

# Creating a Corporate Volunteer Community\*

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When I was just a few years old, my father, who was the principal of an elementary school, brought home a book that had been given to him as a sample by a textbook salesman. It quickly became a favourite of mine and was read and reread many times as I was growing up. Last year, I found the book buried away in a box in the far corner of the basement. To my surprise and delight, it held the same appeal for my then five-year-old son as it did for me and we have read and reread it several times already.

The official name of the book is *Building Our Community* but I always referred to it as *Tioga*, the name of the fictional community in it. Beginning with the original inhabitants, the Native Americans, it traces the development of Tioga into the mid-20th century through a series of short stories. It ends with a community-wide celebration of the town's history.

Reading the book as an adult, I have been struck by two themes that are woven throughout the stories. The first is that the development of the community is directly tied to the voluntary initiative of the people themselves. Even in the modern Tioga, the city council is portrayed as being made up of responsible citizens who take on the task of governance in addition to their regular employment or other lives.

The second, closely related, theme is that leadership for community development almost routinely came from those who were engaged in business or commerce of some sort. At every stage of Tioga's development, it was business people who were playing the key roles in making decisions, allocating resources, solving problems and mobilizing the community's energy.

It is true that much of that leadership was based on self-interest. Mr. Grant realized that until a usable road was built between Tioga and Seatown it would be difficult for him to replenish the stock in his general store so he became the moving force behind a voluntary road-building and main-

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tenance project. But, as with that road, virtually everything that particular volunteers did was also of benefit to the rest of the community.

Tioga is an idealized portrayal of a community. The departure of the Native Americans is noted only in passing. There are no minorities, no poor people, no criminals, to muddle our view of how communities work. There is never a downside to the decisions business people make—never any pollution, never any disputes with workers, never any arguments over zoning.

But the story of Tioga has more than a little truth to it. Throughout North American history, the development of our communities has rested largely with private citizens, acting individually and collectively to solve problems and to meet their own needs and those of their neighbors by creating the institutions and structures essential for healthy communities. And leadership for that effort most often has come from those who are leaders in business and commerce.

Writing in his landmark history of the United States, *The Americans*, Daniel Boorstin reminds us that this dual identity of business leaders as community leaders is an important characteristic of our national life, dating back to the early days of the nation. “Not to boost your city”, he wrote of business leaders in the mid-19th century, “showed both a lack of community spirit and a lack of business sense . . . Here was a new breed: the community builder in a mushrooming city where personal and public growth, personal and public prosperity intermingled.”

That sense of interdependence has been reinforced throughout our history. And, it is the very success of business people as business people that sustains it. Peter Drucker, writing in *The Future of Corporations*, has summarized this point aptly. He says, “The price of management success . . . will be very high and we are going to have to pay it . . . We will be expected—as a result of our success—to give leadership and direction in the major problems that face the community”.

He continues by observing that while all institutions of society must participate to the best of their ability in problem-solving, “the one who is expected to take the lead, to show the way, and to take responsibility for better and worse, is business leadership”.

That leadership cannot come at the expense of the success of business itself, but the two are clearly intertwined. Here’s how William Woodside, then chairman of American Can, put it: “I firmly believe that a corporation exists to profit its shareholders”, he said, “But if I spread that horizon a little and say the responsibility is to keep the corporation healthy and

growing, then I am face to face with social issues that – if not resolved – will make it increasingly difficult for the corporation to thrive in future”.

It is that “spreading of the horizon” that has led to the view that corporations have multiple constituents — including the community — and that corporate practices and programs must be as responsive as possible to all of them. In seeking to fulfil that new imperative, business has begun to create new tools and resources. One of these is employee volunteer programs.

The development of such programs essentially parallels that of broader efforts at corporate social responsibility, from taking individual, largely entrepreneurial first steps to reacting to crisis in the community, recognizing the value of such programs as tools in meeting the needs of many constituents and, finally, fully integrating them within their corporate cultures.

“Involved companies” can be found at all points along that continuum. In time, each fashions a program or set of activities that respects and responds to its individual corporate culture.

Some, like Levi Strauss and Barnett Bank in Jacksonville, Florida, have fully integrated their volunteer programs into the total life, operations and value system of their corporations. Others, like Pacific Power and Light and Fluor, have deliberately created structural distance between the programs and the corporation.

