

Submittable 

**8 STEPS TO CRAFT**

# an Employee-First Volunteering Program

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# Introduction

Too many corporate leaders see [corporate volunteering](#) as a yes or no question: “Does the company have a volunteer program?” The real question is, “Are employees showing up to volunteer?”

Unfortunately, the answer is often no. Though the majority of employees say volunteering is important to them, when given the opportunity, most don’t participate. In one [Deloitte survey](#), 77% of respondents said that volunteerism is essential to employee well-being. But according to the [Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose \(CECP\)](#), participation has been hovering around 20% for years.

So what’s going on? Is volunteering important to employees or isn’t it?

In short, yes. Employees see volunteering as essential. But they aren’t looking to check a box. They’re interested in [meaningful volunteer experiences](#) that align with their values. In most cases, that’s where the disconnect happens.

Rather than empowering employees, many volunteer programs feel like top-down initiatives, where priorities are

set by company leaders while employees just fill slots. In this hierarchical dynamic, people are likely to disengage before they ever get involved.

Reorienting your program to be “employee-first” can help your team tap into the full potential of your volunteering program. Give your employees a sense of ownership and agency. This will not only boost engagement, but also help create a self-sustaining program through a “virtuous cycle,” where positive outcomes lead to more positive outcomes. Once this cycle starts, employee enthusiasm will drive more engagement and growth, which will spur more enthusiasm, and on and on.

## The Virtuous Cycle of an Employee-First Volunteer Program



## **An employee-first volunteer program shifts ownership**

An employee-first volunteer program centers the employee experience. This approach is not just about the day-of volunteering experience, it's about employees seeing themselves as true stakeholders in the program—from choosing a cause to understanding the impact of the volunteer work.

In reality, running an employee-first volunteer program aligns with effective management tactics that may already be happening in your company. Good leaders help employees connect their work to bigger company goals and empower them as much as possible to make decisions and act on their values. That's what you seek to do as a program leader—help employees feel a sense of ownership of your volunteer program.



## What does it mean to lead an employee-first volunteer program?

Shifting to an “employee-first” ethos is about reimagining your role as program leader. You need to reset priorities to align with employee needs.

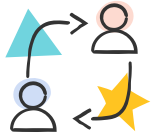


### Be the bridge

As a program leader, your role is to connect employees to opportunities they want. Remember, most people want to volunteer. As the [Deloitte survey](#) referenced earlier suggests, most employees have an innate desire to give back. So don't approach them as if they need convincing or cajoling.

#### OUR ADVICE

See yourself as a facilitator. There are countless volunteer opportunities out there; your mission is to connect people with the ones that will be meaningful and convenient for them. You provide the structure, but employee values should set the course for your program.



## Center people

Employees know when they're being treated like numbers on a spreadsheet. They can tell whether you're truly invested in understanding their perspectives or just trying to hit a quota. Some metrics will help you understand [the impact of your work](#) later, but people should be at the heart of your program from the start.

### OUR ADVICE

As you build your program, honor the full human experience. Give people space to explore big ideas and make deep connections.



## Keep employee experience top of mind

A vital part of running an employee-first volunteer program is continually seeking feedback. It's not about seeking employee feedback once and then moving on. It's about opening up lines of communication so there can be an ongoing dialogue that you can act upon. This feedback loop will likely cause your program to grow and change over time. That's good. You want to stay dynamic and responsive.

### OUR ADVICE

Incorporate employee feedback into your decision-making processes. As your program evolves, stay focused on the employee experience and continue to check in with everyone involved.



## Operate with transparency & clarity

Part of giving employees agency is letting them into your processes. You want to be clear and transparent about how you make decisions and what practices you put in place. Employees shouldn't feel like there's a "behind the scenes" aspect to your program that they aren't privy to.

### OUR ADVICE

As you set up your program, communicate openly with employees. Explain why you chose the cause or structure you did and invite them to ask questions. Transparency can go a long way in helping employees see themselves as stakeholders in your program.



## Find where values overlap

Though it's important to put employee values at the heart of your program, you need to keep your company values in mind as well. Your role as a program leader is to [find the overlap between the two](#). The most successful volunteer programs align company and employee priorities.

### OUR ADVICE

If your business already has a clear social impact mission built in, you might find that you attract employees with similar values. In that case, finding overlap will likely be straightforward. If you haven't articulated a clear set of values for the company, now is the time to do so. Define what positive impact you want to have as an organization and ensure you craft your volunteer program to fit into that vision.



