



**POINTS  
OF LIGHT**

# **8 WAYS TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES RIGHT NOW**



*Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt... Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality', trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists... **Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different.***

*- [Arundhati Roy](#)*

## INTRODUCTION

From clearer water in Venice and emptier trains in London to our newfound experiences of place (i.e., working from home, restricted mobility) and how we interact with each other, the COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed our lives.

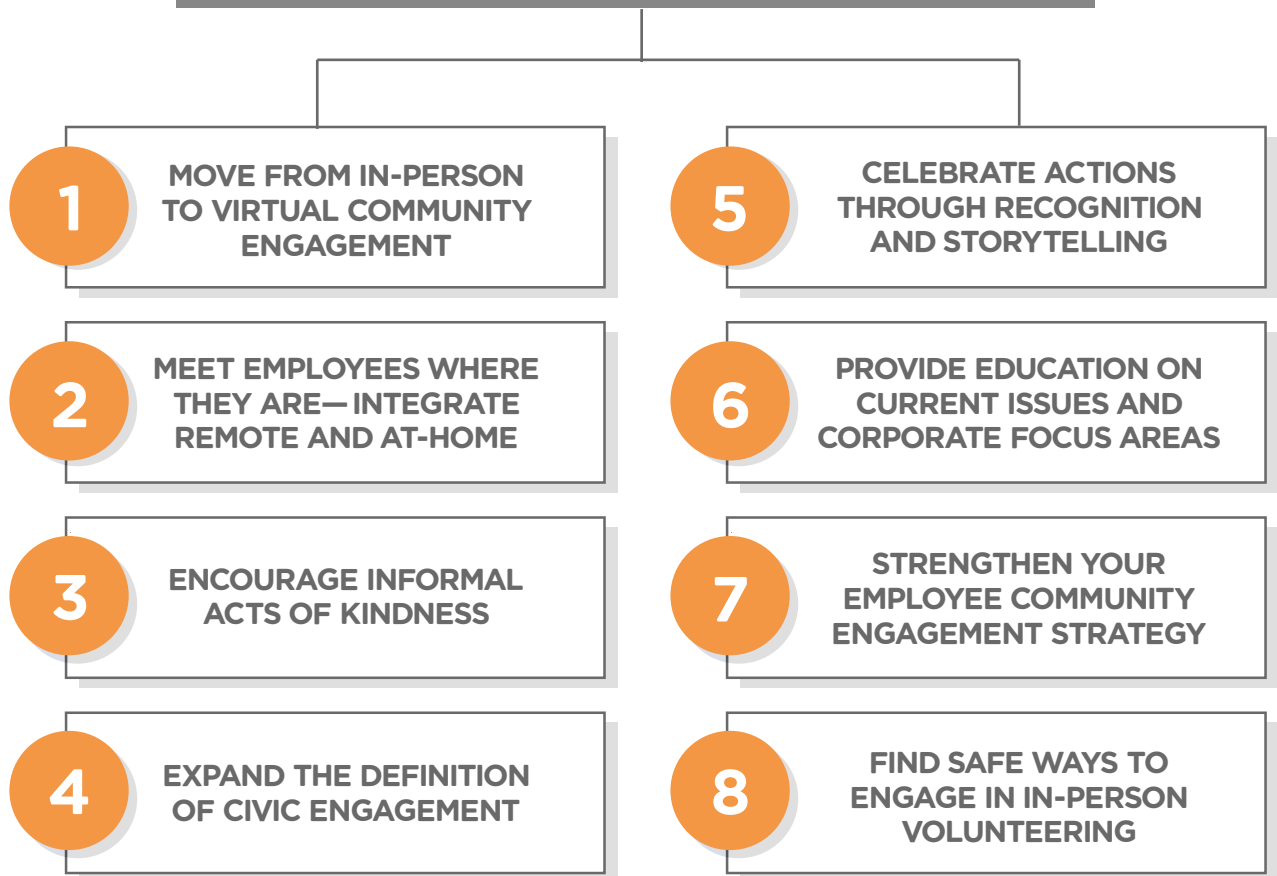
Like many other aspects of our lives, employee civic engagement—mainly traditional employee volunteering—has been considerably affected by recent global events. Restrictions imposed to protect the health and safety of communities around the world have forced well-planned enterprise-wide galvanizing moments of service to be either postponed or canceled. There is also no clarity on the duration of these restrictions. We have seen the increase of informal volunteering (e.g., helping neighbors), the widespread emergence of mutual-aid or viral kindness networks, and emergency-response platforms and initiatives along with the proliferation of digital engagement opportunities. All of this has left CSR and employee engagement professionals to ask, **“What is the best way to adapt current employee community engagement activities to meet the needs of today?”**

