

# The International Journal of Human Resource Management

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rijh20>

## When give-back turns to blowback: Employee responses to learning from skills-based volunteering

Kiera Dempsey-Brench & Amanda Shantz

**To cite this article:** Kiera Dempsey-Brench & Amanda Shantz (2023) When give-back turns to blowback: Employee responses to learning from skills-based volunteering, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34:8, 1500-1529, DOI: [10.1080/09585192.2021.1996434](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1996434)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1996434>



Published online: 02 Nov 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 537



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## When give-back turns to blowback: Employee responses to learning from skills-based volunteering

Kiera Dempsey-Brench  and Amanda Shantz

Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

### ABSTRACT

Skills-based volunteering programs are designed by organizations to enable their employees to donate their job-related skills and develop new ones, while making a positive difference in the community. Although skills-based volunteering is one of the fastest growing trends in corporate citizenship, we know little about how employees respond to it. Using interview data from a financial institution (volunteering managers,  $n=2$ ; employee volunteers,  $n=27$ ), we explored this research question: *How do employees react when volunteering is framed as an avenue for learning?* Our findings show that one-third of volunteers expressed anger or defensiveness and ultimately rejected the notion of learning from volunteering; two-thirds reacted with curiosity, using the interview process to make sense of what they learned. These two groups of volunteers reported different attributions about why their firm supports volunteering. Whereas the former group was cynical about their firm's motivations, the latter believed that the firm's intentions were altruistic. However, not all of the participants fit neatly into this pattern; for a minority, manager support for volunteering altered the relationship between attributions and acknowledgement of learning. The key contribution of this paper is a theoretical model that explains how employees respond when volunteering is framed as a forum for learning.

### KEYWORDS

Attribution theory;  
defensive routines;  
employee volunteering;  
moral outrage;  
sensemaking;  
skills-based volunteering

Skills-based volunteering is one of the fastest growing channels through which firms engage in corporate citizenship (Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose, 2020). Whereas traditional forms of employee volunteering include activities such as cleaning parks, planting trees, or painting community centres, skills-based volunteering requires volunteers to donate their specialized job-related skills, such as marketing, finance, or human resources (HR), while providing a forum for employees to cultivate new ones to bring back to the workplace (McCallum et al.,

**CONTACT** Amanda Shantz  [shantza@tcd.ie](mailto:shantza@tcd.ie)  Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

© 2021 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

2013; Steimel, 2018). Skills-based volunteering is therefore of interest to HR, and learning and development specialists in particular. Leading HR practitioner bodies have commented that skills-based volunteering blurs the line between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and learning and development because these programs enable employees to use their existing skillsets *and* develop new ones, while making a positive difference in the community (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2021; Society for Human Resource Management, 2019).

Research at the nexus of employee volunteering and learning suggests that volunteering can develop a host of skills, such as leadership, project management, and communication (e.g. Jones, 2016) and when employees recognize that they have used or developed skills while volunteering, they find their volunteering activities more meaningful (Caligiuri et al., 2013) and feel more successful in their work role (Booth et al., 2009). Yet employee responses to their firm's CSR activities are not always positive. Instead, their reactions are informed by the attributions they make about why the firm engages in CSR activities in the first place (e.g. De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Vlachos et al., 2017). For instance, Gatignon-Turnau and Mignonac (2015) found that employee volunteers were less affectively committed to their organization when they believed the organization supports volunteering to enhance its external reputation. The very notion of skills-based volunteering may elicit the perception that it is designed to benefit the firm, employee, or both. This is important because one of the strongest motivations to volunteer is altruism which may be at odds with personal or firm gain (e.g. Cook & Burchell, 2018; Pajo & Lee, 2011; Shantz et al., 2014). As such, skills-based volunteering may undermine the purpose of volunteering: to give, not to gain.

The mixed messages inherent in skills-based volunteering beckon for research on how employees respond to such initiatives, giving rise to our research question: *How do employees react when volunteering is framed as an avenue for learning?* To respond to this question, we undertook an in-depth investigation of one program that purposefully blends employee volunteering with learning, using attribution theory (Heider, 1959; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1979) as a guiding theoretical lens. Although attribution theory was important in understanding employees' reactions, it fell short in unraveling some surprising findings. We therefore explored and integrated alternative literatures on moral outrage (Goodenough, 1997), defensive routines (Argyris, 1990, 1994), and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). The result is a first step toward building meaningful theory that explains how employees respond to the notion of learning from skills-based volunteering programs.

We proceed by reviewing evidence on learning from volunteering, followed by attribution theory and its application to CSR, and volunteering in particular. This is followed by a description of the method, analysis and findings. We interpret the results in the findings and discussion chapters by drawing from the aforementioned alternative theoretical lenses.

### Learning from volunteering

Firms offer employer-sponsored volunteering for multiple reasons, such as attracting job applicants, increasing employee engagement, building brand awareness, and giving back to the community (e.g. Caligiuri et al., 2013; Grant, 2012; Peloza & Hassay, 2006). Skills-based volunteering programs are distinct from general ones in at least two ways: they are designed to (1) enable employees to donate their work-related skills to a charitable cause, and (2) gain new skills to bring back to the workplace (McCallum et al., 2013; Steimel, 2018). There is scant attention paid to skills-based volunteering in particular, yet the broader literature on employee volunteering suggests that volunteers can and do learn from their volunteering experiences, even if they are not designated as skills-based *per se*.

One stream of research has focused on the types of knowledge, skills, or abilities that employees gain from volunteering. For instance, it enables leadership and teamworking skills (e.g. Gordon & Gordon, 2017; McCallum et al., 2013; Vian et al., 2007); improves professional and technical abilities, such as communication and project management skills (Booth et al., 2009; Jones, 2016; Peterson, 2004); broadens perspectives through increased empathy and humility (e.g. Cook & Burchell, 2018; Vian et al., 2007); and when conducted in global environments, it increases cross-cultural competencies (Caligiuri et al., 2019; Pless et al., 2012).