8 STRATEGIES TO CENTER PEOPLE IN YOUR

# volunteer program





## 1 Let employees choose the causes they care about

You want employees to feel excited about the volunteer work they do. The easiest way to ensure this happens is to let them volunteer their time toward causes they already care about. Before anyone from your team starts reaching out to community nonprofits, check in with employees to find out what issues matter most to them.

Depending on the size and scope of your company, you could send out a survey or create a forum for discussion in a meeting or in Slack or Microsoft Teams. Employee input from these surveys or forums should inform the [partnerships you build with nonprofits](#).

Creating structured volunteer events can be a great way to get people involved, especially employees who haven't volunteered before. But you also want to support employees who choose to volunteer on their own, outside of the events you organize.

If some employees already have relationships with nonprofits, you're not looking to pivot them another direction. Instead, you want to support them so they can dig in deeper to that

commitment. Choose a [volunteer platform](#) that enables employees to join organized events and create their own.

[nCino](#), a fintech software company headquartered in North Carolina, gives their employees two paid days off per year to volunteer. They can spend those hours working with the organization of their choice—pursuing activities on their own or signing up for company-sponsored events. nCino also supports affinity groups—or employee resource groups—which create and sponsor events for their members as well.

Having several avenues to engage with volunteer work helps more employees find meaningful opportunities to give back and will help inspire the enthusiasm that's necessary to support a virtuous cycle.



## 2 Leverage each employee's unique value

Most employees don't want to feel like a cog in a machine. If all your volunteer opportunities are similar and require the same basic skills, some volunteers might disengage. For instance, if your volunteer opportunities are all some version of packing boxes for a nonprofit, that's an issue. You want to give people the chance to bring their unique skills to the table.

Not every volunteer opportunity has to be tailored to a specialized skill, but keep in mind that some employees will be much more enthusiastic about participating if they feel that they have unique expertise to offer.

Think about your employees and what skills they already possess. Tapping into their talent and experience will not only help them feel more valued as individuals, it can be much more useful for the nonprofits themselves. Say the members of your marketing team help an organization create a new fundraising strategy or your web developer helps them update their website. This assistance can be much more impactful than sending those same people to pack boxes.



Some nonprofit organizations are built to tap into your talented workforce. For instance, [ChickTech](#) is a national organization dedicated to empowering people of marginalized genders to engage with the tech industry. They partner with companies to pair skilled tech experts with up-and-coming talent. “Showing up as a queer, non-binary person to teach young women and non-binary people coding was so rewarding,” says Suz Reahard, an engineering manager at Submittable and ChickTech volunteer. “It was more than just the technical skills, I was able to show them that someone who looked like them could succeed and thrive as a developer in Montana.”

You also want to keep in mind that your employees likely have a range of physical abilities. If every volunteer event you host requires people to be on their feet or doing heavy lifting, you’re likely [leaving people out](#). Be sure to offer opportunities that allow everyone to participate.

Through skills-based volunteering, your organization can help support the infrastructure of your nonprofit partners, but there’s also the option to connect your employees directly to community members. [Regions Bank](#), headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, partners with Mercy House, an area nonprofit, to offer free financial counseling to community members. Bank associates meet one-on-one with individuals and families to answer questions about budgeting, saving, and money management. Getting access to volunteers who can provide nuanced financial advice is an incredible resource for local residents.

Letting employees tap into their skills and talents is a win-win. You give them an avenue to get more deeply engaged in volunteer work and the community members and nonprofits benefit from their knowledge.

**“Showing up as a queer, non-binary person to teach young women and non-binary people coding was so rewarding. I was able to show them that someone who looked like them could succeed and thrive as a developer in Montana.”**



**SUZ REAHARD** Senior Engineering Manager, Submittable



### 3 Give employees time off to volunteer

This is not a complex strategy, but it's essential. You need to give your employees dedicated volunteer time off (VTO). This time shouldn't be lumped in with other paid time off. You want to create a designated bank of hours that they can use exclusively for volunteering.

Companies offer a wide range of VTO policies, with most falling between **8 to 40 hours per year**. If you're just starting a program, it might make sense to start small—offering one or two days to each employee. But as your program grows and evolves, you might consider upping that number. Increasing your VTO allotment is an easy way to show you're invested in your employees and your community.



All that said, providing VTO doesn't mean much if your employees don't feel like they have the bandwidth or flexibility to use it. Be sure that managers are supporting employees who want to volunteer. And make an effort to plan your volunteer events around big business initiatives or busy seasons, if you have them.

