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Managing Home Depot's 'Volunteer Army'

Working locally, the Home Depot Foundation develops affordable homes in league with nonprofit groups, Kelly Caffarelli tells Patricia O'Connell

The Home Depot Foundation was started and funded by Atlanta-based Home Depot ([HD](#)) in 2002 with the mission of building affordable homes for working families while improving community health. The foundation's volunteer force—Team Depot—is made up of tens of thousands of Home Depot associates in North America and China. According to Kelly Caffarelli, the foundation's president, it is well ahead of the 10-year plan established in 2007. Back then, the foundation pledged to invest \$400 million over the next decade to develop 100,000 affordable, healthy homes for working families and to plant three million trees in urban communities. By yearend 2009, \$163 million had been invested, 64,000 homes built, and 732,000 trees planted.

Rather than assign projects, the foundation relies on the stores themselves to choose projects to work on. Each store has a Team Depot captain who coordinates volunteers and helps decide where the community most urgently needs help. Since the foundation switched to this self-directing approach in 2007, Team Depot participation has increased: The budget for the projects has tripled and the program is still oversubscribed. According to Caffarelli, it's no coincidence. "Our associates feel they truly own the projects, and they are deeply proud of the results they achieve," she says.

Caffarelli recently spoke with Businessweek.com Management editor [Patricia O'Connell](#) about administering what amounts to a workforce of volunteers. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow.

Patricia O'Connell: What do you see as your primary role?

Kelly Caffarelli: I think a lot about what we should be doing next. I talk to my team about missed opportunities. No one is going to come and tell us we don't do enough good stuff. My question is always: Could we have done more? What else could we do with the resources we have?

We have relationships throughout the country with nonprofits and businesses. We try to be a matchmaker in terms of thinking of the resources we have and which ones are most appropriate for a given nonprofit.

You said you are constantly thinking about what you can do better. What are some of those things?

Our purpose as a foundation is to create healthier homes and more sustainable communities, and we are currently focusing on making our volunteer projects greener, too. We think about that in terms of everything we do—from what kind of project we select to the material we use, to how we feed the volunteers.

How many volunteers do you have?

All of our 300,000 associates are eligible to volunteer. On any given week, we have at least 20 volunteer projects going on, ranging from 10 to 200 volunteers.

Do you have any sense of what percentage of employees volunteer?

We made a very conscious decision about five years ago not to track everything that is going on, which may sound counterintuitive in a corporation that likes numbers and statistics. But we wanted to allow our stores and our associates to respond to what matters to them. The point of volunteerism is that people are doing what they want and what's important to them in their communities. The only restriction is that it be about making a lasting physical improvement involved with painting, planting, building—and that the group be recognized as a nonprofit by the IRS.

It's interesting that you don't pay attention to the numbers because of the idea that what can't be managed can't be measured.

Previously we had national partnerships with nonprofit organizations that provided volunteer opportunities. We told the stores what projects they were going to do. We have now turned that upside down. I have four people on my team who respond to requests from stores asking for financial support to do the projects they want, from all over North America and China. Because our associates volunteer their own time, we have learned that the best way to manage them is to let them decide when and how to work on a foundation project, rather than dictating schedules.

Can you talk a little about what is going on with China?

The concept of giving back and partnering with the community has transferred really well to China. You typically hear that Asian countries are not

very involved in volunteerism but we have found that not to be the case.

In addition to not measuring participation, you also decided to decentralize the decision making.

Those decisions are very interrelated. We recognized that every place we have a store is a home town for Home Depot. Anywhere we have a store, the people in the community expect us to be involved. I think we recognize that we don't know what's important in every community. But volunteering is giving of your time, giving of your skills, your sweat equity.

We do track the projects that we are supporting in terms of making sure they fit our guidelines and that the partner is a nonprofit. But we don't require a report back on how many hours are given, how many people showed up.

It must be hard to pick favorite projects but are there any of which you are particularly proud?

One that comes to mind was in Houston after Hurricane Ike. It was a working class neighborhood where the houses probably needed some work before the hurricane. One of the owners came out and looked around to see what we were doing and she said, "I didn't know people did this."

I said: "I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean." And she said, "I didn't know people helped people like this. I want to look around for what I can do. I take care of my mom and I'm busy, but I'm going to figure out what I can do." That's a huge win.

Here in Atlanta last year, we found out through one of our nonprofit partners that the city had a 30-acre park that it had forgotten it owned. We adopted that park for the year. We did five work days with about 100 people each day. What was really cool from our perspective was that the impact was enormous. We made friends in the neighborhood because we came back so many times. It was great to see how the neighbors were using the space each time. Those kinds of projects that we can find that are large and significant—and give the full experience to the associates—are important.

When you think of a city that needs help, you think of Detroit. Are there any particular projects out there?

We've done a few community gardens, which may sound a little frivolous, given the issues that they are facing. I think any activity that gets neighbors out and talking to each other reduces crime and will strengthen the neighborhood over the long term.

How can someone in a community bring a potential project to the attention of their local Home Depot?

They can come into the store or do it online.