Leading from the FRONT LINE

How would you cope in a crisis? To be a leader it pays to know the answer as UK Border Agency's Dave Beaumont discovered

Good leaders are not just skilled at their profession, but rely on depth of experience to guide them during tough times. The new leaders programme was set up to challenge up-and-coming staff in posts across the business, and occasionally broaden their horizons in conditions very different from the usual nine-to-five routine.

For Dave Beaumont, who works for the finance directorate of the UK Border Agency, that meant travelling to South Africa to learn about the challenge of upholding the rights of foreign migrants facing the threat of xenophobic violence, a lack of basic amenities, education and healthcare access.

Experience for life

Dave, 29, was selected for the programme in 2006. This year, he decided to use funds set aside under the programme to travel to South Africa for a month-long stint as a volunteer with Projects Abroad – an organisation that runs benevolent projects overseas.

The Cape Town project Dave joined was set up in the wake of country-wide unrest last year. In a troubled economic climate, migrants in South Africa became the target of xenophobic violence inflicted by disaffected locals.

'Migrants who were already integrated in the community – who had businesses, shops, relationships – suddenly found themselves on the receiving end of beatings and intimidation,' says Dave. 'There were a number of people killed during the height of the violence last summer.

'The government's response was to set up around 100 refugee camps across the country. More than 30,000 migrants who were no longer tolerated by the domestic community fled to the camps in a very short time,' he adds.

Working as a volunteer case officer, Dave helped refugees complete essential paperwork and looked into protection options on their behalf (including third country resettlement), working alongside international agencies like UNHCR and South Africa's own Human Rights Commission.

'Lots of people were initially holed up in the camps, but [as the trouble subsided] the government has attempted to close them – remaining migrants have been left stuck between a rock and a hard place,' Dave says, adding that it was still unsafe for many to return to their former homes, while opportunities to resettle in other countries were few.

Though rewarding, the work highlighted the difficulty of finding solutions for vulnerable people.

Main picture: Dave and one of the children he helped on a refugee trip to the beach.

Inset: work at Youngsfield refugee camp

'Some of the migrants had refugee status but their documents expired after a certain amount of time and that person would have to go back and get a revalidation of that document,' he says. 'There were an awful lot of problems in getting that done. Although we sometimes get things wrong in the UK, the experience showed me how much we get right,' he adds.

Now back in the UK, Dave will take the lessons he learned in South Africa into his future career. He recommends volunteering abroad to anyone seeking a fresh professional perspective or a personal challenge – especially if they can get support from a scheme like the new leaders programme.

'It's a great thing to do,' he says. 'It opens your eyes to what's going on out there – it's such a different experience to just going away and lying on a beach somewhere.' ■

> *'The experience showed me* ***how much we get right in the UK'***

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