

Corporate Community Involvement

Ellen Linsley, Ruth March, Marion Jeffery, and Richard C. Durkee

Companies must make decisions, at least once a year, about where and how to provide community support. This can range from minimal financial support only, to more complex involvement including employee volunteers. It is more and more clear that any involvement program must relate in some way directly to the company's bottom line.

Is the application of bottom line measurements to community affairs incompatible with responsible community involvement? It does not have to be.

"Corporate Community Involvement" can be defined in terms of the corporation, the community in which it operates, the consciousness of business managers in terms of the corporate/community relationship and the commitment of the corporation to move to use its resources appropriately.

Typically, the sponsorship of employee volunteer programs occurs because a corporation feels a deep sense of responsibility to its community. Far from being altruistic, the participating corporation is one that also sees a principal truth, i.e., promoting a social program in which employees act to meet human needs in the community not only benefits the recipients and the employees, but it is also good business.

That fact should color the thinking and dictate the methods by which any social service agency approaches corporate management. By focusing on the *duality* of corporate purpose (the meeting of cor-

porate social responsibility *and* the need to make a profit), the agency has a far better chance of persuading the corporation to sponsor a community involvement program.

TRENDS

When an agency reaches for the hand of a corporate sponsor for a long-term employee volunteer program, it is essential to understand the trends in business—not only what is happening, but why. These trends have not suddenly erupted in 1985. In some cases they began to emerge a decade ago, but they have become evident more recently. Those agencies who anticipate and understand these trends will be better equipped to develop a successful working relationship with a company.

Diminishing Resources, Personnel, and Money

A. *Resources.* The issue of allocation of resources is fundamental. If a company has dollars to spend on research and operations or on social responsibility, the pragmatic company will opt for research and operations. The agency must sell the company not on the basis of being socially responsible. Selling must be on the basis of affecting a bottom line issue; showing how such community involvement can contribute to the company reaching its objectives.

Let's assume you are in a local human service agency that has just decided its program needs the help of a local com-

Ellen Linsley is President of Involvement, Inc., a California based non-profit corporation that acts as consultant, under contract, to develop corporate community volunteer programs. During 1984 she was responsible for recruitment of corporate employees for the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee. *Ruth March* is an advocate and catalyst to initiate and administer community volunteer programs. She has spent over a decade in encouraging more than 1000 private and public sector employers to recognize volunteer experience on their employment applications and in their hiring practices. *Marion Jeffery* has been Director of the Second Careers Program, Voluntary Action Center, Los Angeles since 1976. She has served on numerous boards of directors and task forces particularly dealing with the employment of older workers. *Richard Durkee* is the principal of Richard C. Durkee and Associates, specializing in organizational consulting. He was 2nd Vice President of Transamerica Occidental Life where he was responsible for organizational development.

pany and its employee volunteers. Your task now is to select and win over that corporate sponsor. Focus on your objective: obtaining the chief executive officer's personal support and commitment. Do *not* make cold contacts. Try to pre-screen both the company and its key executives. Identify people who believe in you and in the issues/problems your agency is dealing with. Translate your skills into the mainstream of the corporation. Offer to barter the services in which you have expertise, e.g., literacy in the workplace, educational information, sponsoring no smoking days, drug and alcohol abuse literature, etc.

B. Personnel. Today's Corporate Community Relations Departments have shrinking staffs that handle a multiplicity of tasks. The percentage of time available to organize employee volunteer activities is relatively small (some as little as 5%), even in major corporations that in the past had full-time coordinators of volunteers.

There is a need for agencies to be highly organized in presenting a project. Emphasis should be on specificity—job descriptions with a time allocation for each task, down to the smallest detail. Consider identifying short-term consulting jobs. These are particularly helpful in obtaining management and technical assistance volunteers, e.g., computer support.

C. Money. Many companies recognize that it is important to combine maximizing profits with upgrading the quality of life. In the short run, they must first solve business problems that in one way or another threaten profits. In the *long run*, however, those companies that address both the economic and social problems help assure their survival. Ultimately, you can't have one without the other.

Keep in mind, for example, that there are two basic approaches to corporate volunteer programs. These approaches are distinguished from each other by whether management or the employees run the program. Since management-run programs are more costly, bottom line conscious corporations prefer to sponsor programs operated by employees.

Early Retirements

The increasing number of companies offering special retirement benefits as a means of workforce reduction is on the increase. Applicants to the Second Careers Program (which provides broker services between public and private corporations and agencies for paid and volunteer employment, part or full time, temporary or permanent), for example, now range from 40 to 45 on up. However, the bulk still remains 55 and older. To meet this challenge, Second Careers has needed to do more job development for middle managers; to strengthen its volunteer and referral network, and develop more interesting volunteer opportunities which include leadership as well as individual and group service positions.

Early retirees have often not prepared adequately for retirement because this decision is often made with little advance notice. Yet this group of all groups is best prepared through training and expertise to make the greatest contribution if encouraged and permitted to do so.

Pre-retirement involvement in volunteer programs is a natural path leading to continuing activity. Your role is to broker—to help "reinvest" the enormous expertise, experience and energy available to the community. If this is tapped, there is less likelihood of retirees becoming depressed, particularly if retirement was forced.

You might provide a series of special planning programs not only targeted to finances and benefits, but also to health, psychological role adjustments and use of time in a variety of community, educational and special programs and resources. Available to retirees are, for example, International Executive Service Corps, Earthwatch, and Volunteer Centers across the country.

Second Careers has found that for many people, particularly men, the issue of pay is still important. The amount doesn't always matter but the fact of being paid something does. Also, persons in retirement are willing to volunteer, but many feel that it should not be at financial cost to them. This also needs creative thinking. There are programs and agencies that do reimburse for out-of-pocket expenses, but we also need new approaches in how

to handle this.

