



POINTS OF LIGHT
CORPORATE SERVICE COUNCIL

Engaging Hourly & Manufacturing Employees in Volunteering Programs

August 26, 2025

Key Insights & Takeaways

- Despite making up a significant percentage of their workforce, large organizations often struggle to engage deskless employees in corporate giving and volunteer programs.
- A structured roadmap—identifying problems, designing solutions, and refining processes—can help overcome engagement barriers to engaging deskless employees.
- Direct, qualitative research through employee interviews can reveal critical insights that leadership assumptions may overlook.
- Hourly employees tend to be skeptical of corporate initiatives and prefer communication from trusted peers over digital messaging.
- Simple technologies like badge readers can streamline participation in giving and volunteering activities.
- Shifting from familiar analog systems to digital volunteer and giving platforms without adequate support can significantly reduce participation.
- Employees may be technologically capable but resist using complex systems for simple tasks.

Overview & Key Concepts

This presentation focused on strategies for engaging hourly and manufacturing employees in corporate giving and volunteer programs at General Motors. Sean OSullivan shared his experience as Community Impact Business Partner for Manufacturing Operations, detailing GM's journey to increase participation among their 78,000 hourly employees (90% of whom work in manufacturing sites) as part of their goal to achieve 50% total employee engagement in community impact initiatives.

- **Problem-Product-Process Roadmap:** A useful framework for identifying barriers to engagement, creating solutions, and implementing effective processes
- **Qualitative research approach:** Using one-on-one interviews with employees to understand their needs, challenges and preferences
- **Badge reader technology:** Simplifying participation through quick badge-tap donation and volunteer tracking
- **Champions program:** Utilizing trusted plant employees to promote initiatives rather than relying solely on corporate messaging

Meeting Summary

Understanding Hourly Employee Engagement Challenges

The presentation highlighted two distinct timeframes of challenges in engaging hourly employees at GM. Pre-COVID, manufacturing sites operated in silos with less of a cohesive giving strategy. Each plant ran independent programs with local charities without coordination or communication between sites or with corporate. This resulted in fragmented efforts and inconsistent employee experiences across locations. Post-COVID, when GM transitioned from paper pledge cards to digital platforms like YourCause, participation dropped dramatically by 56%. Multiple pilot programs in 2022-2023 experienced challenges despite leadership recommendations for communication tactics. The fundamental issue was that corporate teams were not directly engaging with hourly employees to understand their needs and preferences, instead relying on assumptions from leadership who were also more disconnected from the frontline workforce.

Qualitative Research and Product Development

After experiencing frustration with engagement attempts that did not produce positive results, Sean's team conducted qualitative interviews with 33 manufacturing employees across four plants in Michigan, Texas, and New York. These one-on-one conversations with open-ended questions revealed consistent themes regardless of location or tenure. Key findings included: hourly employees are naturally suspicious of corporate programs; they were aware of local plant giving activities but unfamiliar with the GM Cares program; they preferred in-person communication from trusted colleagues rather than digital signage; and contrary to leadership assumptions, they were technologically capable but unwilling to use complex processes for simple transactions. Based on these insights, the team developed several products including badge readers, policy updates, leadership education tools, and a champions program. The badge reader system emerged as a particularly effective solution, allowing employees to simply tap their badge to register participation in donations, in-kind giving, or on-site volunteering without requiring time-consuming digital processes. On the back-end, Sean and his team would use the data spreadsheets from the card reader to record the donations and participation.

Implementation and Results

The team implemented a strategic process focusing on in-person engagement and leveraging trusted plant employees. For a United Way fundraiser at two manufacturing sites, Sean personally attended all-people meetings to introduce the initiative, then trained 10 employees at each site to use the badge readers. These trained employees, who were trusted by their colleagues, managed the actual solicitation of donations on the shop floor and at gate collections. This approach addressed the key findings from their research: employees wanted in-person communication from people they trusted, and they needed a simple, quick way to participate. The results were impressive - 931 employees participated over two weeks, raising \$61,000 with matching funds. Most significantly, these two plants achieved 163% of their entire previous year's participation in just two weeks. This success demonstrated to other plants that reaching their 30% participation goal was achievable through focused, well-designed events rather than year-round efforts.