As I See It

Ethics for Volunteer Administrators

It is time to be more comfortable in examining what is right or wrong with our actions and explore how our actions lead to good or bad outcomes.

By Mary A. Culp

One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong. Only through the bringing together of the head and the heart, intelligence and goodness, shall man rise to a fulfillment of his true nature.

—*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

During the last 15 years, those of us who are leaders in the volunteer world have paid attention to this warning. We have been working to get our heads on right, and we have been succeeding. We have become professional managers who have learned the management language, and we are very pleased with our new ability to use management by objectives and to market our programs. We have taken our lead from corporate managers who have joined our boards. They have taught us about long-range planning, effective supervision and program evaluation.

Now corporations are beginning to discuss ethics. They are concerned that America is no longer the biggest and best in business or international economic competition. We are no longer number one. Critics are suggesting that the problem is not management as such, but management decisions that have to do with ethics. Perhaps we nonprofit professionals can take the corporate lead again. It is time to be more comfortable in examining what is right or wrong with our actions and explore how our actions lead to good or bad outcomes.

In the past, we have taken for granted that the heart is totally right. Perhaps we need to scrutinize our assumptions about goodness. As we are in an international arena economically, perhaps we might also ask, "Is volunteering American or international? Is goodness uniquely American or is it a human concern?"

Last fall I visited Thailand on the way to the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) Conference in Australia. The group with whom I traveled arranged to meet with leaders at Bangkok's Family Planning Agency, which is strongly supported by government policy. On the bus ride to meet a volunteer in the city slum, I sat next to a woman who recruits volunteers to teach villagers about birth control in northern Thailand. This young woman, about 25 years of age, spoke English with a strong accent so I had to listen carefully to understand her. Because she had been raised in the North, she was familiar with the many dialects there and was well suited to her task.

I asked how she went about recruiting volunteers. She said, "Well, I go to the village, talk to the chief and tell him what I hope to do and get his support. Then I call a meeting and explain the program and what the volunteer will do. While we're meeting, I look at the people and develop some idea of who might be good. Then I talk individually to the one I would like to have and if the person agrees, I spend a whole day training him or her. Once a month I come back to make sure the material is understood, answer questions, explain again and thank them for the work being done."

I was startled to realize that she had just described planning, recruiting, interviewing, placing, training, supervising, evaluating and recognizing. In that small village where everyone knows each other, even though the procedures are the same as in America, the process is less complicated.

In addition, the Family Planning Agency follows the same principles of volunteer management as their American counterparts. It has taken a stand based on the Thai government goal to decrease the birth rate. The organization has clarified its purpose, declared its specific mission, set goals and objectives and developed a volunteer job description that the volunteer recruiter relays to the potential volunteer.

Then I asked, "For what reasons do people in the villages agree to volunteer?" She said, "They want to help."

Just as the principles of volunteer management are natural in that small community, each person there knows what it means to help. Here in the United States, almost all volunteers when questioned say they became involved because they want to help too. But just as we have needed to make clear the various elements of volunteer management in our more complex society, I think we need to better understand the elements of helping.

In 1984 I undertook a study to find out more about what it means to help. I went to a Nebraska town of 2,500 about 20 miles from where I spent my childhood and talked with people in the town whom others considered helpful. I found that these small town folk define "helping" as trading, cooperating, taking turns. Helping for them is an exchange; it means caring, being there and making a difference.

Encouraged by these findings and at the suggestion of a community leader, I applied for a foundation grant to carry out similar research in San Francisco. In contrast to the small Nebraska town, helping has a bad reputation in the city. Many people, both paid and volunteer, with whom I spoke did not wish to be thought of as helpers.

On reflection this perhaps is not surprising. How many times have we known a helper who gave inadequate, even damaging help: the teacher who passed a failing child, the nurse who forgot to give essential medication, the psychologist who did not diagnose the alcoholism of a client, the volunteer who causes trouble (does not follow directions or institutional rules, complains to the wrong person, does the

Continued on page 34

Mary Culp, a former executive director of the Volunteer Center in San Francisco, obtained funding in 1985 for the "Research Project on Helping." This editorial is based on her

As I See It

Continued from page 2

work poorly). We could all make long lists. We can add to the list the manager who lacks the skill to remove the troublesome helper.

The difficulties in helping center around four problems. To begin with, unlike the small town where there is an exchange on an equal basis, in the city there is the perceived helper—the strong one—and a helpee—the needy one. Many difficulties can arise from this unbalanced relationship: Help is given that is not wanted, help can be damaging or patronizing, or help can create an unhealthy dependence.

The second problem is based on fear. People do not know each other and are often afraid of getting hurt or doing harm.

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The third problem revolves around achievement. In our society we stress success, being in control, the bottom line. We like accomplishments that are neat and tidy. In contrast, the purpose of helping is to comfort, encourage and support. The helper is not in control. Helping is not tidy; it is serendipitous.

The fourth and most serious problem comes from the fact that when something is given without care, this kind of help is demeaning to the recipient. One senior said, "Agencies want us to be like birds in a nest. The more helpless we are the better they like it." Help given without compassion and care is *not* helpful.

What then is the essence of helping that really supports and does not detract? In interview after interview, when asked about helping, people talked in specifics about what they did: teaching a child, listening to parents, giving food, encouraging the discouraged or depressed. As helpers talked about the depth of their concern, their care became apparent. Some told me that helping *means* care, concern, being there. One man said, "I work with the homeless. They go to jail. 'Being there' is what I do."

