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The Process of Outreach to Under-served communities by National Park Service Employees

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THE PROCESS OF OUTREACH TO UNDER-SERVED COMMUNITIES
BY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE EMPLOYEES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

by
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ABSTRACT

The National Park Service (NPS) has recognized a need to conduct outreach to people from communities that it recognizes as underserved. This paper offers an examination of outreach programs that were included in a “best practices” database by the NPS. Primary data for this study came from interviews, recorded and transcribed, with two groups of experts: NPS employees who developed or conducted outreach programs and senior managers in the NPS. Unlike traditional park programming, outreach programs are designed with non-visitors in mind. Outreach programs are supported by different rationales, have different goals, employ different methods, and offer different challenges than traditional programming. The following five themes were developed from interview data: 1) The rationale for outreach is often based on a desire to create healthy participants, not just healthy parks; 2) The goal of outreach is to create a sense of community between park employees and people who have not traditionally used parks; 3) Outreach uses methods that provide opportunities for person-to-person instead of person-to-resource connections; 4) Outreach is challenging because it can be a risky, uncomfortable experience for those conducting it; and 5) The way that the national park idea manifests is transformed during the process of outreach. Outreach offers a subtle solution to the “problem” of non-Anglo under participation.

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INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) has been more successful in serving people from Anglo backgrounds than people from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. During the 1960s, critics noted that most parks were only accessible to upper and middle class Anglos who could afford to travel long distances to reach them (Runte, 1997). Hostile attitudes and segregation made long-distance travel particularly difficult for minorities (Erickson, 2001). Likewise, the resources preserved in parks and the themes developed to interpret them traditionally reflected a European-American male perspective (Brown, 2001). Until recently, most parks and protected areas only offered interpretive media in English. Perhaps because of these factors many studies have documented higher visitation rates to national parks by Anglos than by people from other racial and ethnic communities (Floyd, 1999; Gramann, 1996; Solop, Hagen, & Ostergren, 2003).

Articles that review research into the relationship between race and ethnicity and use of parks and protected areas describe several theoretical explanations for “under-participation” (Floyd, 1998; Floyd, 1999; Floyd, Bocarro, & Thompson, 2008; Gramann, 1996; Shinew et al., 2006). Washburn’s (1978) marginality and ethnicity hypotheses provide a theoretical framework for many studies. The marginality hypothesis asserts that historical discrimination led to fewer economic resources for minorities, constraining their participation in wildland recreation. The ethnicity hypothesis asserts that cultural differences explain minority use or under-use of parks and protected areas. Researchers

have called for investigations into the possibility that perceived discrimination also constrains minority participation in outdoor recreation (Floyd, 1998; Shinew et al., 2006). Each of these theories implies that non-Anglos are not free to use parks and protected areas the way they would absent some limiting factor such as economic resources, cultural identity, or perceived discrimination.

The leaders of environmental groups and land management agencies also seem to see the relationship between non-Anglos and outdoor recreation as problematic. Former NPS Director Fran Mainella (personal communication, February 17, 2009), former Audubon Society President John Flicker (Sahagun, 2007), and former Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Fischer (Lage & Fischer, 1997) all expressed a commitment to become more relevant to people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Current planning documents from each organization call for more involvement with non-Anglo communities (National Audubon Society, 2007; National Park Service, 2005; Sierra Club, 2008).

The success of parks and protected areas depends on their ability to garner public support. Many of these areas are administered by public and non-profit land management agencies that must persuade legislative bodies or donors that their work is important enough to fund. Others raise all or part of their revenue from visitor use fees. If these agencies cannot provide a convincing case that their work is relevant to their constituents' needs, they will be unable to compete for scarce resources. Parks and protected areas

must remain visible, be perceived as providing a valuable benefit to society, and appeal to their constituents' sense of ownership. This relevance ensures that legislators, donors, and potential visitors will feel responsible for providing adequate funding.