Your company has responded to the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, provided emergency relief and adapted to a new working environment. Now, as we begin to test and potentially change long-term strategies, we are all asking how we can build on the sense of community, the social norms of supporting one another through the crisis, and provide opportunities to be part of something bigger.

To provide suggestions and inspiring examples, Points of Light reached out to our Global Network of innovative volunteer-mobilizing organizations and our corporate partners to better understand how the pandemic has changed employee civic engagement programs. The following resource will explore ideas and provide actionable examples for making sure CSR leaders can meet the expectations of addressing current, pressing community needs and harnessing employees' passion to serve.

As you read through the eight strategies, think about how you would respond to each and consider what tactics would or wouldn't work for your organization. Remember that the expert staff at Points of Light is always available to help you move from thought to action!

## 8 WAYS TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY



### 1. MOVE FROM IN-PERSON TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Cyber service, digital volunteering, e-volunteering, online volunteering and Internet-mediated volunteering are all alternative terms used to describe virtual volunteering activities.

To be considered virtual volunteering, the activity should include the following elements:

- Actions or activities can be completed, in whole or in part, using the Internet and a computer or other Internet-connected device (such as a smartphone or a tablet) and information and communication technologies (social media, online chat systems, webinars, etc.) to support nonprofits and their beneficiaries.
- These actions or activities can be performed anywhere in the world where the volunteer has digital access.

## MOVE FROM IN-PERSON TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, cont.

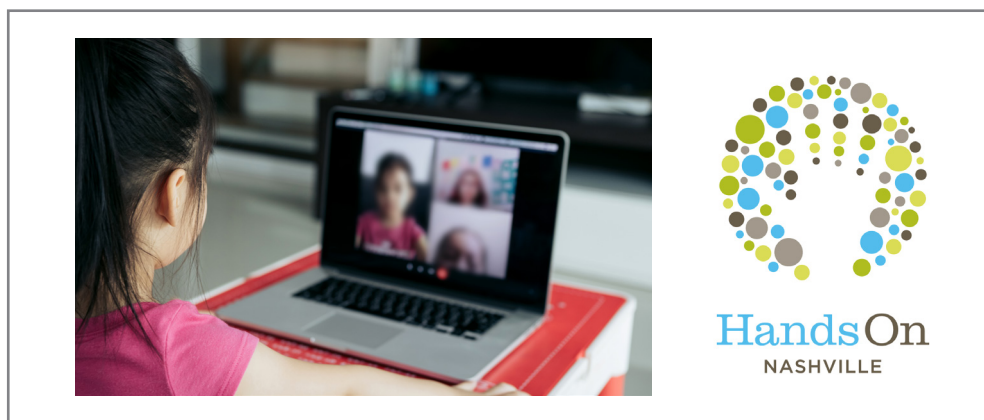
Virtual volunteers can complete one-time, short-term or ongoing tasks and projects. Like in-person volunteering, virtual volunteering relies on the willingness to share one's time and skills, human compassion and the desire to lend a hand or help make a difference.

*Examples of virtual volunteering opportunities include:*

- *Writing, proofing, transcribing or editing activities for newsletters, articles, reports, website, social media content, story writing.*
- *IT-based activities including website design, setting up social media pages, content management, data entry or management, coding and application development.*
- *Mentoring and teaching online, including helping children with school work or adults with life skills, fitness, music and language instruction, or mastering a new skill.*
- *Emotional or practical support roles, including welfare check-in calls, help lines and counseling.*
- *Professional skilled roles including graphic design, reviewing or preparing documents, reports, plans and strategies around risk management, cyber security, marketing, business planning, contracts and HR procedures.*

