

The Benefits of a Global Perspective

Bonnie Koenig

INTRODUCTION

Two recent trends that are affecting society at large are also having an effect on the volunteer community. Being prepared for these changes as a volunteer administrator can help you to address them effectively and may even provide an increased depth to your program. These two trends are: 1) The increasing multiculturalism of the work force and 2) The increasing impact of the world on individual countries and our local activities.

Although the concept of multiculturalism (varied cultures within one country) is not completely the same as multinationalism (cultural distinctions as they arise around the world) there are many similarities in how one approaches a sensitivity to and appreciation of differing cultures. As the understanding of one can certainly enhance your ability to understand the other, in this short article (which is designed to raise some preliminary ideas that you may want to explore further vis-a-vis your own organization's volunteers), I will be addressing them together by focusing on common factors. I will refer to this as developing a "global perspective", or a looking outward into the world for perspectives that can enhance your local programs.

BENEFITS TO A MORE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

There are many benefits to incorporating a more global perspective into your own leadership approach. Some of these include:

1. Understanding and appreciating the strengths of different cultures can help you to better understand those who currently volunteer for your program who may have a different cultural background than you.
2. Understanding and appreciating different cultures can help to increase the quality of service you provide.
3. Reaching out to other cultures may expand your customer service base by making your programs more attractive or effective.
4. Reaching out to those from other cultures can expand the employee or other pool of people available to volunteer for your program.
5. Learning about and trying different approaches can supply a variety of options for resolving problems or challenges.
6. Lessons learned from colleagues in other countries dealing with similar challenges can provide additional

Bonnie Koenig is a consultant working with nonprofit organizations on developing their international programs. She has worked with local, national and international organizations in the areas of strategic planning, organizational and program development, staff training, membership expansion and international meeting planning. Prior to beginning her consulting practice she was the executive director of Zonta International, a women's service organization with members (doing volunteer activities) in 65 countries, and the Council of Great Lakes Governors which worked closely with the neighboring Canadian provinces. She is the author of the recent articles "Taking your organization international" and "The Fine Art of Meeting Planning" in *Nonprofit World* and "The Management of International NGOs" in *Transnational Associations*, as well as co-developer of a web site for the American Society of Association Executives to help associations find resources on international programs. Ms. Koenig has lived in Australia, France and Mauritania, West Africa, and has traveled to over 20 countries.

knowledge to strengthen your own programs.

Some considerations when developing an international program or building your own global perspectives skill set

To understand other cultures and build relationships of trust takes time and genuine commitment. The results of your efforts may only be seen in the long term, especially if you are dealing with individuals who are not familiar with the 'way of doing business' that is practiced in the U.S. You may find that they will not want to rush the relationship.

Concepts of volunteerism vary around the world. Do not assume that someone from another culture shares your concept of volunteerism. Take time to clarify what you are expecting of the volunteers who are part of your program and to understand their expectations.

You may want to learn more about other cultures/nationalities, especially of the volunteers you manage. Working with those of other nationalities or cultures is about more than just understanding another language. According to Varner and Beamer in their book *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, "In order to understand the significance of the message from someone, you need to understand the way that person looks at the world and the values that weigh heavily in that person's cultural backpack. You need to understand the meanings that are not put into words, the importance of the words that are used, and the way the message is organized and transmitted."

As a leader, incorporating varying approaches into your programs and/or management style can make those who may first be uncomfortable in your environment feel more at ease. Don't assume others know what you mean or you know what someone else means — when in doubt explain or ask questions. For example, in many Asian cultures it is polite to describe one's abilities in modest ways. If these words are taken at face value and not probed deeper, the skills and strengths of the individuals describing

themselves may remain hidden.

One of our best tools is often that of observation and being willing to try new things. Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations who was born in the African country of Ghana tells the story of coming to the United States as a student and experiencing his first Minnesota winter. At first he shunned something used by his fellow students to brave the cold: earmuffs. But he soon learned an important lesson. "Never walk into an environment and assume you understand it better than the people who live there," Annan later commented.

The story of Kofi Annan also illustrates another truism about being successful in dealing with a multicultural or multinational environment: try to understand first before rushing to judgement. We all have our own perspectives on how the world 'should' operate, and we are often quick to judge others by the only standards we may know. Take the time to understand why someone may be approaching a situation differently than you do — you may learn something helpful!

