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"Full Circle" Volunteering

One of the ways that Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is making its commitment to the Presidents' Summit is to encourage their adult/child matches to participate together in some form of community service. This is a "full circle" concept: while the adult volunteer is giving meaningful time to the youngster, that young person develops the self-esteem and connection to community that allows him or her to, in turn, be of help to someone else. And, since such volunteering can be fun, the experience becomes a great way for the Little and Big to spend time together--strengthening their own relationship and therefore being of even greater value to the child.

This concept is totally win-win. Interestingly, the idea surfaced as early as the mid-1970's during a series of staff development sessions BB/BSA held around the country. But obviously the time is now right for the idea to blossom. More importantly, does this "doubling up" of service effort hold potential for other organizations as well?

The old concept of charity as noblesse oblige has long been discredited. Certainly those with wealth or talent should feel an obligation to assist others. But the idea that one person "who has so much" gives to another "who has so little" smacks of paternalism and condescension. In the volunteer field today, we speak instead of volunteering as an "exchange," in which both the giver and the recipient benefit in some way.

With so much to do to improve our world, it seems right to make the fullest use of time and effort. Frequently this means selecting strategies that accomplish more than one thing at a time. So, if mentoring partners can help others while developing their own relationships, great! The nursing home that offers an after-school homework center to the nearby elementary school can have a double agenda: help the kids by providing a structured and pleasurable activity for the active older residents.

In some ways, the best student service-learning projects already demonstrate this "doubling up" strategy. Initiated by the goal of giving students the chance to apply and test their classroom learning, success occurs when this educational process also provides genuine service to others. Beyond some of the more common student community service assignments, just about every subject can have a practical application that contributes something to others. One example seen at a Pennsylvania service-learning conference was an art class project with both an anti-litter and a public education point. The class painted municipal trash cans with pictures representing various styles of art (Impressionist, Cubist, etc.), along with a brief text

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explanation. While the students studied each style and used their talent to decorate the receptacles, the community ended up with a widespread art exhibit and eye-catching reminders to dispose of litter the right way.

Are you in an organization that can meet its own goals and also pass along service to others? Creative thinking can lead to endless possibilities. For example, any program serving people with disabilities can create a "talent bank" of the skills and interests of their clients (consumers) and publicize it to agencies in town. Facilitating volunteering by differently-abled people offers true service, demonstrates the contributions this population can make, and gives the new volunteers all the learning and self-satisfaction benefits other volunteers derive.

Day care centers and all agencies serving youth of any age should find ways for the children to participate in the life of the community. Projects can be incorporated on-site, such as decorating bags for homebound delivered meals, or direct service, such as visiting a residential facility of some sort. Note that this can become an expanding chain of service linking to service. The "visit" to the senior center can also become an audiotaped oral history opportunity, in which the seniors talk to the children about, say, toys and games in their youth. The chain goes on with the gift of the audiotapes to the local library, where the antique toy collector association can be asked to create a public display of items mentioned in the tapes. Get the idea?

This type of interconnected thinking can only happen if the right questions are asked in the planning process:

1. Can we see our clients as a source of service to others and not just as people needy for the services of others?
2. What skills and talents do we have to offer?
3. What activities would be useful to our clients--that we might even have planned anyway--to which we might add an outward-looking twist?
4. With whom might we partner for mutual-benefit exchange?
5. Might there be yet a third or more parties that could be involved at some point?

Don't forget client self-help as a strategy. Instead of always looking to bring in outside volunteers to help clients, consider if your entire service might not be strengthened if clients were empowered and enabled to help each other. This means breaking down some current models of service, such as separated case loads or confidentiality guarded by the professionals without asking the clients if

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they care. It means thinking about the system as one of surplus rather than scarcity: hundreds of clients also means hundreds of potential ideas, skills, and busy hands. If you are intrigued by the possibility of engaging clients in their own services, but feel that support and leadership might be needed, recruit volunteers to be facilitators of rather than people who "do for" your participants.

Colonial schools and the Laubach literacy movement used the approach of "each one, teach one." Even with a little knowledge, a new learner could teach an even newer student. And what happened? They found that, by teaching someone else, the original student reinforced his or her own learning. The full circle of service was proven.

The full circle agenda is not limited to human services and education. Cultural arts organizations might recruit the assistance of a nearby juvenile detention facility to help set up and clean up special events. In exchange, the teenagers are consciously introduced to the arts and, later, help plan an exhibit of their favorite items in the collection (with notes written in English class explaining their choices). This then leads to outreach to the local high schools to see the exhibit--meeting the continuing goal of audience diversity for the cultural institution.

This type of interconnected planning can be supported by the Volunteer Center, any consortium of organizations, or the Mayor's office. Connections can be made between nonprofits, government, all-volunteer associations, and even corporations. In fact, the only hope for welfare reform will be "full circle" thinking. How can people dependent on public assistance be helped to find jobs, supported on the job, buddy with one another, and later pass on their experiences to newer job holders? Why develop four or more different projects to bake each piece of the pie? Can't the work be coordinated to meet several objectives at once? We can't afford not to try.

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