The NPS organized a Second Century Commission to develop a vision for its next 100 years. The commission recently published a report that describes a desire to bridge the gap between the way that non-Anglos currently relate to parks and the way that the agency would like for them to relate to parks (2010). According to its report, “A sustained commitment to training, community outreach, and programs that authentically tell the stories of our country and connections to our resources must become part of the Service’s ongoing practices and values for this to be achieved” (7). Other management documents state that the agency:

“Must explore new and innovative approaches to inform a diverse constituency, many of whom may never set foot inside a park’s boundaries. A planned outreach program will be employed to firmly establish each park as part of the local, national, and global community. Clear objectives and tangible outcomes must be developed and measured over time” (National Park Service, 2006).

Outreach is the NPS’s answer to the “problem” of its current relationship with people from non-Anglo communities.

But outreach is uncharted territory for the NPS. The agency has developed an entire Interpretive Development Plan around its relationship with visitors (National Park Service, 2010). The plan includes well defined standards for informal interpretation,

formal interpretation, curriculum-based education, and interpretive media. Its standards are based on a combination of its mission and a wealth of literature on the process of interpreting park resources (see Table 1).

A definition and standards for outreach programs are conspicuously absent from the Interpretive Development Plan. For the purposes of this study a program qualified as outreach if its primary audience is an under-served community. Specifically, this study focuses on programs tailored for people from traditionally under-served racial or ethnic communities.

Table 1: Definitions and Principles of Interpretation

Author	Definition	Principles
Tilden (1977)	“an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interpretation must relate to the personality or experience of the visitor 2. “Interpretation is revelation based upon information,” not information as such 3. “Interpretation is an art which combines many arts” 4. “The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.” 5. “Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.” 6. Interpretation for children should follow a wholly different approach than interpretation for adults
Ham (1992)	“an approach to communicating”	“interpretation must be enjoyable, relevant, organized, have a theme”
Lewis (1981)	“the bringing together of a unique interpreter, a unique visitor, and a unique world, all of which are in the process of change”	
NAI (Brochu & Merriman, 2008)	“a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource”	Interpretation must be enjoyable, relevant, organized, have a theme, have a purpose and require you (the interpreter)
NPS (Larsen, 2003)	“to establish the value of preserving park resources by helping audiences discover the meanings and significance associated with those resources”	$(KA + KR) \times AT = IO$ where KA = Knowledge of the Audience KR = Knowledge of the Resource AT = Appropriate Interpretive Techniques IO = Interpretive Opportunities Themes are best when they connect a tangible object to an intangible or universal concept

There is reason to believe that the process of outreach is very different from the process of resource interpretation because the audiences for each type of program are so different. The audience for interpretive programs is park visitors, and the process of resource interpretation hinges on the voluntary nature of park visits. For example, Falk (2001) defines resource interpretation as “free choice learning.” Likewise, Tilden (1977) emphasizes that visitors are in the park voluntarily, although they sometimes do not know why. He defines the interpreter’s challenge as figuring out:

“What to do; what to say; how to point the way; how to connect the visitor’s own life with something, even one thing, among all the custodial treasures; how finally to elicit from the aimless visitor the explicit thought: ‘This is something I believe I could get interested in’” (105).

Since outreach programs target a completely different audience – people who do *not* come to parks voluntarily, the purpose of this research is to elucidate a framework for essential elements in the process of outreach in order to distinguish it from the practice of interpretation. Specifically I have the following research questions:

1. How does the process of outreach differ from the process of resource interpretation?
2. What rationales are given for outreach programs?
3. What goal or goals do these programs try to accomplish?
4. What methods do they employ?
5. What challenges do they offer?

Some answer to these questions is necessary if the NPS is to develop “clear objectives and tangible outcomes” for outreach as it has for resource interpretation. It is my hope that this research can begin to elucidate a framework for this work.

METHOD

To answer these questions I conducted a case study of the National Park Service. Case studies aim to provide vicarious experience from which readers can make naturalistic generalizations, much as they do from personal experience (Stake, 2005). An instrumental case study of the NPS will help readers to construct knowledge about the process of outreach to people from under-served communities. I have chosen outreach by the NPS because it is a highly visible park agency that has expressed a commitment to conducting outreach to under-served communities. As a model for other managers of parks and protected areas, the National Park Service provides a strong instrumental case.

