

Let the Corporate Volunteer Run Your Program

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Today's volunteer environment is experiencing revolutionary changes. With current public cutbacks, corporate downsizing, emerging social issues, and shifting demographic patterns, volunteer resources are becoming more scarce.

As the volunteer landscape is transformed, a new figure appears on the horizon. That figure is the corporate volunteer. The corporate volunteer is a valuable resource who can become a more significant player in the volunteer world.

At Southwestern Bell Telephone Company (SWBT), volunteerism is encouraged by the company and actively supported by thousands of employees. Company volunteers believe they have a responsibility to put something back into the community—a sincere desire to make their communities a better place to live. Our volunteer programs attempt to position the company as a concerned corporate citizen.

Our employee volunteer program is organized at the local level—where the employee lives or works. This factor is very important. Local employees are more likely to have a sincere interest in improving the quality of life in their community. This translates into a more committed and involved volunteer.

SWBT has more than 130 volunteer teams in the five-state area it serves. We call these teams Community Relations Teams or CR Teams. These teams come in all sizes. Some of the teams have 60-75 members; some are small teams—so small you can count their entire member-

ship on one hand. And lots of sizes in between.

What is the mission of Southwestern Bell's CR Teams? To identify local needs and assist in the development of solutions.

To say the company's volunteers are actively involved is an understatement. If you are from our five-state area you most likely have participated in an event with some of our volunteers. CR Team members and Pioneers (Bell Telephone's retired employee volunteers group) annually touch thousands of lives—caring for others, giving of themselves, spending weekends, holidays and yes, even their vacations away from their families. Benevolent actions by unselfish people.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CORPORATE VOLUNTEERS

Inherently, corporate volunteers have different characteristics. They have several unique traits which can differentiate them from other volunteers.

Skills

The corporate volunteer brings certain skills to the volunteer arena, such as organizational and administrative skills, fundraising experience, and access to a pool of other volunteers.

The corporate volunteer has received professional training in time management, handling stress, how to meet a deadline, budgetary administration, how to effectively communicate ideas, and how to manage people. These are market-

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able and useful resources that can make a difference in your organizations.

So if a corporate volunteer can help you balance your budget, help you with your legal matters, train your employees, organize your filing system, help you build your building, or clean your office, why shouldn't you take advantage of this situation? If a volunteer can help you get 25 or 30 volunteers for a special event, why shouldn't you draw on these volunteers? The advantages are obvious and if you don't take advantage of them, someone else will.

Commitment

The second difference is the corporate volunteer's time commitment. In most instances, the corporate volunteer's time will be given after normal work hours. While we all make sacrifices to participate in volunteer activities, the corporate volunteer chooses to forego something else in order to help a volunteer group.

A typical corporate volunteer is the guy who works all day and changes clothes on the way to coach his son's or daughter's soccer team. He leaves soccer practice to attend your board meeting that same night.

The corporate volunteer is the woman who is doing something almost every night of the week. She leaves one membership committee meeting to come to your annual appreciation dinner.

With the increasing number of working couples or single parent families, finding the time to volunteer is becoming more difficult. But, the corporate volunteer has a genuine desire to be actively involved.

Talent

Third, volunteering may provide the corporate volunteer the opportunity to use a talent or hobby that s/he doesn't get to use on the job. Many people are working in job fields not related to their college degree. I know a corporate volunteer who received a degree in music and now is in community relations. However, the music degree has enabled him to become active in his church music activities. Currently, he is serving as music director for his church.

Do you know any volunteers who were classical dance majors in college? One now manages a computer center—hardly a place for pirouettes and tutus. Why couldn't those volunteers become involved at a local center for underprivileged children teaching them ballet and dance?

Skill Development

The skills that a corporate volunteer uses or develops can benefit the employee's career. The volunteer can demonstrate skills such as leadership, program supervision, organizational skills through volunteering. The volunteer's job may not allow him/her to demonstrate some of these skills on a daily basis. The employee's supervisor can use these volunteer-related skills as examples in the performance appraisal of the employee's demonstrated abilities. These demonstrated abilities can provide an opportunity for more recognition from his/her boss and, in turn, positively impact his/her career.

RECOGNITION

Southwestern Bell Telephone Company recognizes the sacrifices company volunteers make. To encourage volunteerism and give a pat on the back, Southwestern Bell Telephone has developed a recognition program for CR Teams—Certification. It is crucial for volunteers to receive recognition—a confirmation their work is appreciated.

