



# EMOTION KEY TO CORPORATE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

By Andrea Donlan, President and CEO, Manifest Communications Inc.

Each and every year, hundreds of thousands of employees roll up their sleeves and head out in their communities to give back. It's estimated that 35% of employees participate in volunteer events and outings organized by their employer.<sup>1</sup> And 37% of all volunteers in Canada are supported by their employers through use of space/facilities (37%), flex hours (34%), paid time off (20%), and more.<sup>2</sup> From sorting cans to planting trees to walking for charity, companies are engaging and supporting their staff to help make a difference.

Giving back is no longer simply a nice to do. An estimated 77% of university grads consider a company's commitment to the community when deciding where to work.<sup>3</sup> Fully 52% of Canadian consumers believe CEOs need to motivate employees to take part in the community.<sup>4</sup>

The benefits of employee volunteer programs are well documented too.

For the community, employees can help help foster community vitality, build community connections and deliver social impact. For the corporation, employee volunteering can drive recruitment/retention, build brand profile and even improve productivity.

So employee giving is good for the community, good for the company and good for employees. With all the good that comes from it, why do I keep hearing about the not so good side of employee giving like nightmare-ish stories of 50 employees showing up for a day-long community clean up only to find out that the charity forgot they were coming. Or employees being tasked with painting a wall that doesn't need painting, cleaning up a shoreline that is already clean or reading to a group of kids that just want to go and play outside. More familiar yet, countless stories of employees waiting around with nothing to do. Worst of all, the guilt that comes from feeling like the charity had to put together

something to entertain your team, not address a social issue.

For the past 18 months, I've been hearing the same questions at conferences, client meetings and corporate roundtables – how can we better engage our employees in giving back?

MY SENSE WAS THAT THE WHOLE MODEL OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT NEEDED TO BE BLOWN UP AND RETHOUGHT.

To get to some answers, Manifest hosted a focus group of some of Canada's leading corporate citizens to explore current volunteer models – from team walks/runs/bikes to group clean up days. The goal was to better understand what's working, what needs improvement and what an ideal program should look like.

To be perfectly honest, I thought I knew what the outcome was going to be – that there was a growing

shift away from the softer stuff (like community clean ups) toward more concrete initiatives (like skills-based volunteering). My sense was that corporations were increasingly looking for more professionalized opportunities that would better lever their functional areas of expertise. Think a bank giving financial planning advice to food bank clients or a food manufacturer helping a seniors centre rethink its food sourcing/planning

to a technology firm offering communications consulting to a help line.

But boy, was I wrong. Very, very wrong. Turns out it's not a matter of what you do that matters. Rather,

THE SINGLE MOST DEFINING FEATURE OF A SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM IS THE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION TO THE CAUSE.

And all volunteering efforts can be successful – from sorting food to cleaning up parks to volunteering on a board to overhauling a revenue generation plan – as long as there is an opportunity for employees to feel something. These feelings can range from feeling grateful to inspired to proud and from strong to energized to alive. Bottom line: emotional engagement wins the day for employees.



## HOW WE LEARNED WHAT WE LEARNED

Before reading the details of what we learned, here's a quick lesson on a unique methodology we used to better understand the ideal corporate volunteer program. Using Level5 Strategy Group's proprietary Brand-Card™ research methodology, we were able to “map” the drivers of successful volunteer programs. We used a stimuli-based series of BrandCards™ that acted as prompts to describe rational and emotional responses to current employee volunteer models.

After a brand card was selected, each participant was able to share the underlying reasons why the specific card was selected to identify the nuanced reasoning behind the cards selected.

Participants were then asked about the ideal volunteer experience and to align on the defining emotional and functional attributes of the ideal experience.

