Last winter, I attended a conference that convened partners of more than 100 CPA firms from throughout the United States. Over the course of a few days, there were discussion sessions on firm strategic planning, the dynamics of the new millennial generation, reducing staff turnover and other such helpful topics. And to conclude the conference, the president of the American Institute of CPAs (AICPA) discussed the state of our profession as well as the need for civic engagement and volunteerism.

Now, I likely have a large ego, but our firm seemed to be so far ahead of most of my comrades in so many of these areas. In fact, in some cases, these partners of my friendly competitors were simply not getting it at all.
Let’s talk about a strategic plan and a mission statement for your firm. Many of my friends at the conference had none. When asked to break into groups to develop what might comprise such a vision, most came up with statements such as “grow the practice” and “increase profitability.”

Well, I’ve been there. More than 30 years ago, I worked at an international consulting firm, where I spent almost nine years advising publicly traded companies, working to keep earnings per share up. I enjoyed my work, but did notice that success — whether personal, professional or corporate — was clearly measured in the form of one single metric: financial.

Accounting faculty: supply and demand

It seemed simple enough: The more money you made for a client, the better you did in the firm. The better you did in the firm, the more money you made for yourself. But, I thought, there clearly must be something more than making someone else money and, yes, even more than making myself more money. And it was neither the first time I recognized this nor that the efforts of my employer were clearly defined in a manner similar to the responses I got in the strategic planning seminar at the conference: “We need to grow the practice: we need to make more money.” That was their definition of success.

But it is not mine. And it is not sustainable. No one in your firm wants to show up for work each day to make you more money, and, I would contend, even solely to make themselves more money.

So I thought about what was important to me. I just wanted to make a difference. I wanted to be a part of some change that was for the good. So I left in 1984 to start out on my own and create my own new metric for success.

The RAFFA, PC, difference:
A social mission

I developed my mission statement within the first year or so, which is still with the firm after almost 25 years. And when one of my partners proudly asked me to pass it on to the rest of my peers at that breakout session on strategic planning in the conference, I was met with sneers and resistance.

Here it is:

To be a catalyst for positive systemic change in our community.

Your reaction may be similar. What does that mean, and how does it get you anywhere as a CPA firm? Well, my editor has given me about 2,000 words to enlighten you. Let’s see if I can do it.

Before I get too deep into it, let’s start with the basics. I think you need to understand the definition of philanthropy, as it is likely that when you hear that someone is a philanthropist, you think of a very wealthy individual giving big bucks away to the poor.

Not true. A philanthropist is one who practices philanthropy, and philanthropy is defined as “loving people or the active effort to promote human welfare.”

Now, I do believe there to be a balance in the world that is created by our giving of ourselves. And I do believe that if everyone practiced philanthropy, no matter how much or how little time or money they had for themselves — to give just a small percentage of that time or that wealth — civil society would be eons ahead of where it is today.

But when I first began my firm, I truly believed that philanthropy was something personal and private. I did much of my giving back anonymously. As I began to employ staff, I quickly understood that philanthropy can be learned.

I now believe as a parent it is my responsibility to teach philanthropy to my children, and as a CEO, it is my job to encourage it of my employees. But more than teaching or encouraging it, with the employment of dozens of professionals within the first few years of the firm’s existence, I had soon come to understand that philanthropy is contagious. The more I promoted it within the firm, the more positive response I got from my staff.

And that response was more than just volunteering and donating. I saw a balance in my people and in their lives just by the feeling they got when I simply allowed them to spend some time giving back.

With this knowledge one can learn to measure self-worth and success in different terms. We can learn to measure our success by the effectiveness of our outcomes. This is the fuel that runs my business and my life.

So let me tell you how this translates into practical programs that can make a difference in your business. But understand, my firm, RAFFA, PC, does this because I believe as its CEO that doing good — being socially responsible — is the right thing to do. What appears to fuel or drive my business is not the reason for my efforts. I do it because I believe we have the responsibility to be a positive force in our community.

But if I cannot convince you to do it for this same noble reason, I know you will be a believer when you see the results: the direct and positive effect on your business and, yes, on your bottom line.

So let’s get into some of our programs.

Community volunteerism

“We encourage and facilitate our employees to get involved in their communities in ways that meet their personal goals, and to do the kinds of things they personally want to do.