Certification was developed to increase the opportunity for recognition. Teams attempt to meet certain criteria which each state establishes for its teams. If a team meets these criteria, it can be recognized. Two levels of criteria are established. These different levels recognize advanced achievement.

By increasing the opportunity for recognition, we hope to encourage more volunteers to get involved. While our volunteers aren't looking for recognition, recognition can boost morale.

DETERMINING COMMUNITY NEEDS

How do Southwestern Bell Telephone's CR Teams plan for the year's activities? They survey and determine local needs

through a needs assessment. The planning process of our volunteers is facilitated by the needs assessment. Our volunteers must be in touch and know the pulse of their communities.

A needs assessment allows volunteers to identify community needs, plan for the year, and set priorities for the future. We feel it is important that our volunteers know what their community defines as its health, welfare, human service, educational, recreational, and cultural needs. Volunteers should know about the business climate, who the key leaders are, and what the problems are.

A few significant areas our teams review include:

Government—What type of government does your community have? Who are the major players—the mayor, the city clerk, other local standard-bearers?

Is the mayor a voting member of the city council?

Does your community need a sales tax increase?

Who's on the Economic Development Commission?

Should I be involved in one of these organizations?

Education—What is the quality of your local school system? Child care?

Is a college or university accessible and what is the quality?

What is the quality of vocational-technical education in your area?

What is the educational achievement level of your population?

Who is on the local School Board? When did we last have a millage or property tax increase?

Community Business—What is the overall business environment in your community? What is the economic outlook for your state and locality?

What are the largest businesses in the community? What financial shape are they in? What is the economic condition of these businesses? Who are the key industry leaders?

How active is business in the civic and community affairs of your town?

What are projects that business has supported in the past?

Community Conditions—What are the crime and law enforcement conditions in your community?

How are the health services in your community? Are you in a rural area that has trouble recruiting doctors?

What is the condition of the roads?

Does your community have organized cultural events (symphony, ballet)?

What are the parks like in your town?

Is affordable housing available? Does your community have the financial institutions to finance the mortgages?

In other words look at the safety, health services, traffic conditions, culture, recreation, housing, growth, special events, etc. in your community.

Minority Issues—What is the minority composition of your community?

Who are the key minority leaders and what are the key minority issues in your community?

Any major changes in the past year? Five years?

Remember, these minorities could be possible volunteers or clients needing your services. It is vital that you have an awareness of their part in community affairs.

Other—Economic development, labor supply, environmental issues, changing demographic patterns, specific economic conditions and consequences, major civic and service organizations, media.

The community needs assessment is a good tool for the planning process of volunteer activities. By making themselves subject matter experts on their communities, volunteers strategically begin the process of improving their communities.

Where can you get the information for the needs assessment? There are several sources including surveys, media (newspapers, magazines, etc.), the Chamber of Commerce, your staff, utility company surveys, face to face interviews with specific key community leaders to identify their opinions and ideas.

While the needs assessment takes time to prepare, a needs survey is important enough that you can't afford NOT to do one.

PLANNING

What do you do with all of this information? First, mentally review your major projects. Review for such things as:

—Do any of your projects address any of the needs you uncovered in your needs assessment?

—Do any of your projects consider any civic or corporate volunteer organizations that could become involved?

—Do any of your projects incorporate feedback from previous projects?

After completing this mental process, begin your planning process. Attempt to strategically use the information the needs assessment has revealed in the formulation of your plan. Involve your staff, your board of directors, your advisory panel, or any group that can make a positive contribution to the process.

After the formal program is completed, distribute copies for interested parties, employees, board members, volunteers, and any other organizational stakeholders, to complete.

Once the completed needs assessments are returned, compile the information. Use this source document as a planning tool for the year. Gather key stakeholders, volunteers, board members, and employees and plan out the year's activities. While impromptu activities will eventually arise, your planning can serve as a good framework for the year.

IMPLEMENTATION

After the needs assessment and planning, it's time to get to work on the projects. The recruitment of volunteers begins. Occasionally, however, potential volunteers may have some objections which can become barriers to success. Such barriers include:

- Lack of time; too busy
- Lack of commitment to your organization
- Lack of recognition
- Jealousy

These are common barriers that must be overcome to run a volunteer program. Here are a few suggested ways to overcome them.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

First, effective communication of the facts about your group to the right people is essential. By finding the key player(s), your chances for success increase. How do I identify who the right person is? Who is the power broker? Who is in charge of foundation money? Who is the leader of volunteer activities?