Following the session, we then mapped the selected cards against each other and placed them in one of eight zones on what is called a BrandMap™ – a three-dimensional globe that plots all 96 human emotions into eight zones of emotion including knowledgeable, trustworthy, familiar, nurturing, friendly, fun, interesting and inspiring. The BrandMap™ helped us uncover and provide insight into the key attributes of successful employee volunteer programs.

### EIGHT ZONES OF EMOTIONS:

**Knowledgeable:** includes core emotions of acceptance and fellowship, as well as feelings of self-confidence

**Trustworthy:** grounded in emotions like trust, loyalty and respect

**Familiar:** home to feelings of satisfaction and gratitude

**Nurturing:** linked to feelings of human warmth – love, caring and compassion

**Friendly:** associated with emotions related to “liking”

**Fun:** grouped with emotions like enjoyment, amusement and desire

**Interesting:** built on the core emotion “interest” as well as feelings of amazement and surprise, being alive and energized

**Inspiring:** based on feelings of success, achievement and optimism

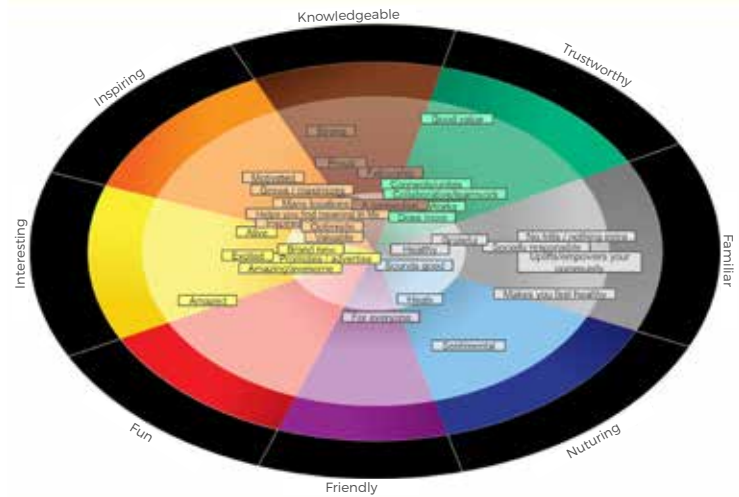
CONCEPT 1

# TEAM EVENTS:

Employees join together to participate in a cause walk, run, climb or bike. Think a 5km run or a 10km bike that employees fundraise for and participate as a corporate-sponsored team.

When describing how employees feel when participating in walks/runs/rides, the majority of the focus group participants referenced emotional attributes in the inspiring, interesting and knowledgeable zones:

CONCEPT 1: Here's what the BrandMap™ tells us:



**How do employees feel?**

Inspired  
Interested  
Knowledgeable

**What do employees get?**

Inspired  
Trustworthy

**What do companies get?**

Inspired  
Trustworthy



**INSPIRING:**

While each employee may have their own personal reason for running, the individual and collective impact derived from participating in walks/runs/rides sparks a deep sense of hope and optimism for those involved.

- **Motivated:** "We are out there rain or shine."
- **Optimistic:** "It makes people feel hopeful and optimistic that they are making a difference."
- **Inspired:** "You're at the finish line and you see children holding flowers for their mom, grandparents cheering on their children and grandchildren. Once you experience that emotion, you can't help but come back every year."

**INTERESTING:**

The combination of accomplishing a physical goal/achievement and making a positive impact towards a cause makes employees feel alive, excited and amazed.

- **Alive:** "Completing any of these rides triggers positive endorphins and makes you feel alive."
- **Excited:** "People are always excited to participate."
- **Amazed:** "It is amazing to see how many people will come out... There's thousands of them. And how much money is raised together."

**KNOWLEDGEABLE:**

When employee commitment starts at the fundraising stage and continues all the way through to the finish line, the experience triggers a feeling of connection, pride and purpose - with the event serving as a goal to work towards.

