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FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE



Profit falls may have affected corporate charity donations, but richer or poorer, companies have stepped up so their causes don't lose out. WONG SHER MAINE finds high energy and renewed commitment from companies working to make cash and time work harder.

It was just one line in a recent newspaper article detailing the escalating effects of the current recession. The story highlighted how some people were putting off medical appointments to save money. That was enough to jolt the MHC Asia Group into action.

The group, which provides managed care services for 400 General Practice clinics, held a management pow-wow. Then, Group Chief Executive Officer Dr Low Lee Yong, shot off an e-mail to staff. Part of it read:

"We are not a big company and most of us come from humble families. But it will be a good gesture for us to show our concern. It will be good if we could give some hope to those in need during this depressing time." The email marked the company's first in-house corporate fund-raising effort.

Shortly after the management meeting, a staff member sent Dr Low an SMS: "I have never felt so proud working in MHC as I did today. Thank you for this sense of purpose."

In less than a fortnight, the 30 employees at MHC managed to raise

about \$10,000, the sum matched dollar-for-dollar by the CEO. The company is now working with Community Development Councils to disburse the \$20,000 for the needy.

MHC's General Manager Jacqueline Lee said, somewhat apologetically, "This is just a small thing, we are not setting up an official charity and it's just a self-contained effort."

The sum raised may not have made headline news, but the spirited action from individual staff members willing to dig into their own pockets in a downturn, is worthy of repeated broadcasts.

Many corporations hit by the economic crisis are likely to reduce their cash donations to charities this year, and possibly the next year too. The set back has challenged managers and staff, many of them teaming up to find ways to address shortfalls so their favoured charities don't lose out. Some top managers have responded with personal donations, while staff volunteers band together to plough more energy and effort into existing community service programmes.

MAKING CASH AND TIME WORK HARDER

MHC Asia is not a stand-alone case. In December last year, staff from business software company SAP, took stock of the worsening effects of the recession on their community service partners and got busy.

They responded by buying 500 books to start a reading programme for children at the Henderson Student Care Centre and the Life Student Care Centre in Sengkang. Staff also found time to choose Christmas gifts to match wishes from underprivileged children through the



Children from the 19 MAY orphanage and school in Hanoi play in front of the newly painted walls decorated by CapitaLand volunteers.

Make-A-Wish Foundation. In the same month, they sold teddy bears to help raise funds for the Redhill Food Distribution and Fund Raising Project, which provides food packages for senior citizens.

"It's important to note that SAP employees have supported the various campaigns not because they're being told to do so by management, but because they each want to make their own personal contribution," said Geraldine McBride, President of SAP Asia Pacific and Japan.

Another company that may see a challenged bottom line in this year of falling property prices is real estate corporate CapitalLand. The big-name developer has typically allocated up to 0.5% of its annual net profit to its philanthropic arm, CapitalLand Hope Foundation.

Suffice to say the company's profits this year may not be as robust as in previous years, but CapitalLand has, in fact, just made its single largest donation to a specific cause: \$1.75 million towards the "Green for Hope" project.

The most recent "Green for Hope" project involved CapitalLand staff volunteers visiting 12 primary schools around Singapore for three weeks in February. Their task was to encourage students to recycle paper, plastic and aluminium cans. By doing so, the students "earned" donations towards their school's welfare fund that helps underprivileged classmates. The CapitalLand Hope Foundation donated S\$2 for every kilogramme of recyclable waste collected by participating schools.

"CapitalLand remains committed to its community contributions. The CapitalLand Hope Foundation will continue to support worthy causes that focus on meeting the living, educational and healthcare needs of underprivileged children in Singapore and in countries where we operate," said a company spokesman.



"We have consistently delivered our support and commitment to the social service sector through economically difficult periods. We expect to do the same even as another difficult period unfolds before us."

— Goh Kong Aik, HSBC

STANDING FIRM

Major bank, HSBC, home to one of Singapore's strongest corporate volunteer forces in terms of sheer numbers and range of community programmes, is not holding back on volunteer contributions. The sobering financial climate has not affected the number of staff who want to volunteer.

"Since the inception of Volunteers@HSBC in the mid 90s, we have consistently delivered our support and commitment to the social service sector in this manner, through economically difficult times," said HSBC spokesman Goh Kong Aik. "We expect to do

the same even as another difficult period unfolds before us."

For the 12th consecutive year, about 50 HSBC volunteers hosted its Ang Pow Night reunion dinner for about 100 needy elderly residents of the Henderson Aged Reachout Programme, many of whom live on their own in challenging conditions with little or no support.

Each guest received a goodie bag of Chinese New Year delicacies, a pair of decorative lanterns and a S\$50 red packet. To add a very personal touch, staff volunteers spent more than 100 hours (over lunch time and weekends) to hand craft the intricate lanterns out of HSBC red packets.

