to help solve that problem.

I have little doubt that most of us here tonight have felt some of the growing pains Habitat is going through. I also believe that as I look around this room, we all share the belief that this growth is worth that discomfort. We've all heard and perhaps even spoken these words... We are doing more than building houses, we are building homes, we are strengthening families, we are developing neighborhoods. And I pray we are also building faith in our homebuyers, our volunteers and the communities we serve.

I think we should be proud as we expand the number of homes we build, and also enhance the quality of these homes to use less energy and save significant dollars for those families where every dollar matters.

But this growth in numbers and complexity means that each year, we will need more house leaders, and that many more crew leaders. And it also means that most likely every year, we'll be referencing new plans, using new methods and working with new materials. For the foreseeable future we will be challenged...

As we endure these growing pains please know that Habitat's staff as well as the Leading Edge Committee have been working to fill our leadership void.

We now have training courses coordinated through the community college to call potential crew leaders to our efforts and better orient them to our build process. And, in a few minutes you'll be hearing about our new mentoring process, targeted to help train and support new crew leaders and house leaders. Now, when we recruit leadership candidates we can guide them through a more positive experience. And to recruit those candidates, we believe that perhaps the most effective means to do so... is for us, as house and crew leaders, to invite our Saturday volunteers to future build opportunities and a deeper involvement with Habitat.

On the build site we sheppard our limited resources. We marshal lumber, sheeting and flooring. We allocate siding and house wrap. Yet from a big picture perspective, we may be wasting an even more valuable resource... the future leadership potential of our Saturday volunteers.

I admit, when I think of house leadership, there have been times when I focused solely on building the house or helping the homebuyer. I didn't prioritize or may have completely overlooked making sure my house's volunteers had a great day. Perhaps, I'm not the only house leader who has tripped on this oversight.

And speaking of oversights, it's important to realize and remember that when we make mistakes, we often believe we're doing everything correctly. I imagine we've all had the experience of getting lumber from the wrong pile, using the wrong nails or installing the wrong window. One thing all of these experiences have in common is that until the mistake was pointed out, everyone thought everything was fine.

This can also apply to our leadership... We may in fact think we are doing everything right, in dealing with volunteers, when in fact we're not. How many of us have spent a day *managing* volunteers instead of leading them. We believe we had a great day helping build a home, when in fact, few of our volunteers shared in that feeling. Those volunteers arrived excited and engaged, willing to give their Saturday for a cause we all share. They left perhaps feeling unfulfilled or unappreciated. In all likelihood, there may be little chance of seeing those volunteers back on site anytime soon. When that happens, we as leaders have wasted their *potential* value to Habitat's future build.

We must resist the temptation to lead by managing either by how we manage, or have been managed, in the workplace, or how we coach, or have been coached, on the playing field. To do so can have negative consequences with volunteers. We shouldn't forget that volunteers have different drivers than athletes or paid employees.

First time volunteers to a cause basically fall into two categories. The first group are those that serve for a vested self interest. An affected family member or personal life experience, or perhaps a corporate expectation pulls or pushes an individual into a commitment for serving on a school board, or as a church elder, soccer coach, fund raiser or scout master. These volunteers may begrudgingly accept their responsibility, but recognize a vested need to serve the cause. These individuals are more forgiving and accepting of a frustrating volunteer experience because they are driven by something more important than a momentary good feeling.

However, a significant portion our weekend volunteers fall into the second category. They are driven by a *general* desire to serve; they are curious about our efforts as well as other charitable efforts; and they are exploring to see how the build experience benefits them. Their willingness to return after a tough or disappointing day is much more fragile, for they have hundreds of other volunteer opportunities to also choose from. However, how we as leadership act on Saturdays, can positively affect their feelings and over time and with patience, bring them to a deeper commitment.

Because what can happen to volunteers from both categories is that over a period of time and positive experience, the act of volunteering is normalized. It becomes a habit, the volunteers adjust to the time commitments; they make new friends and hopefully have the tacit hands on experience that touches their heart. They see the difference their efforts make. They mature to recognize their value to a cause, and become dedicated to serve it. Look around and you see dozens of examples of this type of volunteer.