My tax manager volunteers at his church each morning. My previous assistant is a volunteer fireperson. My internal IT manager put in more than 1,000 hours of service to the Boy Scouts last year alone — and his sons are fully grown. A senior accountant sings in the gay men’s chorus. A staff accountant in our outsourcing group works with the city’s choral society. An audit manager coaches his son’s baseball team at the Jewish Community Center.

There is a person on staff whose job, in part, can be defined as “community outreach coordinator.” She and her assistant counsel our employees to help them find their purpose — something that charges them. She also has the firm sponsor group events. Everyone that likes to ride a bike or run participates in races for breast cancer, diabetes and MS.

There is a school for learning-disabled children, which our firm sponsors, and several of our employees each week give up a lunch hour to read to these kids. We annually sponsor a treasure hunt for Make-A-Wish Foundation and annually work in the D.C. Servathon for DC CARES.

We have an online tracking system so employees can report the hours they spend on volunteering. There is no requirement to do so. Some certainly still feel that their giving is a private matter and not to be shared, and we are fine with that.
In addition to promoting and organizing these events, we provide sponsorship dollars, often match employees’ charitable contributions, give them time off to volunteer as needed and reward them at our annual staff meeting.

In 2008, we reported an average of more than 50 hours of community service per employee — the highest in D.C., according to the Washington Business Journal. At our annual staff meeting, we had four of the volunteers with larger commitments speak to the rest of our staff about the satisfaction they get from giving back. Our annual MVP awards are based on job performance, client service and community involvement.

What does this all do for me? It simply makes me feel good. That is the only purpose I need. But I can see it does much more for my people. My assistant needed to leave work early one or two days each week to be at the fire department. She often stayed up all night at the station working on proposals and letters for me on her laptop, arriving at work at 4 the next morning. I never worry about lost time if it is lost to volunteering.

Did you know that today’s college students will have 10 to 14 jobs by the time they are 38? In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor says that one out of every four workers today is with a company where they have been employed for less than one year. And more than one out of two are working for a company for which they have been employed for less than five years.

RAFFA, PC, has less than a 5 percent turnover rate, which in a CPA firm is astounding! And the evidence shows that the retention rate for our volunteering employees is higher than for those who do not volunteer. For me, this has added importance, as it is those employees who have this sense of giving back I want to retain.

Do such community volunteer efforts cost the firm money? Inevitably. But if you listen to your HR directors, most believe it costs about one and one-half times that much. My employees are more balanced. They have an improved sense of self and fulfillment; the nonprofit gets financial and human capital to advance its mission; and RAFFA, PC, gets happy employees who stay with our firm for the right reason — they like it here!

**Board volunteer program**

In our firm, everyone who has more than five years of experience is asked to join a nonprofit board. We sponsor an online program called BoardNet USA, which matches my employees’ interests to a nonprofit in need of leadership. This request is built into the core competencies of our employees, and it is a part of the evaluation process. They are not required to do this but encouraged to do so. Active participation is rewarded with a larger raise and quicker promotions.

We assist the employee in finding the board that suits them. We coach them for their interview process and local boards know that when they get one of our employees, they get the full power of the firm behind that employee. The employee can request pro bono services from our firm that are provided as needed to their nonprofit. They can sponsor a denim day on which the staff is asked to pay at least $5 to wear jeans, which is then donated to their nonprofit. They can have their nonprofit’s board meetings hosted in our office, etc.

Now again, we do it because it is the right thing to do. But the benefits are extraordinary. Ditto all the benefits to employee morale as noted above, but add exponentially to the feeling my employees get of self-worth — the confidence that comes with the responsibilities of governance.

I want our people to understand the metric, the one of effective outcomes. And, what better way to learn it than to sit on a board in a sector that almost always focuses on those they serve, how well they serve and how many they serve with little consideration for the money that may be given for such good work? I want my employees to understand mission and programmatic effectiveness. I want them to have an appreciation for the difficulties a business faces and the expertise they as an individual can bring.

This absolutely translates to better business consultants.
Attention CPA’s:

Did YOU choose your job, or did your job choose YOU?

As a fellow CPA, I know that you worked hard to achieve your CPA status. Now the real question is: “Are you in a position that truly suits your personality, values, and professional and personal needs?”

Why leave your future to chance?