Stake (2005) writes that a case is a “specific, unique, bounded system.” The NPS provides Fundamentals training to all permanent employees to familiarize them with the National Park Service’s mission and history. NPS employees are guided by management plans and policies that interpret the agency’s mission on both service-wide and site-specific levels. The outreach programs that they create are designed to meet management objectives laid out in those plans. NPS employees’ strong mission orientation makes the agency’s outreach to under-served communities a clearly bounded case.

In 2008 the NPS published an online database of “best practices” programs. Park superintendents were asked to choose up to five programs that they considered exemplary for inclusion in the database (A. Turnbull, personal communication, 2 February 2009). Each entry in the database included information about the intended

audience and language(s) used for the program. In order to provide an inclusive description of outreach, I used the following broad criteria to identify eight entries in this database as outreach programs: they were conducted by the NPS, they were designed for families, and they engaged an under-served group and/or were presented in a language other than English.

The eight outreach programs I selected represented a variety of park sites and program types. Programs took place in four national parks, one national memorial, one national preserve, and one national recreation area. Of these parks, three were within a one hour drive of a city with a population of at least 600,000. Program types included three activity books, three experiential programs (e.g. habitat restoration), and two more-traditional ranger programs.

I obtained IRB approval and then recruited participants in person and through email. All of the potential participants I contacted were willing to share their experiences with outreach in their particular settings. I collected informed consent; interviewed participants; and collected written materials that were developed for programs, such as advertisements, outlines, and activity booklets. The first set of interviews was with seven experts who designed or implemented outreach programs identified from the best practices database. (One expert represented two programs in the database.) An eighth interview was of an expert who gave one of the same programs included in the database, but in a different park.

The second set of interviews was of four senior NPS managers – a former director, two regional directors, and a superintendent – to provide a different expert perspective. Senior management staff may have their own rationales and goals for outreach, consider different methods appropriate for outreach, and perceive a different set of challenges in outreach. Their understanding of outreach is important because they provide the impetus for new programs and shape existing programs through feedback in the form of evaluations or budgets.

These interviews were conducted through a combination of telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, and email between February and April 2010. Telephone and face-to-face interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview framework followed Seidman's (2001) three-stage method: questions progressed from prompts regarding the life histories of respondents with outreach, to prompts for descriptions of outreach, to prompts that solicited reflections on the meaning of outreach. This format was used to develop rapport with the participants and to encourage them to describe the context in which their programs took place. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to address topics in more detail. Interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes.

I analyzed data, including interview transcripts and written materials. Data from the first four interviews were coded at a specific-topic level, and then specific-topic codes were sorted into more-general topic codes. As a verification strategy, data analysis was started a second time; data from all the interviews were coded at the general-topic level

and then at the specific-topic level. One hallmark of qualitative methods is that data collection and analysis can happen simultaneously. Thus interviews conducted later in the data collection phase benefited from analysis conducted on earlier interviews. The coding methodology was checked by comparing my analysis with the analyses of two other experienced coders and by confirming my interpretations with all of the research participants.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

I identified four general topics that were directly related to our research questions: motivation, goal, method, and barrier. Each of these topics was mutually exclusive (e.g. the same section of text could not be coded with both motivation and barrier). Four additional general topics were identified from specific topics in the first few interviews that were coded: need, outcome, interpretation, and staff involvement. These topics were not mutually exclusive (e.g. the same section of text could be coded with method, interpretation, and staff involvement). Table 2 shows the relationship between general and specific topics.

