Mass Media Culture and the Breakdown of Values Among Inner-City Youth

IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP between the increased prevalence of violent audiovisual images and negative role models in American media, and the increase in violent antisocial behavior among inner-city youth?

Most Americans would agree that the entertainment industry plays a powerful role in the formation of values. And clinical studies show that exposure to violent images heightens the level of aggressive behavior among teens and children during free play. Nevertheless, by the age of sixteen the average American child has witnessed an estimated 200,000 acts of media violence, including 33,000 murders; heavy metal rock lyrics and music videos routinely romanticize bondage, sexual aggression, and death; and popular teen movies are showcasing role models engaged in the most criminally indulgent, morally ambiguous and self-destructive forms of behavior. Is the sheer repetitiveness of this bombardment causing certain segments of our youth to emulate such behaviors in real life?

There is a large, if varied, body of empirical evidence on the effects of media imagery on children and teenagers. Most researchers agree that heavy television viewing tends to impair educational attainment, and that it contributes to sex-role and ethnic stereotyping. They also agree that exposure to violent images—in the clinically controlled setting—increases aggressive behavior in young subjects. There is far less agreement, however, on the impact of violent imagery outside the laboratory, primarily because of the great difficulty researchers have in measuring the connection between fantasy violence and real world violence. No one—not the networks, the sponsors, nor the social science research community—can state for sure exactly what the effects of long-term exposure to violent and sexually explicit images really are.

One result: until recently there has been limited public discussion on the role of the media in our two-decade-long epidemic of youth violence. Instead, the debate has tended to focus on such causative agents as drugs, poverty, unemployment, and the availability of guns in our urban centers.

Only in the late 1980's—as the rising tide of rapes and murders committed by the young has become a threat to whole communities—has the public begun to raise questions about the socializing effects of the media, and its relationship to the breakdown of fundamental values in our society.

And there has been a breakdown. The phenomenon of youth crime has already reached the point where most Americans have changed their personal behavior patterns in some manner. Today

•PAUL CARTON is a Senior Associate and researcher with the National Center for Housing Management in Washington, D.C. He has worked with a wide range of minority community organizations in the United States, and with a number of social development agencies in the Caribbean. Publications include *Mobilizing the Black Community*, Joint Center for Political Studies, Washington, D.C., and *The Effects of Party Organizational Activity and Community Leadership Activity on Black Voter Behavior*, University Microfilm International, Ann Arbor, Michigan. He holds a Ph.D. in urban policy analysis from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

the details of the attacks, rapes, and violent murders are a daily staple of the media. In Detroit, Michigan, a ten-year-old is arrested for brutally beating a 101-year-old woman. In Queens, New York, a twelve-year-old not long ago received a 27-count indictment on charges which included first-degree rape, aggravated assault, and grand larceny. The stories numb us to the point of being beyond shock. According to FBI figures, between 1983 and 1987 arrests of those under 18 for murder leaped 22.2 percent, for aggravated assault 18.6 percent and for rape 14.6 percent, even as the total number of teens in the U.S. was declining. Furthermore, the age at which youngsters have been committing violent crimes has been decreasing steadily. In 1985, youths 15 years and younger were responsible for 385 murders and 2,645 rapes. Children 12 and under were responsible for 21 of those killings and 436 of the rapes. But even these numbers don't tell the full story. For today, within our inner cities, youth violence has become so concentrated and localized that it now threatens the future of whole communities. Life for many people has turned into a daily struggle for survival. Today we often refer to these least fortunate of our citizens as the urban underclass–that group of isolated, mostly minority Americans who populate our most distressed, crime-ridden inner cities, and who find themselves trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of welfare dependency, youth violence, crime, and drugs.[1]