- **Fellowship:** "Employees fundraise all year for these events. It's a wonderful team building opportunity."
- **Connected:** "It's an opportunity to come out as a family and run together. It brings families together for a cause."
- **Strong:** "Employees feel strong and committed to these rides. You're part of this special club with other employees who are also involved."
- **Pride:** "It's a big accomplishment that you want to share with your friends and family. It's something to be proud of.; "Many have lost family or friends to cancer. Participating in rides is a point of pride for them."

Although the rational benefits are slightly different between what employees get and what companies get from these team-based events, we saw a lot of overlap in the inspiring, trustworthy and familiar zones.

This commonality implies that both groups share similar expectations when it comes to team volunteering. A “connections” theme was also expressed as a defining rational benefit that team volunteering provides to both individual employees and organizations, however, the definition of “connection” differs for each group.

- For what employees get, meaningful connections are created with colleagues, family members who also participate, the community and the cause that they are walking/running/riding for:

- “Employees who participate in these types of events feel a connection to them and the people that they are participating with.”

- “Employees are out doing something for their local community, which gives them a feeling of being connected to their community.”

- “Majority of people who participate in walks/runs/biking have a personal connection to the cause. Participating provides a therapeutic benefit to them.”

- For what companies get, team events demonstrate that the organization is socially connected to and invested in the community:

- “It demonstrates that we are a socially responsible company that gives back to the community.”

- “It’s one of the best ways to show that we are socially invested – especially when you have a large number of employees involved.”

- “These type of events grow our brand and show our reach across the country.”

Overall, team events “pretty much guarantee to deliver an emotional bang to employees”. This is something that companies know works and they know what they are signing up for. In fact, many participants praised these types of events for being able to “over-deliver on emotion” contributing to an inspiring employee experience. Clearly the charitable sector has figured out a model for how to truly engage corporate Canada in these kinds of events.

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### **SOME THOUGHTS ON AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT FOR TEAM EVENTS:**

- **Stories of survival, resilience and strength are essential to employee emotions:**  
Continue to share powerful testimonials of the people that benefit from the funds raised at the event.
- **Celebration is key to building emotional engagement:**  
Consider more opportunities for awards of recognition and social media sharing to help build deeper relationships with corporate teams.
- **Physical achievement is a powerful emotion:**  
Help make more people feel that they just climbed Mount Everest to drive a sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction at the finish line.



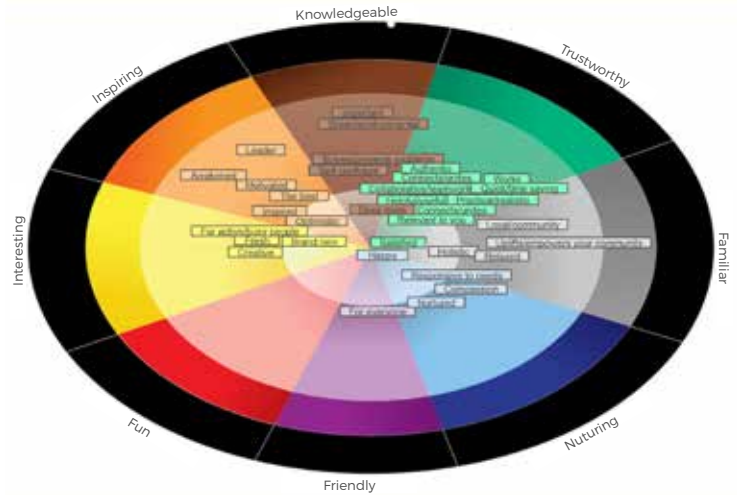
CONCEPT 2

# COMMUNITY PROJECTS:

Employees join together to participate in a community project. Think a river bank clean up, park build or food bank sort that employees work together to support a local charity.

When describing how employees feel when participating in community outings/projects, the majority of the focus group participants referenced attributes in the inspiring and nurturing zones.

