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How to Scale Your Corporate Employee Volunteer Program, Part Two

by Jerome Tennille

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Guest Post by Jerome Tennille

Part One

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/volunteeringiscsr/2019/10/01/how-to-scale-your-employee-volunteer-program-part-1-of-2/>)

Scaling your employee volunteer program can be a daunting task. It requires a vision and strategy adoptable by many. Employees at all levels must row in the same direction at the same cadence. In part one (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/https://blogs.volunteermatch.org/volunteeringiscsr/2019/10/01/how-to-scale-your-employee-volunteer-program-part-1-of-2/>) of this two-part post, the importance of goal setting and gaining senior executive buy-in was outlined. In part two, I'll discuss why it's important to understand that beyond creating the environment that'll allow volunteerism to thrive, you'll need the vehicle that allows employees to act.

It'll be necessary to reach across the aisle and build relationships with the communities you intend to serve, create communication and branding around your social impact programming, have a data collection plan, and then, finally, engage what's arguably the most important resource, your people.

5. Inform your non-profit partners and set boundaries

It's not enough to create policy that sets standards for how employees volunteer. It's equally important that community partners understand how they can receive support. Take one out of the foundation playbook.

Foundations do a great job at communicating to potential grantees who's eligible for funding. They inform non-profits of their submission process, if there's an open application or if it's by invite only, submission deadlines and the focus areas they fund. Companies (while they often tout the good work they do) don't often communicate these same guidelines. If this idea makes the hair on the back of your neck stick up as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) practitioner, it shouldn't. I'll tell you why.

While there's sometimes a hypersensitivity to non-profit solicitations, this is one way you can work to mitigate that. By actively communicating what your company supports, you'll establish some boundaries for non-profits. This will give non-profits a greater ability to determine whether they should seek support from your company. If your company doesn't operate in a way that allows open solicitations, make that clear on your website. This will reduce the number of solicitations you receive from organizations you wouldn't necessarily support to begin with and save you a potentially tricky conversation. In the long run, non-profits will be less likely to throw things at the wall to see what sticks because it'll have been communicated to them in advance.

Additionally, inform your non-profit partners about how your company is structured. For example, if your company is built with a franchise model and your corporate office doesn't make charitable decisions for franchisees, make sure it's clearly stated that if non-profits want resources that are available only through your local franchisees, that the non-profit go directly to that source rather than the corporate office. Or if grants (that support volunteer projects) are mostly issued through your company foundation and not the corporate body, tell them. These are all important details that if communicated in advance will save time.

Being transparent will *establish boundaries, inform non-profits of the realities you face internally and manage their expectations up front*. Your non-profit partners may believe your company has more resources than what's true. Additionally, having honest dialogue about the real challenges you face can in the long run establish trust and goodwill which will do wonders for creating a long-lasting relationship.

6. Create a social impact brand

Marketing will be key for growth. If your company has a marketing or creative team, pull together a small working group and determine the best way to brand your social impact initiatives. In collaboration with this working group, identify your audience, both internal and external. Then work through the process of creating the necessary suite of logos, language and color palette. By creating a social impact brand you'll be able to more effectively communicate your programming, strategy and story to audiences within your company (*for recruiting and consensus building*) and externally (*upholding public trust, gaining customers and shareholder loyalty*).

One company that does a great job at this is The Home Depot and their foundation's associate-led volunteer force called Team Depot (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/https://corporate.homedepot.com/foundation/teamdepot>). Another fantastic example from a regional company includes Berkshire Bank's XTEAM. The XTEAM volunteer program (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/https://www.berkshirebank.com/About/Community/Community-Support/XTEAM-Volunteer-Program>) is Berkshire Bank's nationally acclaimed employee volunteer program where they support the local community through committee led projects.

