

## ABSTRACT

*Symbiotic partnerships between corporate and nonprofit organizations can strengthen volunteer programs. However, since little systematic research has been conducted, better information is needed regarding the advantages, limitations, problems, types of relationships, and benefits of such partnerships.*

*Selected volunteer programs in three large corporations and four nonprofit organizations in Washington State were studied to learn more about how these two types of organizations might work together for their mutual benefit. The results show great potential for collaborative efforts, several potential pitfalls, and a need for more in-depth research and innovative partnering programs.*

# Building Symbiotic Partnerships Between Corporate and Nonprofit Volunteer Programs

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## NATURE OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

Many corporate volunteer programs exist on a very different operational level than do volunteer programs in nonprofit agencies. Whereas nonprofit agency programs are normally structured as "demand" operations, bringing resources in, corporate volunteer programs are usually the suppliers of personnel and funding to volunteer programs outside the corporation. While some corporations initiate and maintain community-directed projects on their own, these are the exception rather than the rule. As Ronald Speed, Director of Corporate and Community Responsibility at Honeywell, Inc., stated:

*Rather than building the company's own capability, we believe we should help build the community's capability and then use it. In the majority of cases, our managers acknowledge the logic of taking advantage of community services. It is better, for example, to have a transportation system that works than to resort to van-pooling; better to have community child care than in-plant child care centers; better to have good-for-the-handicapped training pro-*

*grams at community centers than to create them from scratch (Speed, 1984, p. 49).*

There are several reasons why corporations are involved with volunteer programs including: (1) to enact and maintain a commitment to public interest in areas that benefit both the community and the corporation; (2) to help promote the company's business activities; (3) as part of public relations programs; (4) to maintain effective representation in principal community organizations; (5) to inspire team building, better personnel relationships, and higher productivity within the company; (6) to improve the company image, attracting top people to the company; (7) to allow employees to build new skills, establish new relationships, and feel more responsible for their paid positions; (8) to reward employees for a job well done by allowing them release time from their regular duties; and (9) to involve company retirees as follow-up, encouragement, appreciation, and recognition of their years with the company.

The voluntary sector consists of a vast and diversified collection of organiza-

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tions. Nonprofit organizations (the voluntary sector) are set apart from the two other major types of organizations in American society, government (the public sector) and business (the private sector), by the fact that they are privately controlled, do not pay dividends, have trustees who are volunteers, and turn profits back into their programs. If the primary goal of such an agency is not based on profit, then, in a broad sense, a nonprofit agency may be viewed as a collective vehicle in which people voluntarily pursue goals together that are not primarily remunerative and that provide services to society. Using this as a definition, a nonprofit organization may be seen as simply a collective form of voluntary action (Salamon and Abramson, 1982). Nonprofit agencies use charitable resources to impact a diversity of social, political, economic, and cultural objectives.

#### PROBLEM

The major source of funds for many nonprofit agencies is the government (Urban Institute, 1983). The nonprofit sector has seen increased needs but because of budget cuts has experienced reduced revenue from governmental sources in recent years. Although increased private giving has offset budget reductions to a large extent, funding for nonprofits remains a concern.

As nonprofit agencies continue their need for funding and as more corporations become aware of their community responsibility, profit and nonprofit organizations are recognizing mutual benefits through program partnerships (Graham, 1983). Unfortunately, program development in both types of organizations is rarely designed to facilitate cooperative relationships. Volunteer program guidelines have rarely been concerned with partnering and generally relate to developing new programs and maintaining existing efforts. However, as corporate volunteer programs become recognized as possible sources of alleviation from governmental and other financial restrictions, and as nonprofit agencies become recognized as potential vehicles for corporate-community good will, more information about volunteer programs is

being requested from both the public and private sectors.

It is apparent that there is a need in today's society to create volunteer programs that can easily be aligned into partnerships that combine the structure and outward-reaching communication systems of many nonprofit agencies with the internally-supported and financially-assisted volunteer programs of corporations. However, there is a lack of accurate data regarding the advantages, limitations, and appropriate relationships associated with partnering.

#### PURPOSE

Because of the paucity of studies which examine the potential relationships between corporate and nonprofit volunteer programs, this study was conducted to identify factors important to successful partnering. These factors can provide a basis for further study and/or act as guideposts for those contemplating developing partnering relationships between nonprofit and corporate volunteer programs.

#### PROCEDURES

Because the purpose was to identify factors and questions, rather than to test theory or provide statistics which could be generalized to a larger population, the study relied on qualitative and naturalistic methodologies (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Volunteer programs with diverse programs and goals were selected for study. Three large corporations in Washington State were examined: Rainier Bank; Chevron, USA, Inc.; and Honeywell Inc. In total, these corporations employ about 7,600 people. About 20% of these, or 1,520, are active volunteers. Four nonprofit volunteer programs were studied: the Washington State University 4-H program, the Washington State University Art Museum, Whitman County (Washington) Crisis Clinic, and the United Way.

