

# **ADVANCING SOCIAL IMPACT:**

**Are employee volunteer  
champions and councils  
still effective models in this  
new hybrid world of work?**



**POINTS  
OF LIGHT**

# INTRODUCTION

For CSR leaders, there hasn't been a quiet moment since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. They've dealt with a variety of challenges like navigating health and safety risks for employee volunteers; the changing needs of the communities and stakeholders their company supports; and the economic and business impacts driven by supply chain disruption, layoffs and resignations, and fear of financial losses. These changes have required them to reimagine their company's CSR strategies and programs to address the immediate needs of those disproportionately affected while remaining agile and innovative in their approach.

However, one of the most significant challenges corporate citizenship leaders have worked through is the rise of remote and hybrid workplaces, where employees have the option of working from home or from a designated office space depending on their needs and preferences. In fact, a [McKinsey & Company survey](#) reports that 58% of Americans have the opportunity to work from home at least one day per week while 35% have that option five days a week. While some companies have begun pushing for a return to the office, either in full or in part, other employers realized that a flexible working arrangement is more than just a knee-jerk response to a health crisis, it's become their new normal. Although flexibility might have brought invaluable benefits, what is the cost to engagement, corporate culture and putting organizational values into action?

CSR leaders were no longer able to gather teams together to volunteer in-person either off- or on-site without serious risk assessments and logistical planning. Instead, in-person projects were replaced with at-home volunteering and volunteering together or individually over Zoom. And, although they worked to communicate effectively with employees, partners and stakeholders through this time of uncertainty and change, their concerns about achieving annual goals, creating meaningful virtual opportunities and losing employee interest grew.

Now that the disruption of the pandemic has begun to subside and the push and pull of flexible working arrangements continues, new questions have come to light. Namely, are the people-powered support mechanisms like employee champions and volunteer committees that companies put into place pre-pandemic – and possibly decades earlier – still effective and efficient at helping reach social impact and business goals?

The resounding answer is: Yes! In fact, they might be even more relevant and critical for this new normal. Because employees are now working from various locations and rarely have the chance for watercooler conversations or catching up at lunch, businesses need to build a bridge that helps connect employees and reinforce the company's purpose, culture and commitments. The most effective way to continue building bridges remains creating an employee champion network or council structure that helps scale, manage and drive engagement in the company's social impact strategy.

# EMPLOYEE CHAMPION NETWORKS

An employee champion network or council structure consists of selected employees empowered to play a leadership role in the company's social impact strategy. They partner with the CSR team to serve as a force multiplier, inviting colleagues to take part in program opportunities, communicating key messages and facilitating events. Some are formal with embedded hierarchy, regular convenings, set goals, tools and training. Others might be more informal with less structure but are seen as a valuable way to help execute a particular initiative like a Day of Service.

**CHAMPIONS MAY ALSO BE REFERRED TO AS EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEER LEADERS, GIVING CAPTAINS, IMPACT AGENTS, OR PROGRAM AMBASSADORS.**

In addition to building that culture and connection bridge, there are multiple benefits that developing and nourishing an employee-centric infrastructure delivers. Employee councils and champions leverage the skills, passion and commitment of selected employees to:

- Scale social impact across the company footprint.
- Understand dynamics that may affect particular business units or markets in relation to social impact activities.
- Identify local community needs and partners as well as employee interests and challenges, reporting those to the CSR team for application.
- Create consistency across business units and markets in implementation of strategy as well as communication around corporate values and purpose, partners, and CSR strategy and goals.
- Incorporate local voice, choice, expertise, perspectives and cultural norms.
- Funnel grassroots efforts into supporting enterprise-wide initiatives.

**GLOBAL STRATEGY  
WITH LOCAL  
IMPLEMENTATION**

- Improve leadership and interpersonal skills and develop new skills that are broadly applicable.
- Work with diverse colleagues, increasing interaction with employees in other segments and levels of the company.

**COST EFFECTIVE  
PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT**



- Drive growth in relation to goals.
- Align with other programs like DEI councils, employee resource groups or green teams.
- Play a vital role in the development or evolution of strategy, programs, policies and process.
- Set goals each year and measure success.
- Create ownership of strategy and programs at the employee level.
- Support decision-making.

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT OF STRATEGY, PROGRAMS, AND REACH


- Serve as role models and inspiration for getting involved.
- Foster a positive company culture while maintaining awareness of current trends within particular business units or markets, reporting those trends back to the CSR team.
- Increase trust between decision-makers and employees.
- Improve communication and collaboration.
- Influence employee adoption of key initiatives.
- Support opportunities for employees to give in their own community, which breeds inclusion.
- Help fulfill the brand promise and deliver distinctive value to the communities where employees live and work.

### REINFORCEMENT OF CORPORATE CULTURE AND SENSE OF BELONGING

- Serve as an extension of the social impact team; “boots on the ground.”
- Lead, facilitate and promote company-sponsored CSR events and campaigns.
- Educate other employees about the company’s social impact initiatives and how to get involved and act as a point of contact for questions.
- Share information about the company’s CSR efforts on social media, helping to raise public awareness about the company’s commitments.
- Act as ambassadors for the company’s CSR efforts, sharing information about these initiatives with potential nonprofit partners.

