

Sometimes you don't get paid with money

Is there more value in a project if you are financially compensated for it? This is the question I've been asking myself for the past three months as I volunteered over 200 hours of time in my daughter Haley's fifth-grade class.

I own a communication arts firm in Rancho Cordova. We specialize in graphic design, Web-site development and project management. Our clientele are mostly federal and state agencies.

At the start of the school year, I received a flier for a statewide environmental challenge whose goal is to educate fifth-graders. Sponsors include Walt Disney and various state agencies; the challenge is to be student driven. The grand prize is an all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyland.

This challenge seemed to be the right fit for me: I could contribute my project management skills while helping my daughter's class recognize the importance of the environment. What I didn't account for was the amount of time I would have to put into it.

I learned lessons: The challenge began in January. As a class, we identified our goals and objectives, and put together a time-line complete with milestones. We named our project and created a logo to brand it. I provided instruction for the students to work independently.

Naively enough, I thought the class would carry out their tasks and complete the project ... all on their own. It seemed logical enough, after all, I'm a business owner with employees; when I assign a task, I expect it to be completed on time.

Lesson No. 1: Fifth-graders aren't employees. Since things are not getting done, I propose a change of concept: The challenge will be held before school on a voluntary basis from 8-8:45 a.m., Monday through Friday.

I'm prepared to roll up my sleeves and get



ANOTHER VOICE

INGRID HART

in the trenches with my miniature employees ... er, students.

My active participation in the class will get things done; we will clean up our little corner of the environment.

Lesson No. 2: Many people are willing to work for no financial compensation. For one month solid we work on the challenge before school. Our biggest goal: hold an environmental fair.

We send out 50 hand-addressed invitations; we mail 30 press releases in English and Spanish to local media; we hand out 1,500 fliers to three elementary schools; and we put up 10 posters around school.

On fair day, there are 11 exhibitors. The Department of Water Resources brings its hamburger display; Folsom Lake Ford donates a truck for our recycle can drive; the Department of Conservation brings Recycle Rex, their life-sized four-fingered purple dinosaur; and many others contribute.

We are ready for action. We are expecting 300 people and less than 100 show. I am disappointed.

Patty Weaver, a.k.a. Recycle Rex, put it into perspective: "The children who are here are learning a lot."

We continue the challenge by cleaning the creek behind our school; we visit Assemblyman Anthony Pescetti at the Capitol; we hold a sock hop to raise money to buy an environmental sign; and we learn that working together, we can accomplish anything.

Lesson No. 3: If it feels good, do it.

Would pay improve results? Would I have done a better job of facilitating the environ-

mental challenge if I'd been financially compensated for it? Sure, I would have done a better job on some of the details. I know as a business owner that I have to attend to every last detail, otherwise you might not hire me again.

But for the most part, I worked as hard for free as I do for pay.

My worth was not measured by how much money I received. My paycheck came in the form of helping students recognize the value of a clean environment, and of showing children that together they can make a difference.

Is there more value in a project if you are financially compensated for it? The answer lies within us all, as we struggle to measure what we feel we can contribute in terms of time and money, alongside of the paychecks we need to stay viable.

As good as money: To balance the scale, I propose we establish a new currency for volunteers. This new form of money would be given to everyone who tries to make this world a better place without thought to pay.

It would go to a friend who picks up your sick child from school while you're on a business trip; to the neighbor who bathes your sick father while you are at work; and to the group who feeds the homeless while you and I are at home eating dinner.

Then again, this new form of currency is anything but new. It's not money in the bank, but for some, it's just as good. It is the deep, meaningful relationship we create with ourselves when we reach out to others. It is the validation of self and an affirmation of life.

We are all connected, and together, we can make a better world for all.

So the next time an opportunity comes up for you to volunteer, try it. It's money in the bank of life.

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Business Jour

1401 21st Street, Suite 2
Sacramento, CA 95814-5
Telephone (916) 447-76
Fax (916) 447-2243
www.bizjournals.com/sacra

Subscription: \$79.00/yr

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