A second focus has examined antecedents of learning from employee volunteering. For instance, Caligiuri et al. (2019) found that contextual novelty, project meaningfulness and social support influenced the development of cross-cultural skills. Another contributing factor is the amount of time volunteers spend practicing skills while volunteering. Those who dedicate more time volunteering reported greater improvements in skills (Booth et al., 2009; Jones, 2016).

Third, research has examined the implications of learning from volunteering. Muthuri and colleagues (2009) found that employees who were motivated to develop skills and expand their professional network through volunteering were more likely to volunteer in the future. Caligiuri et al. (2013) found that when individuals sense that they can

acquire skills that aid their professional role, they find volunteering more valuable and are more likely to sustain participation. Learning is positively associated with favourable perceptions of volunteers' employers, including enhanced organizational commitment (McCallum et al., 2013), pride and loyalty (Vian et al., 2007). There are also performance improvements: those who learn from volunteering report greater perceptions of job success (Booth et al., 2009); are rated by their work supervisors as more confident, able to operate in uncertain contexts, and overcome logistical challenges and ambiguity (Vian et al., 2007); and when employees do not learn from their volunteering experiences, it distracts from their job performance (Hu et al., 2016). Learning from volunteering benefits the charity too. Research shows that employees who learn from volunteering end up strengthening relationships with the beneficiaries of their volunteering activities (Caligiuri et al., 2013; McCallum et al., 2013).

A fourth area where volunteering and skills intersect is in theory and research on motivations to volunteer. Clary and colleagues (1998) suggested that people are motivated to volunteer for a host of reasons, including understanding (i.e. the desire to learn from volunteering), values (i.e. altruism), and career (i.e. to progress in one's career) motives (among other motivations, including protective, social, and enhancement). Research using samples from the general population suggests that altruism is most often endorsed by volunteers (e.g. Clary et al., 1996), and when asked open-ended questions about one's motivation to volunteer, altruism is the most frequently mentioned and most important (Allison et al., 2002). Similar findings arise for employee volunteers (e.g. Brockner et al., 2014; Pelozo et al., 2009). Cook and Burchell (2018) concluded that employee volunteers in particular are typically motivated to engage in volunteering for altruistic motives, and importantly, they warned that negative consequences could ensue if employees fail to see an alignment between their motives and those of their employer.

Framing volunteering as an opportunity to grow may not be problematic for those who are motivated to learn from volunteering because their motives are aligned with their employer. However, it may be problematic for those who are motivated for altruistic reasons, and this is particularly important since research suggests that the value motive is relatively strong among employee volunteers. In this case, there is a potential for mixed motives, where employees' motivations (to give) may not be entirely consistent with their employers (to gain, in the form of skills). As we explain next, attribution theory helps us understand how people respond when they believe that their motives are out of sync with their employer.

## Attribution theory

On a daily basis, people encounter events that require explanation. This fact has propelled a large body of research in psychology for nearly six decades (Heider, 1959; Kelley, 1973; Weiner, 1979). Research has clearly shown that people routinely seek to understand the world by identifying factors that give rise to certain outcomes, and these causal explanations are central to understanding events, and consequently, to cognition, affect, and behavior more generally (e.g. Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hewett et al., 2018). Attributions are particularly germane in the context of the current study because people are more likely to make attributions of an event when it is surprising, or out of character (Heider, 1959; Weiner, 1979). Employees are therefore likely to make attributions of a firm's prosocial activities, such as employee volunteering, because such actions are incongruent with most firms' profit-maximization motives (Vlachos et al., 2017).

Research has consistently found that when employees believe that a firm engages in CSR for altruistic, intrinsic, or values-driven reasons, employees respond favourably. Employees who believe that their firm enacts CSR-related activities for the above-mentioned reasons express greater trust (Vlachos et al., 2010), job satisfaction (Vlachos et al., 2013), organizational identification (McShane & Cunningham, 2012), affective commitment and person-organization fit (Donia et al., 2017); furthermore, they enact fewer acts of workplace deviance (Ahmad et al., 2017) and are more likely to advocate on behalf of the firm (Vlachos et al., 2017). Egoistic attributions, on the other hand, including motives for firm gain and impression management, are associated with less favourable outcomes, such as reduced organizational trust (Vlachos et al., 2010), employee perceptions of firm reputation (De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012), affective commitment, person-organization fit (Donia et al., 2017), and increased workplace deviance (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Attribution theory may be particularly pertinent in the context of skills-based volunteering because the potential for motive misalignment is clear: while the majority of employees are motivated to volunteer for altruistic reasons, skills-based volunteering emphasizes not only the donation of skills, but also gaining them. For instance, 3M, a Fortune 500 company, encourages employees to 'share their skills to make a positive difference in the world', while also strengthening employees' 'leadership skills, develop market insights, and spur innovative thinking' (3M, 2021). In another example, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) introduced PULSE, a flagship skills-based volunteering program, which is designed so that 'employees draw on their professional skills to provide skilled-services to meet a need, challenge or opportunity faced by the

non-profit partner...In return, they develop their own skills and capabilities to bring back to GSK' (GlaxoSmithKline, 2020).

