

comment & analysis

“The cavalcade of scandals can make it seem like the world’s politicians have suddenly become greedier en masse. But focusing on individual wrongdoing is misleading.”
AMANDA TAUB • 13

CORPORATE VOLUNTEERISM IN SINGAPORE IS COMMONLY EXPRESSED TOO NARROWLY

It is only in giving that we truly receive

EUGENE K B TAN



Giving is quintessential to our common humanity and progress: It recognises that no man is an island and that there are causes greater than ourselves.

Last week, Singapore observed Giving Week, a national movement that encourages everyone to donate and/or volunteer. It coincided with International Volunteer Day on Dec 5, designated by the United Nations as a day to promote and celebrate the power and potential of volunteerism.

So it is no surprise that corporate volunteerism has become an accepted and integral part of today’s business landscape, especially when a business entity seeks to portray itself as a responsible member of the community.

Ironically, the prominence of corporate volunteerism in Singapore coexists with a somewhat self-limiting view of what volunteerism is, what it involves and how it can make a difference. Matters are compounded by the tacit acquiescence of volunteer welfare organisations (VWOs) in a strait-jacket understanding of volunteerism. Often, VWOs do not adequately use such opportunities to educate volun-



A volunteer (left) raising awareness of people with disabilities as part of a National Council of Social Service campaign earlier this year. Contributing one's time, energy and experience adds another dimension to giving that philanthropy is unable to.
TODAY FILE PHOTO

teers and to champion their causes.

Corporate volunteerism in Singapore is commonly expressed narrowly and insipidly as employees being given time off, often a day or two, to volunteer or take part in a one-off activity at a VWO, often organised by their companies. Employees participate in an activity such as painting and general repairs of a community facility, the distribution of food parcels, the cleaning of homes or visits to old folks’ home, with some entertainment throw in.

Volunteerism that is geared towards form rather substance, symbolic one-off gestures with no lasting impact on volunteers and beneficiaries, could downplay critical social issues, doing more harm than good. For example, one-off projects such as bringing gifts on house visits to needy households during the festive period will not make any significant dent to the immense challenge such families face.

The range of corporate voluntary action can be far more diverse and innovative. It is timely, therefore, to reassess and reassert the purpose, value and meaning of corporate volunteerism, and volunteerism generally.

Some companies have thoughtful volunteer programmes in which employees volunteer their expertise, experience and energy to a VWO or a cause on a regular or long-term basis. For instance, Samsui Supplies & Services, part of the Soup Restaurant Group, engages and mobilises employees, customers and business associates to give together, especially to welfare homes. Working with Nestle and Unilever, they provide low-cost meals

to more than 50,000 beneficiaries. The down time of Soup restaurants is used to prepare meals for various non-profit organisations and to deliver the meals to their doorsteps.

The challenge is to nurture volunteerism that aspires to make a real difference to all those involved and to change mindsets about giving. Sometimes, the VWO needs to take the lead.

For example, the Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) (ARC(S)) invites individuals who are able to volunteer on a “regular and long-term basis”, and companies and schools that can commit to a “sustainable and continued volunteerism programme” for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In so doing, ARC(S) is able to create awareness, and promote advocacy and empowerment, benefiting not only individuals with ASD but also volunteers, who gain a nuanced understanding of ASD.

For corporate volunteerism to be authentic and effective, it should be organically developed. Many students in our schools and tertiary educational institutions seek out causes and issues they identify with, ferret suitable opportunities, and develop action plans for their local and overseas community involvement projects.

These educational institutions often adopt these projects for a couple of years, enabling several cohorts of students to continue the work of their predecessors. This also enables students to appreciate the imperative to make a difference, which is possible only when there is commitment over an extended period of time.

In similar vein, corporate volunteerism should simultaneously invest the capacities and skills of employees for the greater good and not be preoccupied with team-building objectives. The former will take care of the latter. Purposeful corporate volunteerism can unleash the talents, resources and passion of the employees in helping others. It can help employees better identify with their companies.

Employees should be actively involved from the ground up — such as identifying and planning suitable volunteer opportunities — enabling volunteers to gain a deeper understanding of the issues and how they can make a difference.

The real transformative potential of volunteerism lies in educating, inspiring commitment, and creating in-

novative solutions for issues such as poverty, homelessness, educational under-achievement, discrimination and other social issues of the day. Such solutions also need to be sustainable, and scalable. For that, tapping the volunteers’ varied talent, experience and grit is essential.

While we encourage volunteerism and the growing pool of volunteers, we must be careful not to indulge in self-congratulation and complacency that blinds and numbs us to the fact that good intentions alone are often grossly inadequate in making a difference that matters.

Last month, Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office and the labour chief, urged Singaporeans to volunteer, particularly to help needy and dysfunctional families. The aim is to get volunteers to support and guide these families as they strive to overcome the multi-faceted issues that confront them.

From the volunteers, such families learn a variety of useful knowledge and skills such as budgeting and parenting. Volunteers help these households’ adult members secure jobs while encouraging them to persevere on the work front. Volunteers can also seek help for psychosocial issues that afflict such families as addictions, depression and eating disorders.

Much as Singapore is a prosperous country, with ongoing efforts to strengthen the social safety net, there are still unmet needs in Singapore. Contributing one’s time, energy and experience requires a much bigger commitment and adds another dimension to giving that philanthropy is unable to. According to The World Giving Index 2016, only one in five people in Singapore volunteered last year.

As a society, we ought to inculcate the norm of volunteering as part of grassroots activism and our societal DNA. In volunteering, the giver is as much a recipient as one also benefits by giving. Being in a position to help others is as much a privilege, an honour and a social responsibility.

By collaborating, outcomes are improved and the impact greater as VWOs, volunteers and corporate entities pay it forward together and breathe life to the common values they subscribe to. In the process, societal bonds between the haves and the have-nots are strengthened, active citizenry is encouraged, and social capital and empathy are developed. The net-effect is greater inclusivity in our diverse society.

● Eugene K B Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University School of Law.

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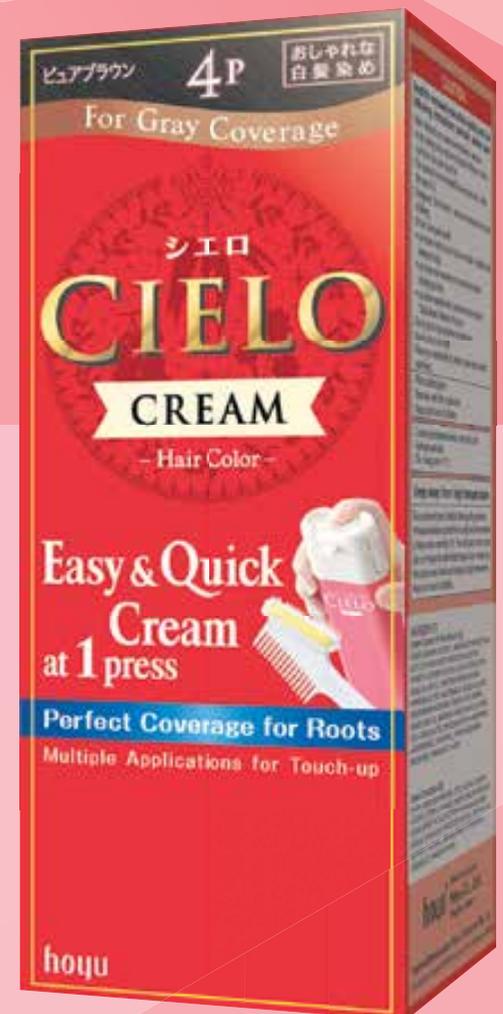
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