

Action Learning Challenge Team

Project: VISTA Leader Roles

Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG)

The primary goal of VISTA Leader roles challenge is to assist future VISTA Leaders in understanding the six leader roles through success stories, constructive examples, and other tools on the VISTA Leader Campus. Ultimately, providing each leader who visits the campus with a greater understanding of how to perform their leader roles.

Process: The team first composed a survey to be sent to current VISTA leaders asking them about their daily activities and how they related to the Six Leader Roles. The team selected leaders from those results, in addition to past and current leaders suggested by our team Facilitator, and interviewed them to obtain further information about the Six Leader Roles. The results of these efforts have manifested in Collected Stories for each role and the Top 3 Effective Practices for each role. While compiling their research, the team realized they had also inadvertently collected Fundamental Effective Practices that were applicable to all Leader roles and Leader service. The team has also composed brief descriptions for each role and collected icons to accompany the roles on the campus.

Vision: The team envisioned the project being displayed on the Campus by listing each of the leader roles, with its icon posted beside it, and its three effective practices listed below. Also posted would be the headshot of the leader whose story corresponded to that role and an invitation to click the headshot to view their story. Ideally, when the mouse would hover over an effective practice, the additional text for that practice would appear.

Participants:

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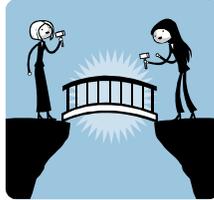
Icons

The group conception of how the icons would be used is as a point of entry to each role. The hope is that the icons become synonymous with the role like the universal symbols for wheelchair access. We have provided 2 examples of concepts that may be used as links to each role.

Ambassador



Liaison



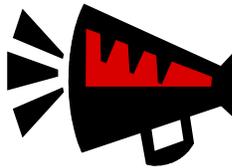
Resource Coordinator



Mentor



Recruiter



Facilitator/Educator



Brief descriptions of VISTA Leader Roles

The brief descriptions of the Six Leader Roles were composed using the descriptions provided in the Leader handbook provided at Leader's training. They are provided here to serve as an introduction to each of the roles before delving into the Effective Practices and Collected Stories.

Ambassador

Ambassadors are representatives or messengers for certain organizations or interests. As a VISTA leader, you represent and promote national and community service in the region in which you serve. You are also a spokesperson and advocate for VISTA and your sponsoring organization.

Facilitator/Educator

Facilitators are those that help to bring about an outcome by providing indirect or unobtrusive assistance, guidance, or supervision. As a VISTA leader, you help identify VISTA members' learning and development goals and work with them to achieve those goals. Educators are responsible for conveying knowledge, skills, and attitudes to group members. This transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes may occur both formally and informally in serving as a teacher, instructor and/or role model.

Mentor

A mentor is a trusted counselor or guide. As a VISTA leader, your role is to influence and guide VISTA members toward achieving the goals set out in their VISTA Assignment Description (VAD). Mentoring can be a peer-to-peer relationship or it can be a relationship between an individual with more experience who shares information and skills with one who is less experienced. Mentoring can also be a combination of the two in which varying levels of experience in different areas can be shared within the partnership.

Liaison

A Liaison is someone who connects two or more individuals or groups. In this role, the VISTA Leader identifies the relationships and needs of key players, such as self, members, sponsor, state office and community. These needs may include resolving conflicts between a VISTA member and the sponsor site, or connecting a VISTA member with someone who can help her to meet her project goals.

Resource Generator

Resource Generators identify and build relationships that lead to the acquisition of needed resources. These resources generally include, but are not limited to, money, materials, supplies, people, knowledge, information, partnerships and alliances. As a VISTA Leader, you actively identify, link, educate and connect yourself and other VISTA members with those who have power and influence when it comes to getting the resources you need. This role is often dependent on your ability to build and constantly expand a network of relationships.

Recruiter

Recruiters persuade others to connect their abilities and expertise to achieve common goals. A recruiter finds the right VISTAs when VISTA positions are available. As a VISTA Leader in this role, you are responsible for "selling" the VISTA positions with your agency. It also means being able to connect someone's skills and desires with the requirements and vision of the position and the shared VISTA goal of eliminating poverty.

VISTA Leader Roles – At a Glance

We have also included an abridged bookmark version of the roles that can be easily viewed and printed out by the leaders as an attachment, creating a quick visual reminder.

