

Company Volunteer Events and Employee Social Capital

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Rationale

Employees are placing increasing emphasis on company ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR), leading companies to develop volunteer programs to meet employee requests and fulfill community relations functions (Meister, 2012). While research has addressed the external benefits to the company of company volunteerism such as positive image in the community (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000) as well as internal benefits to individual employees such as increased commitment to the company (De Gilder, Schuyt, & Breedijk, 2005), little research has addressed how group volunteering may function with regard to relationships among employees. This paper addresses the relational functions of company-sanctioned group volunteer events.

Method

This paper employs qualitative data collection and constant comparative data analysis. Participants in the study volunteered with fellow employees in varying capacities and at varying sites, including food sorting at a food bank and building a home for a new homeowner. The initial results reflect data collected through in-depth interviews with seven company volunteers and 21 hours of observational data of company volunteer events. Companies with volunteer programs represented in this study range from a Fortune 500 finance company to a small design firm with 15 employees.

Initial Results

Initial results suggest that company-sanctioned group volunteer events fulfill the following relational functions for social relationships between employees who volunteer together:

Create a positive experience together

Participants emphasized the positive nature of participating in company-sanctioned volunteer events with fellow employees. Volunteer events in the study often involved rituals to mark the occasion, such as wearing company t-shirts and photographing volunteer activities to share at the office. Brandy, an administrator at a hospital, said "I've yet to see a volunteer walk out [a volunteer session] with a frown on their face" upon participating in her company's weekly reading tutoring volunteer program. Brandy said that her and other company volunteers have shared stories with one another about how the volunteer events serve as a "stress reducer," adding that "if you've had that bad day, [after] going to [tutor], you'll have a better day."

Network to develop contacts in the company

Participants such as Robert, an engineer at a large company, discussed the social networking function of company volunteer events. Because his company employs more than 2,000 people at his location, Robert said he is "constantly seeing new faces" at the volunteer events he helps to organize. Robert added, "there are lots of examples of folks that I didn't know before and now interact with at least personally... [Also] folks who I may have known who they were, didn't know a whole lot about them, but had some tangential work connection before, and got to know them through volunteering. And then that connection was strengthened and we've ended up working in other ways together since then."

Build deeper relationships with known colleagues

Other participants expressed how volunteering together helped to add layers of depth and understanding to relationships with colleagues. Brad, who works as a designer at a small firm, said that after employees at his company met family members of their colleagues at a company-sanctioned volunteer event that was open to family, they tended to "look out for each other more." Brad said that after that experience, employees are more likely to help another employee who is swamped with work so that his or her family life doesn't suffer. Brad added that volunteering "makes your work relationship better because you just realize, oh, they're people just like you, they go home to the same stuff just like you do and they have the same responsibilities and the same things they care about."

Leverage company impact in the community

Additionally, participants reported that they preferred to volunteer with their fellow employees rather than alone because they can accomplish more together and with the backing of the company. Robert reported that he sees volunteering with his colleagues as an opportunity to "make a much bigger impact." He added that groups of employees "make a difference" through the 1,000 hours of service his company logged for a local food bank in addition to helping attract financial sponsorships on part of the company through employee advocacy for the food bank.

Collectively build company culture

Finally, participants reported that they took pride in helping to shape and encourage a culture of giving back in the company through volunteering with colleagues and increasing the visibility and participation in the volunteer program. Describing the volunteer recruitment process, Sue said "[Company name] people are really good people and so everybody will pitch in," reflecting how volunteerism helps define the employee workforce at her company.

Given that each of these functions are only accomplished through volunteering within a group of other employees (as opposed to volunteering alone), the relational nature of these functions is revealed. Based upon these results and previous research, I propose that volunteering together at company-sanctioned volunteer events helps to cultivate social capital within internal relationships among employees of the company who volunteer together.

Discussion

This study analyzes the interactions between employees at group volunteer events, employee reported interactions, and retrospective employee reflections about relationships with colleagues after participating in a volunteer event together. By focusing on the relationships between employees, we can better understand what employees are bringing back to the office with them and how their working relationships are impacted by volunteering together. Initial results from this research expand on previous research addressing the motivations of individual employees (De Gilder, et al., 2005; Muthuri, et al., 2009). Further,

these findings relate to Clary et al.'s (1998) finding that volunteerism is a communicative act that expresses the value of altruism, suggesting that realization of a shared value of altruism among employees may aid in building social capital. Increased social capital in employee-to-employee relationships may translate to increased efficacy in collaborative work among employees in the workplace.

References

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