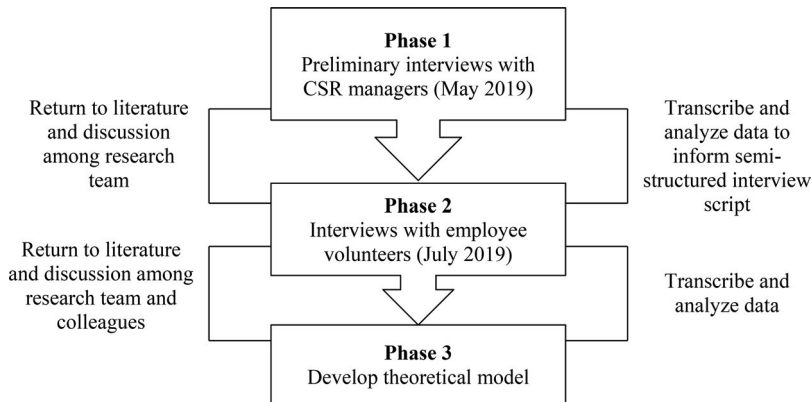
These programs, among others, emphasize that at least one motivation is that the firm, employee, or both benefit from volunteering. This may lead to negative consequences because individuals respond negatively to others who engage in an altruistic act for self-serving reasons. For instance, when employees attribute their firm's motivations to public relations motives, there is a negative relationship between perceptions of company support for volunteering and affective commitment (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015). Another study found that employees respond negatively to colleagues who they believe are motivated to volunteer to impress others (Rodell & Lynch, 2016). Against this backdrop, we asked: *How do employees react when volunteering is framed as an avenue for learning?*

## Methods

### Sample

Our sample was derived from a financial institution in the United Kingdom (UK). Although the firm had an employee volunteering platform for over 15 years, it had recently made a shift to skills-based volunteering. This was prompted by charities that sought volunteers who could contribute their specialized skills, and so the firm began a matching program based on skill demand and supply. The firm included volunteering (among many other activities) in goal setting and personal development forms that employees are expected to complete each year. Their communications team emphasized learning from volunteering in printed and web materials, and suggested that employees should speak to their manager about learning from volunteering.

Our data collection, coding and analysis unfolded in three stages, as depicted in Figure 1. In May 2019, qualitative data were collected from two managers of the employee volunteering program<sup>1</sup> (50% female; average firm tenure = 6 years, SD = 8.49). The interviews covered factual information on its make-up and structure, the program's intent, advantages and disadvantages, impact measurement, internal communication, and how volunteering is integrated into learning and development. Interviews with the managers unearthed contextually relevant topics to bring forward for investigation in the subsequent interviews with employees. For instance, we learned that the organization actively encourages volunteers to include their volunteering activities in their personal development plans, and so this was brought up in the interviews with employees. The interviews with the two managers were not combined with the interview data from the employee volunteers in the analysis stage.



**Figure 1.** Data collection and coding process.

The two managers of the volunteering program invited employee volunteers to participate in subsequent interviews. Employees must have engaged in a company-sponsored volunteering activity within the last 12 months and we sought employees from a range of professions and seniority levels. Interviews with 27 volunteers took place in July, 2019 (55.6% female; organizational tenure  $M=14.74$  years,  $SD=7.85$ ; years volunteering  $M=6.87$  years,  $SD=5.17$ ). We reached a point of pragmatic saturation (Low, 2019) when we believed that the data were able to respond to the purpose and goals of our study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Employees engaged in a variety of volunteering activities, such as mentorship of new business start-ups, committee or advisory board members of non-profits, technical skills (e.g. IT; accountancy) trainers, and event planners. Characteristics of the employee volunteer sample are found in Table 1.

Interviewees were asked to discuss their experience of volunteering and their thoughts on learning from volunteering. Specifically, we asked questions pertaining to why they believed the firm supports volunteering (to unearth attributions), how it influences their working life (to understand learning outcomes), whether and how they incorporate volunteering in their personal development plan or ongoing conversations with their manager, and whether and how volunteering contributes to their personal or professional development. We acknowledge that the interview questions do not straightforwardly align with our research question. This is because, as we explain next, our research question narrowed throughout the data collection, analysis and review processes.

### **Coding and analysis**

We adopted a social constructionist approach, which recognizes that people give meaning to their motives and behaviors in a social context.



**Table 1.** Characteristics of employee volunteers.

Participant	Job role	Volunteer beneficiary	Gender	Firm tenure (Years)	Volunteer tenure (Years)
1	Project manager	Local food bank	M	22	5
2	Bereavement call consultant	Local school	F	7	6
3	Pensions administrator	Local school	F	10	<1
4	Customer advisor	Charity supporting sick children	F	2.6	1.5
5	Claims administrator	Local school	F	6.5	6.5
6	Claims administrator	Local palliative care hospice	M	4.5	4.5
7	Assistant business manager	Sexual health charity	F	8	<1
8	Complaint reporting	Childrens hospice charity	F	19	5
9	Actuary	Mental health charity	M	9	9
10	Culture and responsible business	Education development charity	M	7	7
11	Lending manager	Breast cancer support charity	F	31	3
12	Actuarial manager	Local school	F	22	>20
13	Business analyst	Local cub scouts	M	17	10
14	Team product owner	Charity to support disabled adults	M	14	8
15	Dealer support advisor	Cancer care hospital	F	16	8
16	Frontline manager	Local palliative care hospice	M	9	–
17	Team manager	City hospice	F	23	>10
18	Senior manager	City hospice	F	27	>20
19	Technical specialist	Local cub scouts	M	15	5
20	Risk manager	Education development charity	M	15	15
21	Operational resilience manager	Local hospital	M	5	5
22	Trainer	Mentoring a social enterprise	M	19	1
23	Senior manager	Enterprise mentoring scheme	F	6	4
24	Training manager	Environmental charity	F	18.5	5
25	Business manager	Local food bank	F	25	5
26	Business design manager	Children's panel	M	15	8
27	Director of financial crime	Mental health charity	F	25	12
			55.6% female	$M = 14.74$ , $SD = 7.85$	$M = 6.87$ , $SD = 5.17$

This perspective disavows the idea that researchers begin their studies without prior knowledge about the topics, and views researchers as necessarily involved in co-creating data (Charmaz, 2008). Unlike positivist paradigms where it is possible to apply scientific standards to establish objectivity, this approach seeks to create new insights (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic

analysis is a flexible coding process that is consistent with a constructionist approach.