CONCEPT 2: Here's what the BrandMap™ tells us:



**How do employees feel?**  
Inspired  
Nurturing

**What do employees get?**  
Trustworthy

**What do companies get?**  
Trustworthy  
Knowledgeable

**INSPIRING:**

- **Awakened:** "Having a hands-on experience with the cause and solution awakens employees to the need."
- "It is refreshing to be involved in a community event. You feel alive and invigorated."
- **Inspired:** "It provides employees who aren't as active in the volunteer sector to go out and make a difference."
- **Optimistic:** "You go into these outings with optimism and a positive outlook... sometimes you're doing something you've never done before."
- **Motivated:** "It provides a sense of motivation to continuously help your community."

**NURTURING:**

- **Happy:** "Most people are happy to be able to contribute towards a good cause. It's nice to get out of the office and volunteer."
- **Compassionate:** "It provides a reality check. You realize how lucky you are and how the small things, such as being upset because of subway delays, is so meaningless when you are preparing food baskets for families who can't afford to feed themselves."
- **Nurtured:** "Depending on the volunteer program, it can provide an opportunity to teach and share your knowledge."

Community outings/projects are seen as providing rational benefits in the trustworthy zone for both individual employees as well as the organization.

- For what employees get, the team projects provide an opportunity for connecting around a cause and team building with colleagues.
  - "It's an opportunity to sign up for an outing or project that means something."
  - "It allows you to get together on a local cause that employees feel passionate about."
  - "It's a natural way to build relationships with colleagues versus formal team-building exercises that feel forced."
- For what companies get, community outings/projects are an effective way to positively demonstrate that the organization values employee volunteerism while creating an efficient structure to engage employees in giving back.



- "It's quick, in-and-out. Not much time commitment is required on behalf of employees."
- "It's perfect for busy people who still want to volunteer because it's an easier time commitment."
- For organizations, the trustworthy zone is supplemented with rational benefits in the knowledgeable zone around "solving problems", "doing more" and showing that you are "green/environmental".

Overall, team projects were described as being deeply motivating and humbling at the same time. But - and this is a huge but - only if they are well organized. This was a major point of frustration amongst the group with many of the horror stories previously mentioned coming to light at this stage of the conversation. The group underscored that when community outings are well orchestrated, they can be truly moving. On the flip side, they can also be a huge disappointment if they are poorly managed.




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**HERE IS A QUICK SUMMARY OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT FOR CHARITIES AND WHILE THEY MAY SEEM LIKE COMMON SENSE, DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE HOW CRITICAL THESE TIPS ARE TO A CREATING THE RIGHT KIND OF FEELINGS:**

- **Set the experience up for success:** Ensure there is a clear set-up at the beginning of the day to introduce employees to the cause and clearly identify what role employees are playing in helping make a difference with clear impact statements (even if it is just one person that will be helped).
- **Create an emotional connection to the issue:** Provide ways to connect people to moving stories and experiences of real people that benefit from the charity. Note this doesn't need to be an-person testimonial either - a well-read letter, a short video or even a second hand story by the charity can go a long way here.
- **Have a back-up plan for highly-efficient teams:** Create a secondary set of meaningful tasks that you can put teams to work on right away. The critical take-away here is that you can undo any feelings of positivity by having teams standing around and waiting with nothing to do.
- **Be organized:** Do not overlook the need for a seamless experience. Start on time, have a proper briefing, get teams started quickly and wrap up on time too. This is a highly-motivated group of volunteers that want to help and will even be uber-competitive in the process. Embrace this and companies will embrace you again and again. Companies find it very difficult to find great employee engagement events so when they do, you can expect a long-term relationship from them.