**Splunk**, the data software company, offers their employees 40 hours of VTO per year. This policy fits into their broader social impact pledge of donating \$100 million in software licenses, training, support, education, and volunteer time over a 10-year period. By linking the volunteer program to broader company goals, they make it easier for employees and managers to understand how volunteering fits into the bigger picture.

As you build your program, make sure you clarify how much VTO you'll offer and how much flexibility employees will have to use it. Without that support, it'll be hard to garner the enthusiasm and engagement you need to make your program self-sustaining.

## 4 Provide extra motivation

Getting employees to volunteer can be a little like trying to convince them to exercise. Most people want to volunteer. They know they should, but sometimes they struggle to actually make it happen. This is where you can add a little extra motivation.

One way to help motivate employees is to tap into the [heuristics](#) (i.e., behavioral psychology) that influences how people make decisions. For instance, loss aversion bias is the strong tendency people have to avoid losses. [Loss aversion bias](#) says that a person is much more motivated to avoid losing something they have than gaining something they don't have.

With this bias in mind, you could make your VTO “use it or lose it.” Rather than trying to explain all the benefits of volunteering (which people probably already know), think about framing your messaging to tap into each person's aversion to loss. Set a deadline by which employees have to use all their VTO for the year and make it easy for them to do so.

Another way to provide a little outside motivation is to match employee volunteer hours with donations. For every hour

or day someone volunteers, your company could donate a certain amount of money to the nonprofit organization. This approach helps each volunteer make a deeper impact and can motivate people to get involved.

The [Allstate Foundation's Helping Hands Grant program](#) matches volunteer hours with monetary donations. Employees who volunteer can help earn grants of \$500 to \$1,000 for the nonprofit organizations they choose.

While you want to honor your employees' innate desire to give back, it never hurts to add a little extra motivation to help them take the first step. Plus that motivation can help keep them engaged over time, supporting the virtuous cycle that will help others get involved.

### PRO TIP

**Set a deadline by which employees have to use all their VTO for the year and make it easy for them to do so.**



## 5 Make giving part of your company culture

Employees shouldn't feel like volunteering stands alone as the only effort the company is making to connect with community members and engage in [corporate social responsibility](#). You should be able to articulate how volunteering fits into your business's broader commitment to social good.

You also want volunteering to be part of a larger company culture that values empathy, interconnectedness, and authenticity. If, internally, your workplace doesn't reflect these values, it will be hard to get employees genuinely excited about representing your company as they volunteer out in the community.

Shifting company culture is not something that happens overnight, but as you build out your volunteering program, if you notice a disconnect between your [CSR mission](#) and your internal practices, you need to make a plan to realign them.

Though running the volunteer program will likely fall on an HR or CSR team, volunteering should feel like a company-wide initiative. All company leaders should promote opportunities and champion the effort.

