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FROM INTENT TO ACTION

Five communication principles that turn corporate volunteering into employee participation. Practical insights for communication, HR and CSR professionals



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Many organizations encourage corporate social responsibility and volunteer work, but in practice they find that employee participation lags behind. A recent study by Caro Hamacher, conducted at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, shows that this is rarely due to a lack of motivation. This study, conducted among employees who participated in volunteer activities through their employer, examined the role of internal communication: what sticks, what influences choices, and what actually motivates action?

The findings show that employees often do want to contribute, but drop out when communication fails to help them integrate volunteering into their daily work reality, or when it does not align well with what they experience on the job. The study focused specifically on how internal communication, through the process of “sensemaking,” can contribute to actual participation—and thus goes beyond merely creating a positive attitude.

This article translates these scientific insights into five practical communication principles that help organizations move employees from good intentions to action.



Prioritise credibility over promotion

Employees are highly sensitive to communication that feels overly polished or promotional. When messages appear primarily focused on branding or reputation, they tend to trigger scepticism rather than engagement.

What works better are authentic, peer-led stories: colleagues sharing their own experiences, motivations and even doubts. These narratives help others form a realistic picture of what participation actually entails.

In practice:

- Use employee voices instead of corporate messaging
- Choose informal internal channels where possible
- Allow space for nuance rather than only success stories

Authenticity builds trust — and trust enables participation.



Position managers as sense givers

Managers play a critical role in how employees interpret internal communication. Employees look to their direct manager to understand what is truly valued, supported and legitimate within the organisation.

When volunteering opportunities are merely forwarded, they remain abstract. When managers engage in dialogue, they help employees connect volunteering to their role, workload and priorities.

In practice:

- Support managers in having open conversations
- Encourage reflection rather than directive messaging
- Make it explicit that participation is supported

What managers actively engage with is perceived as meaningful.

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Leverage peer influence to normalise participation

Participation decisions are strongly influenced by colleagues. Volunteering becomes more accessible when employees see others like them taking part.

Rather than positioning volunteering as an exceptional activity, organisations benefit from embedding it into everyday organisational life.

In practice:

- Encourage volunteers to act as informal ambassadors
- Make participation visible at team level
- Promote collective rather than purely individual initiatives

When others participate, participation becomes normal

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Embed volunteering in the organisation's purpose narrative

Corporate volunteering is most effective when it is not communicated as a stand-alone CSR or HR initiative, but as a meaningful expression of the organisation's broader social purpose.

Employees are more likely to engage when they understand why volunteering matters to the organisation and how it contributes to real societal impact.

In practice:

- Link volunteering to organisational values and purpose
- Communicate tangible social outcomes
- Ensure consistency across internal messaging

Meaning drives motivation.

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Balance structure with autonomy

Employees need both clarity and freedom. Clear frameworks reduce uncertainty, while autonomy supports intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement.

Organisations that strike this balance make it easier for employees to participate without undermining personal choice.

In practice:

- Provide clear information on time, processes and expectations
- Offer flexibility in type and form of volunteering
- Respect individual preferences and circumstances

Lower the barriers – but let employees choose

IN CONCLUSION

Together, these principles show that employee participation in corporate volunteering is not driven by intent alone, but by how organisations organise meaning, support and choice.

Developed from hands-on research and interviews with employees across multiple organisations.

Are you interested in Caro Hamacher's full study and the insights it contains? Feel free to contact us or let us know — we'd be happy to share it with you. It offers in-depth insights and practical tools for organizations that want to make their internal communications about volunteer work more effective and, in doing so, get more employees involved.

