

"Castles in the Air"

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Thank you, Clifton [Taulbert], for that kind introduction.

It's an honor and a privilege to be addressing a group of folks such as you who are so dedicated to public service. I also feel very privileged to be on this podium with the distinguished speakers who have or will share their insights with you over the course of this conference.

This roster of speakers itself speaks volumes about the importance of volunteerism in America today. Virtually every significant force in the life of our country -- government; academia; the media; large corporations; the new breed of smaller entrepreneurial firms; socially conscious organizations; non-profit groups; the churches -- all are represented during these plenary sessions.

That says a lot to me about the broad base of support for volunteer efforts and their power to accomplish much good in a complex, troubled world.

So I'm glad to have the chance to be among you today and share a few thoughts with you on volunteerism and corporate America.

Whenever I come to Orlando I'm reminded of the several trips I've made here with my family and my 10 grandchildren. As you can guess, our purpose is always to go to Disneyworld and spend some time in the Magic Kingdom.

Aside from Mickey Mouse, I think the thing that most folks associate with the Magic Kingdom is the castle. It's a powerful image -- one that I would wager is recognized all over the world.

But then again, that image of a magnificent castle, its turrets enshrouded in mist, has fascinated mankind for centuries. No wonder that it's become one of literature's most enduring metaphors for our dreams, hopes and aspirations.

Back around the turn of the 18th Century, one English novelist coined the phrase, "'Tis best to build no castles in the air."

About 50 years later, Henry David Thoreau put a new spin on that saying. "If you have built castles in the air," he wrote, "your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them."

What a difference in philosophy those statements express!

The first is cautious, timid, rooted in the safe and predictable. Perhaps that explains why its author -- someone named Fanny Burney -- has been relegated to dusty obscurity; while Thoreau lives on as one of the foremost shapers of America's conscience.

It occurs to me that, even though he was not overly fond of crowds, Henry David Thoreau might have felt right at home here today. Because this is a group of castle-builders -- folks with a vision of a better world.

What he would have been most drawn to, however, was how you undergird those dreams with the most solid foundation there is -- action.

There are not very many people who can turn away from a hungry child, or a homeless family, or a lonely elderly person without feeling the tug of compassion and hurt deep within their own hearts.

But there are a lot of people -- too many -- for whom the feeling of compassion never becomes more than just that . . . a feeling, never converted to any kind of action.

These are not cold or heartless people. They do care -- on some level. But they don't know how to translate their feelings into a meaningful response. And the fact of the matter is that compassion that isn't converted to action almost might as well be indifference.

The good news is that there's a very simple way to help people overcome their inertia. And that is -- just ask.

A recent survey by the Independent Sector tells us that if you ask 20 average Americans to donate some of their time to a worthy cause, 17 of them will do so.

You leave that same 20 people to their own devices and not ask for their help -- well, only five of them will take the initiative to find a cause to support.

But what's the best way to do the asking? And how do you gain access to a large enough universe of people to result in a significant force for change?

It's clear that the workplaces of America are logical places from which to recruit quality men and women with the desire to have an impact on their communities.

Not only do you have a large group to draw from, but a company's workforce brings together a critical mass of people with complementary skills that can be focused in very effective ways -- on a particular social problem, perhaps, or in a concentrated geographic location.

That, of course, is the essence of the vision behind the Points of Light Foundation.

By offering companies a blueprint to follow to gear up their volunteer efforts, the Foundation is tapping into a resource with the potential to help bring about some real and lasting change.

And thanks to the work of the Foundation and other advocates of volunteer service, I believe we're beginning to see a new groundswell of support in the American business community for challenging and focused volunteer activity.

Please understand that I certainly do not mean to trivialize the tradition of public service that has characterized American business for generations.

But we all recognize that the problems that plague our society today are so terribly complicated, so deep-rooted -- and carry with them such profound implications for the future -- that we have a responsibility and an obligation to make sure that our efforts to address them are as meaningful as absolutely possible.

I won't take your time today reciting the reasons that compel American business to be concerned about the social ills of today. Let's just say that our future as a significant force in the increasingly competitive world of global commerce is at stake.

In other words, we have very real, bottom-line concerns about the long-term effect on our companies and our nation if we continue to allow our social problems to sap our strength, weaken our resolve and drain our resources.

Furthermore, we recognize the responsibility for addressing these problems doesn't rest solely on government. Because while funding for social programs is important, we can't expect any improvement in the social order unless we're willing to expend a certain amount of sweat equity.

We in business -- both collectively and as individuals -- must take ownership of our communities and be part of the solutions to the crises they face.

I believe the best way for business to do that is to foster a culture in which public service is viewed as a way of life -- where employees feel an obligation to give something back.

This can be accomplished in three ways: by offering them opportunities to get involved through the workplace itself; by supporting their efforts as individuals; and by setting an example by taking on projects as a company.

Let me give you some brief examples of what I'm talking about. And I hope you'll indulge me by allowing me to point to my own industry.