A Closer Look at the Hardest Hit Group: The Black Underclass

In New York City today, it is estimated that 60 percent of black youths never finish high school. And although blacks make up only 12 percent of the American population, black men and black male teenagers together account for more than half of the nation's unemployed. Blacks also account for 50 percent of all those arrested for murder, and 41 percent of the victims. So dismal is the current picture for blacks that in the period 1986-1988, the latest years for which figures are available, the life expectancy for blacks of both sexes dropped to 69.2 years, even as whites of both sexes continued to make gains (white life expectancy is now 75.6 years). This marks the only time in this century that the life expectancy for blacks has dropped while the figures for whites went up; a phenomenon almost entirely attributable to the enormous rise in killings and accidents experienced by blacks (e.g., the homicide rate for blacks increased by 15 percent during 1988 alone). In the words of Dr. Alvin Poussaint, the noted black psychologist at Harvard, "If we don't do something soon, black males are going to vanish in nearly all areas."[2]

While life for the black underclass has grown significantly worse over the past two decades, one segment clearly stands out as the hardest hit of all—that of inner-city black children. Health clinic and emergency room personnel around the country have found increasing numbers of inner-city children suffering from the same kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome seen in Vietnam veterans. Dr. Raymond Lorion, director of clinical and community psychology at the University of Maryland, now classifies such young people as "children under siege."[3] *The Washington Post* reports on an enormous increase of drug-addicted parents abandoning children in the streets of our nation's capital, parents selling their children's clothes for drug money, even parents who have sold their children as prostitutes. Social services personnel report entering the homes of their clients and finding 6-year-olds taking care of 2- and 3-year-olds, and preschoolers begging their neighbors for food. "I've been a police officer for 20 years and for the first time I'm seeing kids born without families, including a mother," says Sergeant Peter Banks of the Washington, D.C. Police Youth Division. "No one is teaching them any moral values. Nobody is giving them any love. Nobody is holding them."[4]

But of all the frightening trends currently afflicting the inner city, perhaps none are as socially dangerous or as morally repellent as the growth of what Charles Krauthammer calls the "bio-underclass."[5] The term—originally coined by Dr. Douglas Besharov, former Director of the National Center on Child Abuse—refers to the explosive growth of physically damaged cocaine babies

(currently estimated at 1 to 2 percent of all babies being born in the United States); babies whose biological inferiority has been determined before birth. "This is not the stuff that Head Start can fix," says Dr. Besharov. "This is permanent brain damage. Whether it is 5 percent (the current estimate of New York City black infants exposed to cocaine in the womb) or 15 percent (the estimate for the District of Columbia), it is there. And for these children it is irrevocable."[6]

How, as a society, will we cope with these bio-underclass babies when they reach their teen years? How will we cope with all of the multiplying pathologies of the underclass? Or will we reach the point where most Americans no longer sympathize with them, but just want to be kept protected from them?

Clearly we must, as a society, intervene; we must, in an intelligent manner, take actions to improve the current situation. And clearly, to succeed, we will have to deal with the fundamental breakdown of values among inner-city youth. But in determining what actions to take it would help to first consider *why*, during a period of relative stability in the United States, all of this is happening?

Black Flight and the Isolation of the Underclass

The current predicament, oddly enough, owes some of its origins to the early gains of the Civil Rights movement. In the late 1960's, as the fight for racial equality gave birth to a growing black professional class whose desire for good jobs and quality neighborhoods rivaled that of whites, opinion polls began to show large numbers who wished to move from the ghetto. Subsequent census data bears this out. Throughout the 1970's and early 1980's, "Black Flight" was occurring at record rates. As much as a third of the population abandoned the inner cities during this time. And as the most capable blacks migrated, the true leadership—those clergymen, business owners, block club leaders, postal workers and others who historically had helped counterbalance the forces of social disintegration—began to disappear, leaving the poorest, least educated, and most socially devastated behind. Indeed, it was the isolation of what would later come to be called the urban underclass that created the social context for the breakdown of our inner cities.