We began by generating initial codes that categorized the data into meaningful groups.<sup>2</sup> Since we asked questions about firm attributions and learning outcomes, we deductively derived codes related to these topics. We also searched the data inductively, and coded for as many ideas that seemed significant (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Doing so was germane for this research because some of our findings were surprising, leading us to take an abductive turn.

Abduction is a process that people engage in when their mental models do not explain observed experiences (Hansen, 2008). Abductive theorizing is typically instigated by an unexpected phenomenon that is poorly understood by existing literature (Saetre & Van de Ven, 2021). As we explain in our findings, some of the interviewees became angry or defensive in response to questions that pertained to learning from volunteering, and other respondents were curious about the notion of learning from volunteering, as if they had never made the connection before. These were surprising findings to us because prior research has shown that volunteers report (often through survey questionnaires) that volunteering can be an avenue for learning that is welcomed by volunteers (e.g. Booth et al., 2009; Jones, 2016; Peterson, 2004), and more so, the managers of the volunteering programs who we interviewed informed us of their explicit strategy to blend volunteering with learning and development. Why did the some of the interviewees respond this way?

Saetre and Van de Ven (2021) suggested several overlapping, non-linear steps for disciplined abduction, including observing and confirming anomalies and generating and evaluating plausible explanations, individually and with others. The co-authors engaged in debate, reached out to colleagues, and returned to the literature to make sense of our findings. We found that moral outrage (Goodenough, 1997), defensive routines (Argyris, 1990, 1994) and sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) helped us explain what we found, and these literatures were informative as we continued to code the data (e.g. we coded for 'anti-learning', as seen in Table 2; Argyris' terminology for defensive routines).

Once the data were coded, we combined codes to create 16 candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that were internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous (Patton, 1990). Interviewer field notes were incorporated into the coding. Because emotions were often seen, and not heard, we annotated the transcripts with emotions as we heard them replayed. The entire data set was again re-read, and data within candidate themes were reviewed to ensure that all data had been coded and applied to candidate themes appropriately.

**Table 2.** Candidate themes to themes with illustrative quotes.

Illustrative Quotes	Candidate Theme	Theme
"You don't volunteer for the benefits for you" (curt response) – Participant 19	Anger verbal communication	Anger
Furrowed brow – Participant 22	Anger body language	Defensiveness
"Obviously there is no relation between the two things [volunteering helping professional role]" – Participant 3	Anti-learning	
Arms crossed at chest, legs crossed away from interviewer, and sitting on the edge of seat – Participant 13	Defensive body language	
"Just based on self-reflection I think that looking at that kind of journey over the years and my career and where I have got to now...is probably a testament to the fact that I picked those skills up from my volunteering perspective and those probably helped me in terms of the confidence and developing confidence to go for different roles" – Participant 26	Reflection	Curiosity
"I think some skills-based volunteering would be really rewarding...I think that would be really good actually to do something like that, a...regular go to, where I spend a bit of time with somebody" – Participant 8	Next steps	
"We have a corporate responsibility, we put the UK into this mess...so let us see what we can do to make a difference to those people, so it is like a 'well, we will give you a day off to go and do some volunteering'" – Participant 19	Image enhancement	Egoistic attributions
"We have also got more of a strategic initiative in place. I think actually part of that we actually had a number of refugees from Syria that actually again came in and spent a bit of time with us as an organization again just to ally themselves with what we were doing" – Participant 27	Strategy	
"I think it is that we have annual surveys and things like that, so again as a tick box for them to sort of say, 'Right, fine, oh yes, I have done my volunteering day' and they can go back and sort of spout off to sort of say, 'Right fine, [company name] have spent fifty thousand hours of volunteering across the country'" – Participant 1	Tick box exercise	
"It is not a team building experience, it is not designed as a team event, it is actually designed as you need to help these other people" – Participant 25	Build internal relations	
"They sort of recognize it as something that, [company name] as a business wants to see its employees to do...They value you having something other than just what you are doing for your job" – Participant 7	Values and culture of the firm	Altruistic attributions
"I think the company [are] well respected in the community...I mean people [in the community] approach us you know, 'can you give us help with this' and we will see posters up throughout the office...and then that gets fed on down the line through our line managers regularly, I would say every couple of weeks there will be volunteering opportunities" – Participant 2	Giving back to the community	
"I'm not convinced though [learning from volunteering] is volunteering. I think that is more a... progression to your next pay grade" – Participant 22	Rebuttal of learning	Rejection of learning
"No [laughs]...it is different...[I] don't consciously seek to do a volunteering activity which is then going to feed back into my day job, in fact, I would almost consciously do the opposite" – Participant 20	Refusal to see link between volunteering and learning	

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.** Continued.

Illustrative Quotes	Candidate Theme	Theme
"Volunteering does feed back into the workplace...my listening improved immensely and I brought that back into the workplace...there was a lot of things that really enhanced my skills that I could bring back into the workplace" – Participant 18	Volunteering aids professional role	Acknowledgement of learning
"I think that kind of just volunteering in general makes you a much more compassionate person, understanding what these different peoples circumstances are and challenges people have...you are actually talking to real people and you are not just talking in business speak all of the time...as I get older it becomes much more important to kind of flex those skill sets" – Participant 23	Soft skill development	
"I think they see it...[as] a cop out of doing work... Managers think, you want to go and volunteer because you just want to get out of working, which is not the case at all" -Participant 5		Manager support

Next, we wrote memos to develop a deeper understanding of each candidate theme and how they fit together (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and we built graphical models to synthesize the themes and their connections (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013). The connections between the themes are based on cases; for instance, the same individuals who became angry were largely also those who made egoistic attributions of the firm. These processes led us to identify meaningful variations within two candidate themes in particular: altruistic and egoistic attributions of the firm. To cross-check variation, we leveraged NVivo's cross tab query tool to check the spread of coding across the cases. This led to the identification of a subgroup that indicated the need to apply the comparative case method to investigate how and under what condition(s) responses differed (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). The process of case comparisons produced a new candidate theme, namely, manager support for volunteering. Through an iterative process of memo-writing, discussions, and re-reading the data, eight themes were discovered. Table 2 shows how we collapsed candidate themes to derive eight themes.

