

Merchants Group's Social Action-based Leadership Development

Co-winner of the Dialogue Strategic CSI Award 2018

Merchants Group partners with the non-profit Columba Leadership to deliver the Columba Youth Development Programme. This values-driven programme aims to activate the potential of young people from underprivileged communities by equipping them with problem-solving, collaboration and communication skills to become effective leaders and improve their employability. The programme also inspires young people to be agents of positive social change in their schools and communities. Through Columba, Merchants engages with a few schools each year and remains involved until the principles of the programme have become embedded into the school culture, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the programme. The programme engages various stakeholders, including principals, teachers, learners, the Department of Basic Education, and Merchants' executives and staff. Through its participation in the programme, Merchants Group gains insight into the youth market and is able to develop an alternative employee pipeline by building relationships with young leaders before they enter the job market.

Columba targets quintile one to three schools in six provinces, and focuses on learners from grades 10 to matric. The programme is delivered in three phases:

- Stakeholders are engaged to become part of the movement. This is followed by a six-day experiential leadership academy for the principal, two educators and 12 diverse young people (ranging from shy, underperforming or troublesome learners to academic achievers and established leaders). The programme offers staff and executives from funding partners an opportunity to directly participate in the leadership academy, along with the learners and educators.
- Upon return from the academy, these 15 individuals are responsible for actioning change in their schools and communities based on what they have learnt.
- Through the provision of tools, training and ongoing support, for 18 months after the academy participants work on developing themselves and social projects that will serve their communities.

During the programme, 'communities of practices' are established with clusters of schools. These communities organise annual provincial educator and learner events at which best practice and challenges are shared and excellence is awarded.

Social benefits: Improved learning environments and increased collaboration

Columba runs the programme in a school for up to five years, engaging a different cohort of grade 10 learners and teachers each year, who then mobilise the involvement of their peers and lead projects which address a range of social ills in their school and community.

School management reports that the power of ethical values and shared leadership contributes to an improved learning environment. Educators also testify to being more adept at working collaboratively with learners as partners for change, and learners become accepted as part of the leadership of the school and as role models for their peers. Columba alumni return to use their skills to support learners and their schools.

Participant schools also report improvements in learner behaviour, rates of school attendance, learner retention and the mainstreaming of youth engagement.

Additionally, a monitoring and evaluation process tracks each cohort to gauge the extent to which they successfully transition to further education, employment or entrepreneurial activity. According to the Columba Leadership website, 75% of their graduates are in jobs, further education or volunteerism.

Independent research psychologist, Chris Boon, reported the following on the programme's impact on home communities in 2016:

- 95% of parents reported a sustained change in their children's behaviour
- 89% of parents were more involved in their children's schooling
- 100% of respondents agreed that there were positive changes in the way their child interacted with older people
- 92% reported a positive perception of the graduate by community members



Business benefits: Strengthening staff leadership and developing a talent pipeline

The programme is used as an incubator for Merchants to develop leadership qualities among their staff and, since the project commenced in 2013, 120 Merchants staff and executives have participated in the leadership academies with learners and teachers.

In addition to Merchants' staff gaining leadership skills, about 50 staff members also participate in the annual Merchants-Columba Career Day, which is delivered to 16 schools in Gauteng and the Western Cape, providing learners with career guidance and advice.

Working with Columba has allowed Merchants to improve its BBBEE rating. The programme has also given the Merchants call centre a competitive advantage when attracting new talent. Through the programme an alternate pipeline of entry-level talent is created and an increased insight into different markets, particularly the youth market, is made available. New employees

are taken through induction into the Merchants' People and Customer Strategy which includes principles that are closely aligned with the ones Columba advocates: awareness, focus, creativity, integrity, perseverance and service. One of the pillars of the strategy is to create meaningful and sustainable futures for employees.

An external evaluation of the programme provided anecdotal feedback about improved staff performance at work, including:

- Improvement of interpersonal skills, empathy, better understanding and self-confidence
- Positive teamwork, greater commitment and engagement at work, stronger drive, better problem-solving and greater appreciation of the wider social context
- Encouragement to see themselves through the eyes of others, while learning to understand those from diverse backgrounds and perspectives
- The values-based approach breaks stereotypes and forces a degree of empathy which cannot be simulated in conventional training programmes.

Judges' feedback

"This application was a real gem and illustrates the need for adaptive leadership as we enter the fourth industrial era. It highlights the way in which a more developmental initiative – high school learner leadership development – can be linked strongly with companies to facilitate executive leadership development. This is a strong example of strategic CSI. There has been a dedication to research and monitoring and evaluation and there is excellent data available in terms of outcomes and impact (for example in the survey of parents). It is also a strong example of partnership between a non-profit institution (Columba Leadership) and the corporation."

Programme in numbers

R4.8 million

total company expenditure on project to date

R1.1 million

company expenditure on project in 2017/18

83

participants from five schools in 2017/18, including 58 learners and 25 educators

82%

pass rate for the matric class of 2017, 74% diploma or bachelor-level pass rate

76%

of graduates transition successfully from school to further study, work or volunteering