Yet while "Black Flight" helped harden and condense the urban underclass, it alone does not explain what is occurring today; nor do the other standard arguments—such as high black unemployment, low welfare benefits, the switch to a service economy, or vestiges of white institutional racism. Even the most popular current argument—the enormous increase in the availability of illegal drugs—cannot explain away these ferocious indicators of social breakdown. In the 1980's large numbers of immigrants from Vietnam, Korea, Cambodia, and elsewhere settled in our inner cities and experienced a substantial measure of economic success, even while being surrounded by the same pathologies.[7]

The fullest explanation, today, for the enormous growth of the underclass and the increase in violent antisocial behavior among inner-city youth, has more to do with the distinctive *culture* of today's underclass than anything else. In his oft-cited article, "The Origins of the Underclass," Nicholas Lemann emphasizes the power over people's behavior that culture, as opposed to economic incentives, can have. "In the ghettoes," he writes, "it appears that the distinctive culture is now the greatest barrier to progress by the black underclass, rather than either unemployment or welfare...The negative power of the (inner-city) culture all but guarantees that any attempt to solve the problems of the underclass in the ghettos won't work—the culture is too strong by now."[8]

A Social Equation for Chaos and Disorder

Looking back, the inner city has always had its own unique culture, an extraordinary blend of music, language, and customs, all tied together in a spirited ethic that once made the word Harlem synonymous with life and excitement. But along with the excitement has always been the underside,

the self-generating culture of poverty and despair, the anguish of broken-down families and broken-down lives that is so all-pervasive today. It is argued here that our nation's mass media, largely owned and dominated by American corporations, is accentuating this underside—adding to the building blocks of disorder that are already impairing inner-city youth and, in so doing, helping to mold their beliefs, habits, thoughts, attitudes, and emotional characteristics in a profoundly negative way. By building upon self-destructive tendencies, by reinforcing some of the darkest aspects of human nature that already exist in the ghetto, the media has helped alter the culture and values of the inner city to the point where antisocial behavior is accepted as the norm. There is a social equation for chaos and disorder, just as there is an equation for a peaceful society. As we enter the 1990's, we now have inner cities devoid of basic decency, devoid of hope, where the citizens are so consumed by the deviance and social disorganization around them that most of their energy is used up simply trying to cope with the instability.

By building upon self-destructive tendencies, by reinforcing some of the darkest aspects of human nature that already exist in the ghetto, the media has helped alter the culture and values of the inner-city to the point where antisocial behavior is accepted as the norm.

Of course, negative media imagery alone does not account for the wholesale breakdown of the underclass. The social equation includes a whole host of variables that, acting in combination, have brought us to the present situation. In considering this complex issue, it would help to begin by focusing on the point of maximum impact, the point which separates those underclass youth who assimilate into society from those who do not—the family structure.

Statistically, we know that inner-city teenagers who grow up with both parents in the house are much more likely to graduate high school, get steady work, marry, and go on to college than those who do not. Obviously, in a place as fraught with problems as the inner city the odds can quickly turn against you without high levels of parental support. And herein lies a fact that, until recent years, often wasn't discussed openly: namely, that the rate of family disintegration is far greater among blacks than whites: since 1960 the rate of black illegitimate births has almost tripled to more than 60 percent. In inner-city housing projects across the nation, as much as 75 percent of all children now live in single parent, female-headed households. PBS's Bill Moyers, who has studied the problem, finds that "Today, black teenagers have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrial world, and in the black inner city, practically no teenage mother gets married."[9]

This extraordinary fact of black teenage life is an example of what can happen when antisocial behavior becomes the cultural norm. But what role has the media played in all of this? How is the bombardment of negative and violent imagery in films and television helping to alter the culture and values of our inner-city youth?

Mass Media Culture and the Inner-City Black Teenager

Recent research on substance abuse shows that there is a window of vulnerability during the teen years–a critical three-to-four-year period when they are particularly vulnerable to outside influence, before their values and ideas have fully formed. Significantly, the onset of drug and alcohol abuse is primarily limited to these years—peaking between fifteen and eighteen—while teens who abstain from dependency producing substances are practically immune to later addiction. Simply put,

if you get to them in their teens, you've probably influenced them forever. Now we know that life in the ghetto can be extremely frustrating, that the black teenager is, as often as not, surrounded by temptation. The question is what, in the prevailing inner-city youth culture, has helped ignite this combination. What is it about the culture that is moving ever larger numbers of inner-city black youth away from the norms of the rest of society?