Some, like Shell Oil and Exxon USA, have found strength in collaboration with one another. Others, like Tenneco, have focused on building partnerships with both public agencies and private, voluntary organizations.

No matter how they have done it, each has recognized that employee volunteering is more than a community service. It is a resource that can cut across the entire panorama of issues facing corporations and become another powerful resource, not only in times of trouble, but whenever new opportunities present themselves.

Companies are discovering, then, that employee volunteer programs are *tools* that they can use to address the expectations of others, to strengthen their workforces, and to help meet their overall social and business goals.

Three years ago, when we were examining the current status of employee volunteer programs, we invited senior corporate executives and public affairs managers to join us in developing and articulating a rationale for such programs. From that exercise emerged four key points:

*First*, volunteer programs are a way for corporations to respond to workers' concerns about the quality of life in their working and living environments;

*Second*, volunteer programs are a way to increase and reinforce workers' skills, particularly in leadership and participatory decision-making;

*Third*, volunteer programs are a way for a business to respond affirmatively to the public's expectation of its involvement in community problem-solving; and

*Fourth*, volunteer programs are a way for corporations to demonstrate moral leadership, "doing the right thing", a behaviour which ultimately redounds to the benefit of the company.

When translated into action, this rationale demonstrated the inherent "win-win" nature of employee volunteer programs—they are good for the community, good for those who volunteer, and good for the companies that sponsor them. It is that mutual benefit that has accounted for the continued growth of corporate volunteering, even during difficult economic times and that can sustain them in the future.

As we look ahead, we know that all of the parties that benefit from corporate volunteering are probably going to demand more, not less, from such programs.

For communities, the future holds tremendous challenges in meeting the human and social needs of their citizens. One need only read the paper, watch the news on television, or walk down the street to know that our problems are not going away. Drugs. Homelessness and hunger. Illiteracy. AIDS. Poverty. These are real problems that will demand not just more government action but the concentrated mobilization of all of our community resources if they are to be addressed successfully.

For business, the future is likely to be one of continuous, rapid change as business leaders face a broad range of challenges from increased foreign competition to technological change and the need to increase productivity. Yet in all these challenges, there will be one constant, the need to secure an educated, competent, and committed workforce.

For individuals, the future is likely to hold a continuing search for fulfilment, particularly in the workplace. For most of us, paid work is critical to our view of ourselves and our self-worth. We define who we are by what we do, with the "do" almost always defined as paid work. This is true even among those who are more interested in fulfilment than money. Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich, reporting on his perceptions of the work

ethic, concluded that expectations of work as the basis for our psychic satisfaction may be most prevalent among those who define success in terms of inner intangibles or expressive values rather than external, tangible possessions. He writes, "People whose primary motive for work is self-development almost universally endorse the work ethic". Yet it is by no means certain that there will be enough satisfying work to meet everyone's needs all of the time.

There is no single solution to the problems that will be faced by communities, business and individuals in the years ahead. Certainly employee volunteer programs are no panacea. But there is no doubt that strong volunteer programs can *help* to address many of our problem areas because:

- They are a source of new, creative human energy upon which communities can draw as they seek solutions to their most pressing human and social problems;
- They are a new tool to be used by business as it seeks to strengthen its human resources; and
- They are a way for workers to find the satisfaction they seek outside their paid jobs but within the context of their relationship with the workplace.

Workplace-based volunteering recognizes and reinforces the importance of unpaid, helping work in our lives. It offers additional opportunities to provide in all ways for ourselves and our families, to contribute to our communities and to grow personally and professionally. Participation in helping and problem-solving activities is an empowering experience, reminding each of us of our power to make a difference in the lives of others and in the quality of life of our communities. Empowered people who believe in themselves contribute to high productivity and success in a business environment.

As Cornell Maier, chairman of Kaiser Aluminum, has said, "A corporation is nothing more than a collection of people organized to accomplish more together than they can individually. It is the *people* who make up our corporations . . . [and] . . . we have better people because of their involvement in community programs and organizations".

Now it may seem to you that I have dwelt for a long time on what are relatively fundamental matters, i.e., the importance and benefits of employee volunteer programs. But I have learned from the chairman of the board of VOLUNTEER, George Romney, a man who has distinguished himself in business, government and the voluntary sector, that it is often important to ensure that the fundamentals are clear.

