

# Culturally Diverse Volunteers

by  
Loretta Gutierrez Nestor

As early as 2000, cross-cultural people will be the majority in 53 of America's 100 largest cities and will comprise 29% of the workforce. That's significant for all of us as we plan the future of volunteerism.

And that is only the beginning. Given today's immigration and birth rates, by the turn of the century, one of every three Americans will be Latino, African American, Asian / Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern.

In the more distant future, around 2030, people of color will make up more than half of the American population.

The task of coping with these changes will be one of the key issues for volunteer administrators in the 1990s. It will be far from complete as the new century dawns.

"White males, thought of only a generation ago as the mainstays of the economy, will comprise only 15% of the net additions to the labor force by 2000," says *Workforce 2000*, a report prepared by the Hudson Institute for the US Department of Labor. The rest will be American-born white females, immigrants, and a rich multicultural mix.

## A paradigm shift

Little by little, senior executives and volunteer leaders across America are recognizing that these vast demographic changes demand a paradigm shift, a new way of running things - an approach often called 'managing diversity.' This means recognizing that diversity is already a fact of life, learning to understand 'culturally different' paid and volunteer staff and creating an environment in which they will flourish.

Although race and gender issues are given top priority when managing diversity, the concept of valuing diversity applies equally to issues of religious and regional differences, class, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, and lifestyle. Many also occur across educational lines, leaders

## Diversity within diversity

Diversity is valuable to every paid and volunteer staff member of your organization.

Such diversity supports other goals of the organization by exposing volunteers to new issues, ideas, information, and cultures.

Diversity creates opportunities for character development of paid and volunteer staff by teaching tolerance and respect for other people and by encouraging concern for racial and social equity.

A culturally diverse organization that values and nurtures people from all backgrounds is worthy of active participation.

versus worker bees, or paid versus volunteer staff.

*Culture* is a word that can be applied to any group. There certainly are regional, professional, class and lifestyle cultures. Women are socialized differently from the way men are. Even people with disabilities have a culture with its *do's* and *don'ts*.

However, as we discuss diversity here, it will related specifically to people from racial and ethnic groups. The terms used to designate a racial or ethnic group in this article are based on popular usage rather than terms used by the US Government in most cases. However, other terms may be more acceptable in your community. For example, 'African-American' may be preferred over 'Black,' 'Latino' over 'Hispanic,' or 'people of color' instead of 'minorities.' Some of the terms here may not be acceptable in your community and must be adapted so that they are. Furthermore, because preferences may change as populations evolve, these terms should be evaluated regularly.

Many organizations lose good people because they fail to teach them the rules. But now the rules may be changing, as different players enter the game. With the growing diversity of the American work force, organizations are beginning to reassess recruitment and management policies, and are designing approaches to accommodate cultural differences among paid and volunteer staff.



## Managing diversity

Managing diversity approaches paid and volunteer staff differences not from the legal or moral standpoint, but from a practical perspective because it makes good business sense.

Valuing diversity programs often include presentations on current and projected demographic realities and their implications for labor, productivity, service delivery or profits. The shrinking volunteer pool means more competition for existing talent, and that in turn requires a greater commitment by managers and volunteer leaders to recruiting, developing, and retaining paid and volunteer staff of all kinds.

*Managing diversity is much more than EEO regulations. Rather, it is part of the corporate strategic plan. We must go beyond numbers crunching and begin to value diversity.*

Managing diversity can help cut costs and increase productivity by tapping and developing seriously underused human resources. Also, employee and volunteer turnover can be reduced by recruitment, hiring, and promotion policy based on merit.

Inefficient allocation of human resources in the short-run may occur when individuals are not recruited, assigned, or promoted to the position for which they are best qualified. In the long run, paid and volunteer staff may become convinced that they will not attain a desirable position, and lose hope of attaining the education or training necessary for advancement. As people quit their 'dead-end' jobs, the organization and the individual both lose when human resources are underused.

Changing the attitudes and assumptions that prevail within an organization is far from easy.

## Change is painful

Many times we can only hope to change behaviors rather than deep-seated attitudes. We must continuously remind ourselves that what we are doing is new, and that it may be frightening for those who prefer the status quo, or who fear that they are not ready to face the difficult and sometimes threatening issues raised by diversity. But we know that such resistance is no excuse for avoiding change.

Non-profit organizations that deliver essential health and human services have little hope of continued success unless they mirror the diversity of their community. The message is clear. Diversity can be a revitalizing force for carrying your organization into the twenty-first century. And you personally can be the catalyst to make that happen.



## Getting started

You must be the visionary who takes the first step.

To begin the process of managing for volunteer diversity:

- Have active top management and board support (not just lip service).
- Determine why you are doing this. Is there a need in the community not being met? Do the changing demographics demand it? What is the benefit to the community? To your organization?
- Be prepared for resistance – 'change is painful.'
- If you're in a city with a high percentage of a specific culturally diverse group, you are probably not alone in your endeavors. Collaborate with other agencies, community-based organizations, and universities. No need to start from scratch. But if you are the first, serve as a forum for bringing other groups together.

