

# Valuing and Achieving Diversity in Volunteer Management

The goal of achieving organizational diversity is more than a moral or legal issue; it makes good sense! Diversity strengthens and enhances the effectiveness of organizations. This is particularly true of organizations with youth development, social service or educational purposes and missions. Valuing diversity goes beyond just meeting quotas and completing reports. It means that you have sincerely analyzed your communities and that volunteers and programs are reflective of that population and their needs. Many times, the only needs and populations addressed are the ones with whom you feel comfortable. Individuals stop at this level for many reasons. One reason is that we look for and see the differences versus our similarities. In most cases, we will always have more similarities than differences but it is the differences that we need to value and not try to change.

Another reason we only reach people reflective of us, is the fear of the unknown as we look at people who are different from us. FEAR can become an acronym standing for: FALSE EVIDENCE APPEARING REAL. We need to reach beyond our comfort level, our fears, and our unknowns and tackle the challenge to diversify our volunteers and programs.

What is diversity? Most groups define diversity as the differences among people. United Way of America defines it in the following way:

In general terms culture is defined as the practices, habit patterns, customs, and structures that are related to a common group experience. In more operational terms it is helpful to think of culture in two dimensions. The first is the characteristics that we are born with that are not easily changeable such as our gender, race, or age. The second are those characteristics that can be developed and even changed such as our education, social class, or functional responsibilities. Diversity is simply the recognition that our workplace is composed of individuals whose orientations to serving the community may be quite different depending of the influence of the characteristics. Our task then is to learn how to value those differences and enhance the whole of our efforts.

## “WHY ARE WE ADDRESSING IT IN THE FIRST PLACE?”

In many instances the obstacles to valuing diversity or even in managing it seem to outweigh the opportunities it presents. Although we have always had diversity in the largest sense it is only recently that we have been willing to confront some of the feelings, mindsets, and historical constructs that have made the subject difficult to address. In addition, the presence of various “isms” (sexism, racism, etc.), the rapidly changing demographic profile of our communities, and the need to improve productivity, have all made the topic an important one.

Besides cultural diversity, these definitions should be helpful. They can be obstacles in addressing, valuing, and achieving cultural diversity.

## BUILDING ON DIFFERENCES: DEFINITIONS

A **generalization** is an oversimplification, conclusion, observation based on insufficient or limited experience.

A **stereotype** is the belief that all people of a certain group will be the same and behave in the same way.

A **bias** is the failure to be objective and impartial about people or an issue. It is an attitude based on personal, subjective preference.



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A **prejudice** is judgment of people without really knowing them, on the basis of the group to which they belong. Its victims are treated as objects and not as persons. Prejudice is usually based on stereotypes and bias.

**Discrimination** is unequal and unfair treatment of an individual or group because of race, religion, age, physical ability, gender, etc. When people act on the basis of their prejudices and stereotypes, they are guilty of discrimination. Prejudice is an attitude while discrimination is the action that results from it.

Like an iceberg, some of these differences are obvious . . . like age, race, and gender. Most are not . . . like education levels, childhood experiences, birth order, spiritual practice, mental ability, and numerous other human differences. Is your volunteer force reflective of a variety of categories?

If you have a diverse population, you need to look at how you are involving diverse volunteers. If you have a balanced and diverse volunteer force and are using them effectively, then you need to look at maintaining and expanding what you have.

Most organizations are challenged to create an environment where diversity is valued and pluralism is achieved. This environment will encourage individuals to be themselves and not have to conform to cultural practices, norms, and values of the majority culture within the organization. Before this can happen, an organization must be representative of ALL people in its volunteer leadership roles. These roles may include group leaders, committee members or a variety of other opportunities on local, county, state, and national levels.

Asking the following questions may be your first step in addressing the issue of diversity. After reviewing the process and collecting data on your current program and geographic region, you are encouraged to establish a committee to evaluate and analyze your situation using this process. The team will need understanding, commitment, and perseverance to create change in the organization. As leaders, we must have a strong sense that becoming an inclusive organization is an important goal. We need to communicate this to the team and help them adopt it. This is the first step in creating a system without boundaries!

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF ADDRESSING DIVERSITY?**

Brainstorm individually or as a group: What are the benefits of having a diverse volunteer force?

Some of the benefits that you may list are:

- Increased productivity
- Increased relevance of needs with programs being offered
- Reduced costs
- Tapping into and developing underused or unused human potential
- Revitalizing force to get the organization into the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Reflective of the population the organization wants to serve
- Increased effectiveness
- Enhanced creativity and innovation
- Teaches tolerance, understanding, and respect for other people
- Encourages concern for racial and social equity
- Active participation of individuals in value and nurture development

Addressing diversity and forming a commitment to recruit and retain diverse volunteers is an involved process. It will take time and effort but hopefully the list you generated along with the above list creates a convincing scenario of the benefits of this commitment.