He tells the story of a young lawyer who was given 15 minutes to plead his first case before the Supreme Court. After he had spent the first 12 minutes or so reviewing the fundamentals of the law applicable to the case, he was interrupted by one of the justices who asked, “Don’t you think you can assume that those of us on this bench understand the fundamentals?”

“Well, sir,” the young lawyer replied, “that was the mistake I made in the lower court.”

Having, then, made my effort to review the fundamentals thoroughly, let me move on to a discussion that might be titled, “If these programs are so good for everyone, how do we get on the bandwagon?”

I want to suggest to you that there are four broad groups of activities that can be undertaken to create, community-wide, a strong commitment by business to the involvement of its people as volunteers.

The first of these is to *learn what is already happening in your community.*

Ten years ago, when we set out at the national level with the goal of encouraging greater corporate volunteer involvement, we recognized that the first thing we had to do was to learn everything we could about what companies were then doing, what they were accomplishing, why they were doing those things and what barriers they were encountering in their work. Virtually everything we have done since that time to strengthen corporate volunteering has grown out of that first study and the subsequent one conducted three years ago.

Time and time again, we have had people say to us, “Business isn’t doing anything in our community”. Or CEOs say to us, “Our company isn’t working in this area”. But invariably, when they stop to find out what is really happening, they discover that their perceptions are very false, that, indeed, there is a great deal happening. It just isn’t as well organized or as visible as they think it ought to be.

I am often asked to mediate discussions about what constitutes a “real” employee volunteer program. My answer usually disappoints each side, because in my view virtually anything that a corporation does to promote the involvement of its workers in community service is a “real” program—whether that be a letter from the CEO to all the workers urging them to volunteer, regularly scheduled group projects, a system to match individual workers with community needs, or a highly structured involvement team.

When I was in college, I remember that students in the school of social work wore sweatshirts with a picture of Jane Addams and the caption, “Are we a profession?” As the field of corporate involvement matures, we run the risk of spending time asking the same kind of pointless question, rather than getting on with our work. Discussions of what is “real” fall into this category.

So, begin by learning what is going on, who is being served, what is being accomplished, how it is being done and what people perceive as ways it can be strengthened. You will be surprised by what is already there and amazed that so much is happening that no one recognizes as “corporate volunteering”.

Second, *take the time to develop the rationale for yourselves*. Engage people from all levels of business, from the voluntary sector and from government in an exercise to identify, agree on, and articulate the rationale for workplace-based volunteer programs. Don’t just read what we or others have written and sit back, satisfied and accepting. Redo it. Rethink it. Most importantly, make it your *own*, a rationale based on the realities and needs of *your* community and the business within it.

As you develop the rationale, you also will be developing a vision of what should be happening in your community. If, for example, these programs offer ways for workers to learn new skills, and if there is a company in your community that has such a program, shouldn’t there be an effort to spread the word throughout the business community and to create opportunities for others to get their workers involved?

Third, *make the sale*. Put the rationale and the information about what is happening and your vision of what *can* happen together in a neat package and begin selling it — to chief executive officers, to other senior managers, to vice-presidents of public affairs, to vice-presidents of human resources, to mid-level managers who are looking for a way to increase productivity, to the community as a whole. Work to create a community-wide consensus not just about the value of corporate volunteering but on the need to rally behind the vision you have created of what *can* exist.

This is not an easy thing to do. First, you have to be able to get the attention of those with whom you wish to talk, then you have to have your case in order. Finally, you have to be prepared to overcome every possible objection they will throw up to you, including some that are not likely to make any real sense at all. So it’s important to marshal your own human resources as well and make sure that you have visible, credible people with you in this effort.

Finally, then, you need *continually to support, reinforce and renew* the rationale and the vision and the activities that grow from them. As we will discuss, that is why resources like volunteer centres and corporate volunteer councils and schools of business are important to this type of effort. They are best positioned to provide, on a continuing basis, the support services, training, information-sharing and forums that are needed to ensure that corporate volunteering remains energized, responsive to real community priorities, and maximally beneficial to community, company and workers.

To review what you need to do:

- learn what's happening;
- develop the rationale;
- make the sale;
- support, reinforce and renew.