Ambassador - You are VISTA! Be able to tell people about your experience and what VISTA is.

Facilitator/Educator - Help your VISTAs achieve their goals through effective training.

Mentor - Share your experiences to help your VISTAs aim high and achieve their goals.

Liaison - Be the bridge, help people come together.

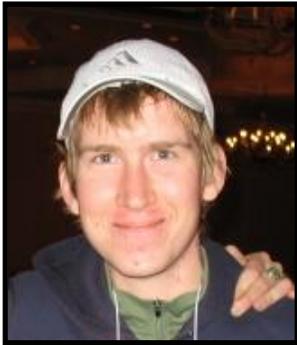
Resource Generator - Know what your VISTAs need, and help them get it.

Recruiter - Help find new VISTAs to serve at your project and build even more capacity.

Collected Stories

The group collected stories for each of the 6 VISTA Leader roles: ambassador, liaison, recruiter, facilitator/education, mentor, and resource generator. The group obtained stories by conducting interviews with present and former VISTA Leaders. After completing the interviews, one story was chosen for each leader role. The group would like to post the stories on the campus, along with headshots from the people whose stories were used.

Mentor



Brian Christianson, VISTA Leader at Montana Campus Compact, leads 50 members throughout the state. When one of his members began suffering the effects of a toxic work environment, compounded by issues in her personal life, Brian knew it was his job to mentor her through this difficult time during her service year. The member was frustrated, felt unappreciated, and was not seeing the results of her service that she thought she ought to. She was contemplating suspending her service for a month or more or even terming early. Brian encouraged her in the work she was doing, guided her in understanding its impact, and encouraged patience as he was sure she would see the fruit of her labor soon. With Brian's leadership, the member endeavored to stick it out. Two months later, a Homeless Resource Guide she had created gained notice from a local non-profit involved in homelessness issues. The organization worked with the member to publish and distribute the document, which is now making a noticeable impact in the lives of the homeless in her community. Brian knew it was his duty to ground her in the work she was doing, help her to see the big picture, and appropriately recognize her emotions in response to the situation. Because of Brian's ability to perform effectively in his mentoring role, the member is moving towards completing a very successful year of service.

Recruiter



Ericc Powell, VISTA leader for the Illinois Campus Compact during its first year having a VISTA program, had a lot of recruiting to do when he first began in his leader role. Ericc attended multiple career fairs and recruitment events, letting people know why joining VISTA could be good for them. He quickly grew use to seeing people approach his table, begin the conversation by asking how much you get paid, and walk away. Unsatisfied with his results, Ericc decided to employ a different strategy. A woman soon approached his table and asked what a VISTA was. Ericc began to tell her his story of service and why he loved being a VISTA. Soon three more people, seeing Ericc's enthusiasm and the interest of the woman, joined the conversation. One of the men who joined later told Ericc, "You come to these things and people always tell you why you should do the job. But when I saw how interested that woman was in what you were saying, and how passionate you were about what you were talking about, I knew I had to check it out." By passionately telling his story of service, Ericc effectively recruited members to serve for his project.

Ambassador



Yalitza Negron served as a VISTA Leader at Sienna College during the program's first year of operation there. Since the program was just beginning, Yalitza spent much of her time serving as an ambassador to help people at the college and in the community learn about the VISTA program. She did this by presenting to the various college departments and conducting informational sessions with the students at the college. She gave presentations off campus with 20 different agencies throughout the community to tell them about the project. Through this role, Yalitza helped spread awareness about the VISTA program, and this has made the program what it is today.

Liaison



Lynne Aussman, a leader for The Ohio Coalition of Homeless Advocates, led 10 VISTAS statewide and learned early on how important the liaison role is to a Leader's service. She had often acted as the main liaison between the state offices and the Ohio Coalition of Homeless Advocates, but one of her VISTAs came to her with a growing problem; she was not getting any assignments from her supervisor. No matter what the VISTA did to alleviate the problem, she was just not getting through to the supervisor and she was contemplating quitting the VISTA program. Lynne stepped in, and through careful guidance and speaking with both the supervisor and the VISTA to find out how the problem could be resolved, she was able to facilitate a successful resolution and the VISTA was able to happily complete her year. By acting as an effective liaison between the VISTA and the supervisor, the VISTA and the supervisor were able to break through communication barriers and move forward in completing a successful and productive year.

