A Simple Lesson about the Power of Collaboration

This is the story of a grassroots farmworker advocacy group, which, through perseverance and ingenuity, forged an improbable alliance of tomato buyers, growers, and farmworkers, bringing life-changing benefits to Florida’s tomato pickers.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) began life 20 years ago in the hardscrabble town of Immokalee, in the heart of Florida’s growing fields, with a mission to improve the livelihood of farmworkers.

Several years later, an epiphany came to the cofounders of the CIW—Greg Asbed, Lucas Benitez, Laura Germino—and several other farmworkers who have since moved on: the power to help farmworkers resides with the buyers and not the growers of tomatoes, a reflection of the power of corporate purchasers of many commodities. From this, the “penny per pound” concept was born. Basically, buyers would pay an extra $0.01 per pound for tomatoes, which would be passed on directly to farmworkers. With the current “bucket rate” for farmworkers at about $0.016 per pound, that “penny per pound” is a life changer for farmworkers but not an exorbitant burden for consumers.

Over the past decade, the CIW has won over corporate buyers, one after another. By 2013, major fast food restaurants, food service companies, and many supermarkets had signed on. Equally important, Florida’s tomato growers also joined this partnership of buyers, growers, and farmworkers. A key initiative of this partnership was the establishment of the Fair Food Program, which, besides “penny per pound,” provides standards and audits for the fair treatment of farmworkers.

Earlier this year, Walmart Stores Inc. became a partner, a landmark event given Walmart’s position in the supermarket segment. Even more, Walmart, having understood the CIW’s “business model,” has expressed interest in extending this model to their other agricultural purchases.

Twenty years after the CIW movement began, the Fair Food Program is finally in place. When fully implemented, for thousands of Florida tomato farmworkers, “penny per pound” translates into a life-changing 60 percent wage increase. (Although, partly because of the seasonal nature of the work, it only raises average annual income from $10,000 to $16,000. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the 2013 poverty threshold for a two-person household is $15,600.) Equally important, farmworkers now truly have a constructive voice in how they are treated in the field. Looking toward a more distant future, the CIW is working with Walmart on their broader vision, which, if implemented, could affect a far greater number of agricultural workers throughout America.

Over these same 20 years, the CIW’s modus operandi has evolved from adversarial to collaborative. Throughout, the CIW was the grateful recipient of two streams of encouragement, financial support from several foundations and church groups, and recognition and honors from the United Nations, U.S. Department of State, Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights, Roosevelt Institute, and Prince Charles of the United Kingdom. But none of the above is as rewarding as the signs of hope on the faces of the countless tomato pickers.

While the good-faith partnership among buyers, growers, and the CIW that created the Fair Food Program may have been a rare occurrence in the annals of labor relations, it presents a model that others may follow. Walmart is far from the only corporation that could improve its image and its reality by treating workers more fairly and generously. Direct government intervention is not the only strategy for achieving meaningful improvements in the lives of underpaid workers. Perhaps government could help corporate leadership recognize the benefits that may accrue from such collaborations with advocacy groups. Enlightened self-interest may do the rest.