If you’re seriously interested in making the “right” move to your next job, I can help you find it. I am an actively licensed CPA in Virginia with over 20 years of experience including public accounting (E&Y) and consulting (KPMG), financial accounting (American Cancer Society), internal audit (Moneyline Telerate), and recruiting (Acsys, formerly Don Richards). As a networker who truly enjoys helping others and sharing my career experiences to guide fellow professionals, here is how I can help you:

- Guide you on career paths available in public accounting and industry
- Enable you to capitalize on your strengths
- Coach you on how to put your best foot forward to find the “right fit”
- Advise you when to stay in your current position if that is the right move

If you’re interested in working with a recruiter who will understand what you do best and can help you find the right employer, then I welcome the opportunity to meet you!

EMPLOYERS: If you have not been satisfied with the results of your hiring efforts including working with recruiters who do not truly understand your needs, I welcome hearing from you!

BETH A. BERK, CPA
Independent Recruiter
Specializing in CPA Firm, Accounting & Finance Positions
in Metropolitan DC & Nearby Suburbs/Baltimore/Richmond/Tidewater

Connecting You To Your Next Hire
Contingency & Retained Staffing Solutions
MATCHING SKILLS, EXPERIENCE & VALUES WITH NEEDS

CPA Ambassador for the state of Maryland, sponsored by the AICPA

Serving clients and professionals as an Independent Recruiter since March 2005

(To date, no website needed. THANK YOU to all who have contacted me and/or referred me to others.)
The BoardNetUSA™ link on our website has now become so popular that hundreds of employees from other companies have used it to volunteer to sit on a nonprofit board.

**Pro bono services**

At the Nevada Volunteers conference, it was noted that “Companies have long recognized the value of employee volunteer programs in bettering their communities while driving up morale, retention and productivity. But to get more ‘bang for the buck,’ more companies are shifting to a pro bono approach. Instead of painting a school or cleaning a park, employees use their professional skills — such as marketing professionals creating an outreach campaign, logistics experts helping a food bank improve its delivery system or IT professionals installing a local network.”

Our partners and our firm work to give away and leverage approximately 5 percent of our gross annual billings each in pro bono services and direct support (that is hard dollars, computer hardware and software, etc.) to nonprofits each year. Nonprofits solicit us directly or through our website for assistance they might need in finance, technology, investments, human resources, insurance, governance, strategic planning, organizational assessments, etc. Often, a local foundation will come to us with an “A” program but very poor infrastructure.

We look at these requests and define ways in which we can help build capacity with these programmatically strong nonprofits to ensure they can sustain themselves — so that their “A” programs can continue on long after we have ceased to provide such services.

We could evaluate what the pro bono service will do for our company. For example, if we sign the audit opinion of a nonprofit whose annual report goes out to hundreds of potential clients, we are more than ahead in our marketing costs. But we do not.

Our criteria are simple:

- Does the nonprofit provide a quality service or product to a deserving constituency?
- Are they ready for the services we are to provide?
- Can they commit the resources in terms of time and staff to work with us to achieve the required objectives?

There is nothing about making money here. But we do get back something that is much more valuable.

We typically work in teams among the various divisions of our companies, because most often the nonprofit seeking help needs more than just a “fix” in one area. At times, we leverage our work with our strategic partners who have agreed to provide similar forms of pro bono goods or services in exchange for other paying jobs we may refer to them. And often foundations can find their way to fund a portion of the cost of the services required, relying on us and our partners to fill the gap.

Our staff who we organize to do the work does not necessarily know it is pro bono. The work is run through our billing systems just as it is for a paying client. In this way, the same standards for success apply as with a client that is paying full fare. The client, too, is held to standards that replace the typical hourly rate structure. They must agree to commit a certain number of hours at various levels, including the CEO and board members, so as to guarantee their commitment to the success of the process.

At the end of the engagement or at the end of the year, these success stories are disclosed as learning models. Through this process our firm has come to measure staff’s core competencies to include goals that make them better and not just make our business better. By so doing, our people get to achieve more within themselves and for themselves. This self-satisfaction and self-esteem translates to happy, confident employees.

And we are much better for it in the work we do for our paying customers.

Get responsible!

Check out these ways you can begin a corporate social responsibility program in your workplace.

