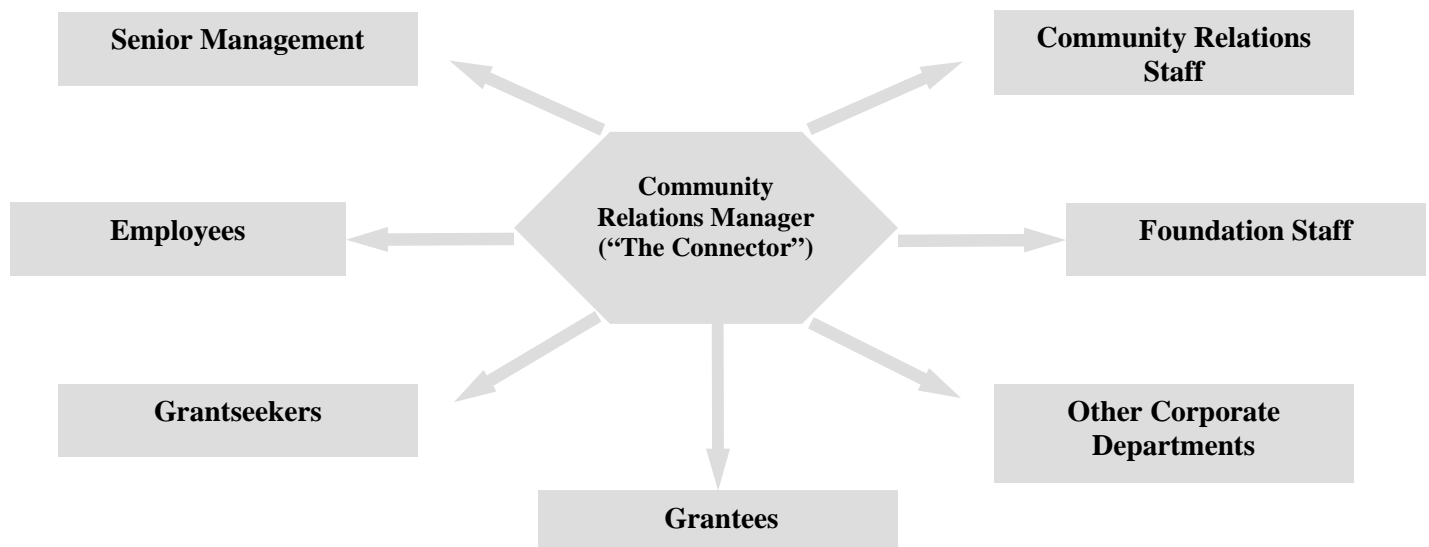# First 100 Days of the Community Relations Manager*
Advice from the Field

Note to the Community Relations Manager:
In his best-selling book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell defines connectors as "individuals with an extraordinary knack of making connections."[1] With varied responsibilities that include developing and maintaining a workplace giving strategy, formalizing employee volunteerism, managing employee matching gift programs, establishing corporate sponsorships, creating and growing community relationships and working with the company foundation/corporate giving staff and various corporate departments, the community relations manager is clearly a "connector," a person who works with many internal and external stakeholders. Gladwell notes that while the sheer number of people connectors know is important, the different kinds of people they know is of greater significance. The different stakeholders with whom community relations managers must connect—and work—include:

Senior Management		Community Relations Staff
Employees	**Community Relations Manager ("The Connector")**	Foundation Staff
Grantseekers		Other Corporate Departments
	Grantees	

During the summer of 2004, we interviewed several corporate community relations managers to gather advice for new staff in similar positions. Their comments are summarized here, and direct quotes appear in italics. While *First 100 Days* is not a detailed job description, it will provide novice community relations managers with insight and advice during those initial days on the job.

We hope you find this helpful as you embark on this new phase in your career.

*A note to Council members: The term community relations manager refers to the individual who leads workplace giving, volunteerism, matching gifts and community involvement activities. Depending on the organization, the term is interchangeable with a broad range of titles, including community relations officer or representative, director of community relations or employee programs specialist.

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[1] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown and Company, March 2000), pp. 30-88.