This list of tips is largely for charities to take into account, but participants also had some very clear advice for their corporate peers as well when it comes to executing a great corporate outing:

- **Treat the charity as a partner, not a vendor:** Avoid the risk of bringing your employees out to a "make work" project by talking with your charitable partner regarding their needs. Too many charities are directed to create an employee engagement opportunity when there really isn't anything "hands on" the charity needs from 20+ employees. So don't dictate to the charity what you need - make sure to listen to find out if they really need your team of employees. This will help minimize the guilt I talked about earlier too.
  - **Be ready to handle your team:** Understand that on every team, there are going to be those that just don't read your emails and show up unprepared for the day. So know that you are going to have to bring a few extra pair of gloves or sort out parking for someone. And really, it's not the charities responsibility to handle your tricky personalities for you.
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CONCEPT 3

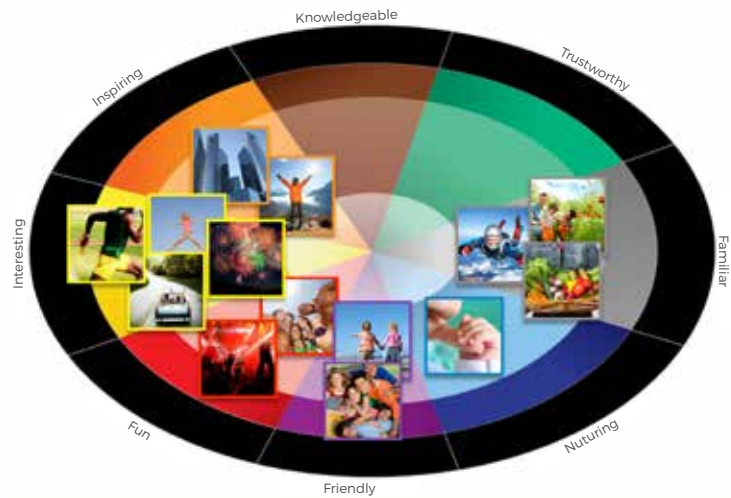
# IDEAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM:

Finally, we explored the ideal corporate volunteer program. Overall, focus group participants felt that the “ideal” corporate volunteer program should have elements of fun and friendly.

The fun and friendly zones are unique to the ideal corporate volunteer program as they were not selected as attributes for concepts #1 and #2. It’s also important to note that none of the participants selected image BrandCards™ from the knowledgeable or trustworthy zones when describing the ideal corporate volunteering experience (versus concepts #1 and #2 which has a number of emotional and rational attributes selected from these zones.) This implies that attributes in the knowledgeable or trustworthy zones may be considered antes rather than defining attributes / benefits of an ideal volunteer program.



CONCEPT 3: Here’s what the BrandMap™ tells us:



## MORE SPECIFICALLY, PARTICIPANTS IDENTIFIED THE IDEAL CORPORATE VOLUNTEERING MODEL HAD THE FOLLOWING SEVEN FEATURES:

FEATURE 1:

**Create strong emotional connections.**

- “The emotional connection piece is most important when volunteering. It’s the emotional connection that motivates employees to participate in more volunteering opportunities.”
- “Emotions need to be at play. If I am doing volunteer work from my desk, such as filling out a spreadsheet, I don’t get to see the impact of my efforts, feel the connection, or build relationships with those that I am helping. It’s what I do every day for work so I don’t want it to feel like work too.”
- “People need to feel a sense of connection to what they are doing.”

FEATURE 2:

**Balance the organization’s signature cause with employees’ interests and values.**

- “If an organization has an umbrella focus area, employees should be encouraged to participate in programs of their choice within this umbrella. If they want to volunteer for a cause outside of the umbrella, the organization can always match the efforts monetarily where we can.”
- “Employees should be able to pick a volunteer initiative that is fun for them and go do it.”
- “There is a greater sense of fulfillment when employees have the opportunity to volunteer for something that resonates with their own beliefs.”
- “Employees should be able to pick what they want to do and feel supported by their company.”