Supervisors of volunteer programs in each of these organizations were selected based on their interest and commitment to the project. They were first contacted by phone or in person to ensure their understanding of the goals, clarify their time commitment, and reassure them of

confidentiality. A questionnaire with 32 open-ended questions was mailed to each supervisor followed by a telephone interview after supervisors had a chance to think about the questionnaire items. This procedure allowed for interaction and clarification of perceptions.

While these procedures do not ensure representative responses generalizable to a larger population of volunteer supervisors, they do provide us with contrasting views which raise important questions—the goal of this study. The use of a questionnaire and follow-up interviews do give us confidence that respondents' views were accurately recorded. The questions raised by analyzing and comparing their responses should be useful starting points for others interested in this topic.

Questionnaire development was based on volunteerism literature and included questions grouped in five categories: (1) volunteer recruitment and selection; (2) volunteer needs and expectations; (3) volunteer activities; (4) financial considerations; and (5) program administration. The questionnaire was developed and refined through a series of reviews by a research committee.

Data collected from study respondents and analysis of research/writings related to collaborative corporate/nonprofit volunteer programs were combined to identify important factors and questions.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings and conclusions are presented in five sections related to those used in developing the questionnaire.

### *Volunteer Recruitment and Selection*

In the corporate and nonprofit organizations we studied, recruitment and selection were not distinctly separated. There was a tendency by organizations to accept anyone who volunteered to take a job. While this is a problem common to many volunteer organizations, it is perhaps more critical when attempting to establish partnering relationships because poor volunteer placement can threaten the partnership.

The nonprofit organizations studied relied primarily on paid advertisements and solicitation of potential volunteers by active staff. One nonprofit organization,

an art museum, relied on a second party external to the organization for its recruiting. This "Friends" group's recruiting methods included contacting the local chamber of commerce and sending fliers to past members.

On the other hand, corporations did little to inform employees about opportunities to volunteer in nonprofit agencies other than irregular dissemination of information about available volunteer positions which was supplied by the nonprofits. For certain volunteer positions such as volunteer board member or chair positions, employees were selected individually by the volunteer program supervisor or other company supervisors. These were usually executive level employees who were chosen through informal channels.

Supervisors of corporate volunteer programs felt that their employees were motivated to volunteer by three major factors: (1) advancement of their careers, (2) skill building, and (3) corporate sponsorship for nonprofit activities. The last factor implies that employees are more apt to volunteer when the corporation sponsors nonprofit activities.

Our data related to recruitment and selection suggest the following:

1. Since nonprofits themselves are the primary source of data about volunteer positions available, they need to be sure corporate employees get specific up-to-date information.

2. Nonprofit and corporate representatives need to better understand each others' needs related to volunteer programs.

3. Nonprofit volunteer programs need to target corporate employees when advertising positions.

4. Positions need to be developed with the limitations and potentials of corporate volunteers in mind (*i.e.*, work hours, available time commitments, skills and interests).

5. Successful volunteer programs require careful placement of volunteers so selection processes must be developed through cooperative efforts of corporate and nonprofit organizations.

6. Consideration should be given to the utilization of a central recruiting office

which could act as a broker to provide job descriptions, identify volunteer qualifications, and facilitate partnership development.

7. Nonprofit volunteer organizations would be well served by spending time and energy to obtain corporate sponsorship of activities.

### *Volunteer Needs*

Once volunteers are recruited and selected, their needs must be met in order to provide a satisfactory experience and retain them as volunteers. Although volunteer turnover rates were not specifically collected in this study, all supervisors interviewed considered them to be high. Corporate supervisors believed turnovers were primarily due to volunteer dissatisfaction with job duties or the nonprofit agency programs in general. They felt this was caused by lack of adequate supervision or support from the nonprofit agency and lack of fulfillment of volunteer expectations. Corporate volunteer supervisors suggested the following: (1) more supervision from the nonprofit agency staff; (2) better nonprofit volunteer program structure; and (3) evening work hours for volunteers to avoid conflict with the volunteer employees' regular work hours.

Supervisors in nonprofit agencies tended to think turnovers were caused by relocation, lack of time to participate, change of job, *etc.*—causes generally outside their control.

Another factor related to meeting volunteer needs was the use of written job descriptions. Written job descriptions were provided by nonprofit organizations for some positions. On occasion, corporations had job descriptions available to potential employee volunteers but not on a regular basis.