Senior Management

Priorities:

Establish relationships with the corporate leadership. *"Understanding senior management's view on corporate giving and employee volunteerism will provide you with insight on how the community relations function is viewed."*

Partner with senior executives in regional offices. You will need executive buy-in for programs such as employee volunteerism and community involvement, but be sure to recognize the cultural differences between the work environments (headquarters versus the field) and individuals at corporate headquarters and those in regional offices.

Tactics:

❑ **Interview** corporate senior executives to understand how they view your position, the community relations function and corporate giving. *"Since the community relations position was new, I met one-on-one with the senior management team who created the position to learn about their ideas and details that were not explicitly stated in the official job description."*

❑ **Work** with senior executives in regional offices, as they know and understand the pulse of the community and are good allies. This is especially important if the company has a wide geographic or international reach. These executives also know which employees are best to tap for certain projects, such as volunteers with special talents.

❑ **Involve** senior management in programs and initiatives. Ensure and make known their approval of, or involvement in, initiatives the community relations department is promoting. *"In my experience, once employees see that the CEO or a senior vice president sits on a nonprofit board or is part of a company volunteer program, employees are immediately willing to learn more about the initiative."*

❑ **Be cognizant** of the appropriate level of formality in your company, especially when interacting with senior executives, and be sure it is used in your work. *"At my company, there is a formal, business tone in all written communication, such as presentations and memos, which I did not pick up on initially."*

Employees

Priority:

Work with employees to promote and expand employee volunteerism and matching gift programs.

Tactics:

❑ **Increase** your knowledge of the company's industry and business areas. Doing so will give you a better sense of how employees think and work.

❑ **Network** with employees and find out whom to tap for ideas. *"Since I was in HR prior to taking this position, I knew where people resided in the organizational hierarchy, which was definitely an advantage."*

❑ **Learn** the history of, and level of participation in, employee volunteerism at the company. Find out how others in the organization view the program.

❑ **Review** employee-volunteer applications from previous years to determine employees' interests in the nonprofits they have supported in past.

❑ **Establish and promote** employee volunteerism. Identify employees who can lead volunteer efforts and form volunteer committees. If employee volunteerism is in its nascent stage, create an exploratory volunteer committee to gauge employee interest and attitudes.

❑ **Formalize** volunteerism by creating a policy with clear guidelines that explicitly state causes the company will and will not support. *"In order to become more strategic, we changed the focus of our major volunteer event. We are a healthcare company, yet we spent years volunteering at the zoo or food bank. While good causes, they weren't aligned with our corporate goals. We refocused our volunteer guidelines, and employees now volunteer in small community health clinics."*

❑ **Educate** employees about corporate giving, volunteerism and matching gifts by using various communication methods, including the company newsletter and Intranet.

Community Relations Staff

Priority:

Establish good working relationships with the community relations staff.

Tactics:

❑ **Focus** on learning—not doing—by being an observer for the first six months. One community relations manager warns against immediately instituting changes. *"Do not go in and try to change or tamper with things. After all, you are the new kid on the block, and if you change things at the outset, you will meet with resistance."*

❑ **Create** a personal development plan. *"During my initial days on the job, I wrote out my objectives and goals. For example, I realized that I would have to learn about our industry, core business and operations, and meet with the CEO and our community contacts."*

❑ **Schedule** weekly meetings with your manager, creating a set time when you can discuss expectations, challenges and successes.

❑ **Hold** one-on-one meetings with the community relations staff to understand each individual's role and responsibilities.

❑ **Understand and accept** the administrative aspects of the position. *"My biggest surprise was the massive amount of paperwork and administrative tasks I had to tackle. I wish I had anticipated the busy work. However cumbersome, I recommend you learn the details of how things work, as it will save you a lot of time in the future."*

❑ **Be clear** about the company's giving guidelines and policies. As a reminder, one community relations manager created giving "cheat sheets" for the community relations staff. *"During those initial months, I took our corporate giving guidelines and translated the information into two documents for internal use: one was a strategic giving do's and don'ts and guidelines cheat sheet; the second was an administrative cheat sheet that included information like whose signature was required for final approval of grants."*

❑ **Maintain** contact with your community relations counterparts who are located in other geographic areas, who can keep you aware of news and events at other company locations. *"We have a monthly conference call where community relations managers from all the company sites—approximately 90 to 100 people—discuss issues and keep each other in the loop."*

❑ **Distinguish** community relations from the foundation or giving program. *"One of the things that surprised me the most was how confused employees are between the foundation's mission and purpose and community relations. I received daily grant requests or employee questions about issues that were foundation-specific."*

Foundation Staff

Priority:

Share information with the foundation's staff. Because both groups are involved in corporate giving, a complementary relationship is vital.

