

Importance of Volunteerism by Hospital Employees

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Does community volunteerism by hospital staff members make a positive impact for the hospital?

Furthermore, should the hospital develop a structured employee volunteer program?

Background Information

The hospital is a private, not-for-profit 110+ bed hospital located in a rural community of approximately 14,500 people and in the county seat of a county with a population of approximately 45,000. The community is fortunate to have a favorable economic outlook and strong community volunteerism.

The hospital has approximately 800 full and part time employees, many of which live in the local community. When ranked by the number of employees, the hospital is one of the top employers in the county. Hospital employees have a wealth of skills that are beneficial to organizations in the community. The hospital's senior management is involved in volunteer efforts in the community and supports hospital staff in their volunteer efforts. However, the hospital does not have a formal volunteer program for employees.

The impact of volunteerism on employers, employees and communities will be discussed. In addition, examples of volunteer efforts of some of the hospital's staff will be given. The information provided can assist senior management of the hospital in deciding if a formal workplace volunteer program should be established so that hospital employees of all levels could be formally encouraged to volunteer in their communities.

Positive Impact of Volunteerism

According to the website www.volunteer.ca, volunteerism by employees benefits your company by: increasing public image; improving relations with community groups, the public and employees; creating a healthier economic and social environment; and improving employee morale, productivity and loyalty. In addition, the website lists learning new skills, enhancing self-worth and confidence, gaining additional experience for career growth and adding to a healthier and more fulfilling life as benefits to employees and retirees. Lastly, the benefits to communities include increasing the number of active volunteers, providing an influx of skilled volunteers, providing support for needy individuals and groups and strengthening philanthropic donations.

Volunteerism also benefits employers in many ways from a human resources/employee relations standpoint including increased employee retention, improved employee recruiting, enhanced professional development, increased productivity and improved morale. According to Anne Rouse Sudduth, National Director of Community Involvement for Deloitte & Touche USA LLP, "There's been a lot of research done to show that people want to work for companies that match their values and that when given a choice, a person will choose to go to work for a company that offers them an opportunity to be involved in the community and that they see as being socially responsible, vs. same job, same pay, same everything, without those two ingredients" (Deloitte). In fact, a Cone Corporate Citizenship Study indicated that 91% of Americans surveyed in 2002 would consider switching to a company involved with a good cause, all other things being equal (Bridgeland). Due to the caring nature of healthcare workers, I believe it is likely to be important to many of them to work for healthcare organizations that promote volunteerism.

Sudduth also stated, "It makes sense for our people-based organization; our most precious asset is our people. We want to develop them....we want to have a competitive advantage in recruiting great people who share our values and our commitment to the community" (Deloitte). I believe this thought lends itself to hospitals due to the people-based nature of healthcare organizations.

Volunteerism also benefits organizations in many ways from a marketing standpoint including increasing awareness for their products and services and attracting civic-minded customers. This theory is supported by these findings: “A 1994 survey of 1,572 households showed seventy-seven percent of respondents said their purchasing decisions were influenced by their perceptions of a company’s involvement in the community. Seventy-four percent said they chose not to do business with companies perceived as not acting with the best interests of the community in mind” (Center). Furthermore, Robert K. Goodwin, President and CEO of the Points of Light Foundation, feels “Many businesses are recognizing that corporate social responsibility and good corporate citizenship have become deciding factors for consumers in choosing and buying brand” (Goodwin).

“When EDS employees volunteer their time and talents to community projects, they’re putting a human face on the company and exhibiting its best side: its heart and soul,” according to www.eds.com, the corporate website of EDS. The website also states “Community service is raising the company’s profile in Minneapolis, where employees serve on boards alongside employees from other Fortune 100 companies. That’s important because local companies like to work with other local companies, said Byron Olson, a client delivery executive in Minneapolis. In addition, the website states,

“Our volunteer work raises the customers’ awareness of the presence of EDS,” said Dick Callahan, California client executive for state business for EDS (EDS).

Although the marketing aspect of volunteerism by hospital staff is difficult to quantify, I believe consumers make healthcare decisions in a similar fashion as they make decisions for other products and services. Therefore, I believe hospitals can realize added revenue as a result of employee volunteerism.

Volunteerism Efforts of the Hospital's Staff

Examples of volunteerism by the hospital's staff are described below to show specific benefits recognized by the hospital. These volunteer efforts involve several facets in the community and aide a wide variety of organizations and individuals.