One way to identify these strategic players is through the *needs assessment* identification and subsequent interview to get that person's opinion on subjects in the needs assessment.

Once you have identified this key player, maintain contact with him/her. If he/she is an executive of a company in town, see if it has a volunteer program. If it does have a volunteer program, get the volunteer leader's name for your next project. If it doesn't have an organized volunteer program, arrange to speak to the work groups at that company to enlist volunteers. Suggest involvement in a local volunteer fair. Suggest that he/she have someone attend a Corporate Volunteer Council meeting in your town. Whether or not that company responds to your call for volunteers, maintain contact with the key player.

One other suggestion: ask for money later, *after* the volunteers are involved or he/she has responded to your call for volunteer involvement in the community.

A second tool to overcome objections is to make volunteering interesting. That may sound simplistic but it works. Volunteering is interesting when the activities are distributed among the volunteers. In other words, don't use the same volunteers over and over. I call it "volunteer burnout." Encourage dividing the volunteer activities among the volunteers and emphasize "participative leadership." For example, if the plant manager of XYZ has been your membership chairman for three years, burnout could be setting in. So, if the shop foreman from the same company wants to become involved, ask him to serve as membership chairman.

Then ask the plant manager if he would like to join the finance committee. You have increased the involvement of XYZ corporation and probably prevented a valuable volunteer from quitting. This concept puts different people in charge of different projects. This also helps develop people for leadership positions.

A third tool is related to making volunteering interesting. Some volunteers don't have enough time to participate in all volunteer activities. However, they do have enough time to participate in two or three projects a year. Use these volunteer members as "*ad hoc*" members. Introduce the concept of "*ad hoc*" team members or part-time volunteers. *Ad hoc* members are team members who receive meeting minutes and are counted on to play a major part in two or three projects each year. Place these people on the list of volunteers for those specific projects each year and then use their volunteer skills to the fullest.

One of our volunteer teams in conjunction with the local Pioneer chapter holds an annual 5-K road race to benefit Special Olympics. The race takes six months to plan. The number of people required is enormous—registration, refreshments, crowd control, being at the start and finish lines, awards, and promotion and publicity. The team has a list of nearly 175 company volunteers who work on this project. For more than 100 of these volunteers, this will be the only project they work on. But they provide a great service to the community on that event.

Using the *ad hoc* concept can increase the number of volunteers and alleviate some of the burnout of the full-time volunteers. This type of membership may increase the interest of the "*ad hoc* volunteer" to the point that he or she becomes a full-time volunteer.

Fourth, by keeping volunteering interesting and giving volunteers the responsibility for projects, the popularity of volunteer programs should grow by word of mouth. One volunteer team of which I was a member quadrupled its membership from 13 to 52 members in just two and one-half years. One of the key ingredients to this success was the

word of mouth about the fun and success the team was enjoying.

Through *ad hoc* members or word-of-mouth publicity, recruitment is an ongoing process. With corporate restructuring, downsizing, and the aging of our workforce, we realize that we must continually work at planting the recruiting seeds. Otherwise, we may face a crisis in volunteer recruitment and membership within the next couple of years.

A fifth tool used to overcome objections is to encourage the fostering of the positive contribution the volunteer is making to the community. Volunteers need to see results, and demonstrating the positive impact their activities have on the community or a group can serve as a motivational tool to the volunteers.

While external publicity, thank-you notes and commendations to the volunteer's boss are mandatory, the real reward for the volunteer is the smiling face of the Special Olympian, the gentle "thank you" of a senior citizen, or the boundless enthusiasm of a child who has just received the wagon from Santa.

Sixth, return the favor to your board members and volunteers. When a board member calls on you to make a speech at his or her civic club, accept the invitation and have a good presentation ready. When a board member asks you to the company picnic, grab your spouse and go. In other words, remember to nurture your volunteers and board members.

The next time your organization needs a volunteer or group of volunteers to manage a project, remember the corporate volunteer. Begin now to develop an ongoing relationship with companies in your town. There is an untapped resource that can significantly enhance the impact of your organization's activities. Don't be afraid to ask corporations for volunteer help. Corporate volunteers are willing and able. I believe there is an old saying which demonstrates the attitude of most corporate volunteers: "By sharing the joy of another, we increase it. By sharing the woe of another, we diminish it." Let them share with your organization.