

Article for “Australian Philanthropy”

“Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.” Syrius Publilius, 42 BC

Most people would agree that our world faces a number of challenging issues, such as current international instability, the environment, poverty and exclusion. The sea is far from calm. We need more leaders who are driven by values and are not afraid to stand by them; who will persevere through difficult times; who are not afraid to stand at the “centre of the storm”. The challenge is to find these leaders, but where?

Activate Australia, a leadership development organisation, believes that we should be looking for these leaders in the toughest of socio-economic environments. Although this may seem to be the least likely of places, *Activate* argues that the skills that people develop in these “tough realities” are closely aligned to those attributes that we seek in our leaders.

Background - Activate Australia

Activate Australia, formerly known as Columba 1400 Australia, delivers leadership development programmes for young people from tough realities. Many participants in *Activate* programmes have faced enormous life challenges, including socio-economic disadvantage and long-term unemployment. Usually aged between 16 and 25 years, participants attend the programmes because of a desire to make a positive change in their lives.

Activate programmes are modelled on the successful work of Columba 1400 (Scotland), which has conducted almost 100 programmes with over 1,300 young people from tough realities and is recognised throughout the UK and beyond for its work.

Activate Australia's belief in the leadership potential of young people from tough realities is supported by academic and programme-based research, which was conducted by the American Management Association (AMA) and brought to Columba 1400 by its founding CEO, Ian Chisholm. The research identified the alignment between the core competencies sought by companies when recruiting staff and Board members and those demonstrated by youth from tough realities participating in AMA programmes. These included an ability to make clear decisions in times of pressure, the existence of a code of ethics and the ability to persevere and respond to adversity.

If recognised, developed and focused, the skills of young people from tough realities can be a real source of advantage, both individually and communally.

Activate Australia Leadership Programmes

Activate Australia's objectives are:

- to recognise, develop and *activate* the leadership potential within young people from tough realities
- to *activate* personal development and change
- to provide a forum through which young people from tough realities can become role models for social change and *activate* their communities

Activate Australia's main programme is the "What Other Way (WOW)?" Programme, the core of which is a residential Leadership Academy. Each WOW Programme focuses on a defined geographic region and includes a series of preparation and follow-up sessions, as well as post-programme support.

The Leadership Academy is held at the Pinnacle Valley Resort, a premium quality conference facility located at the foot of Mount Buller in rural Victoria. The high standard of the facility is extremely important, as it sends "silent messages" to participants – that they are valued, important and respected.

The Leadership Academy is structured around six core leadership attributes, which represent the Columban Code of Responsible Leadership:

Awareness, Focus, Creativity, Integrity, Perseverance and Service.

Through experiential learning, participants are introduced to practical leadership development tools and frameworks, such as communication, conflict resolution, ethical decision-making and problem solving. Participants identify their core values and translate those values into a 12-month goal and action plan.

While outdoor activities are an important part of the Leadership Academy, it is far from an outdoor adventure camp. In fact, one graduate referred to it as an "inward bound" experience.

Community Partnerships

Central to the success of the WOW Programme are effective local partnerships. To ensure a seamless process of support and opportunities for participants, *Activate Australia* works closely with people and organisations within the local community. Key relationships include Community/Welfare Organisations, Local Government, Local Learning and Employment Networks, Service Clubs, local businesses and employment and training providers.

Current and future activities

Activate Australia has run two pilot programmes in Victoria and is funded to conduct a third programme in September. The pilot programmes have demonstrated that the WOW Programme model is as applicable to Australian youth as it is to participants in the Scottish programmes and have allowed *Activate Australia* to develop strong relationships with a number of Partner Organisations.

Activate Australia is well-positioned to deliver a further nine programmes over the next two years, which will focus on young people in West Heidelberg, one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in Victoria. These programmes will operate in partnership with Philip's Gate, a community organisation acting as a "hub" of local services.

In 2005, *Activate Australia* is planning to introduce its corporate sector initiative called the "Gemini Project", which "twins" young people from tough realities and corporate "fast track" managers. The experience has been engineered to create an equal playing field - where learning and perceptions of advantage flow in both directions.

How can you help?

As a relatively young organisation, *Activate Australia* is looking for support in a variety of areas, including financial contributions for the WOW Programmes (individual or group funding) and in-kind contributions.

More information

If you would like more information, please contact Nicole Endacott, Founder and CEO:

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Activating Leadership Potential

Activate Australia works with youth from tough realities to harness the personal strengths born of their life experience, to *Activate* the leadership potential within and to position them to drive both personal and social change

