

# We Commit When We Give

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In today's workplace, where employees rarely expect to remain with one organization for their entire careers, firms are searching for new ways to increase the commitment of their employees. The benefits to organizations of employee commitment, which have been well documented, include increased retention, decreased absenteeism, and higher productivity. To identify new ways for organizations to foster employee commitment, my colleagues and I conducted a study at a Fortune 500 retail company.

We focused on employee support programs, which have become increasingly common as companies such as Southwest Airlines, The Limited, Domino's Pizza, and DaVita search for new ways to strengthen employee commitment. Such programs extend the range of benefits and services offered beyond pay, benefit, training, and development programs by providing child- and elder-care, counseling, scholarships, and emergency financial aid. For example, some companies in the airline, automotive, construction, and railroad industries provide employees the opportunity to volunteer as support providers for coworkers in need. Other companies have established programs through which employees can donate money to support coworkers who are facing medical or financial emergencies.

Studies have shown that when employees become aware of or utilize support programs, they are more likely to feel that their employers care about their welfare and reciprocate the support received by becoming more committed to their employers by developing intrinsic or "affective" commitment to their organization. Our research revealed a new explanation: it is the experience of giving support, not only receiving support that strengthens employees' commitment to their companies.

We discovered the importance of giving through interviews with 40 managers and employees at a large retail corporation. The corporation established its own independent not-for-profit organization to manage an employee support program. The support program offered financial grants to help employees with life-qualifying events such as medical problems, family emergencies, thefts, divorces, spousal disabilities, and home damage.

We expected that employees who received support from the program would be more committed to the company. Our interviews, however, suggested that it was employees who gave support to the program who became more committed to the company. By providing employees with an opportunity to participate in caring actions, the program offered an outlet for helping others. One manager explained, "Donating myself [helps me to see that] business can make you very focused on [making] money, and this kind of releases you from that, to think about other people, to reach out to others in need." A sales associate commented "I have money taken out of every paycheck to help with the [giving program]...it benefits a lot of people that really are in need...I feel real good that it's available. I feel good that it can be taken out of my paycheck." Another said "Any time I do stop to give it some thought, I think things like...'It's a good thing that I'm part of this,' and...'This really is a good thing that my company has.'"

Giving led employees to feel grateful to the company for managing the program, which provided them with both a means and a rationale for making contributions to support their coworkers. Giving also led employees to take pride in the company as a caring, humane organization. One manager commented, "It gives that

## Organizational Behavior

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## Executive Summary

Employees who use company-sponsored programs to give support to others feel a stronger commitment to their companies. These employees see themselves as more caring people and see the company as a more caring organization. Receiving support from a firm in cases such as illness or family emergencies is appreciated but does not make employees feel as proud and supportive of their employer as does the opportunity to give help.

sense of caring from the company, that sense of, you know, we're there to help you out in times of need—that sense of family.” Another manager stated “It’s given me a little bit of faith in our corporate structure that I didn’t have before... [In] major corporations today...it’s all about the bottom line...I understand that way of thinking, but, you know, add a little bit of heart.” An associate explained that donating to the program strengthened her feelings of pride in being a part of a caring company: “I do feel very attached to the company...I always feel proud that the company [has this program]...I think my money’s being put to very good use. So I’m always happy to do it. I think companies should give back...I feel proud that our company does that.”

We substantiated the findings from interviews in a national survey of employees at the company. We found that giving to the program, not receiving support from the program, predicted higher levels of employee commitment. Further, our data showed that giving enabled employees to see themselves as more caring people and to see the company as a more caring organization. These perceptions of the self and the company as caring cultivated feelings of gratitude toward and pride in the company, strengthening employees’ commitment.

The key lesson for managers is that organizations can cultivate commitment not only by enabling employees to receive support, but also by enabling employees to give support. Having a giving program may improve the quality of employees’ experiences while simultaneously promoting the welfare of the recipients and of the organization itself via increased feelings of commitment to the organization.