CORPORATE INITIATIVES

Learning How to LEAD
Verizon helps new employees develop their management potential

MARCUS ALLEN’S ORIGINAL PLAN
was to join the military after college, but he changed his mind when he applied to the Verizon Future LEADers Program, a 10-week summer internship. Since interns can return to the program throughout their college years, he participated for four summers, working in areas such as project management, government contracts, budgeting, and diversity training. After completing his fourth year, Verizon Enhanced Communities, a business unit of Verizon Communications Inc. that provides high-speed Internet and telecommunications services for multifamily residences, hired him as a sales coordinator.

Once he took the job, Allen became eligible for the company’s Leadership Excellence and Development Program, an 18- to 24-month program designed for entry-level employees. Participants, who are required to have received a bachelor’s or master’s within the past two years and maintain a 3.0 grade point average, develop valuable management skills and contacts. Hiring managers recommend candidates; if they meet the criteria, they are entered into the program. “LEAD launches careers here at Verizon,” says Katherine Burr, a manager of organization development who works with the program. “It transitions them from college to work and helps them to be strategic about their careers.”

Since LEAD was established in 2003, 440 participants have completed the program, more than half of them people of color, and 37% have been promoted.

In Allen’s class, 14 twenty-somethings handle a curriculum that comprises formal and informal learning activities including assessment tools and as many as 12 online and on-site courses in areas such as leadership, time management, presentation skills, communication, and business etiquette. Moreover, they receive mentoring from their peers and from company leaders. To further increase their knowledge of current trends, the participants meet business leaders and industry experts at quarterly conferences.

Allen says he has noticed how the program has improved his leadership skills. One class, called goals and goal setting, teaches that a well-constructed idea assesses the abilities, time, and resources available. He says he applies this criteria when managing his market research team and negotiating deadlines with salespeople.

“Before, I took more directness from other people instead of asserting myself,” he says. “After taking that class, I realize it’s not just about one person’s goal. It’s about cross-collaborating. There’s the salesperson’s goal and there’s my team’s goal.”

Success is measured by an evaluation survey and qualitative data is collected to examine diversity, promotion rates, and participants’ success with their skill sets. Participants are also measured on a scale of 1 to 5 to see how well they apply learned leadership skills.

Bernard Anderson, Ph.D., former Whitman M. Young Jr. Professor of Management at the Wharton School, considers Verizon’s LEAD program a best practice of human resources management. He says scholarly research studies show that such programs promote better management performance and high-performance workplaces.

“These types of programs are especially important for introducing African Americans to the values, culture, and operating modalities of an organization,” says Anderson, who is also a member of the BLACK ENTERPRISE Board of Economists. He adds that there should be more African Americans in corporate leadership programs because there is still a shortage of visible black candidates in the pipeline for senior-level management roles.

Burriss says LEAD ensures that a diverse group of entry-level workers are brought in because the program serves as a feeder into other organizations within the company. LEAD participants themselves are required to take diversity training.

“Before LEAD,” Burriss says, “we didn’t have one program that provided a comprehensive approach to developing new college hires.”

—Brittany Hutson