Successful helpers—that is, those individuals others identify as helpful, also want to make a difference. Some aim for a specific change, some are interested in a process (being a teacher, a counselor), some want to change the system and some understand that "being there" for another person makes the difference.

Successful helpers talked about an exchange, but they do not mean an even exchange as in the small town. An exchange for them is more subtle. On the one hand, it has to do with being able to use one's unique talents and skills to further a cause in which one believes. On the other, it is finding that the person they set out to help has reservoirs of patience, courage, knowledge, strength, creativity that inspire and teach the helper. For successful helpers, the exchange occurs in making a meaningful connection with the person they are helping.

The volunteers who are motivated to help in Thailand see the starving children and understand the value of teaching people to have fewer children. They know that fewer births will mean that those who are born will be healthier. Because they live in the village, they can see the outcome of their effort and their expression of care is understood and returned.

In the small town people can also see and feel the difference they make in one another's lives and on the town's resources. They know that in times of trouble, one of their own will care and be there for them as well.

In the city it is harder to see the difference one's efforts make. The problems are usually complex and often involve a number of helpers. The projects themselves may be larger and sometimes require a team of helpers over a long period of time. The team may consist of people who are mobile so both the helpers and the structure may change many times before the project is completed.

In addition, it is harder to care about or to feel cared for when someone's values, culture or experience is very different from one's own. In our materialistic society volunteers sometimes think of the exchange in self-serving terms such as preparing for a future job or acquiring skills or contacts. A volunteer's participation may generate these benefits, but real exchange occurs at a different level. The exchange has to do with our relationship to humanity, history and goodness.

Although we have mastered the tools of good management in our complex situations, if our aim is to help, then ethical questions must guide us. How will we determine if our action is right or wrong? How will we know if the outcome will be good or bad?

When we consider the ethics of helping, we need to ask ourselves: What is the common good we care about? We find articles more frequently now discussing love, truth, justice, peace. If we mean to help, our projects require consideration in light of what is good for all society, not just our own program. There are three areas of questioning that can serve as guidelines.

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The first area of questioning has to do with care. What do we care about in the program? Is it possible to design a pattern of care so that each person in each job understands his or her role as part of a caring system? How can we express care to the client, to the fellow worker? How do honesty and care relate to one another? Can we teach caring in our training? How do we supervise in a caring way?

An article in *Time* (February 2, 1987) indicated that Americans have stopped caring about giving services. Have we stopped caring about service in our program? Our organizations need to discuss these questions in an open forum that allows individuals an opportunity to share their personal ways of caring.

The second area of questioning has to do with how we make a difference. What difference does this program, job, person, task make? We need to evaluate seriously how each job makes a difference both to the project's immediate objec-

tive and to its long-term goal. If the work the volunteer is asked to do does not clearly matter, then the work is not appropriate for a volunteer. In the same way, the paid staff needs to understand the importance of their work. Once I overheard an unhappy employee say to a fellow worker, "I wish I were a volunteer. If I were a volunteer, I'd quit!" This unhappiness can not but affect the employee's quality of caring.

In a series of workshops held in San Francisco for nonprofit workers, participants were asked to describe a childhood experience in which they had been a helper. Invariably they described a situation in which they felt they had made a difference. It was striking to note how many of these nonprofit workers, now years later, were using similar skills, serving similar clients or concerned with similar issues. Perhaps as children we instinctively know how to care, how to make a difference and how to put our unique talents to work.

When we use our individual skills and gifts for a greater good, we participate in an exchange. The last area of questioning has to do with this exchange. How does the one being helped really benefit? Is the benefit an honest reflection of the one being helped or a distorted assumption of the helper? How does the helper benefit? Is the helper aware of his or her own needs such that they don't interfere with the outcome?

If our programs are working toward a more just, honest, loving and peaceful society, the work that our helpers perform must support that end. Our programs must draw those who are interested in carrying out their tasks in the spirit of mutual exchange, the same spirit observed in the small town or primitive country.

At the conference in Australia, representatives from 22 countries shared ideas about volunteering. In my workshop on helping, everyone agreed that caring, making a difference and a meaningful exchange were key elements in their programs. The participants shared many ways to make these elements come alive for their volunteers.

One intriguing training program focused on helping the volunteers see that "being there" does make a difference. Murray Walker, an advertising executive from Sydney, told us that in marketing terms, nonprofits have a good story to sell. Unlike the constant clamor to get attention with new gimmicks and gadgets, our story is about unchanged humanity. It is in all of our genes to live, to take care of each other, to succeed.

In the 1980s, success is often characterized by wealth and importance. We are beginning to see, however, that many people include humanitarian issues such as love, justice, truth and peace in their definition of success. We are at a point in history when it is becoming increasingly clear that our actions influence an outcome for better or worse. It may be that each person doing what is ethical is the way to improve our situation and, in Martin Luther King's words, "rise to the fulfillment of our true nature."

As volunteer administrators, our job is to bring volunteers into a setting in which they can experience the meaning of real "helping." To accomplish this, we need not only the management skills we have learned so successfully in the last few years but also new skills that enable us to clarify the ethical issues involved in caring for one another. If we are able to incorporate both management skills and ethical concerns in our work, we will find our organizational roles much more significant and our jobs a lot more satisfying.

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