## Findings

### *Rejection of learning*

Approximately one-third of employees expressed hostility or became defensive when the interview addressed learning from volunteering. They either became irritated by the notion that volunteering could be a source of profit for themselves or the firm, or they psychologically withdrew from the interview. Regardless of whether they became angry or withdrawn, the result was a rejection that volunteering provides an opportunity to learn.

## Anger

Anger is a basic emotion with a universally recognized pattern of facial expression and communicative tone (Ekman, 1999). Anger influences how we feel because it increases muscle tension and heart rate. It is recognized by others through verbal expressions (e.g. use of sarcasm, speaking curtly), and physicality (e.g. facial expressions, clenching fists, moving forward; Averill, 1983; Suinn, 2001). Our abductive analysis unveiled that the source of anger was moral outrage, characterized by anger directed toward those perceived to violate one's ethical standards (Goodenough, 1997). Volunteers suggested that it was immoral to insinuate that volunteering can be an avenue to skill development. For instance, when asked whether he felt that he had learned from volunteering, one volunteer retorted in a sharp tone: 'Okay, I'm going to throw that back at you...how would *you* answer that question?' (Participant 6; field notes recollect tone of voice). Employees interrogated how anyone could consider that their volunteering was motivated by anything other than to help others. Another volunteer forcefully argued that, 'for me, it's about putting into the community; it's not enough to say, "well, I am going to put into the community if I get something back out of it"' (Participant 25; field notes suggest anger).

These employees recognized the difference between giving and gaining skills. Although they were satisfied with the notion of donating skills, they became noticeably angry (field notes) by the idea of developing new ones. For instance, in one interview:

Interviewer: I have been talking to a couple of people over the past couple of weeks and what has become apparent is that they are trying to encourage volunteers to put volunteering experiences into their personal development plans or balance scorecards to either show that they have achieved something, or are trying to tackle a skill or ability. Is that something that you do?

Participant 25: No

Interviewer: And why not?

Participant 25: Because what I do is actually using skills that I have already got. It is not about developing me as a person for the benefit of [the organization], it is about using the skills [the organization] has given me to pay back into the community.

Although prior definitions of skills-based volunteering often conflate giving and gaining skills, this volunteer, and others, differentiated between them. These volunteers continuously reinforced that personal gain 'wasn't the purpose behind' (Participant 22) their engagement, and that volunteering did not lend itself to development. For instance, in another interview:

Interviewer: I wonder about whether you learned anything from your volunteering experience...have you picked up anything from it that might be helpful in your personal or professional development?

Participant 6: I am happy to help the charity, but other than that, no...I don't feel I have ever picked anything up from it.

This interviewee rejected the notion that he had learned from volunteering (i.e. 'picked anything up from it'), and he felt that gaining from volunteering in the form of learning was in conflict with his altruistic intentions to volunteer. Another volunteer reinforced the difference between giving and gaining skills:

Interviewer: Okay, so going from that, do you think that there are opportunities for you to adopt aspects from your work to volunteering, or from volunteering to work? Or do you like to keep work and volunteering completely separate?

Participant 26: You obviously take yourself and the skills and knowledge you have...but essentially, [I] treat them separately.

### *Defensive*

Others responded using defensive routines, characterized by actions or responses designed to avoid threat (Argyris, 1990; Senge, 1990). Defensive routines prevent learning because they inhibit reflection, stop conversations short, and deflect attention from a perceived attack (Argyris, 1985). For instance, defensive routines were used by a volunteer, as shown in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: When we spoke with people within [company name], they mentioned that [company name] encourages employees to put volunteering into their personal development plan... Can you tell me about that?

Participant 12: No, I have not related development to volunteering.

Interviewer: Okay, is there a reason for that?

Participant 12: I have not actually heard of that being done before.

Interviewer: No?

Participant 12: I don't know whether it is something to do with the area that I work in.

Interviewer: I mean, I am just the messenger (laughs).

Participant 12: Yeah, yeah. That is interesting.

The response, 'yeah, that is interesting', was a reoccurring defensive response to this question. Some respondents made repeated comments throughout the interview such as, 'hmm interesting', to avoid responding,

and/or divert the interview elsewhere. This and other guises of defensive routines appeared, such as 'ah-hah', 'right okay' (Participant 13) and 'it could be a good idea' (Participant 12). Other blanket replies were used to fill in the blank spaces of the conversation, display indifference, and ultimately made probing the topic under discussion difficult. In one case, Participant 20 used laughter to display indifference:

Interviewer: Has there ever been a time that you thought that through your volunteering experience that you were able or more capable to get things done at work?

Interviewee 20: No. [Laughs]

Interviewer: And why is that?

Interviewee 20: I am not sure how it would help.

Interviewer field notes: This was as if he said, 'haha, you got to be kidding me that this is an actual interview question.'

Since defensiveness is often seen, rather than heard, the interviewers' notes were important in documenting this behavior. The interviewer noted that interviewees used body language that signalled defensiveness, including crossed arms, leaning back, and looking away.

### ***Acknowledgement of learning***

The remaining two-thirds of interviewees acknowledged learning from volunteering. These volunteers became curious when asked how they had learned from their volunteering activities. Curiosity is a knowledge emotion that is associated with learning, exploring and reflecting; knowledge emotions are often experienced when something unexpected happens and they can propel individuals to build useful knowledge about themselves and the world (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009). Some interviewees were initially curious, which led them to engage in a sensemaking process whereby they reflected and built knowledge during the interview. Our abductive analysis led us to revert to the literature and we found that research on sensemaking was helpful. Sensemaking involves reflection, rationalization, and connecting the dots and is critical for learning (Weick et al., 2005); research shows that people who do not deliberately process their experiences are much less likely to learn from them (Haas, 2006). Some employees commented that the interview process aided reflection, indicating that the researcher was involved in co-creating knowledge (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017). As we explain below, curiosity ignited a sensemaking process by which interviewees eventually acknowledged that they had learned and developed through their volunteering activities.

