Lend A Hand

Kicking off a corporate volunteering initiative—or ramping up an existing one—doesn’t have to be a massive undertaking. Here are 10 steps to launch a new (and rewarding!) program

Every year, for nearly two decades, the employees at Klatzkin & Company in Hamilton bring Christmas gifts to underprivileged children. They also pack hygiene bags for a nearby soup kitchen and deliver weekly meals to the hungry and homebound. Klatzkin’s corporate volunteering program is robust and bursting with participants. But it all started with just a couple of bins around the office for employees to toss clothes they wanted to donate.

Launching a volunteering effort at your company, or improving one that is small or stagnant, can be just as easy. Here are 10 simple tips for getting things up and running:

1. Tap Your Leaders
“Before starting a companywide volunteering program, you need to find people who are willing to be the organizers,” says Donna Dey, accounting supervisor at Klatzkin & Company, an accounting firm based in Hamilton. “The organizers don’t have to do everything, but you need people who want to take charge and...
“ALIGNING YOUR PHILANTHROPIC ENDEAVORS AROUND YOUR BUSINESS WILL GET YOU BUY-IN FROM YOUR EMPLOYEES.”

DAWN SCHWARTZ, SVP OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION, JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT OF N.J.

get the ball rolling.” Dey says that includes making the initial contacts with the charities that your company is interested in supporting.

2. Assess Interest
To get employees to rally around a cause, you have to make sure they’re interested in it. “We email staff asking for their suggestions, and what organizations they’d like to support,” says Dey. She notes that if folks are not interested in the mission of the charity, they won’t become invested in helping it. “To keep a program thriving, you need that personal investment and commitment.”

Another way to assess interest: “Find out what employees are already doing in their own time,” offers Pat Hartpence, assistant vice president of corporate giving for NJM Insurance Group in West Trenton. “That way buy-in will be greater, and the project will be closer to their hearts.”

3. Go Local
A great way to choose an organization to support, says Hartpence, is to consider the needs right in your own backyard: “See what’s lacking in the community around your office.” Pick something relevant, she recommends, “and just keep growing it.”

Besides its West Trenton headquarters, NJM also has offices in Parsippany and Hammonton, and local volunteering efforts are alive and well at all three locations. “Giving back to the community has become part of our overall company culture,” says Hartpence. For instance, summer interns at all NJM offices are required to complete a local service project.

4. Get Brass On Board
When starting or growing a volunteering program, it’s important to have support from the top on down. Says Dey, “If management shows an interest in supporting those in need, it’s more likely staff will be interested.” Hartpence agrees. “Management sets the standard for the company. And it just flows from there.”

To get the top dogs motivated to play a part in office volunteering efforts, “we ask them to suggest charities they’d like to support,” says Dey. Similarly, Hartpence advises, “managers should be the ones to introduce the program or effort to the company,” to demonstrate endorsement from on high.
5. Find the Right Fit
Before signing onto a project and presenting it to employees, call ahead, advises Dey. "The last thing you want to do is get everyone in the office excited about a charity or cause that doesn't actually need what everyone is psyched up to give them." Make the calls, she cautions, "talk to the nonprofit," and find out how you can really help. To run a successful program, Dey adds, "You have to make the pieces fit on both ends."

Catherine Milone, president of Edison-based Junior Achievement of New Jersey (JANJ) says nonprofits love hearing from organizations that want to support them. "We hope to make it easy for companies to work with us." Milone says JANJ, whose mission is to inspire and prepare young people to succeed in a global economy, is always looking to form partnerships with corporations. "We want to share expectations for both parties to make the project as smooth as possible so that we both get something meaningful out of it.

"We like to know what they want to achieve by teaming up with us to ensure that we all gain something from the experience," she adds.

Dawn Schwartz, JANJ's senior vice president of development and communication, suggests companies look at their mission and purpose when deciding where to focus their volunteering efforts. "Ultimately, it's about the company, and how the effort serves the company's mission." Plus, as a nice by-product of that mind-set, she adds, "Aligning your philanthropic endeavors around your business will get you buy-in from your employees."

6. Start Small
For companies that are just getting their feet wet in the volunteering world, or for those that need to light a fire under their existing programs, it's best to start small. "Begin with something easy, and build from there," recommends Dey. She suggests having a blood-mobile park outside your office for a day, as this "requires nothing more than a phone call on your part, but it mobilizes staff around a cause."