Now that you are aware of the benefits of diversity, what is your situation? Do you know where your gaps are for adding diverse volunteers? Proceed to the next step.



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## WHAT IS DIVERSITY?

Write your thoughts on what diversity is.

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Diversity includes human differences in all forms, no matter how diverse. It does not necessarily mean "minority" as we usually define it. To add diversity to your organization, you must first analyze your volunteers to see who is not represented or who is under-represented. Sometimes, individuals do not know they can be involved or they have not been offered the opportunity to get involved.

Organizations do not have the option of allowing this to happen. The goal is to respect and be sensitive to all people.

## DO YOU HAVE DIVERSITY?

Collect information from a variety of sources to analyze your program. Sources may include but not be limited to: school boards, planning departments, census data, other youth serving organizations, etc. Plot where your programs are on a map. Indicate whether your audience is diverse in this locality.

Analyze who is represented in the current volunteers of your organization. In the process, you will also detect expertise that volunteers do not currently have for which you want to recruit. This expertise may be found in special populations that are not represented. If not, do not use it as an excuse not to diversify.

The completed analysis will help you address diversity issues such as: sex, age, race/ethnic group, professional background, geographic background, economic level, ability level, and area of expertise.

## WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO GET THERE?

Why would an individual from a different cultural background join a volunteer organization? There are many reasons, reported *Leadership 1991*, the yearly publication for volunteer association leaders produced by the American Society of Association Executive:

- Because the organization is doing work that is perceived to be important by the individual or the community from which the individual comes
- Because the organization is open, welcoming, and interested in the individual
- Because the organization's power, resources, and energy are shared by all members
- Because there is potential for growth for the individual
- Because there are others like the individual already in the organization

Attracting individuals from different cultures to an organization will require new recruiting, training, and retention strategies, say corporate educator Jeanne Hites.

**Obtain.** "Organizations are going to have to use some of their best talents to help recruit people," says Hites. In addition to communicating their accomplishments, "Organizations need to make sure they have people who are Asian or black or who speak the same language so they can explain what it is like to work for an organization.

**Train.** Training will be especially critical in the future, says Hites. "Managers are going to have to be more responsive and to customize their products and services to cope with culturally diverse populations. In particular, managers need to understand where people are coming from so they can educate newcomers not only about what their job is but how people expect the job to be done," she adds.



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**Retain.** “Many problems with retaining people occur because newcomers do not know about an organization’s social practices. Managers need to educate all individuals in how to socialize with one another so everyone in the organization can be a full participant.”

### **ARE YOU READY FOR DIVERSITY?**

Inclusiveness allows for diverse perspectives and honest feedback. Individually and as a team, answer the following questions:

- How many minorities hold leadership positions and what are the positions? (Minority in this case, means whatever is not your majority of traditional volunteers in your situation.)
- Who traditionally holds the leadership positions in your organization or controls the power? Describe them by race, gender, culture, or other characteristics.
- List members and their ethnicity who are involved in decision making that shapes the organization.
- Review your mission statement. How does it address inclusiveness? How do you share your mission statement with “all” in your organization? If you are not inclusive, how can you become inclusive without disturbing the structure and culture of the organization? OR are there significant changes that need to be made within the organizational structure and culture to accept diverse volunteers? What are those changes and how will you make them?
- How do you recruit volunteers who are not typical of the current majority of volunteers? What methods do you use to target diverse audiences?
- Describe an example of an activity you now offer geared to the needs of a diverse population. Brainstorm others.
- What are the barriers keeping your organization from obtaining a diverse volunteer force? How do you plan to overcome this barrier/s?
- How do you plan to prepare the organization for inclusiveness such as your co-workers, other volunteers, administration, etc.?

Add other questions that will be helpful in assessing your inclusiveness and identifying strategies for addressing or expanding your diversity of volunteers.

Two worksheets that may be helpful at the moment are: “Self Examination of Diverse Attitudes and Values” and “Pledge for Inclusiveness”.

### **SELF EXAMINATION OF DIVERSE ATTITUDES AND VALUES**

1. How do you let people from diverse cultures know that you accept differences? Does this mean you cannot disagree with a person who is different?
2. Are you aware of the traditions, economic conditions, educational practices, values, and life-styles of diverse cultures? How did you learn this? Do you need to add to your knowledge bank on diversity?
3. Do you react differently to individuals that are different than you? Describe a situation where you have been different from others and your reaction to the situation.
4. Are you afraid of being perceived as a racist by others? Describe an example of being racist.
5. Are you aware of concerns and aspirations of other cultures? How do you interact with “their” world to discover these things?
6. Do you feel betrayed by culturally diverse individuals you consider a friend who talks or acts differently around their group than he/she does around you?
7. Do you talk or act differently around culturally diverse individuals or groups than you do your own culture?