Teenagers, according to theories on childhood development, have a deep-seated need to emulate other human beings. Moreover, in their search for role models they turn not only to peers, but to older, more authoritative figures. An Oscar Robertson or a Magic Johnson comes along and suddenly the playgrounds are filled with expert dribblers, a Martin Luther King and a new generation of justice-seekers are born. About the time of King's death, however, as we approached the end of the 1960's, we began to see the infusion of an entirely different set of role models in the minds of inner-city youth; models that no longer embraced the Civil Rights/Social Justice symbols of the 60's, but stood for a whole other side of the ghetto that had nothing to do with human justice or the betterment of people. Many of the newly manufactured role models stood for nothing more than that they vicariously acted out the coarsest desires of the ghetto, and in so doing made them acceptable. Many glorified the underside, where anger and despair were compensated not through the pursuit of social justice, or self-improvement, but through the most criminally indulgent, morally ambiguous and self-destructive forms of behavior. Most of us can remember the character specs of one of the first of these new heroes for inner-city youth—the gold-chained, silver-studded, super-sexed drug king. He was the man who flew through the night flaunting enormous wealth, drugs, and all forms of illicit pleasure; the man who capitalized on black anger toward the establishment not by seeking justice, or by peaceful or even violent protest, but by the killing of white law enforcement agents equally corrupt as he. Tough as steel, ready to devour any who got in his way, the Superfly black role model glorified the pursuit of hedonism and immediate gratification in a frustrating environment. Indeed, power and self-respect was seen in being like this man. And he was but the first in a new generation of negative authority figures—notoriously unprincipled, perpetrators of horrific crimes, men incapable of mustering more than the gruffest forms of affection, and then, only for their criminal cohorts. Today, after a two-decade explosion of inner-city violence and antisocial behavior, the question we should be asking is: Has a largely white-owned and dominated American mass media mobilized in some inner-city youths a model of themselves that resembles these characters? Is the media changing the very standards by which they judge their lives? Importantly, are these and other antisocial heroes somehow tapping into negative vulnerabilities that already exist within our youth populations?

Examples abound of youths emulating television and movie heroes in real life, sometimes with devastating consequences. A few years ago in Buffalo, New York, a 14-year-old boy, dressed in Ninja Warrior garb, threatened a police officer with his sword—one of several incidents that occurred in Western New York around that time. After his arrest it was learned that he was part of a "Ninja gang" who were extorting money from other youths. (The Ninja Warrior, an ancient martial arts assassin glamorized in today's karate movies, has become the new super hero for many teenagers, much as Superman was a couple of generations back). In New York City, last year, a 14-year-old drug dealer was shot to death in a drug territorial dispute, prompting a *New York Times* piece on his short and tragic life. According to his mother and friends, the boy grew up without any positive role models or heroes, though after learning a few elementary karate moves he had lined his bedroom walls with magazine pictures of Ninja Warriors.

Of course, antisocial role models, in and of themselves, clearly do not explain the breakdown of values in the inner city. To understand the youth transformation we need to take a much closer look at the role of the media in our lives.

Media systems—in actuality—are active, cognitive weapons. They influence our moods, opinions, and value choices on everything from feminine deodorant to candidates for office. Even so, for years people scoffed at the thought that repetitive images—particularly those on television—could somehow act as societal transforming agents. They were wrong, of course—grievously wrong. The laughter at the "boob tube" was really the nervous laughter of a society that unconsciously realized it was in the presence of a force greater than itself. By making light of its effects upon society, we could deny its effects upon ourselves. But we now know images do have an effect. An awesome effect. Besides the considerable clinical evidence, one can find real world examples of violent images heightening the level of aggressive behavior. One need only attend a showing of one of those Oriental Kung Fu movies in the inner city to appreciate the power of violent imagery firsthand. Often, when the lights go out, the kids literally seem to don the identities of those super killing heroes, as if they themselves were living out the fantasies on the screen. Afterwards, as they file out, there have been numerous reports of shovings, fist fights, even murders, occurring in the immediate aftermath of one of these showings.

In a similar vein, the recent Miami arrest and obscenity trial of the Rap group 2 Live Crew piqued national interest on the issue of sexually violent music and its effect upon teenagers. While legitimate First Amendment issues eventually swayed the jury to acquittal, this was not the first time that violent media images employed by certain Rap groups have drawn fire—nor the first time that real world evidence has surfaced of their potentially harmful effects. A rather well-publicized earlier example: in Long Island, New York, a few years back, a 17-year-old was thrown through a window and as many as 225 teens engaged in fighting after attending a showing of a popular Rap music film. The previous weekend two people were hurt when 500 youths stormed from a theater following the same film. A rash of similar incidents were subsequently reported around the country.