Facilitator/Educator



Patrick Magee-Jenks, leader at the Colorado Youth Corps Association, dove into his role as a trainer for the 25 VISTAs scattered across his state. He realized that it would be challenging to get all of his VISTAs together at one time, so he created trainings that he could e-mail and include in monthly newsletters that he sends out to keep his VISTAs up to date. Patrick also created a retreat that is now held annually where all of the VISTAs could meet each other and share ideas. The retreat was so successful that most of the members said it was the best time they had had all year!

Resource Coordinator



Coordinating resources for nearly 200 VISTAs spread across 160+ host sites in about 30 different states would be a daunting task for any leader, but Habitat for Humanity VISTA Leader Martiel Beatty executes this task with such alacrity she makes it seem effortless. One of Martiel and her co-leaders strategies was to set up a resource hotline email address that their members can send their questions to. Martiel sorts through the emails and responds within 24-hours with either an email or a phone call, depending on the issue. Through this system Martiel is not only able to coordinate resources to support members, but she is able to keep herself organized and respond to each of her VISTAs in a timely manner.

Best Practices

While going through the interviews, the group decided to collect best practices that may be helpful in understanding leader roles. The group chose three best practices for each role. The group would like the effective practices to be displayed as a list under their corresponding role, and when someone rolls their mouse over one, a box with suggestions will pop up.

Ambassador

Know VISTA and sponsoring site missions

- Familiarize yourself with the history of VISTA and its mission in addition to the history and mission of the members' host site. This knowledge will enable you to be well-versed on the purpose of the program and be a ready resource for anyone you might talk to about it. Having this knowledge on hand will make you a strong Ambassador for both the VISTA program at large and your sponsoring organization.

Spread awareness about your organization and VISTA

- Whether it is a casual conversation on the bus or a presentation you arrange at a community event, be an advocate for your organization and VISTA everywhere you go. Increasing awareness of your program's goals in the community will likely result in more people utilizing your organization's services and create inroads for your members who might need to work with the community as some aspect of their VADs.

Remember: You are VISTA

- To your members, the employees at your host site, and the community at large, you are a representative of VISTA. Your actions and attitudes will reflect directly on people's impression of national service. Practice self-awareness and maintain a healthy attitude to make sure that your impression is a positive one.

Recruiter

Develop a recruitment strategy

- What are you recruiting for specifically? When are you going to do it? Where and how are you going to recruit the members you need? Whether you're recruiting for specific positions or recruiting for your program at large you need to determine your target audience and then figure out how to reach them. Should you attend career fairs? Volunteer fairs? Schedule talks at local colleges and universities? Attend service-oriented club meetings? Regardless of your recruitment needs, you're going to need a strategy for a successful effort.

Tell your story

- The most common way current VISTAs found out about the program is through word of mouth from other VISTAs and VISTA alum. Your story of service is powerful and personal. People will be inspired to hear your experience and will be more likely to ask for more information than if you just shared the facts of service alone. Let your passion show.

Follow Up

- You should have a plan for screening applicants and a plan for following up with them as part of your recruitment strategy. The most important part of that plan

will be its execution. Follow up with candidates who have expressed interest, answer any questions they might have, help guide them through the next steps of the application process, and make yourself available for future conversations. Doing all of this in a timely manner could mean the difference between a lot of really strong applicants and only a few mediocre ones.

Facilitator/Educator

Orientate your VISTA members

- Helping your members navigate the world of VISTA and the world of their organization are most likely going to be some of your biggest day-to-day tasks. Start off on the right foot by ensuring your VISTAs have a good foundation of understanding at the beginning of their service. Make sure they do not have any residual need for clarification after PSO and develop some type of site orientation to help them get familiar with their organization.

Provide skill building opportunities

- VISTA is more than just a year of service; it is also a professional development opportunity. Utilize resources and trainings in your community, those posted on the VISTA campus, and ones you create yourself to help your members make the most out of their service terms. The trainings may be work plan specific, focusing on issues of volunteer management or grant writing, or they may be more general with topics such as professional etiquette, effective presentations, or life after service.

Don't be afraid of new media

- Utilize different forms of media to enhance your communication and training capacity with your members. Popular social tools include skype, facebook, twitter, webex, ning, and any other web or system-based tool that will help you to interact with your VISTA members. Communicate with your group early on about their preferences and agree on tools that everyone feels comfortable with. Look for resources on the campus such as how-to guides and social media webinars.

