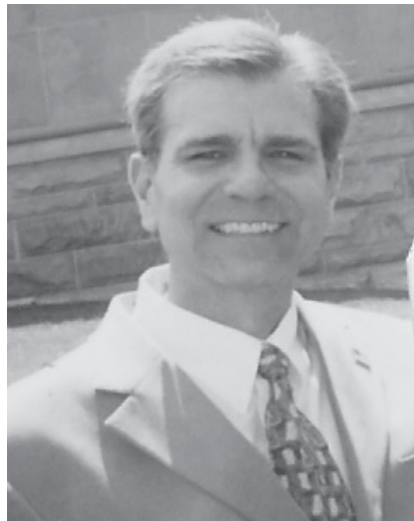


# Helping Hands: A Conversation with Samuel Voorhies

*Samuel Voorhies is senior director for organizational effectiveness at World Vision International, a faith-based relief, development, and advocacy organization working for the well-being of all people, especially children. Established in 1950 to care for orphans in Asia, World Vision has grown to embrace the larger issues of community development and advocacy for the poor and the oppressed.*

*In his current role, Voorhies is part of a team leading a global reorganization of World Vision's International Partnership. His focus is on strategic engagement to equip senior leaders to lead and manage change effectively. In his previous role as director of leadership and organizational development, Voorhies led a team that established World Vision's corporate university, which offers a program called Pathways to Leadership that provides accredited, graduate-level training in nongovernmental and nonprofit organization leadership and management. The program has trained more than 430 World Vision leaders from more than eighty countries.*

*Voorhies has been with World Vision for twenty-five years and served twelve of those years in Africa, working in twenty-three African countries and helping to establish World Vision's regional office in Zimbabwe. For the past ten years his focus has been on Asia, across fourteen countries. Voorhies has been involved in all aspects of*



*World Vision's operations, from starting up grassroots programs to managing global initiatives and serving personally in relief and development efforts.*

*Voorhies holds a Ph.D. degree in international development education from Florida State University and an M.A. degree in education from Wheaton College Graduate School. He is a recipient of numerous official honors, including the Outstanding Young Men of America award and the American Legion of Leadership award.*

*Jeffrey Yip, a research associate at CCL-Asia, recently spoke with Voorhies about his experiences with and insights on the role of humanitarian leadership in today's world.*

**JY: Reflecting on your career with World Vision, what are some of the personal highlights and challenges you have experienced in your work?**

**SV:** World Vision has three major focuses—relief, community development, and advocacy. In the area of relief, World Vision provides emergency assistance to save lives, such as in the famine in Ethiopia or the tsunami in Asia. In the area of community development, we facilitate a process of self-help in the community with the aim of enabling local people to better care for themselves. In the area of advocacy, we speak up for the rights of children on both the local and the global levels.

World Vision globally is growing very rapidly. Human talent and developing leadership capacity are our biggest challenges. We can raise all the money we want, but if we don't have capable people to design programs and deliver them locally, it won't happen. Our strategy is to identify and develop local leaders and not rely on expatriates.

Most of my work has been at the national and global levels in the areas of program development, leadership, and evaluation: developing leadership capacities across all levels—indigenous, national, and global leadership. This work has been a tremendous education for me, enriching me in ways I never thought possible. To facilitate transformational development in communities of need, we

have to be transformed ourselves. I would say our biggest challenge is growing our own leaders.

**JY: How is World Vision situated to facilitate this organizational and societal transformation?**

**SV:** What's fascinating about World Vision is that we have evolved through stages to organize and operate on a federal structure. In the 1970s we went through a process where we decentralized decision-making power from our office in the United States to other support or fund-raising offices internationally. The aim was to distribute decision making and authority, so that all the members of World Vision could have an equal say. By 1995, we had moved to a federal model and gave every member of the World Vision partnership an equal representation on the World Vision Council—our governing body. This includes not only fund-raising offices but also all program field offices. Our board today is truly multicultural, with members from some twenty countries.

