



Do-Good Execs

How to develop a positive presence in the community.

by **Stephen Xavier**

President/CEO, Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc.

What is the best way to develop a presence in the community? Some leaders generously donate millions of dollars to charitable organizations on behalf of their companies or even out of their own pockets. Others go on the speaking circuit to establish a reputation for themselves or their enterprises. While these are worthwhile endeavors, neither is necessary for establishing a community presence. In fact, the greatest benefits to leaders and their companies come not from monetary donations or image enhancement on a national or even local level, but from making a genuine, self-less contribution to the community.

A Two-pronged Approach

Developing a presence in the community begins with the internal community of a leader's own organization, whether the entire company or a business unit. Why? Picture the leader as a hub around which work life revolves—internally the life of the company or business unit, and externally the life of the community in which the company operates. For both communities, the leader serves as a role model. The question then becomes: Is the executive modeling types of behavior and levels of performance that demonstrate high quality leadership? The best leaders are consistent in their conduct and performance, whether at work or away from the office, with their families, communities, neighborhoods, church groups, civic organizations and in their daily lives. Thus, when leaders are viewed as caring team players inside the company, it sends a positive message to the external community that is more powerful than any self-serving attempts at enhancing image. When these leaders become involved in the community, they do so with integrity and commitment. They don't just donate money, but give of themselves and their time. They step up to the plate by contributing expertise and leadership skill and become involved in activities such as fundraising efforts among peers, vendors and competitors.

But isn't there a difference between the internal and external community? Executives are often tempted to argue the stakes are higher at work where they manage, say, a \$500 million budget or 5000 employees. But isn't it just a difference in the number of zeros? When a leader serves as a role model for a scout troop, for example, and teaches the values of teamwork and community, the impact on the children's futures can

be more lasting than meeting the often short-term goals of corporate life.

Can't Find Time? Consider these Benefits!

Getting involved in community activities is basically a matter of showing up, and that's where the greatest challenge lies. For the typical overworked executive, finding time to practice leadership skills outside of work is easier said than done. However, leaders who spend most of their time at the office deprive themselves of an opportunity to develop themselves both personally and professionally. "Executives who consider professional development a priority make time for volunteer work," says Maria Chavez Wilcox, CEO of the United Way of Orange County, California. "The pay-back in terms of skills development and team building is huge. Those willing to take the risk and make the time will realize tremendous benefits both personally and professionally. They will also get visibility, meet new contacts and create friendships while making a contribution to an individual organization and the community." Wilcox constantly receives feedback from volunteers after they return to their offices. "They tell us how much they benefited from exploring different interests and utilizing skills different from those they need in the workplace," she says. "They also tell us that our safe, supportive environment taught them the value of a longer-term view and allowed them to take risks they might not take in a corporate setting where they are evaluated against short-term goals."

Community activities have many tangible and intangible benefits:

Practice leadership skills and team building in a new environment. A weekend of beach cleanup can be a great team-building exercise. Leaders report not only increased leadership effectiveness, but teams who bonded on a personal level and returned to the office more inspired and enthusiastic than ever.

Realize personal growth. Taking the time to help at a crisis center or homeless shelter has lasting emotional impact. Executives realize the value of a personal rather than financial investment in improving their community while receiving a learning experience that results in substantial personal growth.

Gain perspective. Executives who volunteer their time to serve on a nonprofit board or committee get the chance to practice their skills in a different setting. They gain new perspectives that often increase their effectiveness and productivity.

Gain visibility and credibility. Leaders whose hands-on involvement in charitable outreach and fundraising activities includes appeals to customers, vendors and competitors not only lend credibility to the charitable organization, but also increase their own companies' visibility and credibility.

Hone communication skills and refine leadership expertise. Teaching is a wonderful way for executives to contribute to the success of others. Consider teaching working adults at a junior college who are looking for real-world leadership experience.

Inspire the next generation of leaders. Rather than going on a speaking circuit, give a talk for Junior Achievement or a similar youth group. Political leaders such as Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell recognize the value of serving as role models as they speak to groups of young African Americans, demonstrating that success is possible for blacks in America.

Case Study: The Whirlpool-Habitat for Humanity Partnership

Whirlpool's partnership with Habitat for Humanity began in 1999 as a one-year, \$5M commitment to donate a refrigerator and range for every Habitat home built in North America. "It's been exciting to see this relationship evolve from its beginnings as a financial commitment to something that is much more about the people of Whirlpool and Habitat," says Jeff Terry, Whirlpool's Senior Manager of Corporate Commitment and Strategic Relationships whose focus has been on growing the relationship globally. "When Habitat approached us to be the cornerstone of a five-year campaign starting in 2000, it was an easy decision to expand our commitment to five years at the same level." Soon Whirlpool began sponsoring building projects and getting its leaders and employees involved as a way to cultivate team building.

In 2005, 270 Whirlpool employees from 19 countries worked on a Habitat project near Whirlpool's Michigan headquarters. "It was a practical application of our core values of diversity and inclusion and gave

rise to a virtual community among participants who continue to maintain a mutually supportive and caring dialog," says Terry. "Our work with Habitat allows us to connect with one another on an emotional level—and when you do that, you build strong teams and strong loyalty to one another and to the company."

The program's executive sponsor, Ted Dosch, personally works on projects with Habitat partner families and other volunteers. "When you're out there working alongside fellow employees, regardless of your level and position in the company, it allows everyone to see the human side of leadership," says Terry. When over 200 Mexican employees came together to build homes in Puebla, Mexico, Roy Armes, general manager of Whirlpool Mexico, amazed factory workers by working hands-on for an entire week. "It created significant loyalty and respect for him and allowed Roy to better understand the people who make up Whirlpool Mexico," says Terry. "It increased his grounding in our business and his understanding of how best to run the Mexican organization."

Whirlpool has two full-time executives dedicated to growing the global relationship with Habitat for Humanity. The company's goal is to support every Habitat home built around the world by 2011, its centennial year.

A Tool for Playing Smarter

Many companies are taking their civic responsibilities seriously and write big checks each year in support of local and global charities. As yet, few are reaping the tremendous benefits of personal engagement on the part of their executives. Hands-on involvement not only enhances company image while benefiting a charitable or civic organization, it reshapes leaders and participating employees. When people become involved in the *external* community, it makes for better *internal* communities with more effective leaders and better team players.

However, if a leader's heart is not in it, any contribution to the community will be perfunctory and of little benefit to the organization or the individual. The best way to overcome a lack of interest is to give some thought to the range of possibilities and identify a cause that "resonates." Do the research and find a way to become involved in an organization of interest. Some obvious choices are the American Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity and the Scouts. But there are many other worthwhile causes, from children's charities to health care and animal welfare organizations to civic groups that give back to those who genuinely give to themselves. ■

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Cornerstone
Executive
Development
Group, Inc.



Stephen Xavier, America's Top Coach™, is President/CEO of Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc., a global firm specializing in executive coaching and related leadership development. For further information call 805 492-8263, email Xavier@cedg.com or visit www.cedg.com

3717 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Westlake Village, CA 91362 ■ direct: 805-492-8263 ■ web: www.cedg.com