### STREAMLINED WORKLOAD FOR CSR TEAM





CSR leaders, especially those with a small team but a large employee headcount or corporate footprint, can't be everywhere, even though digital communication has increased their reach. Using an employee volunteer champion or council model can help overcome challenges that the pandemic left in its wake while still maximizing engagement in social impact activities through the power of peer-to-peer influence.

## CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate citizenship leaders choose to implement one of these people-powered models because the vast benefits outweigh any risks. However, there are a few things to consider before launching this type of leadership opportunity.


**Time and effort to set up and sustain model:** Someone has to lead the charge to get the model organized, and creating this type of structure is no easy feat. It takes sizable effort to put a successful model in place and continue to nurture it so that it remains relevant, helpful and meaningful. Don't forget to start with senior leader buy-in as these employees may need them as local sponsors as well as a regular sounding board.

**Cost:** Setting up and maintaining a committee or champion model can be costly, as it may require investment in training, resources and support. CSR leaders will also need to decide if their volunteering and giving budget remains decentralized or centralized, and if so, putting in place a process for requesting funds and guidelines as to what grants or expenses the budget can cover – including the company's most-prized asset, volunteer t-shirts.

**Choosing between committees or individual champions:** What should your company's support system look like and how do these councils or ambassadors integrate into the social impact team and its reporting structure? Deciding which way to go is often dependent on the company's footprint or headcount, the corporate culture, how many other formal or informal networks already exist, and the team's capacity to stand up and sustain a model. . Based on some wellness champion data from the Society for Human Resources Management, CSR leaders might target 1 to 3% of the workforce to serve in these roles. Think also about starting small in key departments or markets and allowing the model to grow organically as needed.

**The selection process:** Employees are selected to serve as champions or council members in a variety of ways. Some are hand-picked because of their passion, some are selected because of high performance or their natural influence over colleagues, some complete an application to participate, and others self-identify when taking surveys. Companies should mention these roles during onboarding. Making these leadership opportunities part of the conversation from the start allows new leaders to get exposed to the company's social impact strategy and understand how they can participate. Most often, the selected employees are also vetted by HR and their direct supervisors as another step in the process. One last note of caution is to enlist a variety of employees in different





roles and at different levels across the company. This diversity will ensure a deep bench and multiple perspectives.

**Succession planning:** Once the model and representatives have been selected, set term limits and ensure that they are staggered so there is consistency of representation and adequate knowledge transfer. Some companies ask champions or council members to find their successor(s) or invite other employees to participate as a project leader with the understanding that the project leader role can ladder up to becoming a champion or council member. Remember that these employees must remain productive in their "day job" while also serving in a social impact capacity. Keep up the energy and enthusiasm for these roles by sharing stories of current leaders' experiences and what they've gained through service.

**The measurement and evaluation of the program:** It is important to have a plan in place for regularly measuring and evaluating the success of the chosen model in order to determine whether it is meeting its goals and to identify areas for improvement. Suggestions for key performance indicators include simple measures such as satisfaction and skill development among participants as well as whether or not the integration of a champion network or council structure is supporting an increased awareness of opportunities year over year.

With these considerations in mind, CSR leaders will be set up for successful implementation and will do well to avoid any obstacles that might arise.

## TRIED AND TRUE PRACTICES

Most of the drawbacks listed above can be warded off by listening to the best practices of experienced leaders. The following tips can help to ensure the successful launch and maintenance of an employee-centric leadership model that will support and scale a company's social impact strategy.

**Clearly define the purpose and goals of the model:** It is important to have a clear understanding of what the committee or champion will be responsible for and what you hope to achieve through their work. Each committee should have a charter that explains how to get the committee started, its connection to the national or global CSR team and strategy, and its responsibilities. While aligning with overall CSR and business goals, take the time to outline the suggested outcomes for implementing this model, such as increasing strategy and program awareness, improving employee and community partner satisfaction, or promoting a positive company culture.

**Involve employees in the planning process:** Engage employees in the planning process to get their input and buy-in for either model. This can help to ensure that the champion network or committee structure is meeting the needs and interests of employees. This is also a smart way to identify colleagues who would be excited to participate.



**Establish clear expectations, roles and responsibilities:** Clearly define the expectations and responsibilities of the committee, its members or the champion role, including how much time and effort is expected to be dedicated to this work and how they will be held accountable. Decide if there are limitations to the role such as influence over certain policies or processes, or the administration of certain programs or activities within the company's strategy. Ensure that they have access to and understand how they should work with the technology the company has in place. The perfect place to start is to develop a comprehensive job description for each role.

**Provide resources, training and support:** Providing champions or councils with the right training, tools and guidelines to do their job is incredibly important. While setting them up for success, this step should also help them avoid overpromising to community partners or not fully understanding the company's CSR strategy and goals.

