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The Passion and Power of Giving Back

Harnessing the passion of employees who want to make a difference can make a world of difference for you, them, your business, and society

By [Alaina Love](#)

Imagine losing a star performer because he or she has a desire to make a significant contribution in the world but perceive that it would be impossible to do so while working for your company. That's what happened when John Wood left his well-paid executive position at Microsoft 10 years ago so he could tackle illiteracy in the developing world.

Ironically, Microsoft has turned out to be a valuable supporter of John's nonprofit, Room to Read. Says John, "Some of our best volunteer fundraisers around the globe are Microsoft employees; they've embraced Room to Read as one of their charities to support, both individually and on the corporate level. Clearly, they don't seem to hold a grudge against me for leaving the company to follow, what some might call, a pie-in-the-sky dream. In fact, Microsoft has helped us make that dream a reality for millions of children."

But given the heightened focus on profitability in these tough times, leaders at many companies may fail to focus on the power of "doing good" and its potential impact on the bottom line.

A focus on the bottom line at the expense of the higher good could be shortsighted. Not only do companies risk losing employees who can be valuable contributors on any number of levels, they could also be losing out on business opportunities. The ROI on employee engagement is significant and clear: Engaged employees outperform the competition in such important business metrics as profitability, productivity, and customer satisfaction. That's why leveraging employee passion of any kind is always a smart business strategy. But an organization can benefit in unique ways by nurturing those employees who are what we call "Passionate Altruists" (like John Wood) while allowing society to benefit as well.

Altruists, who often act as fierce advocates for others, will challenge the organization to develop products or services that contribute to the higher good. They strive to balance business priorities with making a positive difference. They can serve as inspiration for others, helping them broaden their focus and sphere of interest beyond the company. And because altruists also act as the moral compass of the organization, they may be more essential members of the team than ever before, examining business decisions to determine if they are not only legal but ethical as well. In an era in which the public demand for sustainability and social responsibility is increasing, leaders will need teams that can embrace and understand the power of giving back.

What follows are just a few examples of companies that have embraced and nurtured the altruist spirit, and have seen the benefits both internally and externally.

- Aveda, which makes botanically based cosmetics, boasts 100% wind-powered facilities, uses environmentally responsible packaging, and donated \$3.2 million to environmental causes during Earth Month in April. Since being acquired in 1997 by cosmetics giant Estee Lauder, Aveda's earth-friendly positioning, coupled with the marketing horsepower of its parent company, has resulted in a fivefold increase in sales and a compound annual growth rate of 13%, placing Aveda among the top five Estee Lauder brands in overall sales. "Despite the challenging economy, the green-business sector has fared well as consumers continue to desire high-performance products from brands that share their personal values," says Dominique Conseil, president of Aveda.
- Leap Wireless, a San Diego-based communications firm, has built a core business model to serve lower-income households, the fastest-growing segment in the wireless industry. LEAP sells the contract-free, no-credit-check Cricket wireless plan, which appeals to customers who use the phone as their daily lifeline—whether to find employment, arrange daycare, or locate a place to sleep for the night. "Our employees have a core understanding that what we do matters," says T. Scott Edwards, chief marketing officer and general manager.

Leap's employees recently donated their time to renovate the homes of 90 local families and provided them with a year of free phone and broadband service. Edwards believes programs such as this build brand loyalty—in both employees and customers. "We came out of bankruptcy five years ago. We can appreciate what tough economic times are like. Our employees can appreciate it, too."

- Last year chip giant Intel ([INTC](#)) decided to celebrate its 40th anniversary by challenging employees to donate 1 million hours of their time to charitable causes of their choice, for which Intel would provide matching grants. The

company wrote checks totaling \$8.4 million to 5,500 schools and NGOs around the world after 54% of the company's workforce volunteered 1.3 million hours—30% above the goal. "Because this was such a visible program, it gave us great business value," says Shelly Esque, president of the Intel Foundation. "They came back to work more energized than ever."

- Dr. John Smith, vice-president for clinical research at family-owned pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim, indulges his own altruist passion by donating his time to treat patients at an AmeriCares Free Clinic in Danbury, Conn., a facility funded by an initial grant of \$750,000 from Boehringer Ingelheim. Smith says his humanitarian efforts provide him with patient perspectives that help him better direct the company's clinical programs. "One of the concerns I've had is that the research we do for the drug-approval process is not real-world-focused," he says. "We need to stay connected to the ultimate consumer—the patient.... It keeps me grounded in this industry."

- SAS CEO Jim Goodnight has long been concerned about the about the quality of education in the U.S. and the country's ability to win the "brain race" with China and India, especially in science, engineering, and math. Back in 1995, Goodnight instituted a program to build educational software called Curriculum Pathways, a product that is now being used in 8th- to 12th-grade classrooms all over the country.

"Our belief is that students are bored with the blackboard and the teacher [as the sole method of learning], so we need to engage them by making use of technology," says Goodnight. Teachers report that students are engaged in new ways, thanks in part to the software and laptops that the business analytics software specialist has donated. In one rural community the dropout rate decreased by 40% after the program was initiated. SAS has spent some \$80 million since the program's inception and expects to spend \$5 million a year for ongoing product development. Despite this huge financial investment, Goodnight insists he is not concerned about the return for the business. He looks at this program as providing a tremendous brain trust for the future.

- The power of giving back is not limited to corporate giants. Even smaller companies can exercise their altruist passion and make an impact. Look at Tropical Smoothie Café. The company created a program called National Flip Flop Day to raise money for Camp Sunshine, which offers seriously ill children and their families an opportunity to attend summer camp free of charge. This year the company is expecting to raise enough money to send 200 families to the camp, doubling the number from last year—an impressive result in any economy, and especially so in a down economy.

"It feels right to be able to give back," says Barbara Valentino, Tropical Smoothie Café's vice-president of marketing. "If it weren't for corporate stewards, the camp wouldn't exist." At the same time, Valentino reports that stores that did the greatest fund-raising realized a 10% increase in same-store sales over the previous year.

Passion indeed drives results. And altruists can help your company drive results that reverberate in ways that go beyond dollars and cents.

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