

## Corporate volunteers can be a burden for nonprofits

By Sacha Pfeiffer, Globe Staff

The next time you're inclined to pat yourself on the back for your company's volunteer work — the murals painted, the community gardens planted, the vacant lots cleaned — think of Kathleen Walsh. She's the chief operating officer at the YMCA of Metro North, which manages more than 1,000 volunteers a year at its seven facilities, and she sometimes breathes a huge sigh of relief when those do-gooders go home.

"Oftentimes a van shows up, a bunch of people get out with no real understanding of our cause, and they come with the assumption they're getting a day in the sun or out of the office," said Walsh, recalling volunteers who have arrived in flip-flops to do debris removal and without sunscreen or bug spray for outdoor work in late spring. The arrival of such volunteers often triggers a coin flip no one wants to lose.

"We're all saying, 'They're your problem!' 'No, they're your problem!' and finally, when the day is over and they get back onto their little corporate bus, we think: thank god. Now we can move on to our real jobs."

It's the dirty truth of corporate volunteer projects: They may make good photo ops and sound virtuous in a company's annual report, but nonprofits often dread them and suffer in silence.

Walsh's lament is widespread, although few nonprofits are willing to express it publicly for fear of offending business supporters and jeopardizing the funding they may provide.

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Without a doubt, the free staffing can be invaluable. But the unfortunate reality of corporate "days of service," well-meaning as they are, is that they can be burdensome, time-consuming headaches for nonprofits, and of dubious value. The "help" may not be all that helpful.

Your company may want to organize a team-building project to paint a community center, when what that center actually needs is a volunteer social media strategist to teach its staff to use Twitter. Your firm hopes to read to children at a homeless shelter? What that shelter could really use is a volunteer accountant to assist with its bookkeeping.

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"The general attitude is, 'They're a nonprofit, of course they need our help,' but you need to ask what the actual needs of the nonprofit are and not just think about what you'd like to do," said Jessica Anderson, who manages employee volunteer programs at EMC, the Hopkinton data storage company.

The problem is exacerbated by the corporate world's growing emphasis on "employee engagement" and "corporate social responsibility," which are typically code for volunteerism. That is considered crucial to recruit and retain millennials and has created a demand for projects that often outstrips supply, leaving some nonprofits devising make-work activities for corporate volunteers. Anecdotes abound of different corporate groups repainting the same wall within the same week.

"I think that's hyperbole," said Katherine Smith, executive director of the Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College, "but who knows?"

Worsening the situation, some companies have precise requests for the type of volunteer service they would like to do.

"We'll get calls that say, 'We have 250 people and we'd all like to volunteer together on the same day in a school where we can interact with children,'" said Patrice Keegan, executive director of Boston Cares, a matchmaking service for volunteers and nonprofits that last year placed 5,200 corporate volunteers in 155 projects.

What those callers don't realize is that some schools don't allow volunteers on their premises during the school day, or first require criminal background checks, or don't permit projects like painting while students are in school because of the disruption and fumes. Similarly, a weekend volunteer activity might force nonprofit staffers to work overtime. And assembling supplies and materials needed for volunteers can be arduous, diverting nonprofit staffs from more pressing projects.

"In general, a lot of nonprofits are not built to accommodate volunteers," Keegan said, "and I can promise you there is no place in America where you can send 1,000 volunteers to one site all in one day — but, believe me, they'll ask."

Short-notice volunteer requests are also common.

"A company might say, 'Quick, we have 50 executives that we want to come to your organization to do volunteer work the day after tomorrow. Can you accommodate them?'" said Lindsay Firestone Gruber of the Taproot Foundation, which helps businesses find pro bono work. "The better way is to call and say, 'We have people who have skills in the following areas. Do you have any needs that you think could be well-served by taking advantage of those skills?'"

Even nonprofits that depend heavily on volunteers have limitations on what they can handle. Roxbury-based Horizons for Homeless Children, which coordinates about 4,000 volunteers a year, builds play spaces in homeless shelters, "which from an outside perspective sounds like it could take a lot of work and effort," said program director Meghan Schafer, "but in reality can be a job for 10 to 15 people at most because we're working in a small space."

Yet companies that help pay for those play spaces "a lot of times also want to send 20 or 30 people to be part of that experience," she explained. "The experience is better for everyone when there's openness and honesty from the get-go about what their expectations are."

But honesty can feel risky to nonprofits since they don't want corporate sponsors to feel rebuffed or unappreciated. They especially don't want a business funder to take financial support and brand-name backing elsewhere.

"That hesitation by nonprofits to speak out about this cuts directly to the heart of the problem," said Gruber, leading to "the proverbial wall being painted over and over and over again."

Some nonprofits occasionally do say no, albeit diplomatically.

One of them is Cradles to Crayons, which coordinates 35,000 volunteer visits each year to its Brighton “Giving Factory,” where customized “KidPacks” of donated clothes, toys, and other items are assembled for disadvantaged children. Founder and chief executive Lynn Margherio said her organization knows exactly how many volunteers it needs per shift, “so if someone is seeking to send us a larger group than we can handle . . . then it doesn’t work for our business needs.” In those cases, volunteers will be asked if they can come another day.

At YMCA of Metro North, Walsh said lousy volunteer experiences have made her organization realize that “we need to be selective despite the fact that everybody needs free labor.”

Some companies are also rethinking what it means to volunteer. The traditional view of corporate volunteerism is a team-building, feel-good opportunity with visible results, like a cleanup or a renovation.

But what many nonprofits need even more — sometimes desperately so — is help with accounting, technology, and other administrative projects.

Last year, for instance, Constant Contact, the Waltham online marketing firm, developed a free media strategy for Catie’s Closet, a Dracut nonprofit that supplies clothing and other necessities to students living in poverty.

“Where companies go wrong is if you have the attitude that nonprofits should be grateful for anything we give them,” said Bev Dribin, a vice president for the food service company Aramark, “but if it’s not providing value or it’s not something they need, it’s just activity for activity’s sake.”

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