

Panelists: Teamwork key to companies giving back

By Paul Schott

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Ashok Vasudevan, co-founder and CEO of Preferred Brands International and Chairman of the Board of Tasty Bite Eatables Ltd., discusses his company's strategies for giving next to Hope for Haiti Board ...
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STAMFORD — Creating a corporate culture of philanthropy and community service requires much more than sending out a memo or writing a policy. It requires building a grassroots movement.

The five executives who convened Tuesday at [First County Bank](#)'s Summer Street headquarters underscored those points during a panel discussion on philanthropic strategies organized by the [Mark Lapine Endowment for Families](#) in Business, a foundation that supports families in business in Fairfield County. The quintet have overseen the distribution of some \$45 million in funds and services in the past decade to groups supported by their firms.

“It’s an opportunity to engage our employees,” said First County CEO [Reyno Giallongo](#) Jr., who also serves as president of his bank’s foundation. “It’s not a corporate mandate or foundation mandate. ... We believe that engagement in the nonprofit community should come from an individual’s DNA.”

New initiatives do not need to be perfectly planned and executed from the outset, the panelists said. [Cindi Bigelow](#), president and CEO of Fairfield-based Bigelow Tea, cited the improvised origins of a race started by her company to benefit a scholarship fund set up in honor of the late son of a Bigelow employee. That initiative now raises more than \$100,000 each year.

“We were just trying to do something nice,” Bigelow said. “It really wasn’t like ‘Let’s make an impact on the community, and let’s do something amazing.’ It was just ‘Gee, can we do something for this one employee?’ It has now become a centerpiece of Bigelow Tea.”

Executives should not hesitate to champion causes they support, said [Mike Maguire](#), CEO of the Essex-based print marketing firm [Structural Graphics](#) and co-founder of Raise the Roof, a Connecticut nonprofit that supports [Habitat for Humanity](#) projects.

“No. 1 — say it in your values, put it out there,” Maguire said. “Be there at the (community) events, and be authentic. If you’re not authentic, nothing works. Be loud and thankful to your employees. Be very vocal in many different ways.”

Nonprofit initiatives do not conflict with commercial goals, said [Ashok Vasudevan](#), co-founder and CEO of Stamford-based Preferred Brands International and board chairman of Tasty Bite Eatables Ltd. Vasudevan and his wife founded a nonprofit, MAV Foundation, that aims to end hunger and malnourishment in the U.S.

“If somebody asks you why did you come to a fork in the road where you have to choose between being socially responsible and providing consumer delight, I would say ‘Hey, baby, you took the wrong road,’” Vasudevan said.

Executives should not see themselves as the focal points of their organizations’ philanthropic programs, Vasudevan said.

“Don’t take it upon yourself to inspire,” Vasudevan said. “It’s too much work. You can’t do it. It’s easy to be inspired — if only you try.”

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