

# LEADERS OF THE FUTURE

Home Depot recruits talent through SIFE, a program where university students use a market-based approach to help communities around the world.

**W**HEN GORDON ERICKSON joined Home Depot as senior vice president of merchandising four years ago, he brought with him decades of retailing experience—and a passion for SIFE. A nonprofit started in 1975, SIFE gives students the opportunity to use market-based ideas and an entrepreneurial approach to solve problems in their communities and around the world. By working in teams that present project outcomes at national and global competitions, students learn how to use business to do good. Here, Erickson explains why Home Depot and SIFE are such a good fit and why the former students he's hired inspire him every day:

#### How did Home Depot and SIFE first come together?

I was involved with SIFE back in 1997 when I was asked to judge one of SIFE's regional competitions. I went kicking and screaming because I thought it was another time-consuming obligation. But once you see these kids compete, it's amazing. I was at Home Depot a few years and wanted the company to be part of this. It wasn't a hard sell.

#### Can you describe how Home Depot got involved in the beginning?

I had a good relationship with the SIFE program at the University of Arizona, and in 2010 we started by recruiting several SIFE students from the school. Since then, we've established a formal college internship program for the merchandising organization. I knew the SIFE students were the kind

of talented individuals we wanted in our company.

#### Why? What skills do they bring to the organization?

I really believe what sets SIFE students apart from other college kids is their poise and ability to form a point of view. You watch these kids at the competitions and they're speaking in front of 2,000 or 3,000 people, including the CEOs of some pretty big companies. They are polished, well spoken, and can support their point of view on a project or problem with thought-out responses and data. There are no canned answers. They've worked on projects in places like Nicaragua.

#### How many former SIFE students has Home Depot hired?

Over the past 18 months, we've hired three who started as interns. Each began in their junior year of college, and we offered them full-time positions as associate merchants in the merchandising group by the time senior year began.

#### Are you pleased with their progress?

I am. You know, it hasn't been the routine in this company to take students right off a college campus and give them a merchandising role, but these kids had a level of maturity that gave us the confidence to try it. Each of them is assigned a senior merchant who's good at doing his or her job out loud. I meet with the SIFE hires at least every other week just to see how they're doing and if there's anything we need to discuss. But for the most part they know how to think independently and solve a problem because they've done it so many times before in SIFE. They're just fearless. ●



A head for business. A heart for the world.™

Home Depot's  
Gordon Erickson