

BEST PRACTICES:

The Jobs Partnership: It's Who You Know

History

The Jobs Partnership was founded on the idea that relationships are key to changing and improving lives. It is fitting that the organization was founded through one such dynamic friendship.

In 1996, white businessman Chris Mangum of C. C. Mangum Inc. met African-American pastor Reverend Donald McCoy of Pleasant Hill United Church of Christ, while Mangum's company was paving McCoy's church parking lot. The two forged a friendship fueled by their religious faith and their mutual desire for racial reconciliation. They made a commitment to develop their own relationship by meeting weekly for lunch and prayer.

One day over lunch Mangum told McCoy of his pressing need for reliable employees, noting that many of his larger trucks were parked due to a lack of drivers. McCoy knew of many capable men and women in his own congregation who were in need of work.

The two saw an opportunity to help each other—and their neighbors—through a partnership of businesses and churches. They each promised to recruit 12 friends, businesspeople and pastors from their respective communities, who would commit to a common mission of reaching out to, mentoring, training and employing unemployed and underemployed residents of Raleigh, North Carolina. Together this group set out to create the first Jobs Partnership; they formed a Steering Committee with eight pastors of different races and denominations, and seven representative business leaders.

Seven years later the Jobs Partnership boasts an 83 percent success rate for helping over 1,400 Americans in 27 cities achieve stable employment.

The Jobs Partnership

Churches and businesses each have a vital role to play in the Jobs Partnership. Churches coordinate and host 12-week workshops that teach life and job skills and ethics. The curriculum is divided into two sets of classes, taught concurrently.

“The Keys to Personal and Professional Success” is a Biblically-based series focused on relationships, attitude, conflict resolution, authority, integrity, stewardship of time and money and other aspects of workplace conduct and ethics. Keys instructors are usually pastors from affiliated churches.

“The Steps to Personal and Professional Success” classes focus on human resource development. Attendees learn about the job application process, including how to complete an application or resume and how to prepare for a job interview. Steps classes are taught differently in different locales, sometimes in coordination with a community college, and other times taught by an individual or team with human resources backgrounds. As the workshop nears to a close, visitors from participating businesses may attend Steps classes to announce job openings at their company.

Perfect attendance and completing homework is required for graduation. Many attendees find jobs on their own while the workshop is underway; they may land an opening by networking with their mentor, or through their introduction to the various businesspeople who attend classes.

Graduates who have not yet found jobs may explore ongoing job opportunities through the Jobs Partnership Clearinghouse, a list of openings at affiliated businesses.

Perhaps more important than the classes, however, are the mentors who walk alongside workshop attendees, helping them identify and pursue a path toward financial self-sufficiency. Mentors are parishioners from partnering churches. They commit to attending three or more workshop classes, leading small group discussions on occasion, ensuring their “mentee” attends classes, providing transportation when necessary, and maintaining personal contact.

The mentor’s role does not end with the workshop. Mentors are recruited to walk side by side with the Jobs Partnership participants not only through their classes but through the storms and trials that come into everyone’s life. The organization asks that the mentor-student relationship continue after the student has found employment. It is the hope and intention of the Jobs Partnership that these relationships will in fact be lifelong.

With the help of mentors and the wider church congregation, many needs may be addressed that would otherwise prevent Jobs Partnership attendees from reaching and maintaining stable employment, including child care, transportation and housing.

Businesses provide an equally important resource: jobs. In addition to listing their openings with the Jobs Partnership, businesses agree to try to employ qualified referrals. Hiring companies provide employee benefits, and training and advancement opportunities. They also agree to match new hires with a coworker mentor who can answer questions on the job and act as a friend to make the new employee feel comfortable and welcome.

By the Numbers

Since its inception in 1996, 2,500 individuals have participated in the Jobs Partnership program and 1,750 of them have reached graduation. That is a 70 percent completion rate, which is quite substantial considering members are required to attend two classes a week for twelve weeks.

Of the 1,750 graduates, 1,450 have stayed employed for one or more years, for an 83 percent retention rate.

The success of the program has encouraged numerous individuals, organizations and businesses to join the Jobs Partnership mission. There are 2,800 mentors who volunteer their time, energy and friendship to help their neighbors achieve self-sufficiency through the program. Six hundred churches are active in the program, and the same number of businesses participate as well.

Numerous other organizations support the cause in one way or another. For example, the Orlando Jobs Partnership works with Charity Cars, a nonprofit that distributes donated vehicles to the working poor, and qualified Jobs Partnership graduates receive a car through this organization at the graduation ceremony. The organization works with local housing authorities, workforce development boards, community colleges and numerous nonprofit community service groups as well.

One of the greatest testaments of the program’s success is how quickly it has expanded from its beginnings in Raleigh. The strong demand for establishing Jobs Partnerships in other cities led the organization to form the National Jobs Partnership in 1998. NJP provides technical assistance support and training for the development of independently operating, locally based Jobs Partnerships.

Today there are 27 distinct Jobs Partnerships across the country, from Washington, D.C. to Orange County, Minnesota to Chattanooga. Over 60 additional cities have also requested NJP support to establish an affiliate in their community, and an average of five cities per month contact the national headquarters to learn how to start a Jobs Partnership.

According to David Spickard, Director of Operations at the National Jobs Partnership, the tremendous growth the organization has experienced did not result from any formal market strategy. They haven’t had to seek out new cities, he explains. “We’ve just been trying to keep up with demand.”

