How To Scale Your Corporate Employee Volunteer Program, Part One

by Jerome Tennille
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> Employees (both junior and senior) need to be equipped with the tools and knowledge to act as force multipliers for your team that's driving social impact. If done well, you have a grand opportunity to change the social landscape wherever you have employees.

Guest Post by Jerome Tennille

Volunteering in the communities where you do business is challenging even when you're focused on the local community. As your company expands geographically, so does the ability to reach more communities. However, that expansion may come with greater difficulties associated with expanding your social impact reach. Scaling volunteerism continues to be a challenge for many companies. This includes those that are regional, national and global. But this shouldn't come as a shock. *The socio-economic issues are often as unique as the locations in which they sit.* Issues in one part of a county may differ greatly when compared to other parts of the same county, that contrast may grow substantially when compared to other states or countries.

Additionally, when comparing two states or nations, you may experience a difference in culture and language. Both can have an impact on how volunteerism is understood and valued. This can be the result of laws that more strictly regulate volunteerism activities or simply having less infrastructure and fewer resources to support your initiatives. All this to say there are many considerations that can act as barriers to effectively scale volunteerism for employee volunteer programs (EVPs).

These barriers can be broken. *But it requires a multi-layer strategy that aligns efforts through common themes. Employees (both junior and senior) need to be equipped with the tools and knowledge to act as force multipliers for your team that's driving social impact.* If done well, you have a grand opportunity to change the social landscape wherever you have employees.

1. Set goals around common themes

"Most companies weren't founded with the goal to have the second-best product. Use this competitive drive to your advantage by setting ambitious (but realistic) corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals. Then lean on the ambition of your employees to be number one. Setting goals will help build cohesion amongst employees and their departments. Just remember empowering employees to act will require thoughtfulness in how goals are formed. "

Most companies weren't founded with the goal to have the second-best product. Use this competitive drive to your advantage by setting ambitious (but realistic) corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals. *Then lean on the ambition of your employees to be number one. Setting goals will help build cohesion amongst employees and their departments. Just remember empowering employees to act will require thoughtfulness in how goals are formed.*

When creating goals, ensure they're expansive and inclusive enough while still maintaining some semblance of focus. *A good starting point could include goals that focus on measuring output. This could be as simple as tracking the number of employees engaged and hours served.* Some companies that do this include Target (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://corporate.target.com/_media/TargetCorp/csr/pdf/2018_corporate_respo UnitedHealth Group (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://www.unitedhealthgroup.com/social-responsibility/performance-tables.html) and Wells Fargo (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://www.wellsfargo.com/assets/pdf/about/corporate-responsibility/progress-to-goals.pdf). But you shouldn't stop there. *If you have the capability you should measure outcomes specific to community being served.*

Regardless of what you choose to measure, there are several ways to approach finding themes, here are a few.

- **Goals that contribute to regional or national agenda.** These types of goals are often quite broad, they're usually created in partnership with the government in a region or country to address common issues. For example, in 2015 the United Nations General Assembly created the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300) to be achieved by the year 2030. The SDGs are designed to drive collective action by all countries and private sector-led initiatives involved. This is a great example of government and private sector action towards solving some of the world's most pressing issues. While there are 17 SDGs, each individual SDG has respective targets and indicators that companies can use as guiding principles to direct their social impact efforts to make progress on. *The key here is that your efforts as a company are structured to support larger goals others are collectively working to achieve.*

- **Goals created in partnership with others in your industry.** There are likely socio-economic challenges that your industry is uniquely equipped to address. In instances like this, you can work towards finding solutions in partnership with would-be competitors. If your company is best positioned to address poverty and food insecurity, work to align efforts with industry partners that are equally equipped to solve this issue. You may also find that by serving the community's needs you're able to solve some business or industry challenges at the same time (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/volunteeringiscsr/2018/09/06/employe volunteers-can-help-you-attract-and-hire-talent/). For example, if your industry is struggling to reach younger generations of future talent, find other partners in

your industry, diagnose the issue, and collectively set goals around engaging youth in a way that's helpful for all involved. *In concert with your industry and community partners define the goal, how you'll measure these goals and what the overall responsibilities are. Just be sure that whatever your goal is, it's something that is universally sought after and valued.*

- **Tie CSR goals back to your business.** Today's consumer is increasingly using their purchase power as a statement of their values. The way you serve the community has greater implications to who buys your goods and services, don't forget that. So, be sure to work with your sales and customer service staff to collect, measure and track what your customers are saying. *Customers spend money just like they cast a vote in an election, and they have a powerful voice. Keep your finger on the pulse by creating internal goals that require listening to public sentiment. After all, they may have a different opinion on where and how you volunteer.*

By working towards goals created with common themes or outcomes you'll remove barriers around the collection, measurement, reporting and gaining collective action towards them. This will act as a foundation for your employees to work towards.