In addition, organizations that solicit clothing or food donations will often provide collection bins and ready-made fliers detailing what they need. "The legwork for you is minimal," says Dey, "but it will have a big impact when everyone sees bins overflowing with clothes or canned goods." Employees will have a feeling of accomplishment.

Another way to make things simple is to provide an opportunity for employees to take part, as a group, in an event that is organized entirely by the charity. "We participated in the Heart Walk of Mercer County 10 years ago, and our companywide volunteering program just grew from there," says Hartpence.

Volunteering is Good Business
Giving back is good for the community. It does wonders for the soul, and research shows it's good for the bottom line, too. According to an America's Charities report from 2015, corporate volunteering programs are an excellent, relatively low-cost way to engage and retain employees. And companies with an engaged workforce, says a Gallup survey, tend to have significantly higher productivity, profitability, and customer ratings, along with less turnover, absenteeism, and fewer safety incidents. Research by PwC in 2014 revealed that employees that are most committed to their companies put in 57 percent more effort on the job, and are 87 percent less likely to resign.

In addition, UnitedHealth Group's 2013 Health and Volunteering Study shows engaged employees are happier, healthier, and perform at a higher level, and volunteers say they feel better emotionally, mentally, and physically.
7. Offer Choice
Providing employees with a variety of opportunities and ways to give back is key, as not everybody is interested in the same things, says Dey. “Some people like to make donations of food or unwanted clothing, while others prefer to donate their time and energy creating something somebody else will use,” like the hygiene baskets Klatzkin employees stuff and deliver to a Trenton-area soup kitchen. Still others want that connection with the individuals they’re helping. “Some of our staff members deliver prepackaged meals to the hungry every Tuesday,” says Dey, of a program that has been flourishing for the past six years (“except during tax season!”)

Klatzkin’s IT Manager Scott Schindewolf is a very active volunteer with the meal delivery program, and likes that he gets to see, firsthand, the good that he is doing for others. “It’s the appreciation of the recipients, the looks and smiles on their faces that really make it worthwhile.”

Naturally, it’s important to let everyone in the office know about the different ways they can be of service to others. A section of NJM’s intranet is reserved for a list of volunteering opportunities that are available to all employees, including retirees.

8. Involve Families
When employees with a yen to pay it forward have a chance to get their families to join them on their mission, you can bet your program will be a success, says Dey, who notes that this works particularly well around the holidays. “Parents love bringing their kids with them to buy gifts for underprivileged children,” as it gives them an opportunity to instill lessons about doing what they can to assist those less fortunate than themselves.

Dey says employees at Klatzkin & Company have been “adopting” kids from The Children’s Home Society of New Jersey in Trenton for about two decades now, and about 50 kids were showered with gifts and coats, gloves, and scarves this past Christmas alone.

9. Debrief
After each volunteering endeavor, discuss how everything went with the charity. “We talk to NJM after all the events they participate in, and they give us real, honest feedback,” says Milone. She calls such a conversation “rare,” but points out that “we deeply appreciate this because we so want to get better at what we do.”

10. Say Cheese!
When all is said and done, be sure to capture the moment and document your success. “We email pictures of overflowing clothing bins and stuffed boxes of Christmas gifts for kids to the whole firm so everyone can see the fruits of their labors,” says Dey, adding that stats about amounts collected and numbers of participants are included as well. “This has a huge impact on morale, and motivates employees to do more.”

Photos from past volunteering events are posted on NJM’s corporate website, “partly for employees to feel proud of themselves,” says Hartpence, “but also to show the world, and our staff, what our culture is all about.”

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**AS FOR THE DON'TS...**

With so many ways to launch or reinvigorate a corporate volunteering program, it stands to reason there might be some things a company must never do in order to be successful. Here are a handful, according to Donna Dey, accounting supervisor at Klatzkin & Company, an accounting firm in Hamilton.

Don’t:
- Do anything without calling the charity first to find out what’s needed. “It’s imperative that you get your goals in line right from the start.”
- Be upset if not everyone in the office participates. “We all have different likes. You can’t take that personally.”
- Worry if you can’t satisfy everyone’s personal interests. “Focus on the greater good.”
- Get involved with too many different organizations. “You don’t want to spread yourself thin.”
- Overcommit to anything you can’t follow through on.
- Ask for money. “Focus on donations of goods and services instead.”
- Be afraid to start small. “You can only go up from there!”