

Communities have the answers, so don't forget neighborhood groups

By JOHN MURPHY

Companies keen to become good corporate citizens through supporting community-sector organisations should be cautious with their selection of community partners. Many government-funded services provided by well-known community-sector groups have little impact on the resolution of serious social problems and, in fact, sometimes they make problems worse.

In contrast, the services and activities of grass-roots neighborhood groups operated by local residents, most of whom are volunteers, have proven to be very effective in building stronger communities and preventing many social problems from occurring. Local people's passion for and commitment to the well being of their community is rarely equalled.

Neighborhood groups overlooked

Ironically, however, governments and business groups commonly overlook the important role played by neighborhood groups in community building and in addressing community problems.

Companies unfamiliar with community issues, but eager to form alliances with community-sector groups, mostly look toward well-known groups. It is frequently the case, though, that the reputation of these groups is exaggerated through public relations, with the images portrayed of them far exceeding their true level of ability. Some groups accumulate a good reputation simply through durability, rather than proficiency and achievement.

For some groups, their reputation as revered community institutions is so strong that criticising them is considered akin to blasphemy. Their immunity to criticism reinforces the continuance of often very ordinary performances.

Current 'solutions' failing

The overall failure of successive government-funded community programs to resolve or even substantially reduce serious social problems such as poverty, long-term unemployment, family breakdown, drug abuse, homelessness, youth suicide, gambling and crime is the most compelling evidence that generally the 'solutions' devised by governments do not work and that the abilities and achievements of many community-sector groups are overstated.

As a recent illustration, John Howard's \$27m drugs prevention campaign is a desperate attempt to address a major community problem in Australia which is out of control. It is another example of government tardiness in addressing a serious community problem with an inadequate strategy. Authorities in the drug and alcohol field believe that the costly campaign will have little impact overall on the country's worsening drugs problem.

Mostly in damage control nowadays, contemporary governments have become more adept at denial, deflecting blame and coming up with creative-sounding solutions rather than ones that actually work.

Governments' fixation on seeking the answers to serious community problems from academics, consultants, the church and welfare groups is largely proving a waste of time and money.

A constant succession of government-led summits and forums, high-profile advisory groups, committees and round tables with membership comprising well-known identities, not always representative of their area of 'expertise' nor always in touch with the relevant issues, create an impression that something is being done, but in reality they achieve very little.

Nowadays governments and the community-sector organisations they fund define successful outcomes narrowly, focusing mostly on good intentions and efficient processes. As a result, much is made of the presence of services and the total amount of people who have used them, rather than on whether services have actually helped people to improve their quality of life. Currently, few resources are allocated to evaluating service effectiveness properly.

More style than substance

Most of the current crop of government social policies and programs are little more than public relations exercises with more style than substance, and follow a cyclical practice by government departments of reinventing themselves by re-packaging and glossing up jaded policies and programs. Catchy and gimmicky names are being used for new programs which promise to be a cure-all for the community's problems.

Most programs have been designed for universal use and do not take into account the unique character and needs of individual communities. Some programs have been copied from overseas and transplanted here, usually with little thought given beforehand to cultural and community differences.

Approaches which emphasise 'local solutions to local problems' and 'bottom-up decision-making' sound like democratic and even radical responses by governments, but they operate within a rigid framework of government priorities and guidelines. Often they are just attempts to get communities to take increasing responsibility for the provision and financing of community services.

Just tinkering around the edges

Most community programs do little more than tinker around the edges of community problems. They give the impression that something is being done, but achieve very little because they do not get to the core of the problems. The majority of them intervene late when problems have reached a more complex and more costly stage.

Further hindering efforts is that communities, especially disadvantaged ones, have had to endure generations of experimental programs designed by 'experts' from outside, which have been full of promises but ultimately not living up to expectations. Because they create cynicism and distrust, these failed community programs make it even more difficult to gain support for new ideas.