### *Curiosity*

The majority of the interviewees expressed that they had never connected volunteering with learning opportunities before. For instance, a volunteer was reflective when he said, 'having this interview now has helped me realize that there is more about it that I can flesh out, I can...talk about how the benefit is to me' (Participant 5), and another stated that 'I think you are not realizing until maybe much later that you have learned quite a lot from it' (Participant 7). Another volunteer evoked exploration in response to a question about using volunteering in his personal development plan: 'I have never deeply thought about volunteering to develop my own personal career...I think that is quite interesting... maybe I should be thinking of that' (Participant 21).

During the interview, respondents were more readily able to articulate how and what they learned, finding that instead of learning hard, technical skills, volunteers gained softer, interpersonal ones, such as leadership, resilience and teambuilding. Distinguishing between giving and gaining skills is important: volunteers described that they donated technical skills, but gained softer skills. For instance, a volunteer who organized EXCEL training days for local charities, stated, 'we probably give technical skills, [but] we gained soft skills and awareness' (Participant 9). He explained that through volunteering, he and colleagues were 'using our work skills...and actually applying them,' and separately spoke of the skills he gained, such as coaching and relationship building. Another participant said, 'I take a lot of the stuff that I do in work and I apply it to the charity, so it is very much skills-based' (Participant 14). He stated that he used 'an element of coaching' and that 'learning [through volunteering] gives you more confidence in yourself, but also gives you more confidence in the value of your abilities as well' (Participant 14). Another volunteer emphasized the learning aspect of curiosity, when he stated: 'Absolutely, volunteering has given me skills to bring into the organization. I think the biggest skill is facilitation.' He continued by sharing that volunteering had enabled him to '[develop] empathy and [an] understanding of other people's circumstances and bringing that to my day-to-day role' (Participant 26).

Sensemaking not only enables learning, but also prompts individuals to act differently in the future (Weick et al., 2005). Consistent with this, some volunteers began to consider volunteering in ways they had not considered before: 'I quite like the idea of seeing if there is anything else I can do, and other areas I can support' (Participant 26). Some came to the conclusion that they wanted to engage in different types of volunteer activities to maximize their learning. For instance, one volunteer explained that she is 'thinking about next year [for] something



that enables us to use our skill set a little bit more to help people' (Participant 23). Volunteers made sense of the benefits that they can reap from skills-based volunteering; one volunteer suggested that he will seek 'volunteering that fits in with what I want to give and gain' (Participant 21).

### **Attributions**

We noticed that volunteers' attributions regarding why they believed their firm supports volunteering were, for the most part, directly related to whether they acknowledged or rejected that learning arose from volunteering. In particular, we saw that the same individuals who became angry/defensive made egoistic attributions, whereas those who became curious and acknowledged learning made altruistic firm attributions.

#### ***Egoistic attributions of the firm's intent***

Employees who responded negatively to learning from volunteering were suspicious of their firm's motivations for facilitating volunteering, believing that it morally conflicted with their altruistic intentions. This led employees to attribute their employer's motives to self-serving or egoistic reasons. For instance, one volunteer stated that the firm's motives were for impression management: 'Volunteering is I suppose a bit like [company name] looking good' (Participant 19), and another volunteer attributed her employer's motives to a 'ticking a box' exercise: 'I think it needs to be not just a tick in the box...it's a bit of a hollow message sometimes...It is more of a veneer than something that they truly believe is worthwhile' (Participant 24). Other egoistic attributions included performance-driven strategic goals, or, as indicated in the excerpt below, some volunteers believed that volunteering was intended to develop team-working among staff.

'I think that [managers believe] it is something for the sort of juniors, I would probably class myself as middle management, that sort of role that like, 'Fine, it keeps them quiet and they can go off and do a team day', and again, I think they are viewing it as a team building exercise as opposed to a volunteering day, whereas I would say team building is like, fine, let us all get into a room like this and try and work as a team on a project, and maybe do sort of fun activities to go right fine, here is a box of Lego, build something...can you build it together, or is everybody just working...?' (Participant 1).

This volunteer, and others like him, did not view egoistic motivations as legitimate (i.e. volunteering to build teamwork is not legitimately volunteering, but is instead work), and ultimately rejected the notion that learning could arise from volunteering. The interviewer's field notes suggest that interviewees who held these attributions expressed negative

emotions, and did not approve of these rationales for supporting volunteering.

### ***Altruistic attributions of the firm's intent***

Those who acknowledged learning were just as adamant as those who were angry or defensive that their own motivations were altruistic. However, they also believed that their organization shared the same motivation. One volunteer commented on the match he saw between his own motives and those of the firm: 'One of our core values is making a difference together, and obviously doing a...volunteering activity resonates with that' (Participant 21). Employees praised their employer 'as a good place to work' (Participant 18) due to its culture, values and ethics, and a volunteer added: 'The senior managers [are] much more human...I think [company name] has added a sort of softness that has changed the culture towards...volunteering... the attitudes of the management...have changed the culture [toward volunteering]' (Participant 11).

One volunteer expressed an alignment between his motivations to volunteer and his organization's motives and stated that he has a '[genuine]...sense of respect' for their firm, which resulted in a 'sense of pride...well done [company name] and kudos for letting this happen' (Participant 9). He believed his organization supports volunteering ('as a good thing to do'), saying: 'There has been a lot more recognition of the value of volunteering, [the organization] have put it out there as a good thing to do', and 'it is the ability of [company name] to allow us to go out and give to the community, I think that is the thing that has stuck with me'. Field notes indicate that the interviewees who made these attributions expressed positive emotions, and approved of their firm's underlying rationale.

