Cornell University
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School
DigitalCommons@ILR

Newsletters

ILR Collection

2-1-1999

The Network Newsletter, Volume 5 Number 1

Tammy Bormann
The National Conference

Susan Woods
Cornell University, sew13@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/newsletters

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the ILR Collection at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newsletters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact jdd10@cornell.edu.

The Network Newsletter, Volume 5 Number 1

Keywords
ILR, Cornell University, commitment, diversity, learning, corporate-community initiatives, outreach, contributions, internships, initiatives, resources, build skills

Comments
http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/newsletters/6

This article is available at DigitalCommons@ILR: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/newsletters/6

The Network Newsletter

A Joint Project of Cornell University ILR and The National Conference for Community and Justice

Change not Charity
Guidelines for Corporate-Community Giving Initiatives

What is it that distinguishes those corporate-community initiatives that build respect and opportunity across diverse communities from those that patronize less empowered communities and circumscribe real change?

Network participants from private sector, public sector and not-for profit organizations who gathered in Atlanta, GA for the 1998 Fall Forum of The Workplace Diversity Network grappled with this question. After exchanging experiences and perceptions, Forum participants arrived at the following guidelines for corporate-community initiatives. Comments and responses are welcome.

Corporate-Community initiatives should be:

☐ *Legitimate and genuine*

Corporate-community initiatives, especially to diverse or less empowered communities, should reflect internal organizational change, not charity. In other words, outreach, contributions, internships, and other initiatives designed to breakdown discriminatory barriers, open opportunity and promote social change externally should correspond to internal organizational values and priorities as well. If no effort is made internally to dismantle the organizational barriers which limit access and opportunity, then external initiatives designed to reach out to diverse communities are neither legitimate nor genuine. Such efforts are often viewed as patronizing. Likewise the corporate participants who represent the corporation in such initiatives should share a genuine sense of personal commitment to the philosophy and values of overcoming prejudice and bias, a commitment built upon thoughtful self-reflection and awareness.

☐ *Holistic*

Donating resources to community-based organizations, schools, or neighborhood projects to build skills and transfer knowledge should be followed-though with opportunity for access and recruitment. It is disingenuous for a corporation to promote community-based initiatives designed to break down barriers of institutionalized racism, sexism and bias yet remain exclusive in its own internal hiring, professional development and promotion practices. A corporation's external initiatives should be consistent with its internal policy.

☐ *Designed in partnership with the community*

Respectful corporate-community initiatives recognize the independent voice of the community being addressed and work in collaboration with that community on the initiative's design and delivery. Collaborative partnership provides a vehicle to acknowledge the interests and concerns of the community and of the corporation. Working through collaborative partnership to design corporate-community initiatives increases the likelihood of creating projects that are understood, that achieve articulated goals, and that build genuine commitment for desired change.

■▲★●

The *Workplace Diversity Network* is a joint project of The National Conference for Community and Justice, NCCJ, a leading human relations organization founded over 70 years ago to fight bias, bigotry and racism and Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations, known for its expertise in human resources, employment and labor relations and dispute resolution and The National Conference for Community and Justice. Now in it's fifth year, The Network promotes “diversity learning” across organizations by linking diversity leaders and practitioners with one another and with leading resources in the diversity field. To learn more, visit our web site, on-line at: www.ilr.cornell.edu/depts/wdn

1999©The Workplace Diversity Network

Corporate-Community Giving Initiatives

Do They Foster "True Generosity" Or "False Generosity"?

By: Tracy M. Fredericks, National Program Specialist, The National Conference for Community and Justice

I was invited to share my thoughts on the topic of corporate-community giving, perhaps because I had such a strong reaction to the group's dialogue regarding corporate-community giving initiatives during the Atlanta Fall Forum. My intention in this brief article is to share my experiences as a recipient of these community initiatives and as a professional who assists corporations in determining how best to collaborate with communities similar to the one in which I grew up. In this article, I refer largely to urban, inner-city communities where the majority of community members are poor or working poor people of color.

Once a year when I was growing up in the late 1970's, my parents drove my sisters and me down from the Bronx to the Manhattan flagship store of a major discount retailer to shop for our school clothing. As a matter of fact, many parents in my community took their children to shop at this store, as did many poor and working poor families because the company provided credit to working poor families. Because the store's customers came from all five boroughs of New York, its community base was very large. The company was known in the community for sponsoring parades, kid's theater, arts and crafts classes for young people. Moreover, the company encouraged employees to volunteer their time with community centers and social service agencies.

Despite the number of community-oriented services this company provided, I do not have positive memories about its corporate giving efforts. As I think back to those days, I remember that the store never held a community event outside of Manhattan, even though most of its customers came from the other boroughs. When employees volunteered their time in my community, they never asked us what kind of assistance we needed. Instead, they *told* us what we needed and what they were going to give us to fill those needs. I also recall several volunteers openly expressing pity for us. Consequently, my family and the rest of our community became very suspicious of these volunteers and their motives.

This example is a very simple one. There are communities where corporations are dumping environmental waste; conducting business and ignoring the destitute environment in which they are situated; and hiring employees who commute for hours to work while the employment potential of local community members is ignored. The retail chain of my childhood memories never considered creating a program to help the people who shopped in their stores learn to take care of themselves economically. The company could have shared its formidable marketing and business skills to teach community members how to create small, non-competing businesses like small grocery stores, newspaper stands and local restaurants.

I imagine that some readers are saying, "But that was the 1970's; things are different now." In response I would say that there are a few corporations using innovative community programs to support inner-city economic development; however, in my opinion, many companies are not. I believe the only noticeable change in corporate giving since my childhood is that corporations now have a specific division or department dedicated to corporate-community relationships!

Why do I question the validity of these efforts? Many corporate-community programs still cater to relatively high real estate areas. Moreover, I believe many corporate volunteers are working in inner city communities in order to say they have "given to charity." Most importantly, however, I believe many corporate-community initiatives are designed to function as social welfare programs rather than genuine efforts to develop strategic economic programs to revitalize oppressed communities. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire called this "false generosity."

I believe that effective, meaningful corporate-community initiatives must provide community members with educational opportunities in economic development, urban planning, and community organizing so they develop the skills to grow and manage their own communities when the designated program is completed. Moreover, I believe that those individuals who design corporate-community initiatives for inner-city communities must be willing and ready to address issues of classism and racism as they relate to inner-city social and economic development. Without the courage to confront these realities, corporations will contribute "false generosity."

Corporations need to reevaluate the motives and practices of their current corporate-community giving efforts. An honest and rigorous assessment, I suggest, will result in corporate-community initiatives that are viewed as *organizational business initiatives*, not as charity. When corporate-community initiatives are devoted to creating healthy, sustainable communities, corporations can focus their efforts on identifying the existing and potential competitive advantages of inner-city communities to sustain profitable small businesses; nurture self-esteem and independence among community members; and develop a viable base of employees and customers. In my estimation, this is a corporate-community relationship that benefits both the corporation and the community in meaningful ways.

Positive changes take time and patience. Corporations must be willing to invest the money, time and effort to understand the needs and strengths of the communities they wish to serve and nurture. Then, and only then, will corporate giving achieve "true generosity." ■▲★●