

Better Together

Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community is an intriguing book written by Harvard professor Robert Putnam. Two years ago at the annual meeting of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, I heard Dr. Putnam speak before a crowd of 800 about his extensive and well-documented research in the area of social capital. There are a great many people interested in this topic.

Using a variety of sources that tracked statistics over the last two decades, Dr. Putnam's research shows a decline in community involvement beginning in the 1970's. While nearly every social activity plummeted during these years, Dr. Putnam uses the analogy of the decline in bowling leagues to represent what has been happening in nearly every arena of social interchange. During the same years he observed the decline in bowling leagues, individual bowling increased.

Dr. Putnam and organizations like the NH Charitable Foundation want us to think about the implications of the decline in social capital to us as individuals, our families and communities, and our businesses. They say this trend is a serious threat to civic and personal health and productivity. But Dr. Putnam's research offers hope. A hundred years ago, the same decline in social capital was countered with the creation of a wide array of civic organizations, among them the Red Cross, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YWCA, and Hadassah—to name only a few.

Individual and collective involvement are needed again to develop long-term solutions. For more reading on social capital, read *Bowling Alone*. Or read a newly released book by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, President of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, called *Better Together, Restoring the American Community*, which provides case studies of successful civic engagement initiatives.

If, as Dr. Putnam asserts, social capital is the “**glue**” that holds us together as a society, how can we build up and maximize that **glue** to the benefit of all of us? I believe that many organizations increase their social capital within the context of **social responsibility**. Social responsibility is not easily defined, but the following appears on the website of New Hampshire Businesses for Social Responsibility.

The types of companies that are joining NHBSR encompass the diversity of the state's economy -- utilities, law and insurance firms, information technology, manufacturing and nonprofits. The common thread, says Kenneth Robinson, general counsel of Concord-based Northeast Delta Dental, is a general appreciation to do right and that, in some ways, we're all in this together."

Robinson says overall trends in the past two decades point to a socially responsible business mindset that is more than just pleasing public relations. "In the past, short-term thinking did dominate, but the marketplace now--even in the nonprofit world--will not be kind to companies who don't develop a reputation for doing right for their employees, customers, and community."

Robinson, who also is NHBSR's board secretary, points to Northeast Delta Dental's numerous recognition awards including Business of the Year and one of the state's Ten Best Companies to Work For in 2001 (an honor we won for five consecutive years) as reflective of its corporate culture, which covers everything from free fruit and coffee for employees to customer rebates for deadlines missed.

I work in the External Affairs department at Northeast Delta Dental, within the larger Marketing division. A tremendous volume of the work we do involves philanthropy. We support many community organizations in a wide variety of ways.

Over two dozen of our employees serve on the boards or advisory committees of over 60 community organizations. Some of those organizations hold meetings here—Horseshoe Pond Toastmasters, for example. Through our involvement in these organizations, we learn of ways we can help. Building social capital within the framework of social responsibility usually involves investments of both time and money.

You might think that trying to be successful in business is enough without spreading precious resources even thinner, but we find that our customers, and potential customers, are very interested in our record as being socially responsible.

A recent article in *PR News* says that with customers and other constituency groups demanding more socially responsible business practices, companies will not be able to distance themselves from these demands.

Are businesses who are building social capital important to New Hampshire? A resounding yes. New Hampshire's volunteer rate is 64% compared to the national average of 44%. That's commendable, but it still leaves lots of demand for volunteers and even more for financial investments to be made through the business community. While New Hampshire's average income is eighth highest in the nation, it ranks 48th in giving. That means that the business community has an important civic involvement role to play in New Hampshire.

The exciting part of this is that sometimes businesses are able to provide assistance in areas that coincide with their missions and about which they are passionate. That's how Northeast Delta Dental feels about oral health.

Through the Northeast Delta Dental Foundation, we award grants related to oral health through an application process. We purchase fluoride and provide toothbrushes for in-school fluoride rinse and oral health education programs, we purchase supplies and equipment for dental clinics, we give scholarships to students studying for careers as dental hygienists and dental assistants, and the list goes on.

It's truly a delightful experience to extend our corporate mission AS we build social capital in a socially responsible way. By contributing to oral health, we contribute to overall health in keeping with the findings of the former and present U.S. Surgeon Generals who have spoken out about the links between the two and the need to address oral health issues.

Part of the joy of building social capital, is that you are not "bowling alone." Many of the initiatives that we have undertaken have been through partnering with other organizations that share our concerns about making the availability of oral health more widespread. Some of these are private/public partnerships.

For example, two years ago, we worked with the State of New Hampshire and others to publish a grade-specific oral health curriculum for kindergarten through grade three, and we provided a set to every elementary school in the state.

We are a relatively small Foundation, but we are able to accomplish a great deal, in partnership with the organizations we help, by giving strategically. As some of you may know, few

communities in New Hampshire benefit from a fluoridated water supply. One year, the coordinator of a new in-school fluoride rinse program we were helping to get started panicked when just before the program launched she suddenly learned that they must have a sink specifically dedicated to that use. The Treasurer of our Foundation reacted quickly to the need by telling the coordinator to buy the sink, have it installed, and send us the bill. It's great to be able to "save the day" in the oral health arena from time to time.

Many of our organizations, that is yours and mine, may be building social capital within the framework of social responsibility, but are you building social capital individually? There are a multitude of ways you can become involved in a community organization and, at the same time, pursue your own interests. Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein would tell you confidently that this will add years to your life.

So if social capital is the **glue** that holds society together, get out your **glue** gun, browse the Volunteer New Hampshire website, and find hundreds of New Hampshire nonprofits that would welcome your help. Why? Because (pause) ***We're Better Together.***