



Banishing five myths about business and volunteering *Whether large or small, companies can have an impact*

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We are fortunate to live in a very philanthropic-minded community. Businesses value our community's nonprofits, and dedicate their time and resources generously. The North Bay Area has a sterling reputation for philanthropy and volunteerism. Although a high-level of community involvement is embedded in our culture, it's time to banish five myths that business can see as barriers to volunteering and partnering with nonprofits.

1. We don't have time to volunteer.

TRUTH: Commit to one activity per year or every six months.

Trying one activity at a nonprofit lets you test the waters to see if you are a good fit for each other. Nonprofits always have seasonal activities, like Secret Santa, back-to-school drives, or fundraising events. Once your company identifies with a cause, it's easy to calendar and commit to walk, run, host a fundraiser or host a backpack stuffing party.

Single or seasonal bursts of volunteer time can lead to additional confidence and committing to more activity, leading to more employee engagement and alignment with your company's community values.

2. It's difficult to choose a nonprofit.

TRUTH: Sorting by category or by existing employee engagement makes it easy and relevant to your mission.

Not sure what causes your employees care about? Ask them! A brief employee survey can give you a sense of which nonprofit mission is most meaningful to your employees. Letting them be part of the process encourages buy-in, increases participation and improves morale. Even if the majority doesn't select their activity, employees still feel included, and you never know what you might learn! One option is to divide nonprofits into broad categories for employees, such as the environment, youth, homelessness, people with disabilities, animal welfare, etc.

While each of the thousands of nonprofits in the North Bay may serve a specific community need, many are working together to solve a common, core issue: to improve our community. Consider utilizing your local Volunteer Center to find nonprofits that match their needs with your company's interests. We can serve as your "matchmaker."

3. If I sign up and realize I've overcommitted, I can't change that commitment easily. What if I want out?

TRUTH: No problem. We want you to find your fit!

No one has time for something that is not inspiring or impactful, and the nonprofit equally wants to ensure that your time is used valuably. Everyone wants a win-win, especially nonprofits that are typically mission-focused and resource-scarce.

It's expected that individuals and groups of volunteers will try one connection to see if there is synergy. It's encouraged to create a natural feedback loop between your business and the nonprofit receiving your volunteer time to ensure commitment agreements are understood and lessons are shared.

4. We can't afford to pay employees to volunteer.

TRUTH: In many cases, you do NOT have to pay volunteers additional funds. Additionally, volunteering builds leadership skills and relationships that you don't have pay for.

Though many companies do offer some paid time off to volunteer, there are many ways to create a company culture around volunteering without paying additional wages. For example, many community projects take place on the weekends and after business hours.

Companies have found that providing paid time off does not affect the bottom line, and there isn't impact on work productivity. Instead, it can be viewed as a "value add" to your organization. Serving on Boards and Committees can be viewed as leadership training, providing an excellent opportunity for employees to learn new leadership skills while representing your company in your community.

Studies show the retention rate of employees allowed to engage in meaningful work while on company time remain at the company longer and make happier employees who tell positive stories about where they work more often.

5. One company cannot make a true impact.

TRUTH: Every effort goes toward changing our community for the better.

The impact of volunteering provides powerful and exponential benefits to the entire community. Those that volunteer have increased self-esteem and feel more valued in their community; those receiving direct and indirect benefits from those services have a day or lifetime changed by even small efforts; and your company can see improved morale and teamwork, giving opportunity for increased productivity and employee retention.

Signature events like the Sonoma County Human Race, cause-specific events, runs and walks, and crowd-funding all illustrate how the presence of one can quickly become the positive impact of many. One company wrapping its arms around one cause or event — big or small — to support and encourage can help highlight the mission in a way they cannot do alone. The power of your company may positively affect one life or thousands, and those benefits may be seen immediately or for years to come.

Cami Weaver is the executive director of the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County. The Volunteer Center has been matching prospective volunteers with local nonprofits for more than 40 years. Learn more at www.volunteernow.org.