*For additional inspiration, Points of Light created a robust resource of virtual volunteering activities categorized by activity, impact area or beneficiaries that you can use as a reference when putting together a virtual volunteering program. [View the resources.](#)*

### Inspiration In Action: GeekCause, HandsOn Nashville



*GeekCause matches Nashville's most talented techies with community partners in need of their services. From tech consultation to solution implementation, GeekCause provides a low-cost platform for agencies to solve tech-based challenges through the support of skilled volunteers.*

## MOVE FROM IN-PERSON TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, cont.

Virtual volunteering is a convenient way to contribute to great causes, providing:

1. Increased access. When a volunteer doesn't have to worry about transportation, childcare, work, physical limitations or other barriers, volunteering becomes infinitely easier.
2. Authentic altruism. Another component of virtual volunteering has historically been its anonymity. When volunteering is removed from a social setting, the ego of the individual volunteer is pushed aside.
3. Safety. Virtual volunteering is a way for employees to do good with minimal risk of contributing to the spread of the coronavirus or contracting the virus.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Keep in mind that simply sharing a few links to a series of virtual volunteer activities does not automatically mean you are launching a fully fledged program. A virtual employee volunteer program is similar to a traditional one: It is a planned, managed effort that seeks to motivate and enable employees to effectively volunteer under the official sponsorship and leadership of the employer. Add time for virtual volunteers to get together and reflect on their experiences or offer an educational series to ensure they fully understand the impact of their virtual activities.
- Identify and curate virtual volunteering opportunities for employees. Should you focus on key issues that align with the company's philanthropic focus or simply embrace and allow issues and local needs to be considered?
- Encourage employees to track and report their virtual volunteering activities using your internal volunteer management platform. In the volunteer reporting form, make sure to include a part where your employees tell you if any part of their contribution was provided virtually.
- Know that local cultural dimensions and perceptions of virtual volunteering may have significant implications on the employees' level of interest and participation in virtual activities. Employees may simply not be interested in volunteering without a social element.
- Similarly, not all nonprofits are able to quickly pivot their traditional volunteer opportunities to a virtual environment. Rather than pulling your support, use this time to rethink how you can best support your community partners to meet their emerging needs.

## 2. MEET EMPLOYEES WHERE THEY ARE— INTEGRATE REMOTE AND AT-HOME VOLUNTEERING

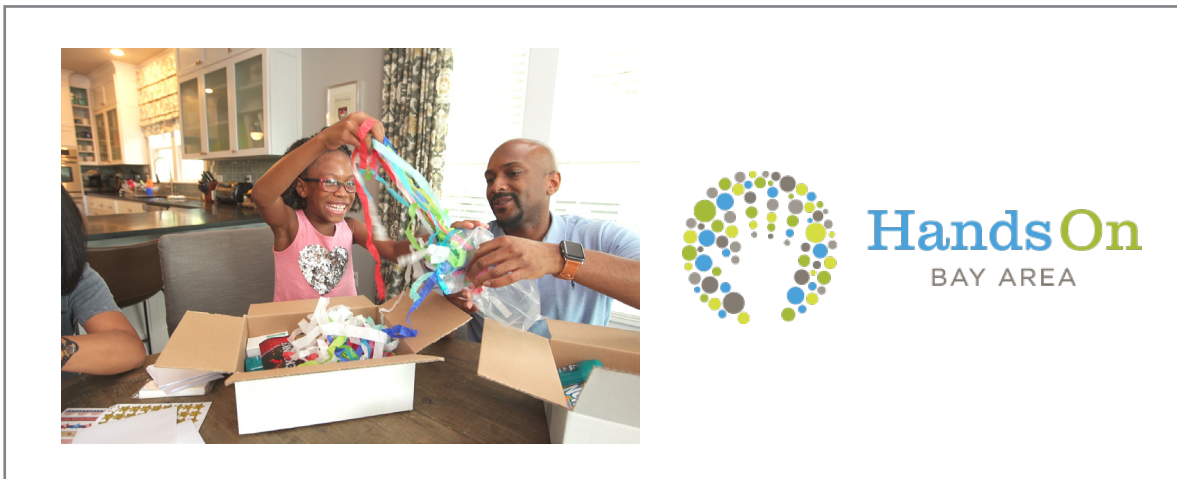
Remote and at-home volunteering activities share the following characteristics:

- Activities and initiatives can be completed in the comfort of an employee volunteer's home. These tasks make it so volunteers can commit their time and service away from the physical site of an organization, project or campaign.
- They are self-directed and not time bound. The volunteer is equipped with the information to accomplish the project on their own time and at their own pace, and can see it through to delivery to the recipient or organization.