- Consider creating a toolkit or playbook that outlines the steps they should take to develop and lead a local project and make partner decisions. It could include site visit checklists, day of event scripts and communication templates that also allow them to insert their own voice and authentic experiences. Some volunteer leaders are also provided a social media toolkit and encouraged to post on their channels to promote recent or upcoming projects with company-approved hashtags. Supply them with easily accessible and understood policies and the answers to any frequently asked questions.
- Offer year-round trainings (both mandatory and optional) on topics related to project management and trends in corporate social impact but also trainings that expose them to skills necessary for professional leadership development like leading with influence, delegation, and storytelling. Some companies also provide recommendations for what ratio of volunteer projects should align with the company's community priorities and those that the employees can coordinate outside of their company's focus areas.
- Make sure they have access to the physical resources they need to effectively run local projects and campaigns including branded merchandise, marketing materials and guidelines for representing the company.
- Finally, offer ongoing support to these ambassadors, including regular check-ins, feedback and coaching to help them succeed in their role.

**Communicate regularly:** Whether formal or informal, convening champions or councils regularly helps the social impact team disseminate information, hear from local offices, answer questions and work collectively on campaign planning, investment decisions and policy/procedure revisions or program changes. Outside of these check-ins, companies use various channels to communicate with their volunteer champions and councils. Most often used are internal newsletters and emails, while others are exploring Yammer and Microsoft Teams channels. Don't forget to keep the rest of the workforce informed about the work of the committees and champions, including updates on projects and initiatives, and encourage their participation and engagement.



**Foster a sense of community:** Create opportunities for champions and councils to connect with one another and with other employees, such as virtual team-building activities or online forums. Think through ways to allow them to collaborate with one another throughout their term. Promote open communication by reminding them of the social impact team's "open door policy" and encourage them to share ideas and provide feedback. Build trust by encouraging transparency and honesty and ensure they feel like their contributions are valued.

**Recognize and reward leaders:** There are various tactics that companies use to recognize their volunteer champions and council members. Options include email signature badges, language to share on LinkedIn to highlight their leadership position, gifts, different color or type of shirt worn at projects, formal awards programs, internal gratitude platforms that allows team to send a thank you (and copy supervisors) or financial rewards (or points) that can be used to purchase company swag. Shout-out these leaders in company-wide meetings whether they are in-person or online. Some companies are also exploring compensation for these leaders like bonuses and restricted stock options, and [The President's Volunteer Service Award](#) is leveraged by several companies and is well-regarded by employees.

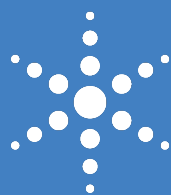
**Offer opportunities for growth:** Provide opportunities for employee ambassadors and committee members to grow and develop in their careers as well as in their service journey. This strategy can be implemented through specific trainings as mentioned above, offering the chance to lead specific initiatives or stretch assignments, acting as the internal spokesperson for a specific initiative, partner or cause, or taking on a higher-level role within a committee model. Give them exposure to senior leaders and work with HR to help identify those who've consistently gone above and beyond and might be poised for promotion or leadership development programs.

## CONCLUSION

Developing people-powered infrastructure to scale and manage a company's CSR strategy remains one of the most effective and successful ways to keep employees engaged in social impact activities, even though workplaces look much different than pre-pandemic days. By following the considerations and best practices outlined in this brief, CSR leaders can rest assured that they are set up to achieve social impact and business goals while providing an outlet for their most community-minded employees.

To get expert support in setting up a champions or council model, equipping them with the right tools or helping them lead a company-wide initiative, partner with [Points of Light](#).





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#### **ABOUT THIS BRIEF**

The findings in this brief are drawn from a series of conversations and peer-led idea exchanges held in 2021 and 2022, featuring CSR leaders and corporate citizenship practitioners from Points of Light's Corporate Service Council member companies. For additional resources on employee community engagement, please visit: [pointsoflight.org/resources](https://pointsoflight.org/resources)

#### **ABOUT POINTS OF LIGHT'S CORPORATE SERVICE COUNCIL**

The Corporate Service Council is an annual membership that empowers and equips CSR and corporate citizenship leaders with actionable resources, benchmarking data, in-person and online learning opportunities, and access to a network of industry experts to spark innovation and achieve business and social outcomes. To become part of the Corporate Service Council, visit: [pointsoflight.org/csc](https://pointsoflight.org/csc) or contact [support@pointsoflight.org](mailto:support@pointsoflight.org).

#### **ABOUT POINTS OF LIGHT**

Points of Light is a global nonprofit that inspires, equips and mobilizes millions of people to take action that changes the world. We work with a through our Global Network of 177 affiliates across more than 38 countries, and have built partnerships with thousands of nonprofits and corporations.

Points of Light believes that companies can be drivers of transformative social change in communities around the world, and that this potential is fully realized when employees are inspired and engaged as part of the strategy. Points of Light supports companies committed to driving positive social change through a variety of ways, including:

- The Corporate Service Council.
- Consulting and strategic planning.
- Experienced program design and management for corporate employee volunteer and civic engagement programs.
- The Civic 50 national and regional recognition program.

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