

Creative Exercise 1: Op-Ed on pro Bono Volunteering

WANTED: A WHOLE NEW KIND OF “VOLUNTEER”

By Nicola O. Goren

If you read “The Little Engine That Could” as a child, you know it’s a tale about a tiny locomotive that miraculously pulls a train of heavy freight cars up an impossibly steep hill, mainly because several larger engines refuse to do so. The moral: with optimism and hard work, even the smallest and least powerful among us can do great things.

Leaders of most nonprofit organizations live by the same mantra. Despite very limited resources and small staffs, they must go to tremendous lengths to address community needs, many of which - such as child care, elder care and job training - are all the more dire in today’s breathtakingly bad economy.

But most nonprofit leaders will tell you that optimism and hard work simply aren’t enough to meet the tremendous day-to-day challenges they face. Like corporations, nonprofits have to run efficiently, with optimum accounting, management, marketing, IT and logistical practices. Like private sector organizations, they need people who can provide skills that guide them toward long-term sustainability.

Unfortunately, very few nonprofits receive the level of pro bono strategic support they need. While some major for-profit consulting firms, such as McKinsey & Company, the Boston Consulting Group, Deloitte and others provide very effective pro bono strategic management services to enhance the effectiveness of nonprofits, the scale doesn’t come close to meeting the sector’s needs. McKinsey, for example, provides excellent support to roughly 100 organizations a year – out of thousands that could benefit from strategic counsel. And only 19 percent of volunteers overall say the workplace skills they utilize in the private sector are applied toward the nonprofit organizations they serve.

With statistics such as these, a call for broader pro bono strategic management support from the private sector could come off as a cry for help. Yet in reality it's the sound of opportunity. More than 80 percent of CEOs from large companies believe partnering with nonprofits is good *for* profits. More than 85 percent of U.S. consumers say they're apt to switch to brands associated with a social or community cause. And 70 percent of Americans consider a company's commitment to social issues when they invest in stocks and mutual funds.

So what's the problem? Simply put: there is a significant disconnect between what many nonprofits really need and what the private sector is providing. Private sector leaders are justifiably proud of their direct philanthropy, and they're honored to serve on nonprofit boards and deliver in-kind goods and services. Yet many nonprofits would profit far more from volunteer accountants, Web developers, production managers and marketers who help them develop sound business strategies, increase their capabilities and improve their organizational infrastructure.

To facilitate this type of support, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation are leading a three-year campaign to attract \$1 billion in skilled volunteering and pro bono services for nonprofits. One year into the campaign, more than \$400 million in commitments have been made.

That's good news – the private sector is willing to put muscle and money into this approach around one particular campaign. But the bigger challenge is to change the culture of private sector volunteerism, so that Corporate Social Responsibility efforts become more focused on the provision of strategic know-how to enable nonprofits to achieve the highest possible levels of effectiveness.

The legal profession offers a perfect model. From junior associates to partners, attorneys at most law firms are expected to provide a certain level of pro bono expertise to community organizations and individuals – with the same level of quality offered to paying clients. Imagine the impact of applying this same rubric to other elements of the private sector. Imagine what would happen if the vast majority of

U.S. companies hired people with the *expectation* that employees' skills would be directed not only toward profits and results for those companies, but toward the nonprofit organizations that improve their communities as well.

The impact would be tremendous – and all the more crucial since many of the nation's social challenges will only worsen amid continuing economic challenges. Yes, most nonprofit organizations still want volunteers to pick up trash on Earth Day and serve meals on Thanksgiving and of course they want those donations to keep on coming. But they also want professional, strategic expertise to ensure they achieve the same long term sustainability that businesses count on. With that approach, nonprofits can still be "little engines that can," even more so with smart mechanics to keep them on track.

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