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OK

Charity Goes to Work

How to give on your own terms at the office

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ONE QUESTION SURVEY

Which of the following best describes how donations are handled at your office? (Choose one)

- People police themselves, and do it well
- People police themselves, poorly
- There's a no-donations policy
- We use the "pool our funds" approach

Here's my vote

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"41% of companies now offer telecommuting. . . and 64% offer some type of flexible schedule."
--SmartMoney, May 2003, 2002 Society for Human Resources Management Survey

Give me another

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Show me the way

English philosopher Francis Bacon once wrote, "In charity there is no excess." As a sixteenth century man, however, he never worked in a modern office--which may be why I'm in a slightly different place on the subject.

These days, in charity there *can* be excess. Imagine: In the same month you've got the HR manager peddling his daughter's Girl Scout cookies, someone in Accounts Receivable selling calendars for Little League, and your cubicle-mate asking you to sponsor his "Walk for Colon Cancer."

There's no official protocol regarding how to respond when co-workers and business associates ask you to support their causes. Some corporations have no-solicitation policies in place that prohibit both Union-recruiting and the sale of Thin Mints. But if you work someplace that doesn't have such a policy or if you do independent consulting from your home office, chances are you've got no system for dealing gracefully with on-the-job charity seekers.

Why we give on the job

Brian Duncan, an assistant professor of economics at the University of Colorado who has written extensively on

workplace giving, says, "The two main charitable motives are 'altruism' and 'warm glow.'" A warm-glow philanthropist donates because of how the act of giving makes him feel, whereas an altruist believes in the cause.

When I give money to a coworker's cause, it's usually out of fear of not looking like a team player and not because I'm particularly passionate about the cause. While I suppose that puts me in the "warm glow" camp--sort of--there's something else at work here.

Duncan cites an Independent Sector survey, "Giving and Volunteering in the United States," that asked people to rate their motivation for contributing money to a cause. Over 80% of participants claimed to be "greatly" or "slightly motivated" when asked by a friend or business associate. Obviously, it's harder to say no to the person you talk with or see daily than it is to say no to some stranger on the street.

Andrea Burtman Selonick, fundraising-extraordinaire and former managing editor of *Working Mother* magazine, has been on both sides of the issue. All three of her children are involved in extracurricular activities, so she has helped sell candy, cookies, and wrapping paper for the schools. She has also run raffles and has done some silent auctions and book sales.

In her experience, colleagues sometimes feel undue pressure to give. "People are more apt to help if it's a personal cause, like if someone in your office has a kid with diabetes," she says. "But it's uncomfortable if you're asking to help a more anonymous group."

There's nothing unethical about asking your equals for charity, says Jeffrey Seglin, business ethics columnist and author of *The Right Thing: Conscience, Profit and Personal Responsibility in Today's Business*. The worst thing you might do is annoy your co-workers, who are tired of buying stuff they don't need.

But the issue gets stickier when employees are asked by the folks who sign their paychecks. In federal organizations, it's against the law to solicit money from one's subordinates. In most businesses, however, it's perfectly legal.

What's required in those situations is the courage of your convictions. A manager is likely to respect you if you tell her that you have other causes you care deeply about and that you prefer to save your charity money for those organizations. While the manager may be disappointed you're not contributing to her pet charity, she most certainly will understand.

Charity comes to work

When Seglin was a boy, he sold sacks of charcoal door-to-door for the Cub Scouts. Fewer children are out ringing doorbells these days. Parents and school administrators now discourage children from working the sidewalks for safety reasons.

Because of this, more raffles and product sales are being taken over by parents. That is how fundraising has ended up in the workplace. We know our colleagues better than we know our neighbors. Work is the new community, so it makes sense that we'll look to our co-workers for fundraising support.

If fundraising has gotten out of hand at your office, if you're feeling overwhelmed by the amount of philanthropic requests during work, as I am, how do you avoid reaching for your wallet every time? And how do you do it without looking uncharitable?

Be honest. Tell people that money is tight, or tell them that you already gave money to so-and-so's child. Just don't make excuses.

Propose an alternative. Approach your supervisor about starting a cash-kitty, where employees can donate to one collection that gets doled out equally on a monthly or bi-annual basis. Or perhaps your department could agree to support one charity each year and all the money in the kitty would go to that charity.

Stick with your own cause. Seglin suggests, "Pick a charity that fits your values or interests, and when co-workers ask for money, let them know about your own cause." Giving money to one organization over another doesn't make you a bad person. It just makes you a person who is intentional about giving.

Don't feel guilty. It's important to remember that people are usually more understanding and forgiving than we give them credit for. If I feel guilty about not forking over a sack of dimes to Jerry's Kids, it's because of my own insecurities.

If there's one thing I've learned in my years and years of giving to my colleagues' causes, it's that the famous axiom, "It's in giving that we truly receive" is correct. Through my goodness, I've ended up with three wall calendars, countless boxes of cookies, smoked salmon, and four years worth of holiday wrapping paper.

I can't afford to give any more. This year I'm saying no--in the nicest possible way, of course.

David Whitemyer writes about workplace culture and is a frequent contributor to the Boston Globe.

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