Both companies (while different in size and areas served) created a social impact brand around their EVP in a way that gives it a unique but complementary identity that is recognizable both internally and externally. By doing so, it creates a great vehicle for social impact stories to be shared in a way that adds value to the business. Just be sure that whatever's created communicates your values, priorities and goals.

7. Collect, measure and report

Let's face it, the only way to know whether you're scaling your volunteerism is to track it. To track your progress, you'll need more than Microsoft Excel sheets. So, think about implementing a tracking tool that allows (and encourages) employees to input and record their volunteerism projects. This can be as simple or as complex as you'd prefer. There are several databases and software platforms you can seek. Just be aware that you'll want to make sure the platform you choose can track and measure the indicators necessary to report progress on your goals.

For example, maybe all you're tracking is the number of employees that are engaged, the number of hours served, location of that volunteer activity, the nonprofit or focus area they supported and a description of the activity. You'll want to be sure that the platform you employ can be built and customized to track those data points.

What I would recommend though is to steer clear from the temptation to build a customized platform from scratch. While it might sound enticing to have something that's designed like a well-tailored suit, meeting your exact needs, it can be a long-term hindrance.

The biggest downside with choosing a platform from a small or relatively unknown technology firm is lack of scalability. You won't likely be able to take advantage of economies of scale (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/https://www.investopedia.com/terms/e/economiesofscale.asp>). By acquiring a platform from a larger well-known firm that specializes in CSR tracking tools, you'll benefit from their ability to offer greater services at lower costs due to their higher level of production. If you choose a lesser equipped technology firm, you'll often find your data collection, tracking and reporting capability to be severely behind industry standards and in need of constant upgrades that can become increasingly too expensive to sustain.

8. Recruit strong advocates

Digital mediums, while important, won't be enough to build brand recognition of your social impact program. Instead, recruit and engage employees to be your champions at your office or other locations where you do business. *These champions will play a vital role in communicating your social impact initiatives, programming, and activities to achieve the set goals.*

This will be the case if most of your employees have limited means to internal communication channels or internet access. For example, if you work in the hotel, retail, automotive, banking or restaurant industry most of your employees may not work in a traditional office. These employees may be more customer facing or work in an environment where they don't have regular access to the company's intranet or message boards. In these instances, the power of people will be vital in driving action.

If an employee wellness or networking program doesn't currently exist, work closely with your counterparts in human resources to get one created. Alternatively, you can seek to create a committee, employee resource group (ERG) or a body of committed employees to lead this effort. If creating formal (or informal) positions for employees, be sure to create guidelines that set expectations for their roles, responsibilities and time commitments involved.

But don't stop there, be sure that you're acknowledging and supporting these champions. Don't assume these key employee volunteers know how to lead social impact initiatives, recruit, engage or manage other employee volunteers. So, provide tools to equip and empower these champions.

These tools can include education material about your social impact brand, strategy and goals. But, it can and should also include webinars, guidelines and toolkits that help develop their ability to influence and manage others. Also, think about creating an internal recognition process that highlights their work while recognizing them appropriately. After all, these are the champions at the grassroots level who will act as force-multipliers for your social impact team.

9. Be patient and give it time

Once the goals are set and foundation of support created, it's important that you *give things time to mature*. There may be a desire and great enthusiasm to do more, but realize all of this must exist within the limitations of a company that's designed to be revenue generating.

However incrementally, put structure and rigor around each of these components and over time as the employee volunteer program matures, so will the results.

About the Author: Jerome Tennille, CVA is the manager of volunteerism for Marriott International, where he leads the company's traditional and skills-based volunteer programs, ensuring they reflect the latest innovations, technologies and best practices. Before joining Marriott International, Jerome was a senior manager of impact analysis and assessment at Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors ([https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/http://tragedy assistance program for survivors/](https://web.archive.org/web/20200516054714/http://tragedyassistanceprogram.org/)) (TAPS), a national organization that offers help, hope, and healing to all those grieving the passing of a loved one serving in America's armed forces.

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