Career Expo

One such event the hospital is involved in is the annual "Career Expo" which is held for the eighth grade students in four public school districts and one private school in the county. A common site is selected each year, typically a high school gymnasium, and students are bused to the site for a two-hour period for the opportunity to learn about a variety of careers. Three separate two-hour segments are conducted to provide for low student-adult ratio and maximum interaction. The careers are grouped into six categories and students are given fifteen minutes in each category to interact with the 10-12 adults in each area.

The hospital is very well represented in the healthcare segment and provides staff to represent careers in a variety of healthcare opportunities including laboratory, radiology, cardiology, physical therapy, nursing, respiratory therapy and pharmacy. Additional healthcare professionals from the community represent a variety of other healthcare areas as well. The benefits to the hospital are not easily quantified, however, the hope is that more students will consider careers in healthcare based on their experience at the Career Expo. The event is directed at eighth grade students so that their interest in specific careers may be considered when scheduling for ninth grade (high school) courses. In addition, the event has made a tremendous impression on the teachers and administrators that attend the event as chaperones and hopefully generates loyalty for the participating organizations.

Leadership Logan County

Leadership Logan County is a community development program of the local

chamber of commerce. It is designed for participants to have the opportunity to broaden their perspectives, enhance their leadership skills and become more effective leaders in their community and profession. The participants meet regularly for full day sessions once a month for nine months. Topics are covered through guest speakers, group exercises, tours, simulations, discussions and group projects. A variety of leadership skills are addressed during the sessions as well as topics such as city/county government, education, industry and healthcare.

During the healthcare session, members of the hospital administrative staff present a strategic planning session at the hospital that covers general strategic planning information as well as strategic planning information relating specifically to the hospital. In addition, current healthcare topics such as malpractice insurance rates, managed care contracting, JCAHO accreditation and new service offerings are addressed. This is a great opportunity to discuss these topics and create awareness among current and future leaders within the community. Many of the twenty to twenty-five participants in the program each year discuss the information with their co-workers and family members thus important healthcare information is spread throughout the community. The participants develop sensitivity and understanding of the issues facing hospitals and an appreciation for the wealth of services offered locally. Another component of the program, which includes a visit to a not-for-profit organization board meeting, civic organization, school or a "lunch with a leader", also benefits the hospital by allowing additional opportunities to inform participants about healthcare issues. A final portion of the program, which involves tackling a "critical community issue", has also impacted the hospital. Participants of the leadership program are divided into small groups to research an issue that may range from a shortage of child care centers, to increasing awareness of volunteer opportunities or a lack of public transportation. Approximately thirty issues have been addressed in the past seven years and many have been related to healthcare thus increasing the participant's awareness of healthcare issues.

Service organizations

The participation of the hospital's President/CEO, vice presidents and department directors in various service organizations such as Rotary International and Kiwanis International has increased the visibility of the hospital in the community in many ways. Interaction among club members allows hospital administration to increase awareness of new services as well as improve community leader's understanding of healthcare issues.

United Way

Participation in the local United Way program's board of directors and campaign cabinet by administrative staff has provided opportunities to network with other business leaders in the community. In addition, participation has allowed for administrative staff to become more familiar with the needs of local not-for-profit agencies and for other United Way volunteers to become more familiar with hospital-related programs that are funded by the United Way.

Relay for Life

The American Cancer Society's Relay for Life is a huge event in the county and has strong ties to the hospital's new oncology center and related cancer network's regional cancer center. Hospital employees serve on the core committee and play vital roles in fundraising and assisting with activities during the eighteen-hour event. The annual local event raises nearly \$200,000 for cancer research and aid to cancer patients. The hospital's Relay for Life team is very active in fundraising and is well represented at the event. In addition, the event allows the hospital to educate community members on the subject of cancer and inform them of oncology (cancer-related) services offered by the hospital through onsite education efforts.

Chamber of Commerce

Senior hospital administration has served as chairmen of the board of the local chamber of commerce. In addition, administrative staff has served on various committees, as treasurer and as board members of the chamber of commerce for a number of years in the past two decades. These volunteer efforts have resulted in valuable networking opportunities with business leaders in the community.

