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Deriving Advantage from Difference

Diversity and Volunteerism: Deriving Advantage from Difference

by Santiago Rodriguez

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ABSTRACT

Among the many challenges facing voluntary organizations and their volunteers is the increasing diversification of the client base. The growth of immigration, changes in the American family, the expanding roles of women, and continuing economic constraints, all are contributing to make the work of voluntary organizations more challenging. Increasingly the term "diversity" is being used in that context. Few people have provided a definition nor have many organizations developed an appropriate "business rationale" for factoring in human differences as an advantage. The future success of voluntary organizations will depend in large part on how different value systems can be incorporated into ongoing programs and in how well we can help new groups of people with the acculturation process.

Voluntary organizations in the United States and globally are faced with the growth of an increasingly diverse population and service base. Methods and approaches that have worked effectively in more homogenous settings may not be as useful in more diverse environments. We need to identify new ways to reach client groups in a manner comfortable to their cultural styles.

What is "diversity"? What can we learn from it?

"Diversity" is a much bandied-about term that to many people smacks of trendiness and a corresponding lack of substance. In part, this syndrome is due to the observation that many who use the term fail to define it, or use it as a substitute "buzz word" for traditional human rights terminologies that have become too emotionally charged. In addition, diversity as a concept remains an intellectual abstraction to many because a great number of its advocates have failed to tie it to an effective business or organizational rationale.

Diversity as a concept and program has a major utility of its own. While related to the older concepts of equal opportunity and affirmative action, it goes well beyond the parameters of earlier programs.

Equal opportunity is a merit-based program in which only accurate and clearly measurable instruments may be used in evaluating an individual's ability in competition with others. It is a fine concept, and great progress has

been achieved, but the dilemma remains that people in the absolute clearly are not always measurable nor do all measuring techniques assess everyone accurately. This is particularly true when cultural differences impede traditional measurement and assessment techniques.

Affirmative action, on the other hand, gauges the progress of different racial/ethnic/gender constituencies in given arenas and attempts to find solutions for greater inclusion and representation. Affirmative action, however, does not mean "lowering standards" in favor of race or gender but is, rather, a technique for reaching specific segments of society and increasing the previously limited competition. Its limitation is that it is not all-inclusive of all possible human differences. Therefore it runs the risk of creating an "us/them" dynamic.

Diversity not only assumes that all individuals are unique, i.e., different, but that difference is indeed value-added. While all societies and organizations have a need to establish common rules and modes of operation, the assumption in diversity is that if an organization learns how to harness individual differences, it will be more effective and competitive than those organizations that are not able to do so. It is, in other words, an effectiveness argument. In personal terms, the other component of a diversity approach requires a finely tuned process for self-examination. Rather than learning about other groups--and that, indeed, may be important--diversity requires an individual to assess what one's personal values are, and how these values affect our individual behaviors with other people. What we value will affect how we behave with other people. We need to be consciously aware of our values.

For operational purposes, culture is a set of values held by a group of people and, importantly, the behaviors that stem from those values. Diversity arises from this multiplicity of cultures. Cultures not only are national in nature. They may be regional, urban, rural, suburban, or based on age, religion, class, professional affiliation and organization--and many more. In fact, one's own life experience may affect cultural values. Being "minority" or "majority" in any larger culture will also affect values--how one views the world.

Perhaps paradoxically, diversity should result in supreme individualization: treating an individual as uniquely different from any other person and thereby avoiding stereotypes based on actual or perceived group memberships.

All organizations, including those of a voluntary nature, essentially perform three things: They develop products and services, they market them, and they deal with issues of customer/client satisfaction. These tasks subsequently are performed by managing human resources. The critical question to ask in the context of diversity is: How does difference, or absence of difference, affect how we design products and services, market the same, or deal with questions of customer/client satisfaction? Do all cultures, for example, provide voluntary services in the same way? Does one market goods and services uniformly around the world, or within diverse societies like the United States? And how do you please a customer/client if you don't know what he or she values? Values, of course, are all about culture.

Volunteerism occurs in all human cultures, but is often performed differently from culture to culture. In the United States we have developed a great number of community-based organizations focusing on volunteer activities. This phenomenon may not be representative of many other societies where extended family groupings, religious organizations, and government may play greater roles. The challenge for volunteer organizations in an increasingly diverse U.S. population is, on the one hand, to learn how to tap into networks different from those customary here and, on the other hand, to assist in the acculturation of groups new to the United States.

Community-based volunteerism, for example, is relatively rare in the traditional Hispanic and Asian contexts--families and churches may play a greater role--yet these populations once here in the United States are exhibiting a trend toward greater dependence on community organizations. That is clearly an example of acculturation. From a more traditional perspective, it behooves every organization to identify key players in each community who can then assist in carrying out the mission of voluntary organizations. Activities such as fund raising, how people are managed, and how decisions are made within groups are affected by different cultural norms. Diversity, then, is about learning to include different perspectives and processes so that the work of the organization can be as effective as possible.

The argument about diversity really centers around how to be more effective personally, professionally, and organizationally. It is not a value judgment about "right" and "wrong"--although each individual has the right (and obligation) to determine his or her own values--but, rather, what approach is most effective in a given setting. In essence, then, diversity is knowing what you don't know coupled with the knowledge that the way we measure people may not always be accurate due to the filters created by our own individual set of values.

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