Information related to volunteer needs as supplied by the supervisors studied suggest the following:

1. There is a need to conduct further study to determine whether the disagreement about volunteer turnovers between corporate and nonprofit supervisors holds true in broader studies and to determine why these two groups of supervisors hold differing views.

2. Job descriptions for volunteer positions should be available. They are essential for recruitment, selection, communication with and retention of volunteers.

### *Volunteer Activities*

In examining partnering potential of corporate and nonprofit agencies, it is important to examine the types of activities each is involved with and the level of involvement. As expected, the nonprofit agencies studied were very different in the types of volunteer activities offered. Nonprofit volunteer activities ranged from cleaning and clerical work to fundraising, consulting, and teaching. The corporations studied involved volunteers in a narrower range of activities. This selectiveness seemed to be related to the desire by corporations to support only those programs with broad appeal and which promoted the corporation's image.

In comparing the corporate and nonprofit agencies in our study, two factors became apparent:

1. There is a need to match corporate and nonprofit agencies based on goals and activities. For example, oil and petroleum industries might be more willing to support transportation for the handicapped while print/journalism and book industries might sponsor literacy programs.

2. Nonprofit volunteer agencies need to be selective in whom they seek to partner with, as well as the volunteer activities for which they seek help.

### *Financial Considerations*

The nature of the organizational funding varied with the agency and proved to be complex in certain nonprofit organizations. The number of volunteers directly affected funding in some nonprofit agencies. This was especially important in those organizations where the funding was not primarily a governmental function. In one nonprofit agency, the number of volunteers (or hours volunteered) paralleled the amount of money the agency could write into its budget and request from support sources; in other words, the greater the number of volunteer hours, the larger the funding. Nonprofit agencies using the corporate volun-

teer extensively felt they had greater access to the corporate dollar.

During periods of business decline, corporate employee participation was more severely affected than the financial assistance that could be offered to nonprofit agencies. This was attributed to increased staff workloads derived from personnel cutbacks. Financial support of volunteer programs seemed to remain fairly constant even through business fluctuation because it was considered to be a source of corporate-community good will as well as good advertisement to the local community.

Two major factors seem important in light of these data:

1. Nonprofit volunteer organizations need to be wary of relying totally on corporate employee volunteers, since this source could decrease during financial downturns for the corporation.

2. Since financial support from corporations appears to be fairly stable even during business downturns, nonprofits would be well advised to utilize corporate volunteers to help them tap into corporate financial support.

#### *Program Administration*

Both corporate and nonprofit organizations studied had basic philosophies which included service objectives. Obviously this was the primary objective for the nonprofit volunteer organizations while it was one of many objectives for corporations. These nonprofit organizations relied heavily on volunteers. The volunteer supervisors of the four nonprofit organizations studied estimated that between 50 percent and 95 percent of their services were available because of volunteer support. Corporations, on the other hand, placed less emphasis on providing volunteers than on financial donations. Carrying out their commitment to community service and the emphasis on it can differ widely between these two types of organizations. This difference in emphasis creates perhaps the greatest obstacle to partnership programs.

Allen (1980) has noted, and the supervisors surveyed agreed, that a key to corporate commitment to volunteer programs rests with the chief executive officer (CEO). Allen believes that a primary

source of motivation for corporate employees to volunteer is a positive attitude by their superiors or supervisors and the overall corporation itself. In larger corporations, the CEO is not normally the person directly responsible for volunteer activities, but often has a large influence on employee perception of volunteerism in nonprofit organizations because of his/her position and authority.

In the corporations surveyed, the community/public service activities were structured into long chains of command. The CEOs at the top of these chains were rarely found to be active in direct participation in volunteer activities. They instead acted as sponsors in the support and encouragement of volunteerism by corporate employees. Therefore, a primary motivation for corporate employees to volunteer was the approval of and recognition by their superiors in the sponsoring corporate workplace.

Our data related to administrative structures and the influence of top administrators suggest the following:

1. While there are differences in goals, emphases, and administrative structures, there appears to be enough common ground to establish corporate/nonprofit volunteer partnerships.

2. Differences in philosophies and goals of potential partners need to be clearly delineated before attempting to establish a partnering relationship.

3. More research needs to be done to better understand corporate views of volunteer program administrative structures, their impact on volunteer programs, and the role of CEOs and other corporate administrators in promoting and overseeing volunteer programs.

#### SUMMARY

Our study of a relatively small number of corporate and nonprofit volunteer programs was designed to identify the factors important to successful partnering. While it provides few answers generalizable to other programs, it raises a number of questions and factors to consider in establishing partnerships. While many questions remain about how to initiate, carry out, and monitor such programs effectively, there do not seem to be any insurmountable barriers. It appears that

time spent by volunteer administrators in developing partnering programs could be highly productive.

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