Of course, not all teens become aggressive. Most have the filtering capability to separate out violent fantasy images from reality. But there are others who have what could almost be described as an allergic reaction to what they are seeing, and who, over time, begin exhibiting emulative behavior themselves. As far back as the mid-1960's, clinical studies were citing instances of the media disproportionately affecting "susceptible" youngsters. Different socio-economic groups may have different tolerance thresholds. Low-income youths from disadvantaged social settings appear to be more susceptible to negative imagery, while those with strong middle-class and family backgrounds tend to have the necessary value structures to remain relatively unaffected.

This is not to suggest that disadvantaged inner-city youths are the only ones affected by, or attracted to, violent and negative themes; the dark side appeals to a common denominator in everyone—the part of us that slows to see the carnage at the side of the highway, that fixates on disasters like the Kennedy assassination. Nonetheless, over the past two decades—as the media has increased the number of programs featuring nasty, mean-spirited people engaging in violent acts—the evidence suggests that violent and negative images have had a severe and disproportionate effect upon the inner-city youth audience. Recent data on black/white viewing patterns tends to support such a theory of disproportionate effects. National surveys taken between 1975 and the present consistently show blacks watching more television than whites (e.g., according to Nielsen figures for January-February 1989, TV usage per black household averaged 77.3 hours per week, for all other American households it was 50.1 hours per week). Based on this differential, it is projected that the average black child, by age 16, will see approximately 100,000 acts of televised violence more than the average seen by all other American children. But perhaps even more importantly—*within the black community those with less education and lower socio-economic status are the heaviest viewers of all.* Thus, disadvantaged inner-city youths—who are being exposed to significantly greater quantities of violent

and negative images than the average viewer—are much more likely to be suffering from disproportionate effects.

Still, what about the occasional positive television series, you might ask? What about the black sitcom family that pursues worthy social objectives? Keep in mind that TV usage per black household is now averaging more than *eleven* hours per day. So while legions of high-powered media executives may trumpet the "noble effects" of the occasional positive series, the paramount question is how many negative and violent images are hitting the target population relative to positive ones. From this perspective, violent and negative imagery is winning hands down.

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Welfare Dependency and the Breakdown of Values

Of course, media violence and unsavory role models are only part of the total picture. The social equation for the breakdown of values in the inner city contains many more variables—including an enormous increase in alcoholism, drug abuse, illegal weaponry, and welfare dependency. Indeed, over the past twenty years we have witnessed the growth of whole communities that appear to have lost control not only over their surroundings, but over their destinies as well—communities that are now entirely dependent on the rest of society for their survival. The key word here is *dependency*. Instead of creative strategies to break the cycle of poverty, we now have inner cities where huge numbers don't participate anymore, and where the prevailing consciousness all to often emphasizes *getting* without having to *give* very much in return. Human nature suggests that those who keep getting things without having to give will begin to lose their drive, especially in those areas where you have to give first in order to succeed—work, school, marriage, caring for your kids, your own career. This is even more true down at the bottom end of the socio-economic scale. As we have seen with public housing, the biggest 'get' of all has helped produce behavior patterns devoid of giving—barely maintained units, urine-stained elevators, graffiti on the walls. Clearly public housing, in many cities, is no longer fulfilling its original mission—that of providing temporary assistance to poor families struggling to pull themselves out of poverty. Today, it is permanent home to a massive and seemingly ever-growing underclass—a place where all sense of obligation, even to oneself, is being destroyed.

This, then, is the equation.