Employee Time Crunch

Hours are an old issue and it's worse now. As demand from the employer for productivity and efficiency increases, pressure on employees has intensified. Competition is stiffer now than it has ever been. The employee must meet department and company goals or fear job loss. Often pay raises and grade levels are tied to productivity and efficiency. Stress and burnout are high. This argues for efficient, clear, well-organized agency projects. There is a need for fun. Employees must have a release of pressure and learn how to manage both stress and time. Look at what service your agency can offer and barter those services for employee volunteer hours.

Value Search

There are problems created by specialties demanded in the work place today with a narrower focus of jobs. The "Yuppie" mentality—quality, service, and status—is important to this group. They are better educated than those younger and older and they have great job opportunities. This type of employee is moving on a fast track. They are mobile, may change companies frequently and have no particular loyalty to their current employer. But by their mid-30's, they could be in search of deeper gratification. Volunteering can influence this and offer values not to be found in work. The idea is to start earlier and make volunteering a lifestyle—sell it like exercise and health clubs which changed that generation.

Career Transition

Think of the opportunity to place employees in learning and experimental settings. Most workers today must prepare for two to three transitions with rapid changes and also expect recessionary periods. Recognizing the value of volunteers, a growing number of companies are asking for volunteer work experience on their job applications. Volunteer work is translatable into functions, skills and services applicable in paid positions later.

Acceptance of this principle has been far greater with employers in both the

public and private sectors than with non-profits and volunteer agencies. Volunteering can be job training as well as community service. As technology eliminates jobs or lessens the demand, non-profits might start thinking in terms of a dual-purpose: serving needy populations and serving the volunteer. With the cooperation of volunteer directors and leaders, this goal could be met.

Private Sector Movement into Non-Profits

Business expertise, creative ideas and specific skills are needed by non-profits. Second Careers, for example, receives many inquiries from other non-profits both for paid employees as well as volunteers. Many positions come to them for Project Directors, Administrators, and other positions which would probably never go to regular employment agencies.

The increasing number of early retirements, whether selected or forced, provides a potential pool of administrators, managers, accountants, etc., who will find the non-profit sector a good match for both their value needs and their skills.

Corporate Volunteer Coordination: From Full-time Position to Part-time

The percentage of staff time allocated to corporate volunteer coordination is being greatly reduced, which relates to both diminishing personnel and dollars. Back sliding can sometimes be related to programs not being institutionalized. However, it can also be the result of layoffs of key personnel making it politically awkward to assign staff. Under these circumstances, an otherwise committed senior management will low key the program.

The solution to this requires that more organizational support be carried out by agency personnel in order to make corporate involvement happen.

Projects Increasingly Tied to Corporation's Business Needs and Goals

It is a matter of corporate self interest to help improve social conditions while working to enhance profits as well. These are some of the general benefits common to most participating organizations and should be mentioned in all presentations to companies:

Productivity increases
 Employee morale and pride improves
 Promotes team building
 Increased alignment with company goals
 Improved public image of the company

Selection of the proper agency is the most vital aspect of success or failure in developing corporate community involvement. Organize your agency's needs assessment and proposal in a way that will save valuable time for you. These should center around the company's people, departments and professionals. Draw the connection, for example, between an operation manager's concern regarding employee career development and what volunteering can do to help. A marketing department in an insurance company may be interested in health issues or a bank in economic education. A fast food chain may want to build a relationship with a growing ethnic group and be sensitive to their concerns such as job training and education. Affirmative Action Managers may be concerned about older workers, company retirement programs or day care for the increasing number of women moving into the workplace. Personnel Managers are concerned about work productivity and efficiency, health related programs, substance abuse, or transportation issues.

Preparing for and responding to demands for appropriate community support programs and services represents a golden opportunity for established corporations with foresight and vision.

Contributions Tied to Employee Participation

The company can fulfill its commitment to the spirit of volunteer service in the community by recognizing those employees who contribute their time, effort and talent to improve the quality of life where they live and work and within the company's service area. The Matching Gifts Program is one way to recognize outstanding volunteer effort. A very high percentage of companies match, dollar for dollar, the gifts of participants. Priority is given agencies with which an employee or community involvement team is actively involved.

In a variation of this, the company establishes a fund for grants for equipment, materials or special projects to organizations with which the company employees are involved.

In-kind contributions, use of company facilities such as auditoriums, training rooms and equipment or community rooms are also tied to employee participation.

Creative Ways to Back Up Person in Company Doing Job

1. Be carefully and respectfully *aggressive*.
2. *Recognition* - say/write "thank you" from the agency staff and clients. Encourage employee enthusiasm. They must see results in as many ways as possible: recognition, visual evidence, praise, publicity and any other means.
3. *Momentum* from one event to another is vital. After an event prepare an evaluation report meeting. At the meeting, the next activity's plans and goals are set, reviewed or revised with new dates established.
4. *Change work hours* to accommodate employee volunteers. Very few agencies are flexible, yet a number of companies have some form of flexible hours.
5. *Manage*—understand clearly where the program is going, otherwise too many employees will be underutilized.
6. Stress *participation*, which supports many current company philosophies.
7. Provide program *evaluation* and *record keeping* to prevent corporate backsliding.

SUMMARY

Over the last decade there has been a shift in corporate thinking from "social responsibility" to "community involve-

ment." In some companies, it is really looked at as "community *investment*." This change clearly signals the need for non-profits to look closely at a company's bottom line goals. While this may not be true for all companies, it is increasingly difficult to get top management support for projects that *only* support a public image. Now is the time to start forming effective partnerships with corporations based on these realities.