**JY: What was the impetus for moving from a central headquarters to a federal model, and what was the impact on the organization?**

**SV:** As a mission-focused organization, we see ourselves as part of a global community. Our identity is not ethnocentric. We seek to model our approach to participatory sustainable development in our organizational structure and governance. It doesn't matter if I'm American or Kenyan, we are all enriched by other cultures that we learn from and identify with as part of the same community. The federal model of work helps us to gain both local and global strengths, though in some ways it can be chaotic, as there is a lot of ambiguity around the way it operates and decisions take longer.

Diversity, however, is invaluable. It helps us to understand and make

decisions that are culturally relevant instead of relying on our own cultural worldview frameworks. Clearly, this approach takes longer. It is much more relationally intensive. It is a negotiating and collaboration model. There is no higher central command, so there is greater ownership of decisions.

**JY: How have the context and demands for leadership at World Vision evolved over your career?**

**SV:** With globalization, leadership has clearly become more complex.

My work in developing leadership capacities across all levels—indigenous, national, and global—has been a tremendous education for me, enriching me in ways I never thought possible.

We've gone from a Western-dominated organization to a multicultural organization that is led by multicultural teams. Our current board is made up of twenty-four people from twenty countries. Within our leadership team, we have very different worldviews regarding operation, in terms of how people interpret, perceive, and communicate. So one has to be able to facilitate a process of decision making that values and respects different cultural perspectives. Leaders cannot simply assume

that other people will think and operate as they do. A multicultural perspective is crucial for leadership in this new environment.

**JY: What are the challenges and demands for leaders at the national level?**

**SV:** A leadership role in World Vision at the national level is one of the most demanding, complex jobs there is. It requires you to relate to the poorest person in the country and to understand poverty, with all its social, economic, and political dynamics. At the same time, World Vision leaders need to relate to high-level government officials, business leaders, and individual sponsors. In our global context, our leaders have to be multicultural and are required to communicate and work across boundaries with partners from typically fifteen to twenty different countries. Typically, our national offices are managing \$50 million to \$100 million worth of program funds and up to three thousand staff members of diverse national and ethnic origins. These offices have to be effective in leading the development and delivery of complex socioeconomic development programs, raising funds locally and globally, and advocating for the benefit of the poor—particularly children.

**JY: What distinguishes someone who is able to take on the responsibilities of national leadership from someone who is able to do so at the global level?**

**SV:** The difference is moving from a programmatic perspective to a strategic perspective. One has to move beyond the details of implementation or administration to be able to scan the horizon analytically around strategic issues. An outward-looking perspective on the environment and toward the future is essentially the difference between leading and managing.

We expect global leaders to practice a twin-citizenship model of leadership. We want them to have local identity, ownership, and cultural relevance, but also to have the ability to see their work from a global perspective, to understand how local decisions impact the global dynamics of the organization.

**JY: How does your organization prepare national leaders for global challenges?**

**SV:** We developed the Pathways to Leadership program to bring a more systematic approach to developing leaders within the organization—through coaching, mentoring, and formal programs of leadership development and performance management. This involves a paradigm shift for managers—to see their roles as going beyond enabling their teams to get the task done to being coaches who develop others on the job.

**JY: What are some of the challenges faced by World Vision in coordinating relief work across geographical and cultural boundaries in Asia?**

**SV:** We experienced this a few years ago through the tsunami in Asia. National offices that had been operating fairly independently for years were suddenly faced with a cross-boundary crisis. In addition, they faced a surge of relief money from countries outside of Asia. The offices were stretched between managing cross-boundary partnerships and a pressing need to deliver services quickly—a major challenge.

We learned a lot from that to improve our model, in particular regarding how decisions are made across boundaries. In situations in countries with politically unstable environments and in rebel-controlled areas, although we may think we have the solutions, the strategies of outsiders may not work. The failure of such strategies has an impact on

the lives of local people and may even endanger them.

Looking back on our experiences, we have in the past sent in expatriates who weren't prepared to operate cross-culturally. In response to unpredictable emergencies we have had to deploy people quickly and have not always been able to find people who have local experience or cross-cultural knowledge. We are now building this knowledge into our system because we don't want to delay the response by not having the right people available. We have to prepare

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people internally or have an external pool ready for such responses.