### Policy Statements on Diversity

The first step is broadcasting a policy statement which tells the view of the organization's top leadership.

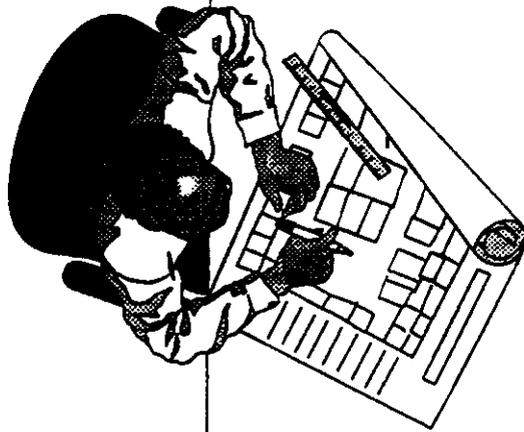
In order for policy statements to be effective, they should serve the following functions:

1. Express the organization's commitment to the goal of cultural diversity;
2. Reflect realistic and measurable objectives; and
3. Be communicated in a way that leaves no doubt at any level of corporate management about the organization's intentions.

As you continue diversification, follow these specific steps:

- ✓ Don't wait for the 'right' time. The time is *now!*
- ✓ Involve people of color now – they can *help* you find solutions. Their involvement will help make the issue real instead of conceptual.
- ✓ Continue the active support and involvement of board and management.
- ✓ Anticipate benefits and problems early.
- ✓ Include current paid and volunteer staff from the beginning to minimize fears and maximize commitment. You need their help for placement, training, and supervision.

- ✓ Develop action plans and calendars of events.
- ✓ Use media sources that cater to specific ethnic groups as well as the mainstream media. Once you begin and people of color feel welcome, word of mouth travels fast. They have just been waiting for the invitation. Prepare for a positive response. Be prepared with culturally sensitive interviewers. If you need be, prepare applications in appropriate languages.



- ✓ Pick some strong and dedicated leaders from your target community as early as possible to help you get things organized.
- ✓ Call a town meeting in their community (not in your building if it's not in the area you're trying to reach). Introduce your organization's services, tell them your challenge (of wanting volunteers to represent the community being served), and ask them to help you find solutions, become involved.
- ✓ Have a structure in mind for subcommittees and fill positions quickly; people will want to be involved.

- ✓ Be aware that a new program will take a lot of your time and some more (for phones, postage, and space, etc.)
- ✓ Keep management informed of the committee's progress and accomplishments.
- ✓ Develop your resources – you're going to need all the help you can get:
  - a strong core group and leader
  - bilingual paid and volunteer staff
  - representatives from other culturally diverse groups
  - others from your organization who are also committed to diversifying your paid and volunteer workforce.
- ✓ Determine what culturally relevant materials you already have. Learn what other agencies, corporations, or churches have that you can use to help your program succeed.

## Taking precautions

And remember to take precautions:

- ✗ Your procedures and activities may differ from those in other people's countries. Make sure recent immigrants are properly oriented and trained early to stem misconceptions and misunderstandings.
- ✗ Be sensitive to cultural differences. 'Minorities' born in the United States may perceive things very differently from those born in other countries.
- ✗ Remain neutral. Many will come from politically volatile homelands.



## Dealing with change

**X** Large numbers of culturally different people suddenly descending upon once familiar territory may be extremely stressful to other paid and volunteer staff who are used to the status quo. Help them to work through this by offering cultural sensitivity training.

**X** Meaningful change requires support from top volunteers and management. Commitment is needed from those whom the change will affect – both the newcomer and those already working within the organization.

**X** Somehow, you will need to keep interest high but expectations realistic during the developmental stage.

**X** The new group is anxious to work and be trained, but lack of translated materials may demand that you move more slowly than these new volunteers would like.

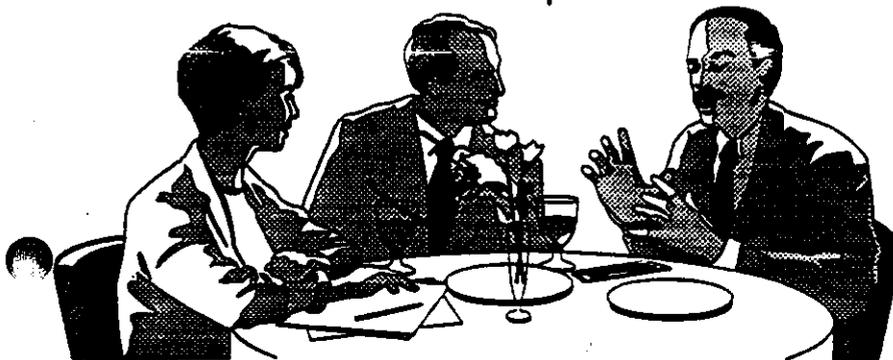
For most people, change is threatening. It is the old and familiar that is trusted; the novel and unknown that arouses alarm. "No one discovers a new world without forsaking an old world," John Dewey once wrote. "To change is to give up familiar things, to feel uncomfortable and force to assume responsibility for a new organization or experience. The degree to which fear is aroused is usually proportional to the extent the future is placed in question." Two-way communication can help alleviate the fear of the unknown and unfamiliar.

