

Vision, Commitment and Action

Cathy Burke, Chief Executive Officer, The Hunger Project Australia, talks about the human spirit and a new model of leadership that is relevant to the corporate sector.

Imagine if the principles of business success – vision, leverage, strategic thinking and responsible, empowered leadership – could be put to work within countries and families that experience constant hunger. Welcome to The Hunger Project.

The Hunger Project (THP) is the foremost leadership training and education organisation working in the developing world to end hunger. It is a global, strategic non-government organisation (NGO) that works to ignite hungry people's own capacity to end their hunger.

The core of The Hunger Project's approach is the recognition that the people themselves – the illiterate, malnourished and subjugated – are the key resource in ending hunger. The Hunger Project has decoded how to unlock that capacity, thus unleashing a momentum of

accomplishment across the developing world to end hunger.

To date The Hunger Project is working in 13 countries across Africa, South Asia and Latin America and has trained more than 110,000 volunteer leaders who are mobilising and empowering 20 million people to become self-reliant in building healthy, sustainable communities free from hunger. The Hunger Project uses a two-pronged strategy: mobilising grassroots people for self-reliant development, and mobilising committed local leadership to create an enabling environment for that grassroots action to succeed.

Vision, Commitment and Action

One of the biggest innovations of The Hunger Project is the Vision, Commitment and Action Workshop (VCAW). This is how we engage with local

communities and is the cornerstone of our work. The VCAW is a four-hour process led by trained volunteer local leadership called animators that has been done by nearly three million people around the world. The VCAW transforms people's resignation and has them recognise that they are the key change agents for a better future. People create a vision for their village free from hunger, set priorities, and launch actions to make that vision a reality.

Through working to create a shared vision, commitment and strategic action in communities, the hungry people themselves step into leadership and create initiatives and long-term sustainable outcomes that money just can't buy. People are building schools, training as traditional birth attendants for safe deliveries, stopping early marriages, and starting small-scale businesses.

How does this leadership movement work in reality?

In Africa, long held as a continent of endless handouts and dependency, The Hunger Project has ended hunger in numerous communities through this empowerment approach. It has empowered more than 70 communities of 10,000 to 15,000 people each for five years. After this time the people are self-reliant – no further money from The Hunger Project is required. The people have created their own schools, food banks, HIV-AIDS prevention, rural banks and other initiatives. They are eating 3 meals a day. Their success is sustained by the leadership structures they have created, and by who they have become.

Also in Africa, special HIV-AIDS volunteer leaders lead Africa's only rural, local language, gender-based HIV-AIDS

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initiative, a program that has reached more than 400,000 people over the past three years. Our staff are able to identify and then train people within the village who can confidently lead from material that challenges the status quo and speaks about issues that are culturally taboo.

In Bangladesh, the approach has been to create a national grassroots movement of trained volunteer leaders called animators. Initially anyone was invited to sit through the four-day training, but over time it became clear that a minimum education level was needed for people to effectively lead changes in their communities.

More than 80,000 animators have been trained and they lead Vision, Commitment and Action Workshops to empower the activities springing from these community gatherings. Hundreds of schools, for example, have been set up

though the efforts of these leaders as villages realise and take action upon education priorities rather than doing nothing because the government hasn't built the schools.

In India, THP seized the opportunity of a constitutional amendment that saw one million women elected as local government leaders across rural India. They hold constitutional authority and money to make improvements in areas including health, sanitation and education. However, for the most part these women are illiterate, subjugated and malnourished.

The Hunger Project has both devised a programme that has trained more than 40,000 women to date to be effective leaders for their communities, and caused a national coalition of government to empower their success.

Starting with shifting the mindset

No sustainable change can happen without people profoundly understanding that they are the key to their own future. This work takes time. It's not sexy and on the outside it can look like nothing much is happening for a while. The pull is to provide services or money so some initial successes are reported.

It's true that people face very real challenges: severe subjugation of women, corruption, broken government promises, lack of education and lack of opportunity to name a few. I know myself when I am in villages I am so enrolled in how hard it all is and how difficult and seemingly insurmountable the challenges seem. When I look into the eyes of a pregnant married 14-year-old girl, living a life of drudgery and denied education, it's hard for me to relate to her as a potential leader.

Thank goodness it's not me training and leading the communities. I look at our local volunteer animators in admiration. They are rigorous and unrelenting in calling people forth. They may have minimum education, but they have in their bones, through the work they've done with The Hunger Project, that the community is capable of ending its hunger.

It is inspiring when I look at 40-point plans in Bangladesh where villagers monitor their own accomplishments, tracked against measurements like literacy, sanitation and dowry that they determine.

I'm in awe when I witness remote rural communities in Africa grapple with the notions that their cultural practices are harmful for AIDS and witness them reshape traditional practices that appease spirits but are safe for everyone.

It is amazing what humans are capable of doing and truly humbling. If this kind of leadership phenomenon can be unleashed in the most harshest of conditions, where the mindset is almost medieval, then what can we learn from this for our own companies and communities – and for humanity?

**Hay Group is working with The Hunger Project in Australia to assist them with their leadership models.*

Getting Involved

The Hunger Project Australia has a dynamic and committed body of investors who fund its strategic work and educate people about ending hunger. The Hunger Project's national office is in Melbourne, but the organisation has activities in most Australian states.

THP Australia assists in all the regions where hunger persists including: South East Asia (India and Bangladesh),

sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, Uganda and Ethiopia) and Latin America (Bolivia, Mexico and Peru). If readers would like to become an investor simply go to The Hunger Project's website in Australia for more information: www.thp.org.au or you can email: thpa@thp.org