*Examples of virtual volunteering opportunities include:*

- *Making care packages for health care workers.*
- *Cleaning out your closet and donating clothes to a homeless shelter.*
- *Knitting a blanket for children.*
- *Crafting do-it-yourself toys for the animals at your local shelter.*
- *Hand writing and mailing letters for seniors.*

Inspiration In Action: [Project in a Box](#), HandsOn Bay Area



*HandsOn Bay Area makes volunteering from the comfort of your home easy with Project in a Box! HandsOn Bay Area mails you a box with all necessary supplies and instructional materials included. They also supply you with a pre-paid shipping label to mail the finished project back to HandsOn Bay Area—they will identify a benefiting charity and deliver the items.*

## MEET EMPLOYEES WHERE THEY ARE—INTEGRATE REMOTE AND AT-HOME VOLUNTEERING, cont.

The benefits of remote and at-home volunteering are immense, especially during these challenging times:

- It is a way of engaging employees with something they care about and keeps their mind focused.
- It supports communities.
- It is something employees can easily build into the structure of their day.
- It can reduce stress and provide a sense of purpose.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Create a space on your internal volunteer management platform that explains the definition of remote and at-home volunteering.
- Create a “remote” and “at-home” tag to add to the descriptions of available volunteering opportunities when you present them on your internal volunteer management platform.
- Make sure the volunteer activity is well-defined and spells out what needs to be done. This will help ensure a positive outcome for all parties volunteering remotely. For example, clear and explicit directions for sewing a facemask can be provided, making it easy for employees to help without asking for additional assistance.
- Encourage employees to track and report their remote or at-home volunteering activities using your internal volunteer management platform.

## 3. ENCOURAGE INFORMAL ACTS OF KINDNESS

“Lending a hand,” “helping out,” “doing good” or “being neighborly” are many ways of referring to people stepping up and offering their assistance in times of emergency situations and crises. Employees, as members of their local neighborhoods and communities, want to support the people around them and look after the most vulnerable groups. Most often, these acts of “informal volunteering” are not associated with a 501c3 nonprofit in the U.S. or similar international equivalent. It’s more closely aligned with a direct action in support of someone in need.

*Examples of informal acts of kindness:*

- *Shoveling your neighbor’s walkway or helping with their yard work.*
- *Picking up litter in your neighborhood during daily walks.*
- *Cooking meals at home and distributing them to at-risk or vulnerable neighbors.*
- *Doing household repairs for your less-able neighbors.*
- *Taking care of animals or pets for your neighbors.*
- *Offering to do shopping or driving your neighbors to appointments.*
- *Starting your own little free library (book-sharing box).*
- *Helping a newcomer settle into your community.*
- *Packing care kits for the homeless and handing them out.*

## ENCOURAGE INFORMAL ACTS OF KINDNESS, cont.

Informal volunteer opportunities are all around us and can be incorporated into your company's civic engagement strategy:

- They can help reach people in ways that larger organizations and programs may not be able to.
- They represent a way of building a sense of community spirit and mutual support. Communities become more resilient through connections like this and learn that they can rely on each other.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER

