

Best Leadership Practices by the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA)

In 2003, the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) was established at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). VSA is a collection of students from various backgrounds that share a common interest in and wish to promote Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American culture, through the use of cultural and service events such as the *Vietnamese Lunar New Year Show* and *Volunteering at Youth Effect International*, respectively. Because of VSA's strong presence and positive reputation at WPI, we chose to research VSA-WPI to see what business leadership practices make them so successful. To do this, we interviewed some of their executive members to gain insight on their leadership practices. In the paragraphs below, we have identified VSA's four best leadership practices and have provided two recommendations for leadership improvement and their effects.

The first leadership practice we identified was VSA's ability to effectively lead its members in team oriented tasks. VSA is driven to make all of its team members feel important and value one another's opinions. Therefore, to promote a more family oriented and inclusive environment, during club activities, VSA's president leads the general body using a participative leadership style. By consulting members before making final decisions, this style of leadership promotes a close-knit community as well as encourages creativity and boosts the club's morale. While executive member roles typically require a more formal leadership style, a formal style could decrease the level of involvement from members and become a deterrent for individuals joining the club in the goal of spreading Vietnamese culture.

The second leadership practice that our group found prominent to VSA's success was the presence of strong, common motives. All the executives and members of VSA are driven by their desire to spread awareness of the Vietnamese culture. They believe it is their responsibility as members of this unique culture to share elements of their lifestyle with others. With that communal goal in mind, they organize and host various cultural events such as *Pho Night* to establish themselves as a notable organization on campus. This helps VSA constantly grow and add valuable, devoted members to their club who share the same desire to spread awareness. As VSA continues to grow, the executive members must find a way to maintain their original goal amongst the new individuals and current members. As a result, the president constantly upholds the goal of VSA. This tactic reassures each member of their important role in the organization and helps the team stay on track in spreading cultural awareness.

The third leadership practice we identified was VSA's power and influence. The club is very collaborative and has worked together with many different campus affiliated groups, such as the International Student Council (ISC). For example, they co-hosted the *Vietnamese Midnight Breakfast* which was a huge success. By building "bridges with other clubs such as SASE, KSA, CSA and JCC," VSA has developed a significant presence on campus. The club has a strong relationship with other culture clubs, giving it a measure of influence over the Asian demographic and WPI community. VSA is powerful enough to motivate its members and partners to work towards a common goal as seen in the upcoming Pan Asian Festival at WPI, a collaborative cultural event bringing together all of the Asian culture clubs on campus. By working with so many other groups on campus, VSA's level of influence has steadily increased allowing them to reach their goal of exposing more students to Vietnamese culture.

The fourth leadership practice we identified was VSA's ethics and social responsibility to include philanthropy. According to Chau, the President of VSA, she says, "we are very true to our culture, and we try to stick to tradition as much as possible, such as TET, or lunar new year." Lunar new year is an annual event in Vietnam to celebrate the beginning of spring according to the Vietnamese calendar. VSA sees it as their social responsibility to give members an authentic Vietnamese experience. VSA also contributes to the local community through *Youth Effect International* whose contributions "provide students with the tools they need to have a better education." Through philanthropy, VSA extends its social responsibility within and outside the WPI community.

Recommendations

After analyzing the club's best leadership practices, we found that VSA still has room for improvement. While talking to the president of VSA, we realized that her transition to her leadership role was informal. As a result, we see that an informal rise in leadership might bring in poor leaders to power that may not uphold the club's family culture. Since VSA's familial, informal culture is dependent on strong leaders' initiatives, we think that the organization should have a contingency plan. To do this, we believe having an alumni advisor for future executives would be beneficial. This mentor would foster the core values that the club was initially founded on. In addition, the alumni advisor would coach the new president on traditional club practices to ensure appropriate leadership techniques and promote VSA's familial culture. While the current leadership does occasionally reach out to alumni for advice, this official position would train

potential poor leadership, add to the club's morale, and overall guarantee that VSA has a consistent transition of power and tradition for future generations.

In addition to this recommendation, while VSA implements adaptive leadership in many of their practices, the president expressed a concern that her execs become extremely discouraged when well-planned events do not go well which leads to decreased morale, affecting future events. To combat this issue, we propose having a recap meeting after every major event to discuss and brainstorm ways to improve the quality of future events. This way, data on the event, such as the amount of attendees, can be collected and positive decisions can be highlighted and celebrated, while the problems that occurred can be discussed in a constructive environment and be avoided in future events. Some may argue that a "constructive environment" is easier said than done, and to counter this argument, we recommend that the president set ground rules for the review session. These ground rules consist of thinking as a team rather than as individuals, writing every idea down, and documenting and applying important realizations for future events. This review session would help the executives gain valuable insight on how to improve their events, encourage them to do better next time, and build up adaptive leadership skills among team members.