Now *how* do those things happen?

It is fair to say that in most communities in the United States, the growth of corporate volunteering up to now has been largely spontaneous. A “thousand flowers have bloomed” and then have been drawn together in a corporate volunteer council or other community-wide framework. This is not to say that companies have not learned from one another in that process; they most assuredly have. Indeed, in many, the impetus for the growth of programs has been the existence of a single strong corporate effort which then provokes others to follow suit. But in most communities, the process is relatively informal and spontaneous.

A second way in which corporate volunteer programs arise is in response to the efforts of a strong leader, usually a single corporation or volunteer centre that decides to assume a leadership role in encouraging greater corporate involvement in the community. The danger in this approach is that the rest of the business community may not fully appreciate this “big brother” company that wants to be the leader. Indeed, in a community that will remain nameless, we observed that the efforts of a single company actually set back the process rather than advanced it.

Increasingly, in the past two years, however, we have seen a third approach emerge, one we might call “spontaneous collaboration”. It offers the best chance to create a truly community-wide process that not only will promote greater corporate involvement but actually help it to happen and put in place continuing structures and resources that will support it. Let me give you two examples of this “spontaneous collaboration”.



Volunteer Houston was created in 1984 through a unique partnership between two competing companies, Shell Oil and Exxon USA. It was designed to increase the overall level of volunteering in Houston, to increase the number of companies who were involving their employees in the community and to strengthen the Volunteer Center and Corporate Volunteer Council as resources. Both companies already had exemplary volunteer programs in place for their own workers but they recognized that by working together they could accomplish more for the total community. It is significant to know that in each case the decision to participate came from the absolute top, i.e., from the president of each company.

Volunteer Houston was run by staff from each company, working together, and operated on a budget of \$200,000. It included an advertising and public relations campaign to promote the Volunteer Center, the creation of a number of joint volunteer projects, extensive outreach to the balance of the business community and an awards program for outstanding volunteers. The results included a 100 per cent increase in the number of people volunteering through the Volunteer Center and the development of some 20 new corporate volunteer programs.

The approach to the business community began with a reception honoring the existing Corporate Volunteer Council. Some 50 corporate chief executives were there at the personal invitation of the co-sponsoring company presidents. Each was asked, during that reception, to designate a person from within his or her company who would attend a seminar which would acquaint them with the importance and operation of corporate volunteer programs. When the seminar was held a month later, 30 of the companies sent representatives.

The seminar was followed by three "how to" workshops conducted over a two-year period on topics such as volunteer recruitment and recognition, management techniques, and effective communications techniques. Some 80 corporate representatives participated in these sessions.

At the same time, new companies were invited to join with Shell and Exxon in co-sponsoring one-shot group projects for their workers. These included a paint-a-thon to repair the homes of elderly people and a clean-up of a residential facility for mentally ill adults.

A somewhat different approach was taken in Los Angeles through a collaboration of General Telephone of California and Atlantic Richfield. The Lend A Hand Project was created to help businesses of *all* sizes to get involved. The two sponsoring companies realized that, to be successful, the project had to involve as broad a cross-section of the business

community and the voluntary sector as possible. To accomplish this, they worked closely with the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce which provided an immediate network of over 4,000 businesses and the Volunteer Center of Los Angeles which provided access to over 3,200 voluntary organizations and agencies.

The project was guided by a steering committee of 23 members, including seven from small business. The committee surveyed agencies and created the *Lend A Handbook*, a compendium of several hundred projects that agencies had identified as high priorities. The listings included a description of the work to be done, the number of volunteers needed and appropriate contact information. Over 1,100 handbooks were distributed and, by the project's official end, some 200 projects had been completed, twice the original goal.

The Houston and Los Angeles efforts focused both on the process of expanding corporate volunteering and on specific projects which offered opportunities for involvement in addressing recognized community needs. Both were collaborative efforts that involved the energies and resources of a number of participants.

Now, "collaboration" is a nice buzzword, easily said, but not so easily practiced. Once, when I was called upon to make a speech on collaboration, I began, as all good speakers are supposed to do, with the dictionary. I discovered that "collaboration" has two meanings. The first is "to work together toward shared goals". The second is "to co-operate with the enemy".