Table 2: Definition of Topics

General topic	Definition	Specific topics
Motivations	What motivates the NPS to do outreach?	Absence, awareness, employment, grant, health, misconceptions, nature deficit, no sense of place, PBS (Ken Burns), policy, right thing to do, survival, transience
Goals	What goals is the NPS trying to accomplish with its outreach programs?	Appreciation, change minds, comfort, community, connection, employment, engage, experience/immersion, health, introduce, stewardship, teach skills
Methods	What methods does the NPS think are appropriate for outreach programs?	Back up to basics, care, comfort, experience/immersion, honesty, informal, knowledge of the audience, language, listen, multiple visits, partner/share, person-to-person, real vs. virtual, reflect, set stage, special experience,
Barriers	What barriers does the NPS face when it tries to do outreach?	Curriculum, discomfort, funding, lack of expertise, language, logistics, real vs. virtual, recruitment, schedule, staffing, too much effort, transience, transportation, uniforms
Need	What needs does outreach try to address?	Experience, how to enter and enjoy resource, improve health, introduce, options, positive experience, sense of place, skills, what is a park, what to do
Outcome	What are the outcomes of outreach?	Change minds, comfort, community, connection, employment, enjoyment (fun), excitement, familiarity, knowledge, multiple visits, sharing
Interpretation	How does outreach compare with interpretation?	Back up to basics, comfort, connection to interpreter, connection to resource, honesty, knowledge of audience, knowledge of resource, person-to-person, real vs. virtual, related to/same as interpretation
Staff Involvement	How are staff involved in outreach?	* This topic was so idiosyncratic that specific topics were not repeated.

I developed seven codes from the specific topics I identified: choice, comfort, communication/community, effort, health, logistics, and real vs. virtual. Table 3 shows the relationship between codes and specific topics. I used these codes to develop five themes:

1. The rationale for outreach is often based on a desire to create healthy participants, not just healthy parks.
2. The goal of outreach is to create a sense of community between park employees and people who have not traditionally visited parks.
3. Outreach uses methods that provide opportunities for person-to-person instead of person-to-resource connections.
4. Outreach is challenging because it can be a risky, uncomfortable experience for those conducting it.
5. The way that the national park idea manifests is transformed during the process of outreach.

The following sections discuss each of the above themes in detail.

Table 3: Definition of Codes

Code	Specific topics
Choice	Change minds, options, what to do
Comfort	Appreciation, comfort, discomfort, enjoyment (fun), excitement, how to enter and enjoy resource, knowledge, knowledge of resource, multiple visits, positive experience, teach skills
Communication/ Community	Absence, back up to basics, care, community, connection, familiarity, informal, introduce, knowledge of audience, lack of expertise, language, listen, misconceptions, PBS (Ken Burns), person-to-person, reflect, sense of place, set stage, special experience, stewardship, transience, uniforms, what is a park
Effort	Policy, related to/same as interpretation, too much effort
Health	Health, improve health, nature deficit, survival
Logistics	Funding, grant, curriculum, logistics, schedule, staffing, transportation
Partnering	Employment, engage, partner/share, recruitment
Real vs. Virtual	Experience/immersion, honesty, real vs. virtual, right thing to do

1. The rationale for outreach is often based on a desire to create healthy participants, not just healthy parks

NPS planning documents reason that the survival of the system depends on support from diverse constituencies (National Parks Second Century Commission, 2010), and several employees echoed this rationale when asked why the National Park Service

should do outreach. As one person said:

“Parks could disappear if the right combination of legislators got in. They could vote the parks out, because it just takes an act of Congress to decommission a park or the pen of the President to decommission a monument. Without public support, we could become very irrelevant.”

The health of the NPS was a concern, but employees seemed equally concerned with the health of outreach program participants. The need to combat “nature deficit disorder,” described by Louv (2008), was a recurring rationale for outreach programs, as was a desire to give program participants the sense of place or home that employees believed they were missing. One employee said that “National parks are really for the people, and they’re owned by the people, and that ownership does something. Especially for people who don’t have a lot. It gives them a sense of pride, over a place.” In claiming that “it’s the right thing to do,” employees expressed a feeling that outreach is equally important to care for the park and for the people who should be visiting it.

2. The goal of outreach is to create a sense of community between park employees and people who have not traditionally visited parks

Insight into the goal of outreach programs comes from asking employees directly about their goals and from looking at the needs that they tried to address and the outcomes that they thought were noteworthy. Several employees mentioned stewardship

as a goal of outreach. This is not surprising given the NPS mission:

“To conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations”
(National Park Service Organic Act, 1916).