Local strategies poached from the Blair government's community regeneration programs in the UK will struggle like their British counterparts because of their overall inability to engage communities in dynamic, entrepreneurial and inclusive ways.

Although many contemporary social programs emphasise the involvement of local people, jaded government workers responsible for implementing a continuing parade of new 'good' ideas from government often lack the required enthusiasm and flair to engage the interest and commitment of people in communities.

Long-term approaches needed

Government solutions often overlook the fact that to build or rebuild strong communities and to address major social problems, sustained efforts are required. Major overhauls of governments' community policies and programs every couple of years is not an effective way to strengthen communities or address their problems.

Governments have been too hasty to abandon community programs when they fail to achieve expected outcomes within unrealistically short timelines. Twelve-month programs or one-off grants for community projects do little more than dabble in community building and community problem solving unless they are a forerunner to more sustainable strategies.

Exacerbating this situation is that some community-sector groups concerned with their cash flow often feign commitment to resolve particular community problems in order to access government funding. Usually the duration of their commitment coincides with the duration of funding.

Once the source of much creativity and innovation, now many community-sector organisations are compliant followers of unimaginative and ineffective government policy directions.

Community people have the answers

It is ironic that many of the answers to community problems can be found where they are occurring – in communities themselves.

Community people often understand local issues and problems better than consultants who live somewhere else, academics who observe safely from a distance, and governments which make politically motivated and often poorly informed decisions from outside communities.

On a small scale, neighborhood organisations are involved in addressing a wide range of social, environmental and economic issues in their communities.

They play a vital role in developing and maintaining community well being because by bringing people together they create community spirit and optimism about what can be accomplished through working co-operatively. The ability of neighborhood groups to generate energy, enthusiasm, creativity and commitment among local people is unrivalled.

Despite this, the contribution of neighborhood groups to the well being of their community is undervalued and even stifled by governments obsessed with leading and controlling everything.

Governments need to adopt a facilitative role rather than one of management and control. Much more authority and resources need to be transferred by governments to neighborhoods, with support provided during the transition phase.

Individuals and neighbourhood groups with entrepreneurial flair and leadership abilities should be identified, encouraged and supported.

By strengthening communities and addressing issues at the level of the neighborhood, problems can be avoided or prevented from worsening. It is also much less costly to address problems at this level because in the early stages they are less complicated.

Partnerships with neighborhood groups

Companies interested in forming strategic alliances with community-sector organisations should consider partnerships with neighborhood groups.

Connecting with them may be challenging for companies not familiar with local community networks. Characteristically, most of these groups go about their activities efficiently and with little fanfare. Also to be contended with is the ability of larger, better resourced community organisations to 'push their way to the front of the queue' whenever support from government or business sources is imminent. In this regard, most neighborhood groups are unable to compete with their larger and better-resourced community-sector counterparts.

Often neighborhood groups are not proficient in articulating well what they do or what they need. Unlike bigger community-sector organisations, for example, which devote considerable of their resources to strategic planning, public relations and fundraising, it is common for minimally resourced neighborhood groups not to have a clearly articulated strategic plan, glossy brochures or a comprehensive wish-list of resources.

Companies should not be deterred by this or judge groups as lacking competence. Often the services they provide and the activities in which they engage do not require long-term planning or highly structured management processes. Importantly, the informality and spontaneity of small neighborhood groups are significant strengths because they encourage ordinary community people to become interested and involved.

Companies wanting to make contact with neighborhood groups should pursue this directly with groups themselves, rather than through government agencies. The latter will simply direct companies to groups whose services and activities are compatible with government priorities and preferences. Often, as far as governments are concerned, community groups outside these categories simply do not exist.

Community Information Centres, neighborhood houses and local community centres are good places to commence the process of connecting with neighborhood groups. Also, most areas have community directories which list neighborhood groups and their contact details.

Making the required efforts to connect with neighborhood groups and working in partnership with them is an important part of supporting the development of communities at their foundation.

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