### ***Manager support for volunteering***

In most cases, our analysis produced a one-to-one relationship between altruistic/egoistic attributions and acknowledgement/rejection of learning. However, not all volunteers followed this pattern. The comparative case study method (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999) showed that, for a minority, managers interrupted this pattern. Manager support for volunteering can involve encouraging volunteering, making volunteering opportunities available to employees, providing education on the importance of volunteering, rewards and recognition, and management role modelling of volunteering (e.g. Basil et al., 2009; Grant, 2012).

When managers failed to support volunteering, those who acknowledged learning from volunteering believed that their firm held egoistic motivations. For instance, although a trustee of a local food bank

eagerly shared that he had developed communication skills, confidence, and empathy, he exclaimed that the ‘senior leadership team...don’t practice what they preach’ (Participant 1); he shared that neither senior leaders nor managers engaged in volunteering themselves. He explained that ‘the senior grading person doesn’t turn up’, and attributed the firm’s motivation to impression management motives, where ‘everybody goes, “oh, look at [company name] aren’t they great”’.

Conversely, a minority of volunteers who rejected learning from volunteering made positive attributions of the firm when their manager supported their volunteering. For example, one volunteer became angry in response to questions about whether he had learned from his volunteer role, yet he also explained how vital his manager was in his decision to volunteer: ‘I took advice internally actually from the head of my office, [who] actually mentors me’ (Participant 22). Although he was initially hostile to the notion of learning from volunteering, he attributed altruistic intentions to his employer: ‘Sometimes when you work for large organizations... there is an impression that lip service is being paid. But having done this for years...you actually realize that the organization’s heart is actually in this.’

## Discussion

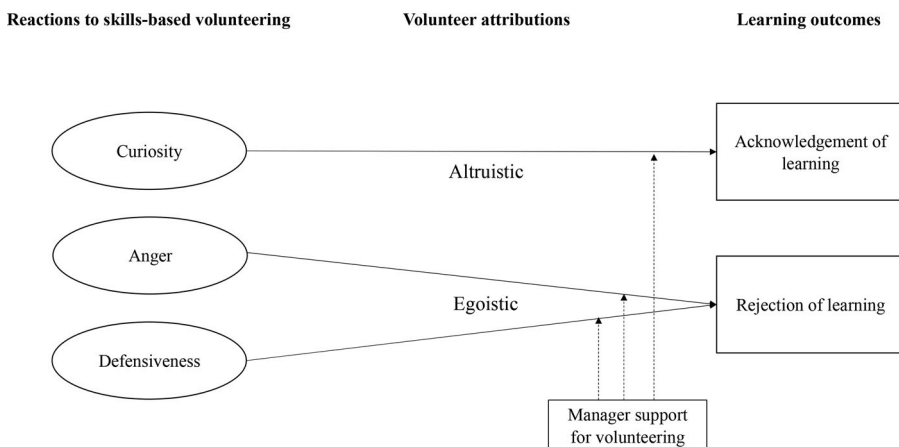
Our findings provide rich and distinctive new insights to the employee volunteering literature. Although research on the affective and behavioral work-related outcomes of volunteering have brought the field a long way (Alfes et al., 2017; Rodell et al., 2016), there are few studies that have examined the nexus of learning and volunteering (e.g. Booth et al., 2009; Jones, 2016; Peterson, 2004), and fewer still that have homed in on skills-based volunteering in particular (e.g. Caligiuri et al., 2019; Cook & Burchell, 2018; Pless et al., 2012). Research that focuses on skills-based volunteering is important because it is growing in practice (Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose, 2020) and developing an understanding of employees’ reactions to the idea of learning from volunteering is critical to realizing its full benefits.

Our main contribution to the literature is building a theoretical model that explains volunteers’ responses to the notion of learning from skills-based volunteering. We found that employees’ initial responses were characterized by either curiosity, anger or defensiveness. Respondents who were curious made sense of their learning through the interview process, ultimately finding that they had gained valuable skills. Those who were angry or defensive, on the other hand, rejected the notion that learning could arise from volunteering, by either expressing moral outrage, or using defensive routines to deflect attention away from the

topic. Since themes were connected by cases, we were able to explain why volunteers responded so differently: employees who acknowledged learning made altruistic attributions of the firm's motives, whereas those who rejected learning believed their employer's intent was self-serving. Although this pattern was evident across most of the data, in a minority of cases, managers disrupted it. Employees who acknowledged learning held egoistic motives of their firm when their managers were unsupportive, and employees who rejected learning held altruistic motives of their firm when their managers were supportive. [Figure 2](#) depicts the theoretical model.

We also contribute to research that has leveraged attribution theory to explain employees' responses to CSR (e.g. De Roeck & Delobbe, 2012; McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Vlachos et al., 2017) and employee volunteering programs in particular (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015; Rodell & Lynch, 2016) by recognizing the powerful role of emotions. Our findings are consistent with Weiner's (1985) attributional theory that suggests that emotions precede attributions, which then have psychological and behavioral consequences. Our data showed that emotions led to acceptance/rejection of learning and one of the underlying mechanisms is the attributions that employees make about their firm's intent. We therefore contribute to this research by showing that attributions may underpin the relationship between emotions and psychological outcomes.

We embarked on this research by using attribution theory as a theoretical lens, but as the analyses progressed, we recognized the need to explore alternative literatures to explain some unexpected findings. For instance, we turned to theory on moral outrage that explains that when a moral principle or standard is violated, people become angry (Goodenough,



**Figure 2.** Theoretical model.

1997). Volunteers who became angry were morally offended by the suggestion that learning was a venue for learning, or in their minds, when volunteering was a source of gain. Research on moral outrage in organizational settings is sparse and has focused on employee reactions to corporate irresponsibility (e.g. Antonetti & Maklan, 2016; Cronin et al., 2012; Romani et al., 2013). Our application of this theory presents a contribution to this research domain because it shows that moral outrage can arise not only when firms behave irresponsibly, but also in response to employee volunteering, a form of CSR that is widely accepted as a positive workplace initiative (Caligiuri et al., 2013; Cook & Burchell, 2018).