If they are unable to donate more, some companies are cleverly leveraging on what they already have to organise community programmes with more impact.

In addition to on-going volunteer programmes here, staff volunteers from CapitalLand offices in Singapore, China, Vietnam and Thailand organised a volunteer expedition to a Vietnamese orphanage. The badly damaged and poorly equipped "19 May" orphanage and school in Hanoi, provides 85 street children and orphans with basic education.

During the five-day trip in September last year, staff volunteers helped improve the school's facilities with simple refurbishment including white-washing walls. They also provided the children with new school bags and gifts, and organised art and singing activities.

Straitened times may have heightened empathy in many offices. Everyone, it seems, can relate to the mood and identify with greater needs on the ground. Retrenchments have an immediate effect in families with children. School costs, tuition and related needs all give way to more urgent daily needs.

HSBC responded by introducing two new



HSBC stands thick and thin by its Ang Pow Night reunion dinner for the needy elderly.

Instead of spending more at a time of lack, some companies are cleverly leveraging on what they already have to organise community programmes with more impact.

programmes for needy children with the Students Care Service called "Read With Me". The programme is aimed at improving the reading and linguistic comprehension skills of children who are academically weaker than their peers, but who cannot afford enrichment classes.

"Education for the needy is a core focus of our community service efforts here," said Mr Goh. "We believe that when it comes to children, their continued learning and development must remain a priority even in this difficult climate." ☆



Photograph by Russell Wong

GIFTS OF THANKS

As the bad economic news continued, lawyers at the TSMP Law Corporation bucked the corporate trend and voted unanimously, to double their charity donations.

In a typical year, the Christian partners at the TSMP Law Corporation tithes 10% of partner profits to a variety of charitable and non-profit causes the firm supports. Their shareholder's mandate upholds this practice.

By every account, the last few months of 2008 were dire as job loss figures and heavily devalued investments took their wider toll on Singaporeans across the board. Charities heavily

dependent on corporate funding felt the sting almost immediately.

"In a bad year, \$100,000 is nothing when there are so many needs to be met. Last year was a bad year but we had a record year, so we doubled our tithe to 20% because this is a time when our donation dollar can stretch further," reasoned Stefanie Yuen Thio, TSMP's Head, Corporate & Joint Managing Director.

After consultation with the firm's lawyers and staff, the pool of charitable cash gifts rallied around \$350,000. In a climate where bosses are braking heavily on cash outflows, such generosity towards non-business costs may seem astonishing. But TSMP has always made giving a tenet of its work ethic.

"As much as you feel you need the money in your own hand, how much more so do the needy feel the lack," Mrs Yuen Thio said simply. "We have so much to be grateful for, really."

TSMP supports a range of causes including Operation Smile, the children's charity treating facial deformities such as cleft lips and palates, and the Children's Cancer Foundation. The firm also awards two scholarships at the National University of Singapore's Law faculty.

Some of the other beneficiaries of the firm's largesse may come as more of a surprise. Mrs Yuen Thio named HOME, the non-profit welfare organisation for migrant workers.

"I feel very strongly about this. Domestic workers here care for our children and our families and homes at the expense of their own. It's because of my helper that I am able to work at what I love, make good money and enjoy my family life free from domestic hassles. I couldn't do all this without my helper sacrificing her own family life. It's not even giving back!" she argued.

Another beneficiary is Action For Aids (AFA). Given TSMP's top management's biblical position on gender issues, this support surprised one of their own lawyers who had

initially hesitated to make a case for supporting a programme for the non-profit. But Mrs Yuen Thio encouraged the pitch.

"We are giving to Action for Aids to support a programme that provides medical treatment for HIV pregnant mothers. That fits in with our mission to help the disadvantaged, sick and needy. That's why we go to our lawyers and staff and ask them to make a case for causes they believe in, it helps us widen the scope for what we do, and we agree on who to give to as a company," she explained.

On the volunteer front, she currently serves on the Governing Council of Dover Park Hospice, where she is part of a new task force aiming to increase hospice beds and services. On a personal level, she wants to champion more training for palliative care among General Practitioners and nurses in the community.

TSMP's volunteer committees organise two community events a year for the elderly and for children. One of them included serving lunch to senior citizens from an Asian Women's Welfare Association organisation at a void deck recently. The lunch ended with the mandatory karaoke session, a challenge for some of the volunteer legals waiting on tables, including Mrs Yuen Thio.

"We all had to join in the Chinese karaoke - including me. I can only sing one Chinese song!" - Monica Gwee

"We gave more because in a bad year, the dollar can stretch further. We have so much to be grateful for."

- Stefanie Yuen Thio