

The Role of ni-Vanuatu Team Leaders in Seasonal Worker Programs

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The success of Australia's Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme has in part been attributed to effective team leadership. Team leaders are chosen by a number of methods including community selection (often based on the status of the individual in the sending community) as well as by the selection processes of sending country employment units, labour recruiters and host-country employers. Besides managing their work teams, team leaders are encouraged to be ambassadors for their countries (Bailey 2014). Based on 10 years of research with team leaders and employers in the New Zealand and Australian seasonal worker programs, this In Brief highlights the duties of ni-Vanuatu team leaders, the challenges they face and the value of competent team leaders to employers, and discusses new pilot programs to support current and upcoming team leaders. Finally, it makes recommendations for managing and supporting these roles in the future. Effective team leaders not only secure successive employment opportunities for workers, but they improve the productivity of the teams they lead. It is recommended that participating governments invest attention and resources in team leaders for future mutual gains.

Duties of Team Leaders

The duties of team leaders vary depending on expectations of different employers, contractors and in-country recruiters but usually involve organising teams to be ready for work, managing paperwork such as timesheets, reporting on work conducted on farms, mediating between employers and workers, motivating workers to focus on their jobs and goals, and monitoring the behaviour of workers at all times (Bailey 2009, 2014). Although their roles appear straightforward, my research has revealed complex repercussions of these types of schemes and the success of team leaders in performing these tasks can be socially and politically fraught, both in their sending countries and in Australia and New Zealand.

Challenges Faced by Team Leaders

The SWP and RSE scheme are contributing to new fields of contestation where some non-traditional leaders are gaining capital (Bourdieu 1998). The consequences are twofold: social relationships and village politics can be negatively affected in the sending country and team harmony in host countries can also be adversely impacted. Team leaders have a powerful political position that can change workers' livelihoods and positions. Participation in the SWP and RSE scheme has resulted in new forms of leadership, jealousy and alliances (Bailey 2009, 2014).

There is often a disconnection between a preferred leader as decided in the village to those of host-country employers (Bailey 2014). For example, despite the choice made by a village (often based on local status), in Australia or New Zealand a different worker might be selected because they demonstrate excellent communication in English and leadership skills to their employer (Bailey 2014). Those with the knowledge, skills and ability to interact with their supervisors and employers have established new forms of leadership based on merit rather than status, affecting politics and social interactions in sending communities (Bailey 2014). Most team leaders do not have contracts stating their positions, rather having oral agreements. Nonetheless, this leadership is situational and not necessarily transferrable on return to their sending countries.

Team leaders are expected to uphold the good standing of the group in both their work and social lives, and they often maintain the internal policing of group behaviour and are expected to resolve any conflicts. However, tensions frequently arise when employers appoint team leaders who have no or low status within their home communities, resulting in difficulties in asserting power and influence over the team in the host country. For example, Bailey (2014:147–48) noted ni-Vanuatu who were prescribed leadership roles while in New Zealand, but who have no rank or status in their home

communities, were not necessarily well respected among workers. Those team members of higher status back home are usually reluctant to directly challenge such leaders, yet it does happen (Bailey 2009, 2014). They have to be careful in the methods they use to protest their leader's decisions as most can influence whether workers can return to their respective programs the next year. This is because team leaders are responsible for reporting on the suitability of workers to their employers, and to sending country labour units when they return home.

Valuing and Supporting Team Leaders

For employers, team leaders are important as they coordinate work schedules and pastoral care with their employers and accommodation hosts. Some employers recognise the importance of their team leaders and reward them through higher rates of pay or gifts in kind, although at recent meetings with team leaders from both schemes this is reportedly inconsistent.¹ Employers have stated that investing time, money and attention to team leaders is vital. Considering the important role of team leaders, an evaluation of rewards systems would be beneficial. Some employers have provided various incentives to keep their team leaders from leaving these programs.² Given that certain team leaders in New Zealand have recently participated in their tenth season, and for leaders in Australia, season eight, employers are asking who will replace their long-term leaders and noted that greater emphasis is needed for training new team leaders.³ A recommendation of this paper is that team leaders and employers should have a forum where they can discuss expectations, challenges and opportunities in order to train upcoming leaders.

RSE Team Leader Pilot Program

While in Vanuatu in October 2016 I was invited to attend a meeting where several team leaders discussed a pilot program to support each other. The meeting was organised by New Zealand employment company Seasonal Solutions Cooperative. The pilot program is designed to help team leaders when they are in difficult situations with workers, including sharing information about workers with supervisors and employers. Its main purpose is to provide peer support with advice on dealing with any incidents that arise, as well as a possible intervention using external team leaders as another form of support. Findings of the pilot program will be presented in an upcoming In Brief.

Recommendations

Sending countries and employers are reliant on team leaders as they influence and manage work, social behaviours and experiences; monitor pastoral care; and induct and support new and current seasonal workers. Nonetheless, team leaders need greater support, because a significant proportion of what team leaders do is often not recognised. Furthermore, most team leaders do not get rewarded for their additional work and a step to solving this would be to ensure proper remuneration for their contributions. Finally, there is a need for succession planning. Team leaders need to be replaced and there should be a focus on supporting future leaders in these schemes. Facilitating discussions with team leaders, employers and governments should be a priority, especially because many long-term team leaders are considering leaving these schemes. Discussions should focus on existing support available for team leaders, addressing employers' expectations of team leaders and considering new forms of assistance that could respond to opportunities and challenges that occur.

Author Notes

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Endnotes

1. RSE team leader meeting, October 2016, Port Vila, and individual interviews with team leaders in Australia and Vanuatu in September and October 2016.
2. It should be noted these schemes are temporary labour schemes. Many workers will stop after they have achieved their targeted goals.
3. Personal communication with various employers, 2015–2017.

References

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