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8. Do you feel anxious when racial, gender, or cultural issues are discussed? Are you concerned about your friends' response to your attitudes?
9. Do you have a biased concept of yourself? Describe who you are.
10. Are you willing to open your mind and learn about people that are different from you? How do you plan to learn about a new group?
11. Are you willing to share the power of decision making of "your" organization with people that are different from you? Give an example of how you have already done this or will do it.
12. Are you willing to establish an environment of inclusiveness that creates comfort for new volunteers that are different from you? How?

### **Pledge for Inclusiveness**

I will actively help all new volunteers "learn the ropes" and the unwritten rules of the organization, as well as the formal structure.

I will be careful not to stereotype volunteers and will work to ensure that I do not treat any volunteer as a "token" in our organization.

I will value the perspectives the volunteer brings but will not ask an individual volunteer to speak for or represent his/her group.

I will embrace the concept that adding diversity to our organization is an enriching experience and an opportunity to broaden our perspectives.

I will recognize the possibility of feeling discomfort with someone different, and will strive to get to know the volunteer on an individual and personal basis.

I will think in terms of "we" and "us", not "us" and "them".

I will make a commitment to continue my efforts beyond this current year, and set up procedures to ensure that my efforts will be carried on in the future.

I will embrace fresh and different perspectives to the organization from volunteers of other cultures, backgrounds, etc.

I will recognize that when I am under pressure I may revert to narrower beliefs. At these challenging times, I will embrace and listen to all volunteers.

If you feel you have discovered some gaps, develop recommendations for how you can prepare yourself or others for diversity.

### **Developing a Plan to Increase Diversity**

At this point, you have defined diversity, analyzed your current volunteer force and defined gaps, reviewed benefits of a diverse volunteer team, pledged to address diversity, and identified linkers and how you can involve them. CONGRATULATIONS! You are well on your way to valuing and achieving diversity. Next comes your plan of action for diversity.

After assessing what you have done, establish concrete, measurable, and workable goals for how you and your team will accomplish recruiting and retaining a diverse volunteer force. Recognize that becoming an inclusive organization takes time so include some fun as you tackle your challenges. One idea might be to have a covered dish supper with an international theme featuring new diverse volunteers. Have that individual talk about traditions from their culture.

As you determine what your goals are for recruiting diverse volunteers these Resources can give you a brief and limited overview of the audience and offer suggestions for successful results.



Write your goals for achieving diversity, the time-frame for accomplishing them, and who will be responsible for giving the leadership to each goal.

Answer the following: What is needed? Who will do it? How will it be done? When will it be done?

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### **Successful Connections**

Links or connectors are individuals or groups within communities that know your new potential volunteers better than you do. They have rapport and credibility within communities that you currently do not have. You will need to collaborate with ethnic groups that you hope to recruit from. Remember to answer the question: What's in it for them? Do you know their concerns and aspirations? If so, it will be easier for you to collaborate to reach mutual goals.

After identifying linkers, they can help you build relationships with diverse audiences. Links can network and build coalitions with individuals or organizations you do have connections with and/or respect to reach new volunteers for 4-H. Their recommendation of who to contact as a potential volunteer is invaluable.

Where can you find LINKS?

- Examine current salaried staff and volunteer force to decide who can help expand 4-H's diversity.
  - School personnel, including school boards. They may be willing to publicize 4-H opportunities, survey needs, recruit individuals, make referrals, or other tasks you mutually agreed upon.
  - Community agencies. They usually can help identify community needs and potential people to assist in addressing needs.
  - Church leadership. They may be willing to offer a place to meet and even sponsor a 4-H club. Publicizing to their congregation in diverse communities can be very helpful.
  - Businesses. Posters and flyers placed in businesses in diverse neighborhoods are beneficial. You may also approach them about donating prizes or discounts for citizens of their community that volunteer for 4-H. An example might be a service station that conducts a drawing for a tank of free gas each month for 4-H volunteers from that community.
  - Ethnic organizations. Analyze your situation for what groups are available that might help you reach diverse audiences.
  - Add your ideas:
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Another possible use for links is to have the link hold a meeting of potential volunteers. They can endorse the opportunities of volunteering and introduce you for explaining more about the various opportunities of volunteering.

Links and connectors can be more than connections to other people; they can be your connections to program success!

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