Employee volunteers contribute to skills development in South Africa

Companies, their employees and community partners are working together for social and economic advancement – opportunities emerging from skills-based volunteering.

The first workshop in the 2014 Beyond Painting Classrooms series hosted by The FirstRand Volunteers Programme and partners CAF Southern Africa, Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) and the Mail & Guardian, profiled the potential of skills-based volunteering to make tangible contributions to South Africa’s development.

Following 2013’s national conference on employee volunteering, FirstRand Group is exploring new profit and tertiary partnerships to facilitate deeper discussion and development of best practice in this promising new arena of corporate social responsibility.

At the workshop which took place at GIBS on March 5, corporate and professionals at non-profit organisations (NPOs) shared their experiences of skills-based volunteering.

In opening the workshop, Desiree Storey, manager of the FirstRand Volunteers Programme, explained that the FirstRand group places high value on thought leadership and innovation in the interests of South Africa’s development. This commitment is the basis for the group’s continuing support for the Beyond Painting Classrooms initiative. Storey was careful to explain that the Beyond Painting Classrooms model does not necessarily discourage traditional volunteering activity which focuses on various forms of hands-on manual labour. However, Beyond Painting Classrooms specifically aims to encourage new and innovative forms of voluntarism in South Africa’s development.

The workshop included discussions on successful implementation of volunteer programmes and the successful planning and implementation of volunteer programmes. Once company leaders understand the skills available and the practical needs of organisations is a recipe for failure. It should also be assumed that skills development takes place only once. This means that volunteering opportunities which align with business and at the same time meets the real needs of host organisation are essential.

Last week’s workshop was designed to provide insight into employee volunteers’ specific skills, both professional and technical, can be harnessed to make sustainable improvements within host NPOs and to the skills of NPO staff. The ultimate aim is to build a volunteering practice that aligns with business and at the same time meets the real needs of host organisation.

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The Beyond Painting Classrooms programme is a corporate social investment (CSI) programme, thus strengthening the corporate/NPO relationship. The Beyond Painting Classrooms team believes that with careful planning and consultation among the role-players, employee volunteering programmes can make positive impacts on both business and society.

Elizabeth O’Leary, executive director of Khuthaza — a construction industry-focused enterprise development NPO — said her organisation believes that the contributions of expert volunteers, particularly when this is accompanied by financial investment, “We are struggling in terms of core funding and so in the past year we haven’t been able to do as much as we’ve done in previous years,” she said. Despite this, Khuthaza has benefited from specific skills offered by companies and individuals. None of these, she said, has come via structured corporate programmes, but rather through networking or knocking on the doors of companies in her immediate vicinity. Irrespective of how these relationships are established, O’Leary said that success depends on mutually agreed objectives and well-managed projects. NPO partners should be very clear and unapologetic about the types of skills or expertise needed; they should act as equal partners in the initiative and remain in control of the activities taking place within their organisations. These points were reiterated throughout the workshop by NPOs and corporate alike. Participants agreed that a mismatch between the skills available and the practical needs of organisations is a recipe for failure. It should also be assumed that skills development takes place only once. This means that volunteering opportunities which align with business and at the same time meets the real needs of host organisation are essential.

Marianne Mostert, founder and chief executive of Sešego Cares, explained the importance of the “mobilisation of like-minded volunteers”. “You don’t need everybody. You need people who care enough, who will connect others to the movement. Find the true believers. You only need a few people who care enough to make a difference.”

Mostert said that employee volunteering is not a “mass activity”, but rather a range of other options available to meet the personal passions and interests of a wide range of Anglo employees.

Storey’s closing remarks highlighted the mutual responsibility of both the NPOs and corporates in forging sustainable volunteering relationships. She emphasised the need for clear ground rules for engagement that ensure that both parties’ needs are met. To NPOs she suggested that it is important to get to know and understand their corporate partners, while corporates should take the time to engage with NPO partners, listen and understand their needs and make honest assessments of the fit between company strategies and NPO requirements.

The Beyond Painting Classrooms team has developed a definition of skills-based volunteering, that prioritises the opportunity for mutual learning, mutual benefit and the creation of shared value. “Skills-based volunteering enables employee volunteers and partners to share skills: talents and experience based on mutually agreed goals and objectives which seek to maximise benefit and learning for all parties involved.”

Storey stressed that corporates should realise that they cannot expect buy-in from all staff. “Instead you want to tap into staff who are passionate and committed.”

The next workshop on skills-based volunteering will take place in Cape Town on June 11 2014.

Marianne Mostert, social performance advisor at Anglo American, said securing buy-in from the executive level of the company is crucial to successful planning and implementation of volunteer programmes.

The discussion panel consisted of Desiree Storey, manager of The FirstRand Volunteers Programme; Elizabeth O’Leary, executive director of Khuthaza; Michael Ngaara, associate director at PwC SA; and Raj Dhanlall, partner at PwC. Photos: Johann Barnard.

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