Liaison

Know VISTA and host site policies

- Make yourself an expert on the policies of VISTA and those of your organization. What is the grievance protocol? Does your organization have some mandatory code of conduct? Knowing the infrastructure of the program, all the technicalities, the ins and outs, and even (if possible) knowing the reasoning behind some of the rules will help you to be an effective liaison.

Serve as a mediator when conflicts arise

- Conflict occurs in even the most idyllic of environments. This is where your own VISTA service can be both a help and a hindrance. You can relate a lot to the members challenges, frustrations, and obstacles, but that might limit your perspective when problem solving. Be able to take a step back and experience the conflict from all perspectives. Take advantage of the opportunity to learn effective mediation strategies at your VISTA leader training.

Connect Corporation State Office, VISTAs, and VISTA supervisor

- You are the go-between for these three entities. You might communicate the details of a Corporation-sponsored state-wide training to your members, or help a supervisor talk to their members about time sheet requirements. Get to know these different groups to make them aware of your presence and help them to make the most out of your unique position.

Mentor

Facilitate an environment of High Achievement

- Sometimes your members might need to vent about project challenges and sometimes they might need someone to enforce a positive attitude. They might require guidance on navigating office politics or a brainstorming session to jump start work on their assignment descriptions. For many members, VISTA is their first foray into the professional realm and they are looking to you to model the way. Your attitude and behavior will directly impact their VISTA experience and how they view and approach professional environments in the future.

Provide Focus and Perspective

- A common challenge of VISTA service is getting too bogged down in the details and losing sight of the bigger picture. As a Leader, it is your responsibility to help your members see the impact they are making and how their service is contributing to a cause much greater than themselves. Regularly share project results and member accomplishments, remind members what their work is enabling their organization or their community to accomplish, and highlight the long-term effects of their efforts. Reinforcing the successes of past and current members will encourage members to continue reaching that same level of excellence.

Listen

- Listening is an important part of communication, and sometimes your members may just want to be heard. As a leader, VISTAs may come to you when they have certain challenges, needs, or just want to share a success story. It is important that your VISTAs know that you are listening to them when they talk to you; listening to your members helps build trust. Show your VISTAs that you are listening by making eye contact, eliminating distractions, and ask probing questions when necessary.

Resource Generator

Discover the needs of your VISTAs

- Where could your members most benefit from your assistance? Do they need help navigating public assistance? Financial literacy classes or how to live on a budget? Or do they need access to grant writing resources and networking opportunities? Whether your members need help finding resources for the tasks on their VAD or living on a VISTA stipend, it's all apart of the VISTA experience, and you should make yourself aware of what those needs are to better lead your members through their service terms.

Network with other non-profits

- Discover services other non-profits in your community provide. These agencies could prove to be valuable partners for your members to network with to

accomplish their service assignments, or they might have services your members could benefit from as low-income individuals. Evaluating these services might help you to establish your own effective practices for a successful VISTA year, which greatly enhances your members' terms of service.

Establish a Resource Database

- Record all the resources you generate and the strategies you used in procuring them. Whether this is a wiki site, a blog, or a simple binder, having this information all in one place will make an easy reference tool for you, and it will help ensure the success of the VISTA program at your project site even after your service term.

Foundational Effective Practices of being a VISTA Leader

Network with other leaders

- Who better to offer you advice throughout your service than your peers? As Leaders, we are put in a unique position somewhere between VISTA member and supervisor where our roles can sometimes seem ambiguous and flexible. Leaders also provide a lot of resources and development trainings for members that can be shared or improved upon with collaboration. Keep in touch with Leaders from your Leader's training, network on the campus, or establish regular communication with other Leaders in your state or region for new ideas, advice, and encouragement.

Capitalize on your strengths

- Take advantage of your natural talents and interests to both enjoy your job and do it well. Your Leader year is not just a year of service, it is a year for you to learn and grow professionally. Recognize the opportunity Leader service offers to expand upon diverse skill sets such as facilitation, mediation, marketing, technology, communication, and mentoring. You can do what you love or explore something you want to learn more about all while supporting your members.

Embrace the changes you can make

- Change takes time. It also takes a lot of patience, but that is a less popular adage. Be cautious not to stretch yourself too thin trying to solve every challenge of the project and your members. It will be impossible to be all things to all people so satisfy yourself by taking a realistic inventory of what you can accomplish and focus your energy on that.