

Corporate Philanthropy & Volunteering Blog

The 3 C's of Successful Corporate Non-Profit Relationships

Posted by [Ryan Scott](#) on Tue, Jul 31, 2012 @ 09:53 PM



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Like any healthy coupling, the recipe to a happy, long term business relationship between a non-profit organization and its [corporate volunteers](#) and [donors](#) is commitment, communication and compromise, with a large dose of appreciation sprinkled on top.

As the Manager of Volunteer Services at Family Centers, Jennifer Flatow has discovered that applying these ingredients to her work with employee volunteer programs has led to [non-profit fundraising ideas](#) that benefit her non-profit while lending [employee engagement](#) benefits to participating companies. Family Centers is one of Fairfield County, Connecticut's largest private non-profit organizations, offering health, human and education services to children, adults and families. On the company's list of 1500 volunteers, a number are made up of corporate volunteers from the area's large banking and financial services industry.

A corporate relationship blooms

Morgan Stanley/Smith Barney (MS/SB) is one of the local companies that reached out to Family Center to fulfill its [corporate social responsibility](#) initiative, Global Volunteer Month, a [community service](#) program held every June. Initially, MS/SB's intent was to simply underwrite

the graduation festivities of Family Center's Head Start Program, a preschool program for low-income families. However, Flatow knows that when a company "buys in" to an event by actively participating - versus just writing a check - it becomes more connected to the non-profit's mission, setting the company up for a possible long-term commitment. So Flatow invited the MS/SB volunteers to a planning meeting, where they met the families of the graduating children and did a site visit to see where the ceremonies would take place.

MS/SB employees became so excited and involved with the graduation that they ultimately took things a step further by paying for decorations, a catered lunch and flowers for the families and gifts for the teachers. They even rented an ice cream truck for the kids. Wearing their company T-shirts, the employees also volunteered for the event by setting up, serving, cleaning and doing whatever was needed to make the day a huge success for both the kids and families.

Building off of this initial relationship, MS/SB asked Flatow to speak at their company about additional volunteer opportunities that would generate [community impact](#). Family Center is now working with their MS/SB representative to apply for funding from the MS/SB Foundation.

Look at the big picture

Flatow advises that when working with corporations, "Don't be afraid to push back and steer them toward your needs. Both sides have an agenda and it's ok to recognize that it's not always a match." That's when the spirit of compromise comes into play.

This delicate spirit of compromise came up for Flatow when a mutual fund company with a team of 30 [corporate volunteers](#) wanted to show their support for Family Center by painting a mural. Family Center's walls could not accommodate such an artistic offer but Flatow didn't want to flat-out turn them down. She wanted to find a way to compromise with the company so that their goodwill could be put toward a future contribution to Family Center. However, the company was firm in their offer of a mural, and only a mural.

Instead of a simple "no, thank you," Flatow decided that even though Family Center couldn't benefit from the offer, another [non-profit](#) should. After some research and a few calls, Flatow referred the mutual fund company to other non-profits. The point-person from the mutual fund company was so appreciative of Flatow's efforts to help them fulfill their [corporate volunteering](#) mission that she asked Flatow to keep in touch to see how they could work together in the future.

Flexibility gets you everywhere

Flatow believes that the key to a non-profit's successful relationship with the [employee volunteer programs](#) it works with is being flexible enough to achieve the group's [corporate philanthropy](#) goals while remaining focused on your own needs and mission.

For example, UBS Financial Services contacted Family Center a few years ago looking for a local organization to partner with on a community service project that had very precise criteria. Specifically, UBS employees and their families had to be able to participate; it had to be done on a weekend; the project had to make an impact with the organization and the results had to be measurable.

Whew! After researching possibilities and making some adjustments, Flatow was finally able to come up with a solution. The UBS team completely cleaned up a Head Start preschool, which is run by Family Centers, and did everything from raking and weeding to planting mums and laying down mulch. The group also raised all of the funds internally for supplies. In the end, they did a complete overhaul of the outside space and left it transformed for the amazed students and families who returned to school the following Monday. Family Centers also received a \$1200 grant from UBS, which was designated to Head Start. Since the project was so well received, UBS did the same clean-up every year since then for two other Family Center preschools.

Based on the feedback from their employee volunteers, UBS contacted Flatow again and this time said they wanted to stay engaged throughout the year. Their next effort involved supporting Family Center's RITE (Reaching Independence Through Employment) Program by donating professional clothing to job-seekers. UBS now also participates annually in Family Center's holiday giving program, where employees shop for items for families in need and work the holiday party for the Friendly Connections Program that services homebound and aging adults.

In short, what was supposed to be a one-day project turned into year-round support due to the positive initial experience and Flatow's ability to communicate Family Center's needs while adapting to UBS's corporate criteria.

The attitude of gratitude

How else does Flatow keep her corporate relationships flourishing?

"Volunteers can never be thanked enough," she says, and that's why every year Family Center hosts a Volunteer Recognition breakfast for all of their volunteers. Many times, senior level management from companies have attended and spoken glowingly about their company's volunteer experiences.

Volunteers also need to feel that they made a difference and that the work they did for the non-profit was important. So Flatow makes a point to not only verbally thank her corporate volunteers when they're on the job but to also follow up with a written letter. This reinforces Family Center's appreciation of their time and effort while also helping to keep the organization on their volunteers' radar screens.

Ultimately, that's what it's all about: giving volunteers a positive experience and staying top of mind so that your organization is the go-to non-profit when a company is thinking about their next volunteer and giving project. The more rewarding your nonprofit's relationship is with a company's volunteers, the more that your volunteer opportunities will be indistinguishable from formal [employee engagement programs](#) that have bottom-line benefits to corporations. Practicing the 3 c's helps you realize this goal by nurturing healthy relationships with corporate partners that stand the test of time.

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