

# Companies walk the talk, plus lift spirits

Culture of employee volunteerism very much alive and kicking

By MOK FEI FEI

COMPANIES have long spoken about the need to support social causes and help the community but increasing numbers are now backing their talk with hard cash and employee volunteerism.

This more proactive approach reflects a growing view in the corporate world that a business cannot work in isolation and needs to show regard for the well-being of the society in which they operate.

The most obvious sign of the new mood can be seen in the higher number of corporate donors at the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC).

The centre raised \$139,282 for various charities from 70 corporate donors from January to October, well up on the \$51,446 from 32 corporate donors in the same period last year.

The NVPC told The Straits Times that companies are not only giving money but are enquiring about volunteering opportunities.

Community Chest, the fund-raising arm of the National Council of Social Service, has seen an increase in the number of companies volunteering their time. It has facilitated 112 volunteering activities for corporate partners in the financial year that began in April, 30 per cent more than the whole of its last financial year.

Community Chest is still on track to at least match the number of corporate donors in this financial year, but the amount collected has shrunk considerably.

About 3,600 firms donated \$16.5 million to Community Chest from April 1 to Oct 31, compared with 3,630 donors who gave around \$40 million for the whole of its last financial year.

Community Chest managing director Ng Ling Ling said: "We are, however, confident as the giving habits of our corporate partners usually include a surge in donations in the last quarter of the financial year especially during the year-end festive season and upcoming Lunar New Year."

## Engaging staff

AS WELL as opening the cheque-book, companies are making it easier for staff to do volunteer work.

Developer CapitaLand has been giving staff three days of paid leave a year to do volunteer work since 2006.

Employees can also take unpaid leave to do such work.

CapitaLand chief corporate officer Tan Seng Chai said: "Our corporate social responsibility focus - in the areas of corporate philanthropy, volunteerism and community development - is in line with the company's credo 'Building People'."

Much of the attention on corporate social responsibility involves employees giving back to society, which is raising the volunteer par-

ticipation rates at several firms.

CapitaLand staff volunteered more than 19,000 hours last year, almost doubling the 2011 figure.

The number of employees at OCBC Bank who took part in its volunteer events rose by 8 per cent this year to 1,460, while the volunteer hours went up by 17 per cent to 7,920 hours.

The corporate social responsibility team at consultancy PwC Singapore was set up some eight years ago due to demand from its employees.

Mrs Deborah Ong, its corporate responsibility leader, said: "The main driving force for us to set up a committee was the interest of our staff to give back to the community we live and operate in."

PwC employees take on between 15 and 20 projects a year.

Mrs Ong said there has been a steady increase in its staff and partners giving more time, money and resources over the years.

The PwC experience points to another trend more evident these days - the opportunity to get involved in voluntary work and other community work is especially important for firms that recruit and rely on young talent.

Associate professor Seshan Ramaswami, a marketing lecturer at the Singapore Management University (SMU), said research shows that such opportunities enhance the attractiveness of an employer to fresh graduates.

## Leadership support

THESE trends would not go far, of course, unless they have support from top management, who are increasingly seeing value in organising such work.

City Developments Limited (CDL) said its managing director Kwek Leng Joo started a dedicated volunteer arm in 1999 to engage its workforce and nurture a spirit of volunteerism.

Led by Mr Kwek and senior management, CDL also set up a committee in 2008 to see how it can be a better corporate citizen. Being greener in its building efforts was one idea.

Ms Esther An, the company's head of corporate social responsibility, said: "As the industry in Singapore begins to transform with growing awareness of the importance of sustainability, CDL as an early adopter, has enjoyed both intangible and tangible benefits."

These benefits include solidifying its reputation as a green developer.

OCBC chief executive Samuel Tsien is also leading by example, making personal contributions to support the firm's volunteer work. He has been donating money to cover the costs of running small-scale, staff-initiated volunteer activities so employees do not have to raise funds themselves.

The bank's head of group corpo-



Staff volunteers from OCBC Bank and its subsidiaries, Great Eastern Holdings and Bank of Singapore, got together to paint the homes of some elderly residents of Chai Chee. PHOTO: OCBC



CapitaLand's president & group CEO Lim Ming Yan flagging off 200 senior management and staff volunteers on the company's volunteer day last month. PHOTO: CAPITALAND



PwC staff volunteering in Cambodia as part of its overseas community project. The different types of help include conducting English language classes for children and youth, and building school infrastructure. PHOTO: PWC SINGAPORE

rate communications, Ms Koh Ching Ching, added: "We have seen the positive impact that giving and volunteering have made at OCBC - staff who volunteer together work together very well."

## Positive corporate image

COMPANIES are coy about the positive publicity or goodwill generated by their activity in this area, saying the efforts are meant for them to give back to society.

But marketing experts say firms that are known for their cor-

porate responsibility can enhance their image, which may in turn translate into better earnings.

SMU's Prof Ramaswami said: "Employees, partners, suppliers, even clients and customers are all happier to associate and do business with a corporation with a human face, where there is at least some tangible, overt effort at making a direct contribution to society."

He added that most companies do not do corporate responsibility activity quietly; there is some expectation of the public relations

benefit in creating a warmer image of the firm.

Other than a higher recall factor that may lift sales, Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon from the National University of Singapore Business School said the goodwill bank can help firms tide over rough times.

"With enough social capital and assuming the crisis caused by the firm is not too severe, people may be more forgiving of a company that has been known to do good," she said.

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