**JY: What capacities and infrastructure were in place that enabled World Vision to respond to the tsunami in Asia?**

**SV:** In the case of the tsunami and other relief cases, our ability to respond has been significant and effective because we had local capacity. After the tsunami, we already had people on the ground working because of our local office and infrastructure in the affected areas. We didn't need to bring in

people to start meeting the need; they were there and were responding immediately.

Investing in local capacity and having people on the ground has served us well. You get the perspective of the local person who can tell you what works or doesn't. You don't have to make a decision from a distance or assume that you know what is going to happen. The good intentions of an outsider may be harmful when implemented in a different culture. I have seen this happen many times. We have been able to overcome that because of partnerships with local people on the ground who are savvy about the social, cultural, and political contexts.

**JY: What are some of the lessons that World Vision has learned that have worked in developing local partnerships?**

**SV:** In our work it is important to understand local cultures and to work in appropriate ways that make sense in those cultural contexts. This includes a cultural understanding of how decisions are made, how leadership operates, and how work is managed. Without this understanding, we may resort to applying familiar solutions or strategies, which may in turn do more harm than good. For example, in repairing or building clean water wells in a village, we won't put in a well unless the community has committed to this being a primary need and unless they volunteer people to be trained to maintain the well. Any initiative has to be both economically and socially sustainable, and that requires strong local partnerships to lead and organize the community around it.

**JY: So an understanding of the cultural context is critical in relief work. How can one learn to work effectively across cultural boundaries?**

**SV:** If you take a river as a metaphor, crossing cultural boundaries is not just looking at the surface of the river, it is appreciating the currents that lie beneath. This determines whether one will sink or swim. A river has multiple currents, and though from the surface it may look as though there is only one current, there are multiple layers with different speeds and different intensities. The different layers are often what prevents you from seeing what lies beneath. Culture is that way too. When we think of culture, we often think of just one level or layer of nationality and ethnicity. But there are many more layers to consider.

For example, in Africa you have urban-rural boundaries—differences in education, worldviews, and religion. In Kenya, for example, where I lived for seven years, there are thirty-two major tribes and ethnic groups. A Kenyan growing up in Nairobi and one growing up in Masai land are as different as an American and a Kenyan. Then you add organizational culture along with gender and personality and you start to capture all the currents.

Becoming a *cultural learner* is key. It requires an awareness of who you are, a comfort level and understanding of your own culture, and a heightened sense of paying attention to new cultural cues.

**JY: How does one build trust as an outsider in a new and foreign culture?**

**SV:** I think the key is to understand what trust would mean from another person's culture and point of view. You can then build trust from their

perspective. Attempting to demonstrate and gain trust through your own cultural perspective and practice often backfires. For example, an act of kindness from one cultural perspective may be misconstrued from another. In crossing cultural bound-

In situations in countries with politically unstable environments and in rebel-controlled areas, although we may think we have the solutions, the strategies of outsiders may not work.

aries, it is important to take time to study the other culture and to read and understand things from a local point of view.

I found it very helpful to work with a cultural insider. This could be anyone from the car driver to the national director—position doesn't matter. Having someone who will give you that insight is critical, and that person isn't always easy to find. With trust there is a universal language and also a local language, which is critical. It is important to understand that local language of

trust and to establish that trust in a new culture.

**JY: Looking ahead to the next five to ten years, what do you see as the challenges ahead and your aspirations for World Vision?**

**SV:** We are working to provide children a better quality of life and to reduce poverty on a global scale, reduce debt on a micro scale, and improve the quality of life for children overall. We are working to provide every child with the basic rights of food, shelter, and education, and to give them a sense of hope for the future. From an organizational point of view, our desire is to keep three promises. The first is to the child and the family, that we will facilitate the process of development that can be sustained. The second promise is to the donors: that we will use the resources entrusted to us effectively and efficiently. And the third and most important promise is that we want to develop our people to grow and do their work well.

World Vision is growing very rapidly, which is a good problem to have. The challenge for us is to look to the future and not measure our success purely in terms of financial growth but also in terms of impact and influence. Are we stewarding the resources we have effectively and efficiently so that they have the greatest impact? How can we leverage our resources to multiply our influence on policy? How can we partner with other institutions to increase this impact and influence? These are some of the challenges we face for our future success in extending our reach to address the needs of the poor around the world. ✍

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