This mission naturally pushes employees to turn all of the people with whom they interact into stewards. But employees’ nuanced understanding of healthy parks (as encompassing healthy program participants) indicates a nuanced understanding of stewardship. Outreach accomplishes the NPS mission in a unique way.

Some of the most revealing comments on the goal of outreach came in response to questions that asked employees to compare outreach with interpretation. Significant differences emerged when they were asked to unpack their first answer – that outreach and interpretation have the same goal. Whereas the goal of interpretation is to reveal the meanings and significance of the park, the goal of outreach is to create a connection between a participant and the park. One person said:

“I think that there’re some moments in programs like this ... where maybe you’re stepping outside of that goal of that interpretive equation and you’re just trying to establish a relationship. You know, you’re just sitting next to a Native American kid on a bus showing him... showing that student that you’re a park ranger and you’re interested in them.”

Establishing a relationship by convincing a participant that you care about him or her is a necessary first step in creating a connection. Other employees mentioned the importance of establishing a relationship in terms of introducing participants to the park, of “backing up” to basics, and of “setting the stage.”

Several employees expressed a desire to make participants feel like they and the park form a community. One employee told an anecdote in response to a question about the goal of outreach:

“I was talking with a mom some time, and she was telling me about the time when her family came up from Mexico, and when they got here and how different it was. And when they were there she was talking about that she looked around and saw the plants that were similar to the ones where she lived in Mexico, and that gave her comfort because she still knew that it wasn’t so different and so new, that she could still be here and it would still be okay.”

The employee was both touched and proud that the park could be so integral to a program participant’s well-being. Other employees mentioned a belief that outreach accomplishes the NPS mission by creating a community whose health depends on parks.

Among some of the frontline staff and among all of the senior management staff, instilling such a sense of community that outreach participants become employees was a goal. One employee talked about watching kids who participated in outreach programs

grow into young adults with deep voices and thinking about bringing them on as rangers:

“Being here this long, I’ve been able to look at these kids and say, “man these kids have potential.” Some of these kids are so into the park, it’s like why not – you’ve already invested so much time into them – why not continue to do so, and have them contribute as adults back to the park or the Park Service?”

3. Outreach uses methods that provide opportunities for person-to-person instead of person-to-resource connections

Because it has community as its goal, outreach really diverges from interpretation in terms of its methods. The interpretive equation, which was developed to teach entry level interpretive rangers about interpretation, gives equal weight to knowledge of the audience and knowledge of park resources in creating interpretive opportunities (Larsen, 2003). Several employees claimed that knowledge of the audience becomes far more significant in outreach. They referred to the “special” nature of outreach audiences; one employee noted that “there’s also a way that [program participants] live with the land that’s different than other people who come to the park – the general park visitors. And we have to be aware of that.” Employees expressed a sense that, while outreach comes with a “need to step outside our box,” doing so is relatively easy because “you may have had a good chance to research or to know either more about the organization or the group you're working with or the community that they're coming from.”

Many employees stressed the use of good communication techniques to develop knowledge of an unfamiliar audience. In the words of one employee:

“Like every kid wants to tell you their story, but sometimes with working with different audiences it’s important to listen to those stories because maybe they’re saying more than just how every kid raises their hand ‘One time this happened and that happened.’ I think in these programs if we make time for that, it goes a long a way.”

Another claimed that the key to good outreach is “truly listening, giving the people, the public, an opportunity to sincerely and honestly be heard.”

Employees believe that good communication requires them to remove barriers that might make participants feel too uncomfortable to speak sincerely and honestly. They reported that approaching programs less formally helps. One employee heard from program participants that rangers should “try to come to our level; like don’t come in your full dress uniform and that sort of thing. If you want to meet with us casually, meet with us casually.” They also reported that avoiding language that may have very different meanings for National Park Service staff and program participants helps. Very basic words like “resource” and “interpretation” often have different meanings to outreach participants and NPS employees. One employee noted, “Unknowingly, we can be our own worst enemy because we use language that many segments of a community don’t understand.”