Ever since Alexander Graham Bell, public service has been a part of telephone industry culture, because, though many folks don't realize it, many of Bell's inventions actually started out as devices to help deaf persons.

Many of you may be familiar with the Telephone Pioneers of America -- the nation's largest industrywide service organization. Founded in 1911, it draws its membership from both active and retired employees of the seven Bell Holding companies and AT&T, as well as from GTE and most of the independent telephone companies and many telecommunications equipment manufacturers -- in a word, the entire industry.

In 1991, the 800 thousand Telephone Pioneers across the country gave some 29 million hours in volunteer service to causes they believed in. Their efforts touched on virtually every category of service you can imagine.

They helped children and adults learn to read. They raised money to fight disease. They brought food and clothing and words of encouragement to disaster victims. They cleaned up streams and planted trees and built mini-parks. They constructed houses for the homeless. They worked in crisis centers for drug users and battered women and abandoned kids. And on and on.

And for the active employees, virtually all of that time was off the job, that is, on their own time.

Why? Not just because they believed it was the right thing to do -- although certainly that was a driving motive. But the thing that makes Pioneering special is that their companies believe it's the right thing to do, too, and encourage and support their involvement.

Aside from the good work that the Pioneers do, the BellSouth companies give our employees a number of other opportunities to participate in community service projects.

In fact, the city of Orlando looks a little brighter today because of such a project. Earlier this spring, more than 1,600 volunteers recruited from local businesses, including Southern Bell, teamed up in the "Paint Orlando Beautiful" effort.

In one day, these folks painted the homes of 109 low-income elderly or disabled people -- bringing them new dignity and pride in their homes and their neighborhoods.

We also recruit employees to get involved in ongoing projects, such as mentoring school children through our Adopt-A-School programs, as well as one-time efforts like building a playground in a housing project.

At BellSouth, we've also found some new ways to support our employees who give their time to efforts in which they have an abiding personal interest.

Through our Volunteer Service Grant program, we'll give hundred-dollar donations to organizations to which employees give a significant amount of their time.

Now, 100 bucks may not seem like a lot -- but to your average Brownie Troop or PTA, that kind of money can make a real difference. And of course, the multiplier can be significant when groups of employees get involved -- and we give out hundreds of these grants each year.

Beyond their intrinsic value, though, these kinds of programs send a very valuable message. We're telling our people that we appreciate the time they spend in service to their communities, we're willing to recognize their efforts, and we'll demonstrate our appreciation in a tangible way.

The third way in which a company can create a culture in which volunteer service is appreciated and rewarded is by setting an example of corporate citizenship.

One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is occurring right now in the city of Atlanta through The Atlanta Project, the visionary effort conceived by former President Jimmy Carter to address the myriad of social problems in our city.

Dan Sweat, coordinator of The Atlanta Project, is on this program as a panelist later today, and I certainly don't want to steal any thunder from his presentation.

In a nutshell, however, this effort is seeking to mobilize the combined resources of local business, existing governmental agencies, schools, churches and others to make a difference in the lives of thousands of Atlanta's most economically deprived.

The Atlanta Project has subdivided the city into clusters, each of which have been adopted by corporations or groups of corporations that have agreed to commit both time and money to it. Enlisting the cooperation and commitment of the cluster's residents is a crucial component of the project -- as is volunteer service.

Homelessness, drugs, teen pregnancy, medical care, public safety, illiteracy -- they're tackling it all. Not too long ago, the project enlisted thousands of volunteers from within the clusters and throughout the community to campaign door-to-door to encourage residents to immunize their children, because it became clear that a great number had never been vaccinated.

BellSouth has agreed to underwrite the overall illiteracy effort for the Atlanta Project, and as such, we'll be working in every cluster. We're excited about this opportunity to help bring about some fundamental changes in our city, and we'll be counting on our employees to be an integral part of the project -- both by actively involving themselves in our literacy efforts and in the project generally.

By the time this conference concludes, you will have heard from a variety of speakers, met dozens of your peers and been a part of numerous discussions on all aspects of volunteering.

Aside from the practical information you'll pick up, my fondest hope is that your time here has fanned even brighter that spark of commitment -- that desire to make a difference -- that brought you here in the first place.

These times demand folks who are willing to make a difference. Because it is a paradox of this day and age that even as we see exciting new advances in virtually every field of endeavor, we continue to be haunted by the same old problems that seem to defy our attempts to solve them.

And yet, we keep on. We keep on looking for solutions -- the breakthroughs that will mean that we're making progress in bringing about fundamental, lasting change.

You -- the folks who lend your hands, your heads and your hearts to bringing about that change -- are the ones who give the rest of us hope that it will indeed happen.

And if anyone ever asks you why you give of yourselves the way you do, I hope you'll remember one more quote from Thoreau. It goes something like this.

"The fate of the country does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of person you drop from your home into the street every morning."

Thank you for being the kind of people you are -- people who care, and, most important, people who act.