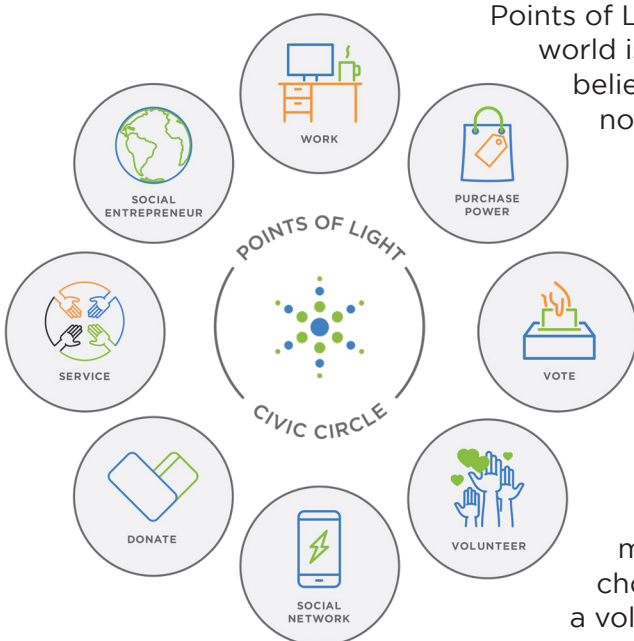
- Your employees might already be engaged in such informal acts of kindness but not necessarily recognize their importance and value. Make sure you highlight and encourage such acts as part of your employee engagement program.
- Informal acts of kindness tend to be driven directly by need. In this way, the support provided can be more relevant and feel more personal. Encouraging your employees to pursue informal acts of kindness can be a low-cost, high-impact way of building community goodwill and reinforcing your company's culture of service.
- Encourage employees to record their informal acts of kindness using your internal volunteer management platform. Focus on asking employees to tell you what types of actions they took and who benefited from them. It is important to understand how and in what ways employees choose to contribute, which may lead you to broadening your company's definition of volunteering for the long term.

## 4. EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Points of Light believes that the most powerful force of change in our world is the individual—one who makes a positive difference. We believe in the value of individual actions, and we know every action, no matter how small, can have an impact and change a life.

When we think about civic life today, we know that people want to live an integrated life that reflects their values. People who “do good” or want to “create change” don't necessarily assign themselves traditional labels like “volunteer.”

Traditional methods of employee engagement through company-sponsored volunteering activities remain important. But as employees strive to live an integrated life that reflects their values, new categories for getting involved become essential to a civic life. Today's engaged person may express their desire to do good through the purchases they make, in what they share on social media, where and how they choose to work, and what nonprofit organization to support as a volunteer or donor.





## EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, cont.

*Examples of civic engagement:*

- *Using your purchase power to buy a product or service from a socially responsible company.*
- *Choosing where to work based on a company's values, or volunteering through your workplace.*
- *Signing an online petition or writing a letter to a politician.*
- *Volunteering with or donating to a nonprofit.*
- *Using your voice—whether in person, on social media, or through your personal network—to raise awareness for issues you care about.*

Doing good comes in many forms. Employees are activating and supporting issues in so many ways, including through social media, their spending patterns, how they vote and to whom they choose to donate their hard-earned wages. And it becomes imperative, from a CSR perspective, that we focus on learning about the variety of activities our employees are getting involved in so we can then create ways to support them and encourage them to do more. How can you engage employees in nonpartisan activities that will strengthen communities around the world?

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Identify the myriad ways your employees are getting involved in their civic lives—formal and informal. Conduct a company-wide survey to ask employees about their participation. Make sure you also ask them how the company (i.e., their employer) can support them.
- Once you have a better understanding of the way your employees get involved in society, you can start putting together a list of initiatives that can be implemented to empower and encourage your employees to continue their involvement. Here are a few ideas to serve as inspiration and get you started:
  - Start a nonprofit board matching program to encourage your employees to join and serve on nonprofit boards and committees. Board service is the perfect opportunity to develop leadership skills, build new networks and make a significant contribution to a nonprofit.
  - Set up a campaign focused on promoting voting.<sup>1</sup> You can use a variety of methods to help inform employees about the importance of registering to vote, educate them about the issues and get them to the polls: send email reminders and links to voter registration information, hold a voter registration drive, create voting guides to help employees understand the roles of each elected officeholder, give employees the day off to vote, share volunteer opportunities related to election season, etc.
  - Encourage and promote donations to nonprofits that employees feel passionate about. Make sure to remind your employees if your company or corporate foundation has a matching gifts program that they can use to double the donation.
  - Showcase a list of socially responsible brands from which employees might consider purchasing products or services. Ensure your company is “walking the talk” when it comes to choosing vendors and suppliers.