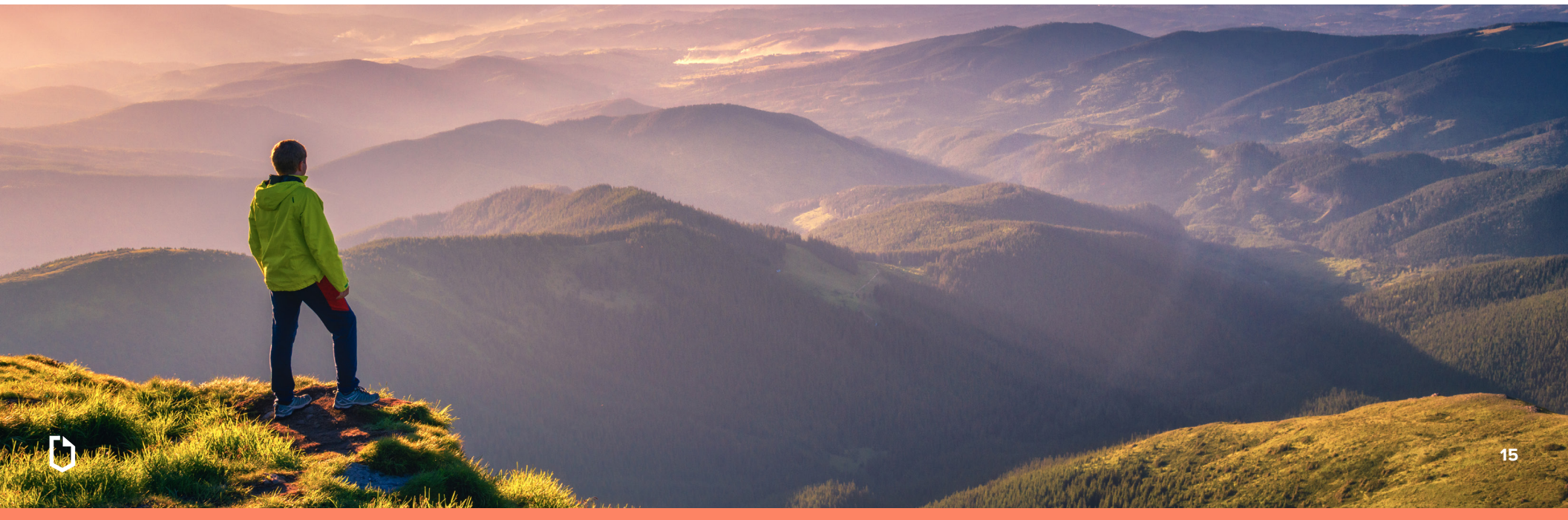


Keep track of who participates. If only certain teams consistently participate, there might be an opportunity to do more outreach to involve other teams. You don't want volunteering to be something only some employees feel invited to do. Ensuring that everyone in the company feels invited to volunteer will help support the growth that feeds the virtuous cycle.

For years, Patagonia has been an example of a company with a strong social impact mission. Their volunteer program is no exception. The company offers an [environmental internship program](#), which gives employees the chance to

take two months away from their regular roles to work for an environmental group of their choice. During this time, they still get their regular paycheck and benefits from Patagonia. This deep investment gives a huge boost to grassroots organizations. Plus employees return to their work with a renewed sense of purpose and inspiration.

Launching a volunteer program is a good opportunity to check the internal culture at your company. If it needs some recalibration, that's okay. Be upfront with employees about what you notice and how you plan to address it.





## 6 Sync volunteering with how you work

Part of making volunteering approachable for your team is syncing the way you volunteer with how you already work. Lean into your strengths as a team.

Leveraging relationships between coworkers is a great way to use the team-building you've already done internally to help bolster your volunteer program. If you have employee resource groups (ERGs), encourage group leaders to create volunteer activities for their members.

Turn volunteering into a social experience. One way to do this is to make it easy for people to see who else has signed up for an event. This visibility can help people get excited about getting involved—think about how much more likely you are to participate in a new activity if you know other people who'll be there.

Enabling employees to create their own events is another really important strategy. This democratization allows anyone who's passionate about a cause to organize an activity and invite their colleagues to join them. It's so much more meaningful to get a personal invitation from a coworker than

to get an email from HR asking for volunteers. Empowering employees to share their enthusiasm helps foster a deeper sense of community and camaraderie, and will help your program become self-sustaining.

You also want to think about the logistics of how you work. If you're a distributed team, this might mean creating virtual volunteering events.

During the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Zendesk](#), the customer service software company, created virtual volunteering opportunities that tapped into their global workforce. Employees from Manila to San Francisco to Krakow helped nonprofits, government agencies, and healthcare facilities translate information to reach local community members, including homebound senior citizens.

As you design your program, be sure to tap into what your company has already built—the relationships and habits that you can leverage to create a better employee volunteer experience.





