



Valuing Diversity

By Loretta Gutierrez Nestor and Carl Fillichio

Nonwhite volunteers in a predominantly white organization need ladders with every rung in place to grow within the organization. It is vital that the agency establish itself as a strong presence in the life of a person of color at a 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 recently has 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 also must 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 arrived only recently in this country and therefore are unfamiliar with American traditions.

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Another difference that must be accounted for is the immigrant's country of origin. "Asians and Pacific Islanders" is a general category that really 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 unit, you can start asking for support through volunteering. Such an appeal is easier once the unit has become more connected with the community it serves. Volunteer appeals for people of color will be strengthened if your unit

1. states publicly that having a culturally diverse workforce is a top priority;
2. recruits more people of color, and places them in both paid and volunteer leadership positions;
3. 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 recruit and retain a culturally diverse workforce successfully, the organization needs to recognize three important points:

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

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.



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.