- **CPA Day of Service:** The VSCPA is beginning a volunteer day in honor of its Centennial anniversary. Mark your calendar for September 18, 2009, and turn to page 4 for more details.
- **BoardnetUSA™:** Connects nonprofit boards with volunteers.
- **Know.org:** Developed and hosted by RAFFA, PC, provides an online network of service providers, consultants and industry information to help nonprofits achieve their missions.
- **Kiva.org:** A person-to-person micro-lending website, partners with micro-finance institutions around the world to connect developing world entrepreneurs in need of a loan with individuals who want to contribute loan funds via the Internet.
- **Networkforgood.org:** A secure, online donation system that allows contributions to any nonprofit at any time.

The BoardNetUSA™ link on our website has now become so popular that hundreds of employees from other companies have used it to volunteer to sit on a nonprofit board.
Growing the practice is the definition of success for many firms. But it is not mine. And it is not sustainable.

**Leveraging philanthropy**

I had previously thought philanthropy to be personal and private. Well, I still believe it to be personal — but I do not believe it to be private.

About 10 years ago, I employed my first real marketing director. She loved what we were doing and kept coming to me with programs to capitalize on it. I continually refused to have her good works out for others to see. I knew what my firm was doing was important — but remember, I was doing it because it is the right thing to do, not because I was hoping to retain and recruit employs or to improve their skill sets and build relationship among my division or operating units. Those were ancillary benefits and were internal to the firm, personal and private.

And certainly, I would never want to exploit the potential external impacts of our work. Her talk of branding, reputation, customer image, vendor relations and business expansion went against everything I thought was my true purpose for being socially responsible.

But I came to a realization as to the potential of such self-promotion when I did a radio interview on corporate philanthropy after 9/11. In October 2001, our firm held a summit of D.C. corporate leaders trying to provide assistance for those people and nonprofits that needed help, and a station wanted a story. After the interview, I received phone calls from a few of the larger corporations in D.C. asking how they might get involved and be a part of the programs we were promoting. One company had 10,000 employees, and I thought just one hour of volunteer time by each of their employees and they could more than double the hours my 50 employees (at that time) were contributing annually.

So, I learned the power of leveraging communication.

Since then, our firm has won many philanthropic awards, we have been featured in articles and I have been invited to speak to groups like the VSCPA and other corporate leaders in various industries on the subject of corporate philanthropy. Most of these leaders run companies the likes of whose numbers I will never see in my firm in my lifetime, and the effects they can have on corporate giving and individual employee education or enlightenment about giving back is staggering.

This self-promotion has allowed our firm to leverage our donations at a rate I cannot estimate. From working with these leaders and their corporations, I have come to realize that even companies that may have begun these programs for good “philanthropic” reasons have nonetheless been forced to yield to the pressure to measure the return on the investment they make — yes, in financial terms.

Even I, within the firm I founded, face the burden of demonstrating the financial worth of these programs to my new partners who often see this as money going out their own pockets.

So, even if I have made some of you “see the light,” many will still blatantly ask why any company should invest in something that has no tangible return. Yes, there are expectations of direct company benefit and yes, there are performance measurements that can be imposed on these programs to convince the non-believer.

Image and branding is important to any business. Think of Target and its support for local schools, or Avon and its ties to breast cancer research. I trust these companies have loftier reasons for their philanthropy, but if they did it solely to promote their brand, we all still win.

Now I will tell you what the executive director of the AICPA told us at the conference I referred to earlier. He said that now, more than ever, there is a need for what we do as accountants and consultants, and the nonprofit sector and the underprivileged are calling out for it. Our profession can make a difference, and we need to do it to regain the respect and confidence the American people had placed in us as a profession before Enron.

So the executive director of the AICPA gives us yet one more reason to become “philanthropists.”

I was interviewed by the *Washington Business Journal* concerning the corporate culture of our firm and the mission that drives it. They quoted me saying that not all my employees “drank the Kool-Aid,” but the stories I have told and the positive results I have shared do work — whether all my people get it or not. But I can tell you the majority do get it. And it is typically just a matter of time for the others. And those who do get it make me very proud to be the CEO of my firm.

I show up to work each day with a purpose that contributes to the greater good, and I give 200 people a place in which to better themselves as human beings as well as professionals. I teach these employees and the clients we service to be philanthropists. To truly “make the effort to love people and promote human welfare.”

And it works — I see it every day in the growth of the size and reputation of RAFFA, PC.

So whether you start a program to retain or recruit, to improve the image of your company or our profession or simply do it because doing good is the right thing to do, I don’t care. I just hope that from the 2,000 (okay, 3,500) words my editor gave me, you have learned that philanthropy can be many things and produce even more in results — but it is most certainly contagious!