D.C. Barlund said understanding comes when there is a willingness to become involved with other persons. It means to treat them as people, not as objects, to see them as individuals, not as numbers. It is to regard them as a value in themselves, rather than a means to some other value. It is to prize their experience and their needs. Most of all, it is to consider and explore their feelings.

Since it is the loss of self esteem that people fear most, such respect can do much to increase the

## Ten Tips to Promote Cultural Diversity

1. Specifically recruit people of color to be selected to serve on the board of directors and special committees as well as grassroots volunteer work.
2. Sponsor at least one meeting each year devoted to increasing paid and volunteer staff knowledge, skill, and sensitivity about cultural and ethnic differences.
3. Contact by letter and in person local culturally diverse organizations to encourage them to refer to your organization any of their members who are interested in helping promote plurality in your organization.
4. Use your newsletter to publicize your diversity policy and to publicize your outreach success stories.
5. Increase the number of minority speakers at your organizational meetings, especially your major conferences.
6. Attend conferences, meetings, and events sponsored by culturally diverse organizations.
7. Eliminate from all printed material any discriminatory statements, pictures or references. Provide guidelines on how to avoid making discriminatory statements.
8. Write job descriptions for elected officer and key committee positions to ensure that all members are aware of the duties and qualification requirements. Distribute these descriptions to all interested people of color.
9. Put culturally diverse people and groups on your mailing list.
10. Appoint at least one person in your organization, paid or volunteer, to manage the process of increasing cultural diversity.



## Valuing diversity



motivation for positive interaction and success.

Non-white volunteers in a predominantly white organization need ladders with every rung in place to grow within the organization. Agencies need to work at becoming closer to multicultural communities. And these groups need to know that their participation is wanted. It is vital that the agency establish itself as a strong presence in the life of the person of color at the very young age, so that he or she becomes comfortable with the organization. To accomplish this task, activities should be conducted at grade schools, junior high schools, and community centers that are racially and ethnically diverse. If possible, volunteer recruiters for these groups should be bilingual, bicultural, and familiar with the local ethnic community, including their schools, churches, and community centers.

Another consideration related to people of color concerns the recent immigrant to the United States. He or she may expect a very different organization than the one you represent. For example, in Lebanon the Red Cross runs the ambulance service and has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this work during the country's civil war. A Lebanese who has recently arrived in the United States may expect to volunteer as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in his new community, or may not want to volunteer because he does not wish to be an ambulance driver. Volunteer recruiters must therefore keep in mind the different customs of the volunteers throughout the world.

Volunteer recruiters must also consider the differences within targeted multicultural communities. For example, many members of ethnic groups have been in the United States for a few generations and thus know about some American traditions. But other members may have recently arrived in this country and are therefore unfamiliar with American traditions. Another difference that must be accounted for is the immigrant's country of origin. 'Asians and Pacific Islanders' is a general category that does not define a specific culture. A person in that category may be Japanese, Japanese-American, Chinese, Chinese-American, Vietnamese, and so on. Recruiters for a multicultural population must recognize that it includes people from different countries with different traditions.

## Maintaining the commitment

As people of color become more aware of your organization, you can start asking for support through volunteering. Such an appeal is easier once the organization has become more connected with the community it serves. Volunteer appeals for people of color will be strengthened if your organization:

- ✓ States publicly that having a culturally diverse work force is a top priority.
- ✓ Recruits more people of color, and places them in both paid and volunteer leadership positions.
- ✓ Ensures a welcoming spirit among current paid and volunteer staff for people of color. Special training can support this goal.



## Making the message real

To successfully recruit and retain a culturally diverse work force, the organization needs to recognize three important points:

- The 'quality' of the volunteer's environment is critical to his or her success.
- The success of volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds greatly affects the ability of the organization to attract more people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Since white staff often control the quality of the environment for non-white volunteers, they should be sensitive to cultural differences.



The materials utilized in this chapter are taken from *Volunteer Recruitment Strategies*, ARC 3318, American Red Cross, November 1990.

An effective way to recruit people from culturally diverse backgrounds is to represent a broad mix of cultures in your volunteer recruitment materials. However, these materials should not convey any 'tokenism' or pandering to any particular group. People from culturally diverse backgrounds need to know that the messages are not addressed exclusively to them. They need to see that other

people besides themselves are concerned with building a culturally diverse organization. Furthermore, whites need to know that the institution values the contribution of people of color – that they do belong as part of the team.