Chapter 8

Workforce Diversity in Volunteerism and the Peace Corps

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss the subject of workforce diversity as it directly relates to volunteerism, using the Peace Corps as an example. The aim of the chapter is to illustrate how nonprofit institutions can draw upon the value of workforce diversity in order to obtain competitive advantages. The Peace Corps' three-fold mission includes helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women, helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served and helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans (Peace Corps, 2011a). This chapter will specifically discuss how the Peace Corps incorporate diversity in their volunteer program. "The agency has always reflected the diversity of America and is actively recruiting the next generation of Peace Corps Volunteers" (Peace Corps, 2011b). In addition, it will make a case for diversity in nonprofits and will provide guidance on how to build diversity.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of workforce diversity is no longer an alien concept. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2005) the United States (U.S.) workforce is becoming more diverse. A globalized workforce has given rise to the understanding that diversity is all encompassing and has proved to be beneficial (Kossek, Lobel & Brown, 2006). There are many arguments that support

diversity, suggesting that society is better when we work together. Workplace diversity is increasingly viewed as an essential success factor to be competitive in today's marketplace. In an opinion poll, 81% of respondents said that it is somewhat or very important "to have employees of different races, cultures and backgrounds in the workplace or businesses." (Barrington & Troske, 2001). Richard (2000) states that cultural diversity adds value and contributes to firm competitive advantage within the proper context. Kochan, Bezrukova, Ely, Jackson, Joshi, Jehn, Leonard, Levine and Thomas (2003) point out that *valuing diversity* is a popular training program in many companies and consulting firms. Diversity is touted as being 'good business' by corporate leaders (Crockett, 2003). Even though research supports the value that workforce diversity adds to organizations, nonprofits seems to lack diversity (Tempel & Smith, 2007; Allison, 2001). In the nonprofit sector, many organizations are involved in working and serving traditionally under-represented and marginalized groups. In these circumstances, the need for responsive and diverse workers takes on greater significance. Diversity not only assumes that all individuals are unique, but that difference is indeed value-added. (Rodriguez, 1997)

DEFINING WORKFORCE DIVERSITY

One of the major stumbling blocks in discussions surrounding diversity is its very definition. There are different diversity definitions available in management literature (Weisinger, 2005). "Diversity can be defined as differences in perspective originating from observable characteristics of a person or people group (race, ethnicity, gender, and age), as well as unobservable characteristics (culture, cognition, religion, and sexual orientation)" (Bortree & Waters, 2014, p. 217). According to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), only 30 percent of human resources professionals say that their company even has an official definition of diversity (SHRM, 2008). A study done by the U.S. Department of Commerce and Vice President Al Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR) Diversity Task Force determined that diversity needed to be defined broadly and that it should encompass a wide range of initiatives that meet the changing needs of customers and workers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999; Kochan et., al., 2003). Deloitte (2011) stated that "focusing on diversity of thought enables us to see people as individuals rather than as representatives of a group and this helps us to find common ground when working together" (p.6). French, O'Rourke and Walsh (2014) also believe that "differing life experiences alter the way people approach a problem, and these differing perspectives can lead to innovation" (p. 1937). In the context of nonprofits that includes the individuals served by the nonprofit as well as the volunteers and employees who work there. The study suggested that leaders and employees should take active roles in implementing diversity processes and in order for them to succeed they needed to be fully aligned with core organizational goals and objectives. The findings in the report illustrated that the benefits of diversity are for everyone. It also emphasized that diversity, more than a moral imperative, is a global necessity. For the purpose of this chapter, we use the following definition of diversity: Diversity includes all characteristics and experiences that define each of us as individuals (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999).

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