<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2019/08/why-and-how-companies-invest-in-get-out-the-vote-efforts>

## 5. CELEBRATE ACTIONS THROUGH RECOGNITION AND STORYTELLING

Through sharing stories, employees find out more about each other, about other teams and about the different ways your company is supporting them to get engaged. If you can't get employees together to volunteer and other ways of engagement have not yet caught on, use this time to focus on recognizing the consistent social impact employees make throughout the year.

*Examples of recognition and storytelling:*

- *Ask one of your employee volunteer leaders to interview one of their colleagues and write an article about their community service experience.*
- *Get your employees to record short videos of their volunteering activities—especially any they may be completing at home—and highlight the videos using company internal communication channels.*
- *Encourage your employees to share their engagement experiences and success through internal chat systems for a quick morale boost.*

Regular communications are paramount to keeping employee volunteers and potential volunteers informed and inspired. Including recognition as a component of your engagement strategy is important to its success and your ability to retain volunteers. These types of stories are not only fun to read, they help to strengthen the bond between volunteers and the company, support a culture of community engagement and reinforce benchmarks for volunteer excellence.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Develop a cadence for celebrating employees who epitomize your corporate values and go above and beyond for their community.
- Showcase stories of social action from across your markets to keep employees connected and ready for action.
- Focus on the good things your employees are doing, including the communities they help, the investments they make, the inspiring conversations they are having, and the personal successes they are achieving.
- Provide an opportunity for peer recognition through digital channels like Slack or as shout-outs during team meetings. Use this time to develop an employee-designed email signature or badge for your amazing volunteer leaders!
- Leverage partners to help tell the story of your company's collective impact, especially after COVID-19 specific projects occur. This is also a sound strategy when sharing stories externally.
- Integrate external or third-party recognition programs into your recognition strategy to add validity and fanfare. Check out the [President's Volunteer Service Award](#) and the [Daily Point of Light Award](#), to learn how you can recognize volunteers.
- Don't forget to use these communications to address any updates to your programs or processes.

## 6. PROVIDE EDUCATION ON CURRENT ISSUES AND CORPORATE FOCUS AREAS

Ensuring employees fully understand the critical social issues prevalent in their communities before they act allows us to invest in building an educated volunteer base.

*Examples of providing education:*

- *Plan a series of highly interactive workshops focused on a specific issue or theme that allows your employees to dive deep and explore an issue area through readings, facilitated learning sessions with nonprofit leaders, and reflection discussions.*
- *Connect with different ERGs at your company that offer learning opportunities through guest speakers, storytelling initiatives and teach-ins, and make sure these formal teaching moments are promoted across the company.*

Promoting education and learning before action enables local nonprofits to teach employees about what they need, recognizing that solutions most often come from local sources. How can you build awareness of pressing social issues with your employees and provide them with needed knowledge and skills? We offer a few ideas to get started below.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Include a strong research component about the issues or needs the company is trying to address that ensures employees' efforts to increase their knowledge and understanding are not simply based on what they already know or assume.
- Look for more guidance on the specific issues and topics you want to highlight by searching for "reading lists" and "guides" compiled by experts on the topic you're thinking of.
- Invite nonprofit partners to share knowledge about the lives, interests, hopes and struggles of the beneficiaries they serve.
- Draw on employees' personal connections to the issues involved. Ask employees who are passionate about a cause to share resources, personal stories and examples with their colleagues.

## 7. STRENGTHEN YOUR EMPLOYEE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

With some of the restrictions around the COVID-19 crisis starting to be lifted and companies starting to redefine operations, now is the time to think about how your employee engagement program can support the company's business priorities, meet the community needs and keep employees engaged. One way of ensuring your post-COVID-19 employee engagement program remains relevant and effective is to involve your employees in its evolution.

*For example, in your efforts to revamp your employee engagement strategy as you prepare to return to the new normal after COVID-19, get your employees' feedback about how your program can stay valid in the coming months. Are there new ways your company can support employees to be engaged? What core policies, documents, processes and procedures can be reviewed, updated and developed to ensure your company's program is meeting best practices and standards?*

## STRENGTHEN YOUR EMPLOYEE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY, cont.

As you are revising internal policies and processes related to community engagement, be intentional about engaging employees in focus groups, feedback sessions or surveys. Involving your employees in the planning process and asking for their opinions contributes to building internal support for the process and commitment to the results.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- As you listen to your employees' interests and suggestions to improve policies and processes related to community engagement, make sure you convey back to them the results of those feedback sessions and the actual changes and innovations in the program you decide to implement.
- Collaborate with your employee resource groups and your employee volunteer leaders and champions. They will be able to explain local nuances that might drive employee engagement, which could be useful in making your strategy and program more inclusive.

