Research
Redefining the Corporate-Community Partnership
By Daniela Blei
The conversation inspired Gibson’s ambitious social impact research. In a new paper, Gibson, now a professor of management at Pepperdine University’s Graziadio School of Business, presents an evidence-based model for developing and sustaining mutually beneficial corporate-community partnerships. Around the world, companies invest billions of dollars in the communities in which they do business, “but it’s often a one-shot or arm’s-length approach,” Gibson says, “and the funds fail to address the priorities and needs of the community.” In some cases, corporate investments do more harm than good, management researchers have shown. Eschewing such failed approaches, Gibson devised a program that required corporate participants to spend six weeks to three months living in communities—many rural, remote, and at-risk—to establish meaningful ties to local partners there.

“In this spectacular article, Gibson asks an important question,” says Alan Meyer, a professor emeritus of management at the University of Oregon’s Lundquist College of Business. “How does the implementation of corporate community investment contribute to mutual development in corporations and communities?” Gibson’s methodology and model-building approach untangle the reciprocal process of social change.

Beginning with a handful of small companies, Gibson enlisted a nonprofit organization to serve as a matchmaker between Indigenous communities with specific needs for expertise and Australian corporations with the expertise needed. “What sets this program apart from others is that community members identified the priorities,” Gibson says. “This was not an external set of experts coming in to tell the communities how to develop their community,” Gibson says. Soon working with a consortium of 11 of Australia’s largest companies, all of which sought to achieve greater social impact and sustained returns on their community investments.

Gibson then used qualitative methods—reviewing interviews, observation notes, narratives, and reflection journals—to study what was happening in the community. She also monitored the behavior of company participants and followed what was transpiring within the corporation more broadly.

“Volunteers from the companies became members of the community,” Gibson says. “Companies continued to pay their salaries although they were not doing their corporate jobs. Instead, they were working in the community, spending time socializing with community members, having meals together, going to cultural and sporting events, and doing regular things people do in their neighborhoods.” This symbiotic approach spurred behavioral changes that led to long-term impacts for both the companies and communities.

After analyzing the data, Gibson developed a theory of successful codevelopment, whereby relational processes, such as “mutual perspective-taking, reciprocating respect, and communal advocacy,” led to positive impacts for both sides. Indigenous partners gained dignity, proactivity, and strategic planning and capability. Corporate partners, in turn, saw increases in intercultural competencies, improvements in strategic behavior, and insights into where operations should be located and how they should unfold. The depth and longevity of development surprised the companies, Indigenous partners, and even Gibson.

“Just as there was trepidation on the part of the corporate volunteers, there was trepidation on the part of the Indigenous partners,” she says.

The project has produced new aged care and youth facilities, literacy programs, and nutritional and substance abuse campaigns, as well as increases in high school graduation rates and reductions in crime in the communities. On the corporate side, there were improvements in employee performance, strengthened commitment to the organization, and reputational benefits for the company. Gibson’s model suggests that a willingness to engage with the community and spend time there understanding its priorities to codesign initiatives can create a deep and lasting impact.

“Gibson’s respect for her Indigenous informants—as well as that of the corporations she studied—are exemplary and inspiring,” Meyer says. “Research like this makes the world a better place.”