Unfortunately for us, the more seasoned we become, the more likely it is that we forget what it felt like when we first volunteered. We as leaders may become disconnected from recognizing the drivers for our volunteers. We as committed volunteers can be *managed* and told what to do, and we don't need to hear thank you as often. However, our first time volunteers need to be *led* to our level of commitment.

One suggested way to do so would be to follow the accepted theory of servant leadership. This means that we as leaders, see ourselves as serving those who follow us... and that is the reason why they would choose to follow us.

This may require some of us to flip our paradigm of house leadership. The volunteers no longer help us build the home, we help them. In their eyes and expectations, God has placed us on the job site, to facilitate their experience. We are more like a fishing guide who knows where to cast and what bait to use, or the caddy who knows the course and suggests the best way to play the lie. If we value having future leaders, then it follows we should consider accommodating this switch.

A good way we can begin is to make sure our building efforts are seen by our volunteers as more rewarding than other ways they could choose to spend their time. The easiest way to do so this is to make sure the volunteers see us enjoying the day. The more difficult we make the job appear, the more we voice frustration out loud... the more we push away future leadership. Nobody will want to be a house leader if they don't *see* us enjoying being one.

And it's important to remember that how our volunteers see us and how we see ourselves are often two different things. We all, at times, have trouble recognizing ourselves as others may see us. I may see myself in the mirror as being persistent, yet everyone else sees me as being stubborn. I may see myself as focused on building a quality home, while others see me selfishly not allowing the volunteers to lend a hand. I may see myself as providing pointers, while others see me finding fault and a negative individual. I see myself taking charge, others see me taking away opportunity. Many things we may see in ourselves as positive or natural traits may in fact be pushing volunteers away.

Our volunteers see leader stenciled on our back. We need to make sure they see it on our actions as well. We need to remember that manager is a job classification. Leader is a compliment to one's character.

We all know that anyone can swing a hammer, but knowing what nail to use, and where to place it are skills that come over time and with considerable practice. We ask each other how to install a door or flash a window, but how often do we find ourselves checking how to motivate, how to best teach or how to thank someone? These are skills to be studied and practiced. Just as with building homes, building leaders isn't easy. And it will take time for us to learn, practice and hone our leadership skills.

We could spend so much more time on this, but for now I would like to ask you all to invest some prayerful consideration between now and the start of your build to consider what you might do differently this year.

Will both welcoming and thanking volunteers be on your daily checklist?

Will you remind your volunteers to thank the people in their lives who may have made it possible for them to share their time with us?

Will you be willing to let volunteers do things even if you believe you or a crew leader can do it better?

Will you practice avoiding confrontational or assertive language?

For instance you won't tell people what to do, you'll ask them. Even better you merely state what needs to be done and the parameters it needs to be done in.

Will you be sure to phrase challenging situations in a positive manner? "You did this wrong," evolves into "we have a problem to fix."

Will you point out to your volunteers the positive difference they are making in building the home, helping a family and making your day easier?

Will your afternoon thanks include an open invitation to return?

Will you give a personal thanks to those volunteers who show signs of both positive attitude and aptitude?

Will you let them know you think they would be great construction leader?

These are just some ideas of what we could do, if we're not already doing them. There's no guarantee that actions like these alone are enough to bring volunteers into a deeper commitment to Habitat. But, we do know that negative volunteer experiences have been cited as reasons why volunteers haven't returned to our builds.

I think we can all agree;

We need more leaders.

Our Saturday volunteers are perhaps the lowest hanging fruit to cultivate to for that future leadership.

And, how we, as house and crew leaders, act will influence, one way or the other, the likelihood of those volunteers returning.

Leadership for the future is as critical a challenge as any we face. Yet, this is a challenge where we can make a difference... How we lead today will affect who will lead tomorrow. Thank you.