

A UNV's perspective

As an SME management adviser and senior UN volunteer (UNV), Toshiyuki Yamana was deputed to Pakistan as part of the APO's Member Country Support Program for six months from April 2004 and thereafter to Lao PDR for the Development of Demonstration Companies project from July 2005. In cooperation with the NPOs, he assisted six model companies in Pakistan and four in Lao PDR in enhancing their productivity. Yamana shares his thoughts on the role of UNVs with APO News readers below.

Volunteer-minded individuals with professional experience can do a lot to help SMEs improve their productivity by offering consultancy services. The multiplier effects created in the country at large after the completion of a project are also a source of satisfaction to UNVs. The professional expertise is only the tip of the iceberg, however. Perhaps the most important qualifications for becoming a UNV expert deputed under APO programs are intangibles. They can be expressed in the three key phrases "taking things slowly but steadily," "capacity building," and "following up."

While giving advice to SMEs and imparting the practical know-how to cope with identified problems, UNV experts must ensure that the communication is not one-way. The experts should feel that they are working with SME owners and staff based on mutual understanding. Even though cross-cultural communication may present difficulties, UNV experts take the time to see the other parties' viewpoints. Those who are easily frustrated or discouraged or expect immediate results should not apply for the role of a UNV. Instead, successful UNVs expect joint efforts to go slowly and steadily, with sufficient time allotted for two-way communication.

The NPO counterparts assigned to work with UNVs are keys to the success of any project. The counterparts are the ones who will take initiatives in creating multiplier effects and continuing projects after the UNVs return home. Ideally, NPO counterparts should have excellent communication skills, be highly motivated and responsible, and be old enough to have good background experience. The UNV's task is to train the counterpart on the job until he or she has the ability to act as an independent, full-fledged consultant. UNVs should be generous with their time in building up the capacity of their NPO counterparts. As far as possible, UNVs should stay in the background and let their NPO counterpart trainees take the initiative in the field.

The procedure in offering consultancy services to SMEs is generally: 1) interviews with top managers; 2) onsite problem diagnosis; 3) presentation of findings and recommendations; 4) devising action plans to improve crucial issues; 5) monitoring implementation of action plans; and 6) frequent visits for follow-up to ensure tangible results. To function well, all enterprises should observe the rules of punctuality, commitment, and communication. However, this does not always occur in SMEs. In developing countries, circumstances beyond SMEs' control may intervene, or cultural barriers may exist, making it difficult to adhere to schedules, follow action plans, or stay in touch with other parties involved in a project. It is therefore vital for UNVs to visit their consulting SMEs frequently and follow up on productivity enhancement efforts constantly, making modifications to original plans if warranted.

Volunteering and putting one's knowledge and skills to use in helping others can be a great source of personal and professional satisfaction. Projects sponsored by the UN and APO offer a wide scope for volunteerism, and I would urge those with the time, energy, and ability to become involved. 