Tactics:

❑ **Schedule** one-on-one meetings with foundation staff.

❑ **Initiate** a monthly conference call with the foundation staff.

❑ **Ask** the foundation staff to compile a list of things you should know and that should be given priority attention.

❑ **Ask** for a foundation procedure manual. If a manual does not exist, create a cheat sheet which provides an overview of the foundation's giving activities, processes and procedures.

Other Corporate Departments

Priority:

Establish relationships with other corporate departments by building connections early on. Do not underestimate the impact of the company's culture and politics. Seeing how others are connected to your work takes time and effort.

Tactics:

❑ **Engage** in relationship-building with company colleagues via informal means—lunches, coffee or special events.

❑ **Establish** relationships with the corporate communications, public relations, government relations and finance departments, as these groups will be critical to your work.

❑ **Establish** ties with the human resources department, as you will work with these individuals on employee volunteerism and other issues.

❑ **Request** invitations to staff meetings in other departments to introduce yourself and discuss the corporate giving mission, volunteerism and matching gift program.

❑ **Maintain** records of all networking efforts and relationship-building encounters.

Grantees

Priorities:

Guide the strategic direction of the company's giving agenda, ensuring its alignment with corporate goals. Understand the logic and rationale behind existing program areas and the selection of individual grantees.

Provide strategic and technical assistance to your grantees and the community.

Tactics:

- **Delve** into the company's giving history to learn about partnerships and sponsorships with various nonprofit groups. Specifically, examine which nonprofits the company has supported, how much money was donated to them over time and how long the relationships lasted.

- **Maintain** an ongoing dialogue with grantees and look for ways to support them that go beyond cash. Schedule periodic site visits.

- **Evaluate** your grantees regularly. This reinforces the need for tangible results.

- **Provide** personal recognition of your grantees' work by sending thank-you notes.

- **Be strategic**, but recognize the implications of your strategy on both the community and the company. One community relations manager noted that to make the giving program more strategic, she had to eliminate funds for several existing grantees.

- **Work** towards establishing a recognizable corporate giving brand. *"The biggest surprise to me was the magnitude of our giving. We support so many nonprofits, and prior to taking this position, I had no idea how positively we affected the community, whether it was via our employee volunteering efforts or corporate sponsorships."*

First 100 Days of the Community Relations Manager

Grantseekers

Priorities:

Be responsive and transparent in your relations with the community by communicating grant guidelines to help applicants submit clear and relevant grant proposals.

Review and select grant requests that are consistent with the overall corporate giving strategy.

Tactics:

❑ **Research** nonprofits, using resources such as Guidestar to learn about their history, mission and causes. Also, determine how efficiently and effectively the executive directors run the organizations.

❑ **Understand** community needs and then align the company's giving focus and goals with them, bearing in mind the self-dealing laws and potential conflicts of interest. *"Once people in the community realize that you are in corporate community relations, they will ask you to join their boards. Before saying yes, take time to figure out the causes and programs the company will support."*

❑ **Manage** expectations and be transparent with grantseekers. Do not commit prematurely, in case a relationship does not materialize. *"I found it challenging to manage nonprofits' expectations, as they were so enthusiastic about the prospect of additional funding."*

❑ **Reduce** administrative work. One community relations manager recommends developing a structured timeline for responding to grant requests. *"I wasn't prepared for the volume of grants that flowed in. I should've instituted a more efficient way to respond to grant requests in a shorter window."*

❑ **Schedule** regular communication (e.g., quarterly or semi-annual visits) with nonprofits. Doing so will help nurture the relationship, make you more visible and communicate that you are serious about helping their cause.

❑ **Read** the local newspaper every day to maintain awareness of the issues and concerns in the community.

❑ **Be proactive**. When you see a nonprofit that seems like a good match for the company's programs or funding areas, approach it.