2. Gain senior executive buy-in

Executive leadership play a critical role in ensuring these goals cascade to the teams they manage and oversee. It's crucial your senior executives (namely your Chief Executive Officer and other c-level executives) believe in and support your social impact goals. This must be more than an exercise of executives blindly signing off on social impact initiatives. What I'm referring to is the importance of proactive involvement by company leadership. This should include the executive leadership team actively and visibly campaigning for social impact initiatives. *Leadership should take part in videos, speaking engagements to actively talk about the importance of serving the community or even serving alongside employees during a volunteer project.*

This should be an information loop of give and take. Make sure you're consistently informing your leadership on the progress you're making, particularly in solving the socio-economic issues of the community through volunteerism. *One way to do this is to create and present scorecards to share progress with the CEO and others. Granted time to share progress is a great way to feed continued buy-in of leadership.*

Ultimately executive support will create accountability around the goals. *If the senior-most executives are fully engaged, they'll lead by example and create a culture of service.* And while for-profit companies are businesses designed to make a profit, having senior leadership support is often a precursor to getting greater financial support. *This financial support could manifest itself as a larger program budget for social change initiatives, or perhaps larger sums of grant funding for community partners.*

3. Create policy and guiding principles

Some companies have more prescriptive CSR programs and others more openly support employee *"voice and choice."* There's no right or wrong philosophy to adopt. Just be sure that the policies and guidelines you create support that philosophy. Before we go further though, I'll clarify what I'm referring to.

Understand that when employees have overwhelming control in how or where they volunteer, it's a strategy that's playing directly to their passion. *It may do wonders to increase engagement (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/volunteeringiscsr/2017/03/14/how-volunteer-programs-improve-employee-retention/).*

The alternative to a *voice and choice* method is having more prescribed guidelines for employees. This means you'll need to communicate how the company defines corporate volunteerism, what counts, what doesn't, and to what extent it's collected

and measured. *While this takes away some autonomy and democracy around how employees volunteer, it can provide greater focus around reaching goals that might follow a specific theme, or type of volunteerism.*

Regardless of philosophy, you should still create documentation outlining how the company defines volunteerism and what counts towards these goals. *While volunteerism is often universally understood as giving one's time without expectation of payment, it's not always understood what skills-based volunteerism or pro-bono is.* For example, an employee may ask whether their travel time to the volunteer opportunity or in some cases overnight stay counts. As you're creating policy be sure to include your counterparts from legal and human resources in these discussions. Take care to account for any greater implications. You'll want to ensure that you're not inviting greater risk by creating a policy that infringes on labor laws related to compensation or benefits.

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4. Outline the dos and don'ts

This policy should include the types of organizations your company supports. Perhaps you'd ask employees to refrain from serving fraternal, religious or political organizations. One way to do this is to make clear that your company only supports organizations bearing the 501(c)(3) designation by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the United States. This same standard can be applied to similarly designated organizations if international.

Secondly, clearly document and make known the policy that prohibits supporting organizations that discriminate in employment practices or services on the basis of race, gender, religion, color, sex, etc., and that the company will not support organizations that don't positively contribute to company priorities or core values. *These actions seem like common sense, but it's not always common knowledge. By clearly communicating and making accessible the company policy you'll create the protections needed while reinforcing your company's commitment to doing good.*

Be patient and thoughtful in your approach. Setting goals, receiving the necessary buy-in and creating the policy that empowers will get you halfway. Next, you'll want to get what exists on paper and expressed verbally turned into action.

We'll explore these ideas in the second part of this series, but in the meantime, please share your thoughts. I'd love to hear from you.

Part Two (https://web.archive.org/web/20200420203127/https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/volunteeringiscsr/2019/10/15/scaling-your-employee-volunteer-program,-part-2-of-2/)

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