Community Corporate Cup

The hospital jointly sponsors a community event with the local YMCA in which teams from local employers compete in a variety of activities including basketball, volleyball, softball, swimming relays, darts, card games and trivia contests. Interaction with employees and managers of local employers has strengthened the relationship between the employers and the hospital in a number of ways including increasing familiarity with the administration and staff of the hospital. The event is a visible way the hospital supports wellness in the community and provides interaction with a number of participants each quarter.

Safe Kids

As the hospital acts as the lead agency for a new Safe Kids chapter in the community, hospital employees are in touch with additional community members including law enforcement officers, child welfare agency staff, school administrators, health department staff and others. Projects include infant and toddler car seat inspections and Bike and Scooter Safety Rodeos.

Bioethics Committee Outreach Program

Providing annual informational programs at area high schools regarding end of life issues, advance directives and ethics in healthcare has also enabled hospital staff to interact with community members including high school students, teachers and school administrators.

Health Fairs

Participating in health fairs in local school buildings has provided interaction with students, teachers, school administrators and other participants in the health fairs.

Corporate health fairs provide benefits to the hospital as well, through improved relations with local industry and increased awareness of services offered by the hospital.

Miscellaneous

Volunteering in parent-teacher organizations (PTO), mental health agency boards, volunteer fire and emergency medical services, coaching, school boards, churches, not-for-profit agency boards, supplying first aid kits for youth sports teams, providing meeting rooms at no cost, providing job shadowing opportunities for middle school and high school students, reading one-on-one with elementary students and many other activities has also provided numerous benefits to the hospital. A recent list compiled by participants of Leadership Logan County shows sixty volunteer opportunities in Logan County, which is not all-inclusive as local churches and schools are not listed.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to quantify the benefits of the many volunteer efforts of the hospital's staff, it is clear that volunteer efforts create respect, understanding and awareness of the hospital within many segments of the community. Interaction with hospital employees and hospital board members appears to encourage local citizens to choose the local hospital for healthcare services by putting familiar, caring faces on the healthcare providers.

The research conducted for this paper resulted in a great deal of support to encourage consideration by the hospital's senior management to establish of a formal workplace volunteer program for its staff. The benefits could certainly outweigh the cost and effort involved in administering the program. Therefore, presented below are keys to the success of a workplace volunteer program and steps to take to develop a program at the hospital.

The Next Step

Keys to a successful employee volunteerism program include designing a program that meets the needs and interests of employees, the company and the community. According to the BEI Website, another key is "senior management must commit to establishing, supporting and promoting the program by allocating appropriate resources and encouraging employee involvement". Other BEI recommendations include encouragement of employees to participate in the design phase of the program to build enthusiasm and interest and to be sure employees do not feel forced to participate in volunteer activities. Another important tip from BEI is establishing "a single point of contact to manage the day-to-day activities, act as a liaison between the company and the employees and develop relations with agencies". In addition, Nunn suggests that all levels of management need to be advocates of workplace volunteerism and make sure that appropriate policies are in place so that the program is well suited to the company's culture and mission.

Steps that should be considered in establishing a workplace volunteerism program at the hospital include deciding on the structure for the program (company directed, employee driven, third party managed or hybrid). Secondly, the design of the program should be created and may include one or more of the following: paid work days for volunteering, designated amount of paid hours per year for volunteering, doing signature events and/or encouraging family involvement. Thirdly, program guidelines must be established including plans for communication (i.e. internal website,

newsletter, etc.), introduction of the program, marketing, registration, safety and/or legal guidelines and awards and recognition (BEI, p.7).

A number of resources are available for organizations establishing workplace volunteer programs including business/corporate volunteer councils, which are “coalitions of businesses who either have active employee and/or retiree volunteer involvement programs or are interested in starting such a program”. In addition, volunteer centers, which “perform as important liaisons between businesses and the non-profit community”, may also serve as a resource (Hahn). Although a business/corporate volunteer council and volunteer center are not available locally, the hospital may benefit from contacting councils and/or centers in other areas for advice on structuring a program. There are also several prominent volunteer programs sponsored by large corporations such as Verizon Volunteers and Honda Heroes that can be used as resources by the hospital.

A successful employee workplace volunteerism program is hopefully on the horizon for the hospital and could easily get underway with something as simple as a “brown bag lunch” where interested employee share their ideas. Count me in!

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