It has been argued that the increase in violent antisocial behavior among inner-city youth is due to a whole host of variables—including violent audiovisual images and negative role models in American mass media—that have acted in combination with one another to produce the current social breakdown. Ultimately, if we are to transform these youths and bring them back into the mainstream world of work, family, and social responsibility, they will have to be wrestled from the prevailing inner-city youth culture. As difficult as this may sound (though surely it's no more difficult than the thought of wrestling Eastern Europe from communism sounded a short time back) there are certain social rehabilitation mechanisms that can help us move toward this goal; mechanisms which address the breakdown of values by focusing on the comprehensive rebuilding of individual and community-wide norms. To have any real possibility of succeeding, however, such mechanisms will have to take

current American public opinion carefully into account—particularly with regard to American attitudes toward sex and violence in today's media.

American Public Opinion

A fairly recent *Los Angeles Times* poll shows the American public has numerous concerns about the quality of media programming, particularly its excessive violence and its questionable impact on teens and children.[10] The poll found that two-thirds of all Americans think violence on television encourages crime, and more than half believe that programs depicting nudity and sex are encouraging immorality in society. A solid majority, however, say banning or censoring programming is not the answer.

While a majority of Americans oppose program censorship, a growing number of social action groups are lobbying television, movie, and record producers to reduce the level of sex and violence in entertainment.[11] One group, the Parents Music Resource Center, in Arlington, Virginia, has succeeded in getting the recording industry to create a ratings system that alerts parents to sexually explicit lyrics. Another group, the American Family Association, has organized boycotts of the networks over charges of explicit sex, profanity, and anti-Christian attitudes. That tactic, however, has historically had little success. There is a profound belief in this country that individuals have the right to decide for themselves what to see and think. If we accept this—and most of us do—then the question becomes not so much whether we should regulate the media, but rather, how do we devise social mechanisms that can help disproportionately affected communities rebuild individual and community-wide norms.

Mobilizing Inner-City Public Housing

In Pawtucket, Rhode Island, a social intervention is succeeding in an environment where most have previously failed.[12] Until recently, life at the Galego Court housing project was like that of many inner-city public housing communities—teenage drug dealers, guns, numerous acts of violence, and a slew of murders. Today the Pawtucket Housing Authority, aided by a $6 million HUD grant, is in the process of turning things around. The drugs are gone, unwanted visitors are kept out by project security guards, and strict rule enforcement has become the norm. Importantly, the project's 450 tenants now participate in a variety of tutoring and anti-drug programs, there are field trips and social events for the youth, and the project tenants' association meets every month to promote grass-roots democracy and resident self-esteem. The concentration has been on changing resident values and attitudes, and on improving the level of project discipline. The results have been eye-opening.

In Washington, D.C., the National Center for Housing Management is working on a similar, yet even more ambitious program, which it hopes to begin testing soon on a national scale. The Center, a non-profit corporation created by Executive Order of the President of the United States in 1972, is proposing that a Marshall Plan of Action be adopted to combat the enormous problems of poverty, welfare dependency, and the breakdown of values in inner-city subsidized housing. Specifically, through its Work Preparation and Community Improvement Program (WPCIP), the Center proposes to transform selected housing projects into intensive, on-site centers of education, work preparation, and personal values development—all which will occur in a highly integrated intervention format. There are several reasons why inner-city housing may be an ideal setting for such a program. First, the residents constitute a relatively homogeneous target population. Second, the environment is largely self-contained and manageable—given that considerable power and authority rests with the local housing agency. Third, most project sites have a community center conveniently located within the property which can serve as both the physical and social center for an intervention program.

The proposed Program is based on the idea that the collective power of the entire public housing community can be harnessed to address the breakdown of values, and the associated inner-city issues of youth violence, welfare dependency, crime, and drugs. Thus all of the values development processes of the Program have been designed to build peer pressure toward a set of community-wide norms and standards. Importantly, the residents of the test housing projects will help initiate and then implement a *mutually agreed upon* set of changes in their community. A major focus of the Program, therefore, will be on developing a whole series of interlocking and overlapping resident support groups—each having a common intent and purpose, and each acting as a kind of residential "family" to help compensate for the massive breakdown in the nuclear family structure.

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The breakdown of values and the huge rise in violent antisocial behavior in the inner city is an enormous, but not unsolvable problem. One answer may lie in the development of this type of intensive, on-site, community reorganization program at the housing project level; a program that emphasizes education, work preparation, and personal values development.