## 8. FIND SAFE WAYS TO ENGAGE IN IN-PERSON VOLUNTEERING

People, including employees, without being asked to step in, came forward to give their time, provide practical assistance, comfort and support, ultimately creating a sense of resilience and strength in their communities. This current pandemic has shown what we have known to be true for years: Volunteering is, and remains, universally strong.

The focus moving forward then becomes making sure we have in place the appropriate recommendations and practices to continue to volunteer in person in such ways that safeguard and protect employees as volunteers and the people they serve.

*Examples of in-person volunteering opportunities during the pandemic:*

- *Emergency shelter volunteer activities, including assisting staff with day-to-day operations.*
- *Engaging with local food banks and assisting with food box packing, food sorting and distribution*
- *Assisting seniors at risk by delivering meals at home, etc.*

## FIND SAFE WAYS TO ENGAGE IN IN-PERSON VOLUNTEERING, cont.

Inspiration In Action: [Community Food Distribution in Newark](#), Jersey Cares



*Make a measurable difference in the lives of many by helping sort, organize and package items for distribution to families. This volunteer opportunity is dedicated to battling hunger and poverty in our community. Tasks may vary such but include distributing food goods to Newark residents assisting with signing in recipients before receipt of food goods, and verifying identification and receiving signatures.*

Should your company determine that it is feasible to proceed in offering in-person volunteer opportunities, Points of Light has made available a resource that helps inform project management and implementation during this unprecedented time. Additionally, we recommend reviewing [safety tips for volunteering in a COVID-19 world](#).

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- Have a clear position on whether you will allow, pause for the moment or stop altogether in-person volunteering for company employees. Explain how this applies to full-time employees, hourly workers and contractors. Make sure this information is available in multiple places (e.g., company intranet, on the internal volunteer management platform, discussed in team/department meetings, etc.) and, wherever possible, translated and conveyed in a culturally appropriate manner.
- Stay informed and share with employees the latest health and safety guidelines as advised by the appropriate and relevant authorities.
- Include messaging that promotes social distancing, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette practices on your internal volunteer platform and in any company-wide communication about in-person volunteering opportunities.
- Encourage employees to track and report their in-person volunteering activities using your internal employee volunteer platform.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Moving forward, employee community engagement will **be less about having strictly structured programs and initiatives and more about enabling and encouraging flexibility**. Part of this includes thinking more creatively about how we can enable and empower our fellow employees to be fully involved and flourish.

As organizers and leaders of employee volunteers, corporate social responsibility practitioners are in a unique position to **reimagine and reframe engagement programs** and rebuild their role in enabling their employees to continue to give back, support and contribute to improving their local communities in a changing environment.

**Flexibility and adaptability** are key drivers of success in this context. For employees, community partners and local communities, the sense of urgency and the need to respond are more significant than ever. Being flexible when it comes to CSR programs and strategy will allow CSR leaders to make whatever internal changes are necessary to respond effectively to the changing outward environment as quickly as possible.

The most resilient organizations are those that have a broader array of choices that embrace many possible scenarios. We envision these eight strategies to engage employees during this time as only a starting point. Additional benefits and real impact will come from adapting and stepping forward with bold action. Points of Light remains committed to working alongside community-focused companies and corporate social responsibility leaders in this challenging time.

## FURTHER SUPPORT

Points of Light understands the intricacies of corporate social good. No matter where you are on your journey, we can help you develop corporate social responsibility programs that boost employee pride and engagement, support leadership development, drive brand loyalty and improve the communities where your employees work and live. From employee activation to consulting to custom programming, we're here to make your ideas a reality. Get in touch with us today—email [askdevelopment@pointsoflight.org](mailto:askdevelopment@pointsoflight.org).

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