FEATURE 3:

**Showcase senior leadership participation and support.**

- “Senior leadership participation is important because it gives the volunteer program legitimacy.”
- “Levels and seniority become less important when you are all working together on the same activity.”
- “Employees get to spend some quality time with their leader outside of the office. You see them in a different light and connect with them in a different way.”
- “Whether direct or indirect, recognition of employees by their leaders is important to them.”
- “No one is ever going to go out and volunteer for the afternoon if they think their boss isn’t supportive of the idea.”

FEATURE 4:

**Drive meaningful action and measurable results.**

- “The ideal volunteer program is more than providing solutions for others but seeing and experiencing the impact that your efforts helped to create.”
- “We want employees to feel connected, inspired, excited, and appreciated as part of the experience. But you need to be able to measure the impact.”

FEATURE 5:

**Contribute monetary donations in addition to employees’ time commitment.**

- “By also donating, it’s a reflection that the company is helping their employees do something important.”

- “By matching employee volunteer efforts with monetary donations, we are effectively leveraging our people and contributing our money to advance important causes.”
- “It’s a great way to show the community and our employees that we can do more together. By also donating money when employees volunteer, it encourages our employees to do more volunteer work.”

FEATURE 6:

**Consider family-friendly options.**

- “The ideal program would provide an opportunity for employees’ family members to also participate.”
- “It would be great to provide an option to bring your families. All parents strive to distill positive values on their children. There’s a really nice emotional connection that is created when families participate together.”
- “It would be nice to have companies help to identify volunteer programs where kids can also be involved.”
- “It’s inspiring when families can participate together. But the options are limited because there’s safety concerns that need to be considered.”

FEATURE 7:

**Spark a long-term commitment.**

- “We want to create a cycle of giving back where we introduce employees to volunteering and then they keep it up with their family and friends.”
- “We want to give employees the fishing rod, not the fish.”
- “We want to help start people on the road to volunteering – help people take off on their own.”





## What did we learn overall?

At the end of the day, an emotional benefit is the underpinning driver behind successful corporate volunteerism initiatives. As one participant pointed out at the end of group, "It's time to stop asking employees about the issues they want to volunteer for, and start seeking out opportunities that deliver the emotional connection employees want to feel."

IT ISN'T THE TASK  
THAT MATTERS.  
IT'S THE FEELING THAT  
COUNTS MOST.

To be clear, I'm not saying meaningless tasks (like painting a wall that doesn't need painting again) wrapped with all the feel-good emotions of a good cause are going to cut it. Of course an important task that truly helps the charity in making a difference in the

lives of people is a must. What I do mean here is that inspiring feelings of hope, caring, compassion and fun – across any range of initiatives from fundraisers to clean ups to pro-bono services to board representation – is the secret sauce.

This was further reinforced by one participant who mentioned that the most memorable corporate volunteer experience she ever participated in was sorting carrots for a day – that it was fun, informal and profoundly emotional given the charity's ability to talk about where the carrots came from, who they would help feed and why the corporation's volunteer support was so essential. Who knew a carrot could create such deep connections?

But again, it isn't the task that matters, it's the feeling that counts most.

## About Manifest

Since 1981, Manifest has been changing the way Canadians think, feel and act in regard to social issues and causes. That's because we Manifest change. It's little wonder our mission lives naturally in our name and is embodied in the Delta of our logo. As the leading agency in this country dedicated exclusively to influencing changes in attitudes, understanding and behaviour, we provide strategic and creative solutions to bring about lasting change on the most pressing social issues of our time.

## About Level5 Strategy Group

LEVEL5 Strategy Group™ is a firm of experienced management consultants that advise organizations on realizing their potential – achieving the highest level of performance – by identifying, creating and unlocking value from their most important asset...their brand.

A special thanks to Companies & Causes Canada for helping promote this focus group, Level5 Brand Strategy Group for contributing their research methodology and the following companies for sharing their insights and ideas, including: National Bank, CIBC, RBC, Accenture, WestJet, American Express, Loyalty1, GM Canada, Rogers, CIBC Mellon and The Home Depot Canada.

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