Whether America will invest in this or any other high-impact, values-based, inner-city intervention effort, however, is far from certain. Frightening as it is to contemplate, future historians may look back on the early 1990's as the last years before our inner cities fragmented into a permanent state of massive violence, desperation, and despair. The first wave of "bio-underclass" babies are already entering public schools across the country. Hundreds of thousands more are set to follow. The theory of disproportionate effects suggests that the increased prevalence of violent and negative imagery in American media is going to have a severe and disproportionate effect upon these same youths. Is anyone thinking about what life will be like for America once they hit their teen years?

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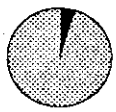

Give five.

THE VOLUNTARY SPIRIT

Building the Board

by Brian O'Connell
President, Independent Sector

Most of us wait until those moments of crisis to give adequate consideration to solid board membership. We fail to spend time to find, develop, and reward good board members. It's like trying to build a professional sports team without thorough scouting, signing, training, and rewarding.

Businesses have their recruiters and search firms their scouts, for us it's the nominating committee. The difference is that the other groups take it seriously. Almost all of us would say that the nominating committee is one of our most important entities, but if you look at the number of meetings held and hours spent by members and staff, I'll bet the contradiction is glaring.

The search begins with careful analysis of what talent, experience and representations are needed; this in turn requires a charting of the characteristics of the existing board. The committee should then think hard about the imbalances and determine what skills, experience, and representations are needed to strengthen the board. I can almost guarantee that if you don't think hard about the categories and balances you need, you'll end up taking the easy course of simply choosing from among the names put forward.

When you begin to think about people, look first within the organization. The board members should represent those individuals who, in the significant majority, have proven their interest in the cause and their ability to help it. There is a great tendency to overleap the people who have proven themselves in hopes of getting bigger names or greater influence. My experience is that you build impact by building with the people who have proven their commitment.

When the nominating committee is convinced that the organization needs an infusion of outsiders, that too should be handled with thoughtfulness and investment. Look on yourselves as a search firm with all attendant exploration, checking and cultivation. If you were in business, you'd probably spend a great deal of time planning for and recruiting the right directors.

Promotion and enlistment should include some deliberate turnover of top leadership. The emphasis ought to be on development of an increasing number of persons who are qualified and interested in top leadership posts. I don't suggest rapid turnover. An organization needs some people who carry forward the history and institutional culture.

Board terms should be limited. Generally, a three or four year term with a chance for one additional consecutive term makes sense. After a year off, the best persons can come back on the board.

Persons who cannot be active should be dropped. My approach is to provide a clause in the bylaws or board policies which automatically drops person who have missed a certain number of consecutive meetings, unless the board votes forgiveness.

As important as it is to be sure that the board is representative of the various constituencies and other factors necessary to the board's work, it is equally important to look for individuals who possess those human qualities that lend themselves to working as a board. I was consulted recently by the organizers of a new foundation. When I looked at the list of people they had selected for the board I was dismayed that although they had covered the categories of professional expertness, they had included only individuals noted as much for abrasiveness as accomplishment. The founder explained that they were determined to be different, aggressive, and innovative. I tried to make the case that boards need a good sprinkling of equally bright people who also have the qualities of judgment, patience, fairness, and team building. It's another argument for choosing people from within the organization who have not only proven their commitment and ability, but who have demonstrated attractive human qualities.

From Chapter 7 of "Finding, Developing and Rewarding Good Board Members," *The Board Member's Book*, Brian O'Connell, The Foundation Center, NY, 1985.

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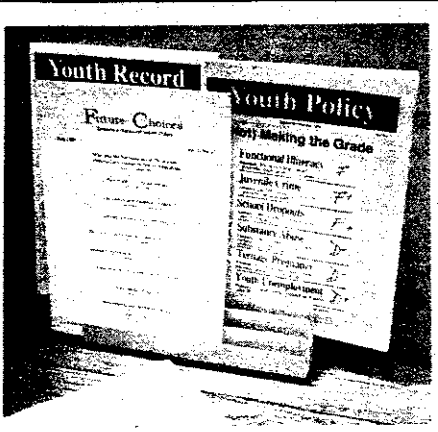

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