

## **CSR: Ask, Don't Tell**

You can bring cohesion to your workforce by giving employees a say in your company's charitable contributions.

by Kurt Ronn

The entire workforce—owners, managers, and employees—likes working for a company that gives back to the community. It's the right thing to do, it's good for business, it motivates and helps retain employees, and it's a good tool in the recruitment toolbox.

Most corporations have a corporate social responsibility (CSR) statement, many have a charitable foundation, and nearly all encourage their employees to be a positive presence in the community, both on and off the job. But traditionally, CSR is a top-down proposition. The leaders of the organization select a worthy cause, back it with charitable funding, and direct their employees to support it. To be successful, though, that concept needs to be reconsidered.

### **Reflect Employee's Interests**

Stop telling people what to get involved with and start asking about their interests. To be truly effective, a company's CSR program must be aligned with the personal values of employees. That is what motivates them to get involved.

Of course, that is not as easy today as it was a half-century ago, when the workforce was much more homogeneous. Since 1960, the U.S. population has grown by more than 100 million people. Today's workforce is not only larger but also significantly more diverse than it used to be. Employees span a wide range of ages, genders, races, and ethnic backgrounds.

Cultural diversity in the workforce can lead to better service for a diverse customer base. But it also creates challenges, since a more heterogeneous group can be less cohesive. Why not address two challenges at once? By bringing your employees together to select a CSR program, you can enhance the sense of integration within the company.

### **Let the Employees Decide**

Corporate giving needs to be a flexible vehicle that is regularly assessed and retooled to represent the interests and cultures of employees. Employees should direct the giving, and the company should do the giving.

A simple example illustrates the difference the approach can make. Let's say your total charitable giving budget is \$1,000. Usually, the company decides where the \$1,000 will be spent. Case closed, check written.

Try this instead: Rather than picking the charity, give a \$100 check to 10 top-performing employees throughout the company and ask them to write in the name of a charity that is important to them. Ask them to tell you whom they selected and then mail it off to the charity. Compare the diversity of their chosen recipients with the charity to whom you would have made a gift.

Undoubtedly, the charitable choices will more closely match the interests of the employees, and their level of engagement will rise.

### **Another Approach**

In a flexible, responsive environment, CSR leaders from within the company can solicit employee nominations or suggestions for worthy causes. A CSR committee, or the organization's foundation, can then consider and determine which CSR activities will be funded. Contributions and corporate volunteerism are measured annually, and events that have been well-supported are considered for next year's calendar.

Letting your employees participate in the process can yield tangible rewards. It is impossible to pick a single cause that everyone will identify with as the best cause. However, it is possible to reach a broader group of employees this way.