

## Civic Involvement

# Employees as Community

Nonprofit collaborations can provide important benefits to your company's most important community – its employees.

*By Jennifer Levine Hartz*

When I explain my business to others, I indicate that community relations is a tool that strategically leverages resources and addresses challenges for a company. Most people think of it as a public relations tool; others might have the insight that it helps marketing. However, corporate social responsibility, integrated well into a business, can positively impact all areas of the company including human resources.

Hal Rosenbluth, while CEO of Rosenbluth Travel, co-penned a best-seller called, The Customer Comes Second, an intriguing play on the corporate axiom, “the customer comes first.” His thesis, which proved critical to the 2003 sale of the company for over \$400 million, was that happy employees create happy products, services, and customers.

Employees in any position in a company have needs at all levels of Maslow's hierarchy. Their job provides security, safety, health, social contact, and hopefully opportunities for growth and even self-actualization. The human resources function exists, at a minimal level, to meet the requirements of employment in our current environment. Good HR departments, and leading CEO's, seek other ways to enhance the skills and experience of all staff members. Why?

- 1) Turnover costs money, time, and quality.
- 2) Employees with more skills develop better products, services, and systems.
- 3) Self-improvement is a natural human urge and your best employees seek it - if not at your company, then elsewhere.
- 4) Satisfaction with how a person spends 20-80 hours of their week is vital. An unhappy employee can do a great deal of damage to a business – in one fell swoop or in everyday wounds, which add up to a large injury. The corollary is true too – a happy worker can dramatically enhance customer experience.
- 5) With all the “best places to work” surveys in today's media, current and future staff members are paying attention. So are current and potential customers.

### *MORALE*

At Manheim, a Cox Enterprises auto auction company, many of their 32,000 employees lead a multi-faceted annual campaign called Heart for Hearts to raise money for the Michael P. Fisher Cardiac Intensive Care Unit at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta's Sibley Heart Center. The season kicks off with Spring Bling, an opportunity for employees to showcase their cars (note the connection to Manheim's business), while fellow employees vote for the “coolest” one with their spare change. Funds from this event, a golf and tennis tournament and auction have raised nearly \$6 million for the

Unit. Manheim staff also donates Beanie Babies, Boo-ties, and Blankets at Halloween, and adopts families with children in the Center during the holiday season, pooling time, money, and gifts to ease the pain that a child's illness brings to a family. The campaign culminates in a huge party for families from the Center, held at the company's offices. Dean Eisner, Manheim President and CEO, supports these and other programs. "We strongly encourage the involvement of our employees in the community because it has so many benefits, including building connections inside and outside our company."

### *RECOGNITION*

By sponsoring a table or tickets to an important charitable event, you can show your people how much you value them. For example, Atlanta Women's Foundation's annual "Numbers Too Big to Ignore" luncheon draws a wide array of female patrons, supporters, volunteers, and nonprofit grant recipients. Some companies sponsor a table and make a show of inviting best-performing women, or executive women, or other women who had a notable impact on the company that year. Events like this one allow your company to show appreciation to your staff and contribute to a good cause. Yes, part of the table sponsorship is a write-off, but if executed thoughtfully, the invitation to attend and the actual event itself can build connections among people in the office, with the charity, and in the greater community.

### *TEAM BUILDING*

There are a number of in-vogue team-building programs now, from Outward Bound, to cooking programs, from NASCAR "pit crews" of employees to murder mystery games. However, many affiliates in the international Points of Light Hands on Network will develop and lead a volunteer project for groups of employees – from the same department or not - to have fun, make a difference, AND tackle specific team-building needs among the participants.

### *TRAINING*

Tom Peters says, "I cannot imagine a better training ground for young managers than active service in a leadership role with a nonprofit organization." Deloitte, a mainstay on most of the "best places to work" lists, encourages, trains, and places partners and associates in leadership roles at nonprofit organizations. Here, opportunities are created for people to share their expertise with a cause that matters to them, and to develop new skills and relationships which will serve them both personally and professionally. Ed Heys, "Whether our associates use their subject-matter expertise or not, nonprofit committee and board service provide opportunities for personal and professional growth. If our firm can help provide that or our clients can benefit from that, it's a win-win for everyone - including the community."

A company's human resources are clearly mission-critical. Creative investment in those assets will provide tangible and intangible payback to all stakeholders. Increasingly, companies consider the community as a stakeholder. Programs like these, implemented thoughtfully and strategically - just as you would with any investment - provide manifold returns to your company and your life.