Because all of the Jobs Partnerships are run autonomously, operating costs vary from city to city. Many are able to keep costs quite low due to the program's strong reliance on volunteers. Spickard estimates that annual operating budgets range from \$5,000 to \$300,000, with an average of \$20,000. Meanwhile the National Jobs Partnership's annual budget has increased from \$102,000 when it served 9 cities in 1999, to \$450,000 to support the 27 city programs in 2003.

Keys to Success

Relationships. "It is absolutely critical to remember that Jobs Partnership is all about RELATIONSHIPS," says the Jobs Partnership Manual. "It is not merely a program of job readiness classes or a mentoring ministry or a job placement service. It is a ministry of making connections."

"What do you do when you get laid off?" Spickard asks. "You call your friends and get your resume out there. Well, our neighbors don't have that luxury, so we try to create a network of support, to connect disconnected people."

He describes the Jobs Partnership method as "attacking poverty through a community relationship model rather than a system-client approach."

It is important to recognize just how different this model is from many social service programs, especially those run by the government. Social workers are routinely taught to maintain a professional distance from their clients.

Of course the Jobs Partnership wants mentors to act responsibly and never "enable" their mentee in unhealthy behavior, but the organization actively discourages any notion of professional distance. They want participants to get to know each other, to form meaningful relationships. They encourage mentors not to think of themselves as serving the poor, but rather, striking up a friendship with a neighbor.

Frankye Stanley mentored several Jobs Partnership participants through her role as coordinator of the Hoover United Methodist Church / Black Community Developers, Inc. Jobs Partnership program. She notes, "Mentors are a vital component because they keep students motivated and encouraged to be successful in all of their attempts."

"Not a month goes by that I do not hear from at least one individual whom I have mentored," says Stanley. "They contact me for advice, for encouragement, and to report on new jobs and new opportunities they have received."

Stanley, like other mentors, enjoys how her participation in the Jobs Partnership strengthens her own faith. "Mentors receive the powerful opportunity to sow into others, and experience, the love of Christ," she says.

Christian Values. Religious faith is key aspect of the organization, uniting diverse people through a common world view, for a common purpose. While anyone may seek career advancement through the Jobs Partnership, regardless of their faith, and while the program is not intended to recruit Christians, if participants find God or commit to Christ during the process it is considered truly a blessing.

The core values that support the workshop curriculum are all taken from Biblical passages. From Psalm 139:14 and Jeremiah 29:11 comes the conviction that all people have value: "We believe every person is fearfully and wonderfully made, created in God's own image and that God has a plan for everyone to prosper them and to give them hope and a future."

Jobs Partnership members are encouraged to put out their best effort with a quote taken from 1 Corinthians 10:31 and Colossians 3:17. "We believe that God has directed us to live a life of excellence, so that in everything we do, we do it for the glory of God."

Relationships are also listed among the core values that the organization promotes. From Mark 12:30,31 and Hebrews 10:25, participants are reminded: "Responding to God's call to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves, we believe that through intentional relationships, we are able to experience a true reflection of the Kingdom of God."

Start with the Congregation. Another key to the Jobs Partnership success is the fact that the first recruits for the Jobs Partnership workshops are church parishioners who are working below their career potential. Thus, the program gets a strong start with individuals who may already be acquainted with one another, and neighbors who may already hold jobs. This helps ensure successes early on, and limits the number of challenges during the learning stages.

Louis Crowder, for example, had been employed as an assistant manager at a convenience store for five years. When his church agreed to take on the Jobs Partnership mission in 1996, Crowder's pastor recommended the program to him.

Crowder thought he'd give it a shot, and perhaps it would help him get promoted to store manager. "I had no dreams or thoughts beyond that," he said.

The program gave him the confidence to think bigger, however. Today he is in charge of building maintenance at the Mangum Group, the company whose owner helped found the Jobs Partnership. There is an obvious sense of joy in Crowder's voice when he explains that he works with computers now, something he never envisioned himself being able to do.

In addition to his career advancement, Louis earned his GED through Wake Technical Community College after completing the Jobs Partnership program. Last Fall he graduated from the Raleigh Baptist Institute of Biblical Studies with a degree in Biblical Studies, and he now plans to pursue a degree in Theology.

Crowder still keeps in touch with his mentor to this day, and appreciates the sound advice he gets from this relationship. He also values the organization's focus on crossing racial lines, and notes with an air of fulfillment that participants in the Jobs Partnership become like a family.

Local Autonomy, National Support. Finally, the Jobs Partnership does well with a model that promises maximum flexibility without individual organizations having to reinvent the wheel on their own. The National Jobs Partnership is always available to provide training and promote best practices, but each city program may develop its own character based on local resources and needs.

This degree of flexibility results in wide ranges in the organizations' budgets and teaching techniques. Most importantly, it promotes unity amongst the partners in each city, as they team up to help their own neighbors in their own communities.

Conclusion

The Jobs Partnership demonstrates that communities need not have a lot of wealthy philanthropists or trained professionals to establish a strong and effective program that deals with poverty and unemployment. The only resources that are needed are available in any community: caring people.

What Jobs Partnership attendees need more than anything else are stable, supportive friends. Once these relationships are made, a world of opportunities opens up, moving participants beyond dependency to a healthy life of financial self-sufficiency.