Unfortunately, in the volunteer community, there is often more of the second than the first. But if we swallow hard and follow a few simple rules, collaboration *can* work. Let me just suggest a couple of rules.

Effective collaborations have:

- Leaders who are recognized as such by all participants;
- Defined goals and agreed-upon ways to measure progress towards those goals;
- An equitable sharing of resources based on the capacity of each participant to contribute; and
- Participants who are willing to play flexible roles, moving from leader to follower or vice versa as situations change.

As you consider whether a collaborative process should be undertaken to promote greater corporate volunteering in your community, let me suggest

briefly who the various players in such a process can be and what roles they might play.

First, seek out the major corporations of the community, the majority of which, whether they know it or not, are probably already doing a variety of things to promote and support corporate volunteering. They will lead by example, particularly the example of involvement by their top executives. Following the Houston example, it may be that there is a small group of major corporations that, together, will assume a leadership role. To these corporations and their leaders will fall the job of giving credibility to the effort, helping to attract the interest of others and, very pragmatically, providing any funding that is required to underwrite activities.

Second, look for an existing Corporate Volunteer Council (CVC) or its equivalent. As an existing body through which corporations have begun to work, it can become the primary vehicle for future work. Strengthen the CVC and you will strengthen corporate volunteering. Ignore it at your peril. It is the legitimate, corporate-owned structure that will be most useful to you. Encourage the CVC to create collaborative projects, to sponsor training for members, to collect and publicize information about the individual company efforts that already are under way — and then help it to do those things.

Third, there is the volunteer centre. There is perhaps no more important resource in the community to promote and support more effective volunteering than the volunteer centre. It is not only the way for people to get involved, it also can be the primary source of training and consultation for those agencies which are involving volunteers. It is the energizing force to promote volunteering to all corners of the community.

Volunteer centres are a prime source of information on community needs and volunteer opportunities. Many have become high-quality consultants to business, helping to design programs and train corporate staff. Many serve as the staff support for the Corporate Volunteer Council and a number actually create and manage projects that involve corporate volunteers. An increasing number of them are providing clearinghouses for donated goods from corporations and for the placement of corporate volunteers on the boards of local voluntary organizations.

Finally, there are graduate schools of business and management. For example, you have a remarkable and unique resource here in York University. Not only has its school of management developed an interest in the management of voluntary organizations but it has combined that interest with a desire to promote and support volunteering by the school's primary constituency, the business community. Because they are a stable

institutional force in the community, it seems to me that they can make three unique contributions to the efforts of those who are trying to implement or increase corporate volunteering.

First, they can provide the focus and forum for continuing community discussions of this issue. It might well be from here, for example, that the energy comes to pull together a working group to create the rationale for corporate involvement in Toronto.

Second, they can undertake the research that is critically needed if we are to prove, conclusively and continually, the value of corporate volunteer programs. Three years ago, when we were developing a publication devoted to the evaluation of corporate volunteer efforts, we discovered that virtually no one was doing any kind of serious assessment of these programs. There was a lot of "evaluation" of the internal process and management of the programs, but virtually nothing was being done to document the *impact* on the volunteers and their companies.

Indeed, there are only two concrete examples of this kind of serious evaluation. Much, much more is needed. Is it true, as line managers tell us, that employees who volunteer are more productive, have lower rates of absenteeism and are more loyal to the company? Is it true that workers actually develop new skills through their volunteering? Can one measure a real "return on investment" for the corporation that sponsors such programs? All of these questions and a hundred more need to be answered. It seems logical that we should look to academe for research leadership.

Third, over the long haul, schools like the one here at York can ensure that future business leaders learn about corporate social responsibility, about the nature and importance of community relations activities and about the benefits of involving workers in volunteer programs. If they do that job well, we will have new generations to support such work.

There are any number of "final thoughts" with which I could leave you today. But it seems to me that the one that is most relevant to the work that lies before you and to the kind of commitment that will be required is a statement made by Ed Spencer, chairman and CEO of Honeywell:

We have come together and realized the nature of the role we have to play, and the kind of commitment this role will require. The role is one of partner with the public and nonprofit sectors. The commitment is a long-term one, commanding the same management attention we give all our long-term strategic and operational plans.

If you pay heed to this counsel, you cannot help but succeed.