from: <u>Building a Corporate Volunteer Program</u>
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ISSUES AND PITFALLS

Like any activity involving people, corporate volunteering has its problems. Some of them can be anticipated and headed off, like some of those noted below. For the rest, the surprise goofs and slips, just remember that even the veteran voluntary organizations took their lumps getting started.

<u>Volunteering isn't free</u>. Even the most modest program, at the smallest company, is going to generate costs -- somebody's salary, or part of it, supplies, space, time, etc. The larger the company, and the more extensive the volunteer network, the more that costs are going to become a factor. Some costs to keep in mind are: printing, travel expenses for site visits, recognition awards or reception expenses. Any employee of a corporation planning to launch a volunteer program would do well to sit down with a pencil and pad, and draw up the actual outlay that will be needed to get the job done. Operating costs and non-productive expenditures are never popular in a company, even less so today. Think about return on investment.

<u>Released time and loaned manpower cost money</u>. It would be nice if all companies could free up several hours each week for each employee to pursue community goals. But free time is costing the company money. If you plan to advocate released, loaned or other donated manpower, be sure you know what the gesture is really worth to the firm. Many companies have found that their contributions dollars could be augmented or even replaced in some cases by providing employee volunteers to a non-profit organization. During the early 1970's, Chemical Bank found that as funding from New York City and other agencies became harder to obtain, requests from non-profit agencies for financial support increased. Since the corporate contributions budget could not support all the worthwhile groups, volunteers and other in-kind services were offered.

If you're interested in establishing a program with released time, you should know that it doesn't have to be an enormous block of time. One New York City project involves bringing kids to companies for on-site tutoring; the time involved is one hour given by the employee, one hour of the company's time. It's easier to convince a company to allow some employees to give away an hour at the end of the day than it is to break out hunks of the work week (see exhibit 42).

The second thing to note is that some companies, a few for now but maybe more down the road, are developing official released time policy statements. (See exhibit 43.)

Beware of bad match-ups. What's good for me is not necessarily good for you! Too often, a volunteer coordinator likes a program and tries to shoehorn volunteers into because he or she thinks they will like it, too. Or an agency uses volunteers a certain way, whether or not the way suits the needs and interests of new volunteers. Or you, the volunteer and the agency all mean different things when you talk about "tutoring." Make sure everyone knows what the volunteer assignment is all about. Make it clear to the employee that he or she is free to change volunteer assignments if expectations are not met, and that you will try again.

Don't waste talent. Try very hard to find volunteer opportunities that tap the best in an individual employee. Feelings of frustration, being ignored and under-utilized can result if a loaned executive finds himself or herself misplaced. Look hard at the work force you're trying to place; while it might please you personally to offer lots of youth counselors to the community, you've got to deal realistically with the talent on hand.

Don't overwhelm a project. It's happened that a one-shot project, needing 25 volunteers, finds itself with 125. Result — frustration, anger and lost opportunities. Considerable pre-planning and advance work by the volunteer coordinator can prevent this.

Look for adequate support from agencies. Try not to let community agencies throw your volunteers into a difficult assignment and say, "Okay, do your thing." See if some orientation and training is available; make sure your company's employees know about training opportunities and take advantage of them if possible. This is particularly important when working in difficult settings, with people who have unusual personal problems or handicaps, etc.

Insisting that volunteers get adequate training will do a lot to dispel the image of the volunteer as "lady bountiful, not too smart, not too dependable and more apt to confuse than help."

Resign yourself to turnover, sagging support. People do lose interest, move, get busy with personal priorities. Sometimes this upsets the relationship between the company and the community agency. It needn't. Work to identify drop-outs in advance, recruit replacements if you can, and keep the agency using your volunteers appraised of pending change. Sometimes, there are no takers for loaned executive programs; Weyerhauser, headquartered in Tacoma, Washington had a leave program for 2 years, with no takers. It's possible that fear of loss of position and seniority may contribute, and no company is invulnerable to this problem.

Avoid overlap. When several companies in the same city develop volunteer programs, duplication of effort and even competition for community slots can result. Firms can minimize the possibility by forming a coordinating group like CVCC. Minimize it further by forming, and using, an information network between and among traditional social service organizations, corporations, community groups and volunteer specialists.

Look closely at risks. Does your company's group insurance policy cover employees while they're off doing volunteer work? Probably not; better check. What about liability coverage for groups you invite to come to the firm? Check again. These kinds of questions don't need to cause problems, but the time to raise them internally is before a crisis, not after.

Be prepared for success. If everything works well, and hundreds of enthusiastic corporate employees seek out a volunteer program and its clearinghouse services, you could be overwhelmed. Make sure a company that talks about, encourages a volunteer effort, is prepared to back it — with salaries, facilities, funds.