Finally, good communication requires employees to be genuine. As one employee said of outreach, “You do it with heart and honesty and just being a real person that’s just there.” Several employees talked about providing programs that “immerse” participants in park resources to create familiarity or intimacy – sometimes literally:

“I guess one of my favorite moments was when we were on that wet hike and everybody gets sort of freaked out at first, walking in. It's an uncomfortable feeling to be squishing around in mud and stirring up the... The water's clear, but you're stirring up the dirt. Anyway, the kids were kind of all... Everybody tends to fall and trip and it's an uneven surface underneath with the rocks and the kids were all sort of clustered in tight near mom and dad or with the ranger on the way in, and on the way back out, the kids were just running ahead. They were – you know – completely comfortable out there and they were cruising ahead without... Even we had a couple younger ones who had been holding my hand and they just took off and didn't need me anymore.”

Genuineness becomes especially important when outreach programs take place outside the park. Here employees need to bring “either the feelings or samples or some part of the resource with [them], whether its photos or cones or whatever. In the park they can just reach down and pick up the cone and take a look at it.”

In general, the people who give outreach programs have immense power. As a person, they establish the trust that is necessary for programs to even take place, both by example:

“Some of the girls were even saying – which surprised me – that they were scared to death that they couldn’t do it, but having the female ranger demonstrating to them made them feel like they could do it.”

And by talking through fears:

“Usually with kids, they might be a little nervous cause they’ve heard about something like a coyote or a mountain lion attacking someone. Usually you can talk to them and discuss things with and they usually feel better after we’ve talked to them.”

NPS employees are key in forming the sense of community that is the goal of outreach.

4. Outreach is challenging because it can be a risky, uncomfortable experience for those conducting it

Though outreach can be extremely rewarding, it involves significant personal risk. The openness and honesty necessary for good communication leave employees vulnerable, especially since they are working with audiences that are unfamiliar. One employee said,

“When you do outreach you don't know if you're going to be able to help them or if they're going to figure it out or if anybody's going to come to you talk or if they're going to get what you're trying to provide. So I think there is personal risk

in doing all that just because it's probably a greater risk of being rejected, both as an agency and what you're personally trying to provide.”

Outreach can also be uncomfortable since it involves leaving the familiar environment of the park. “In order to reach out to certain groups, we need to find out where they go, where they hang out, and we need to be in those places. And those places can be uncomfortable for some people to be in.”

5. The way that the national park idea manifests is transformed during the process of outreach

Being in new and uncomfortable places involves more than just going to new territory in a literal sense. Because outreach involves openness and honesty, listening, and establishing relationships, it pushes NPS employees into new territory in the figurative sense as well. Several employees indicated that outreach was a transformative experience for them on a personal level, enlarging their sense of community or causing them to re-examine what they thought they knew about their own cultures. In other cases, outreach programs led to research that changed the significance of NPS sites. For example, one employee explained that – in response to claims by employees that they did not know enough about the history of Hispanic homesteaders in the park to share it with the public – the park commissioned research that revealed wholly new aspects of its story.

Both the personal and park site transformations wrought by the process of outreach indicate that outreach does not merely involve assimilating people from under-

served communities into an extant park culture. All the changes that NPS employees go through and all the new park meanings that are uncovered while conducting outreach amount to a change in the way the national park idea manifests. The community mentioned in the second theme is truly a community in the sense of a coming together; the process of outreach is dialectical rather than rhetorical.

CONCLUSION

Outreach to people from under-served communities by the NPS is intensely personal: it is motivated by concern for the health of people; its goal is to create a larger community of “park people”; it uses methods that create person-to-person connections; and it may not succeed – or even be taken up – because it involves so much personal risk and discomfort for those who do it. The NPS employees that were interviewed do not see their work in outreach as attempting to remove barriers to participation that have been identified by researchers. Instead they see their work as a process of changing the relationship between people from under-served communities and parks.

The NPS seeks to create a world in which parks are “firmly establish[ed] ... as part of the local, national, and global community” (National Park Service, 2006). It can do so by developing standards for outreach programs that emphasize the good communication techniques that model outreach programs emphasize. It also must encourage employees to do outreach by mitigating the personal risk and discomfort they face and by rewarding them for doing so.

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