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Philanthropy | Employees help guide giving

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When it comes to corporate giving, employees are often the boss.

With programs that emphasize volunteerism and an emphasis on donating to causes that resonate with employees, the Carolinas' top public companies let workers be their philanthropic guides.

The trend is good for the far-flung communities where local businesses employ people to make steel, service power lines or grind rocks. But it also means the headquarters city doesn't always get special treatment, particularly if it's only home to a small number of the company's workers.

That contradicts some of the conventional wisdom about why communities want to attract corporate headquarters.

As the thinking goes, executives are more likely to support causes in their backyards, so headquarters communities benefit disproportionately from companies' generosity.

The assumption was true years ago, said Tom Knowlton, director of the corporate citizenship practice for TCC Group, a consulting firm that specializes in nonprofit groups and company philanthropy. Modern companies have realized that their employees are great ambassadors, and they want their staffers to feel good and speak well about their philanthropy, he said.

"Companies are realizing they need to go where their stakeholders are, and their stakeholders are employees and customers," he said.

More than ever, those workers are dispersed across the world as the result of new global markets, mergers and acquisitions and the search for lower-cost labor.

Sometimes that kind of decentralized giving can generate hard feelings. Take Charlotte steel company Nucor, which employs 75 people in Charlotte and reserves most of its philanthropic dollars to fund scholarships for all employees' children. When it supports charities, it focuses on the rural communities in 19 states where its 12,000 workers live.

"It doesn't always play well in Charlotte," said Jim Coblin, the company's vice president of human resources. "The Charlotte community thinks, 'Here's big old Nucor, and they don't spend anything here.' We spend it out where people are doing the work."

The employee-focused trend also is particularly strong at SPX, a Charlotte company that makes equipment for data networking, fire detection, TV and radio broadcasting and air conditioning.

The largest part of the company's corporate contributions come from matching its employees' donations to their charities of choice -- up to \$20,000 per year. The company also matches up to 50 percent of employees' United Way pledges.

Organizations independently seeking funding from the company are asked to show how an SPX employee is involved with their operations, perhaps as a volunteer or recipient of service. If nothing else, the company likes to see an employee recommendation for charities seeking funds.

"We have people in communities all across the country," said spokeswoman Tina Bettlejewski. "We don't necessarily know what's important in all those communities to those employees."

If the company's donations are disproportional in Charlotte, it's because well-paid, community-minded executives live, work and support charities there, she said.

To be sure, some companies still support major programs in the communities they've called home for decades. Bank of America, which expects to spend \$200 million on philanthropy this year, has committed \$1 million to the Levine Children's Hospital in Charlotte and \$15 million to the city's cultural facilities master plan. Duke Energy committed \$10 million to a research institute at UNC Charlotte and

\$5 million to the cultural master plan.

And Martin Marietta Materials, a Raleigh company that sells rocks, gravel and other construction materials, writes its biggest checks to museums, schools, scholarship programs and the food bank in the Triangle. But CFO Anne Lloyd said she writes even more -- \$1,000 at a time -- to help groups in the 300 towns where its employees work.

"We're not big namers of rooms," she said. "We're kind of a quiet giver."

Many companies also call on their employees' expertise to serve on boards of directors of community organizations. For instance, Burlington-based LabCorp donates \$500 to a group where an employee has volunteered at least 60 hours in a year. If the worker is on the organization's board, it gives more.

Others make it particularly easy for workers to volunteer. Bank of America gives its employees two paid hours each week to volunteer in the community.

Duke Energy promotes volunteering each year during a two-month global service event, which allows community groups to submit projects such as nature trails or dog washes that they'd like Duke employees to tackle.

This year, employees participated in about 400 projects during April and May.

Volunteerism is the hallmark of the Charlotte company's philanthropy program, said Hilary Davidson, director of corporate community relations.

The Charlotte energy company's workers and retirees volunteered nearly 270,000 hours in 2006 at 375 organizations in 167 communities.

"You could put in lots and lots of dollars and just write the checks, but that's not what it's all about," Davidson said. "It's about getting in there with elbow grease and being in relationships in those communities."

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