## 7 Connect activities to meaning

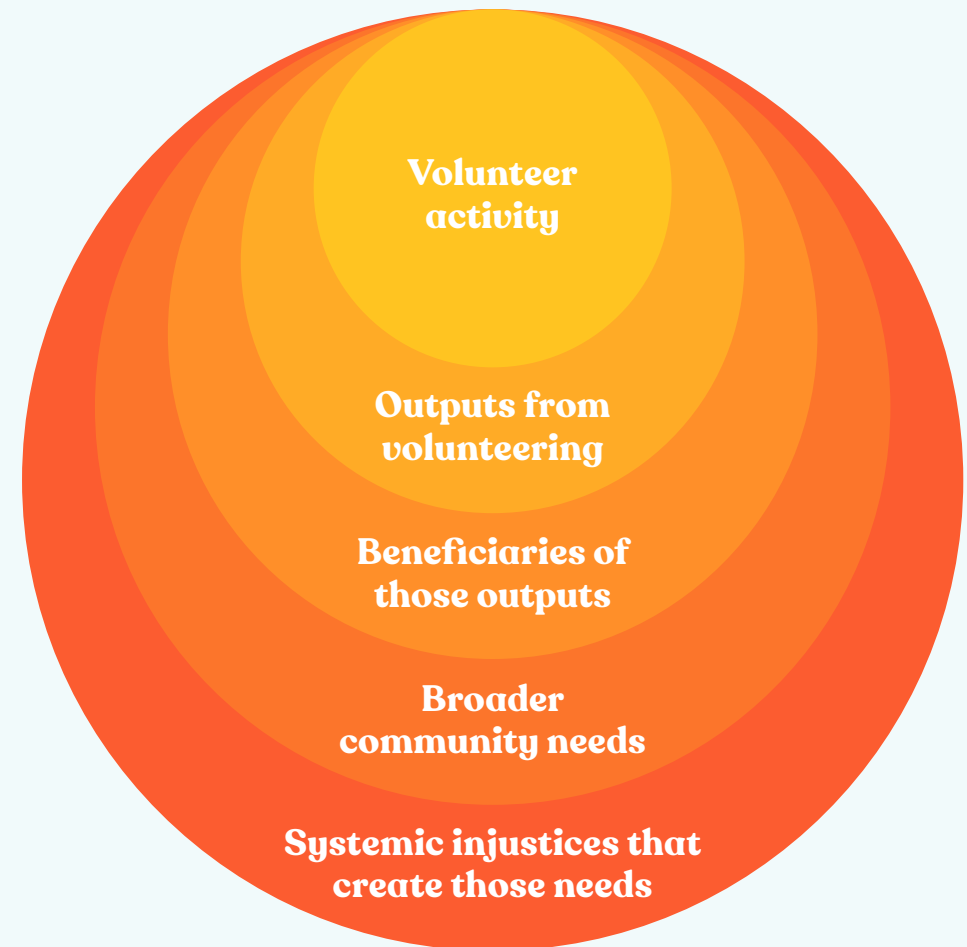
In volunteering, people want to understand how their actions connect to bigger outcomes. If volunteers go pack boxes of food without knowing who the food is for, they'll struggle to understand the significance of their contributions.

Centering the employee means taking the time to explore how the volunteer activities contribute to real progress. Program leaders should help volunteers make [connections between inputs and outcomes](#). The nonprofit partners you work with can be a great resource to learn about community needs and how volunteering helps. Communicate what you learn to employees.

Setting aside a few minutes at the beginning of a volunteering event is a great way to provide context for participants. Talk through what they'll be doing and then share who their work will benefit and how. Then, explore how the cause intersects with larger, systemic issues together.

Dialogue is an often overlooked part of volunteering, but making space for employees to connect their volunteer work to deeper meaning is essential. Deeper conversations lead to deeper engagement, which strengthens the virtuous cycle.

### PUT EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERING INTO CONTEXT



## 8 Take the stress out of the process

No matter how much effort you put into creating a volunteer experience that centers employees, if the sign-up process is difficult or confusing, people won't participate. Think of it this way: if you throw an incredible party, but then you forget to include the address on the invitations, not a whole lot of people are going to show up.

For a lot of employees, bad technology is the biggest barrier to participation. When they go to sign up for a volunteer opportunity, they find a cumbersome process that requires them to fill out a long form and doesn't offer the information they need. Or worse, they have to dig through an email thread to find a spreadsheet.

Think about the sign-up process from the employee's point of view. Make it easy and straightforward. Give them the ability to browse opportunities and then [sign up with one click](#).

Choose a platform that centralizes the volunteer experiences. Give employees one place to track their VTO, sign up to volunteer, and view all the information they need about a volunteer opportunity.

For every event you create, give explicit instructions about what the activity will require. Provide directions, parking information, physical or clothing requirements, a general schedule, and any other information you can offer. People like to know what they're getting themselves into. Providing details up front will help employees feel more comfortable saying yes.

### Why one click sign-up matters for volunteering



## A stronger team culture starts with volunteering

As employees make decisions about whether to stay with their current employers or look for new opportunities, [company culture and social impact](#) are playing a big role. People want to be part of a team that cares about people, shows up for its community, and centers the employee experience.

An employee-first volunteer program can be the bedrock of a healthy team culture. With the right approach, you can create a self-sustaining program that's built on employees' values. But you need to be strategic about how you structure your processes and the tools you use. One thing's for sure—it's time to start thinking more about how your company can be a stronger force for good.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Steele is a Content Producer and Editor at Submittable focused mostly on the world of grantmaking and corporate giving. Her work often explores the connection between technology, equity, and social good. She also writes fiction and nonfiction. You can read some of her stories and essays at [laurapricesteele.com](http://laurapricesteele.com).

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