Remember that seemingly little things can make a difference — pronouncing names correctly or using appropriate titles or salutations. Many cultures are very formal — if you start off a new relationship formally you can always make it more informal when it seems appropriate to do so. But if you start off too informally it may make a bad first impression that may be hard to correct.

CULTURAL VARIANCES ON VOLUNTEERING

First endeavor to understand your own culture as a basis of comparison for understanding others. For example, the U.S. is a very individualistic nation — personal property, freedom of speech, and rights of minorities are all concepts to preserve the individual within a society. The individual is seen as the responsible party and individuals (working within organizations) also choose whether or not to vol-

unteer their time. Many other societies place a higher priority on the collective and are willing to give up some individual rights for the benefit of the collective. Where a country is on this spectrum will also affect the approach to volunteerism. A few examples:

- Many cultures have no direct, equivalent term for volunteering. Unpaid work may be bound up with notions of community obligation. A New Zealand Maori quote points out, "You know your place and contribute accordingly."
- In the Muslim world, volunteering is often linked to the religious and spiritual belief in charity. This often translates into compassion for the most vulnerable in society and an obligation to help.
- In Latin America, voluntary action has been a common feature since colonial times, often tied into the Catholic Church. The social welfare organization, funded through religious channels but administered by laymen, is often a common model.

For another perspective on volunteering, in Russia and other countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, one of the legacies of the decades of Soviet influence has been a perspective that the "state" provides. Thus in some areas, the concept of the need to volunteer to help the community is less common than in other communities. The role of nonprofit organizations and volunteerism is now often seen as important to enhancing the public discussion and participation that can encourage poorly functioning state institutions to become more responsive and accountable.

KEEPING TRACK OF INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

In addition to taking the time to get to know the cultural attributes that volunteers in your program may have, there are also advantages to keeping track of international trends. For example, there may be opportunities for your program

through partnering with a group outside of your home country or "lessons to be learned" from other countries that may help to strengthen your local program.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) recognized this idea and began a program called "Lessons Without Borders" to share some of the good ideas used in projects they funded in other countries back in the U.S. USAID and international development workers in general work in countries where resources are scarce, and therefore, they have had to develop creative, low cost ways to achieve their goals. Lessons Without Borders tries to remind those in the U.S. of what they already know, but sometimes forget, and reinforces the back to basics approach to solving problems.

Management Sciences for Health based in Boston is an example of an organization that has taken the USAID strategy of looking for ways to utilize the lessons it has learned in working overseas back in the health care community in the U.S. Its U.S. programs have focused in the following areas:

1. Utilizing the members of the local community to provide health care education, including using part-time community volunteers to supplement the work of full-time professionals.
2. Matching the work of health care professionals in developing countries to the needs of immigrant populations from the same country that now reside in the U.S. This has included sponsoring a series of conferences with speakers from other countries.
3. Strengthening management systems based on techniques that were developed overseas but that are applicable to U.S. community-based health care groups.

Some ideas on how to keep track of international trends:

- 1) One easy step is to learn about the cultures of the volunteers who are part of

- your program or the communities you serve. Consider holding a brown bag lunch discussion or other forums for the informal exchange of ideas.
2. Attend meetings with international attendees and seek out attendees from other countries. Ask questions about their work and how they approach similar challenges.
 3. Participate on listservs (electronic discussion groups) with international participants. The growth of e-mail and the Internet has made it possible for practitioners (such as volunteer administrators) around the world to communicate easily with each other. One example is a group on volunteer management CYBERVPM which can be found at <http://www.charitychannel.com>
 4. Look at websites that cover international themes in your interest area. The United Nations International Year of the Volunteer site at <http://www.iyv2001.org> would be an example.

Sustaining Civil Society: Strategies for Resource Mobilization, edited by Leslie M. Fox and S. Bruce Schearer, CIVICUS, 1997, Washington, D.C.

Varner, Iris and Beamer, Linda, 1995, *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*, Boston, Irwin Publications

CONCLUSION

First and foremost developing a global perspective is an attitude. It is an understanding that there are varying and equally valuable approaches to many different activities, including volunteering. Once you have this mindset, investing some time in keeping yourself informed as to the global perspectives around you will begin to come naturally and the rewards will become obvious.

REFERENCES

- "Alliance: Building Resources for the Community Worldwide", *Charities Aid Foundation*, Volume 5, #1, March 2000, and Volume 4, #2, June 1999, Kent, United Kingdom
- Culturegram series*, Brigham Young University, David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, Provo, Utah (4 page country write-ups available for over 100 countries).