Whereas some volunteers who rejected learning expressed anger, others became defensive. Those who responded defensively tended to have shorter interviews, exhibited defensive body language, and ultimately cut the conversation short, making the topic under discussion, undiscussable. We found Argyris's (1990) defensive routines to be particularly apt to explain this. Defensive routines are designed to avoid threat or embarrassment (Argyris, 1990; Senge, 1990), and prevent individuals from entering into genuine communication (Yang et al., 2018). Importantly, Argyris recognized that defensive routines are not only likely to be employed when individuals have cynical perceptions of the other party, but also that they inhibit learning (Argyris, 1990, 1994). Specifically, he stated that defensive routines are 'a recipe for ineffective learning. We might even call it a recipe for anti-learning' (Argyris, 1994, p. 80). Although research has examined defensive routines at the organizational level (e.g. Noonan, 2008), we empirically demonstrate that defensive routines are tied up with cynical attributions, and that the outcome is a rejection of learning.

Approximately two-thirds of our respondents acknowledged that they had learned from volunteering. Interestingly, the vast majority did not naturally recognize this on their own. This was surprising to us because prior survey-based research has demonstrated a relationship between skill development and volunteering (e.g. Booth et al., 2009; Jones, 2016; Peterson, 2004). This insight arose because we collected our data through conversations with participants where many used the interview process to connect abstract experiences with the concrete, making tacit knowledge more usable (Weick et al., 2005). These findings are consistent with research that shows that learning is more likely to be realized when people stop, reflect, and make sense of their experiences (Ashford & De Rue, 2012; Haas, 2006). We also found that sensemaking in the interviews prompted volunteers to 'springboard into action' (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Once individuals had made sense of their learning, they engaged in future-oriented sensemaking processes (Gephart et al., 2010) to establish ways of giving and gaining skills that they had not considered before.

Another key element of our theoretical model is the role of line managers, which has been largely overlooked in research on attributions of CSR and volunteering. Although prior research has found that charismatic leadership informs the attributions that employees make of their firm's CSR activities (Vlachos et al., 2013), we show that manager support can alter the relationship between firm attributions and acknowledgement of learning. Our findings imply that the relationships found in prior research (Gatignon-Turnau & Mignonac, 2015) may be reversed by managers' behavior.

Finally, this research may inform a definition of skills-based volunteering. Research has rarely used, and therefore defined the term 'skills-based volunteering', and when it has, the notions of giving and gaining skills has been conflated (McCallum et al., 2013; Steimel, 2018). Our data indicate that there are two reasons why this conflation is problematic. First, the types of skills that are typically gained are different from those that are given. Volunteers donated their business/technical skills, yet gained softer, interpersonal skills, such as leadership, resilience and empathy. Although this is largely consistent with prior research (e.g. Cook & Burchell, 2018; Jones, 2016; Peterson, 2004), this distinction has yet to fully inform research on skills-based volunteering. Second, our findings suggest that employees, at least in some cases, respond quite differently to the idea of giving versus gaining skills. Employees who responded with anger relished the opportunity to give their skills yet rejected the idea of gaining them. This has at least two important implications for future research. First, conceptual clarity is sorely needed, and scholars should leverage the advice offered by Podsakoff et al. (2016) to create a robust definition. Second, future research may develop quantitative measures of skills-based volunteering, and when doing so, should take care to differentiate between giving and gaining skills, because these twin faces of skills-based volunteering may lead to very different consequences.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

This study has several limitations that may open up new lines of research. The first limitation relates to the sample. The organization's representatives invited employees to participate, and we were not privy to how many volunteers declined the invitation, raising the possibility of self-selection bias. We interviewed only two managers, and others who are involved with the volunteering program may have had different information. Furthermore, the sample worked in a financial institution, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings to other industries. After the 2008 financial crisis, financial institutions came under intense public scrutiny, and many responded by increasing their

community outreach. In fact, financial institutions are one of the largest contributors to the growth of community investments and corporate citizenship, and they are well known for using skills-based volunteering programs (Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose, 2020). By framing volunteering as a source of learning, employees of financial institutions may be particularly sensitive to intimations that they, or their employers, act with egoistic intentions. Therefore, we may have seen more frequent expressions of anger and/or defensiveness in our sample. Future research should examine employees' responses to skills-based volunteering programs in other industries that do not have a questionable reputation in the community.

A second limitation is that our model is likely underspecified. For instance, Clary and colleagues (1998) argued that some individuals are motivated to volunteer if they believe it has a functional value towards their learning and development. It is therefore plausible that volunteers with a strong understanding motive learn from volunteering because they seek to satisfy that need. Although altruism is a very strong motive, it is probably not the only one, and instead people hold a constellation of motives. Future research should therefore examine pre-existing motivations for volunteering and establish whether there are synergies among different motives to explain outcomes from volunteering.

A third limitation relates to the process by which we collected the data. Respondents were asked to reflect on their past experiences, thereby re-telling memories of events. Although we asked participants to recount recent volunteering experiences, it is difficult to completely mitigate retrospective influences. Furthermore, our data were collected at one point in time, limiting our ability to make causal inferences. For instance, our results imply that manager support for volunteering shapes the relationship between attributions and acknowledgement of learning from volunteering, however we cannot rule out the possibility that manager support could (also) be an antecedent of learning.

Notwithstanding, our insights on the role of manager support for volunteering may spur research that speaks more broadly to HR attributions, which has so far largely overlooked the role of managers (Hewett et al., 2018, 2019). Managers are important conduits of an organization's strategy, they embody the values of the organization, and they act as 'interpretive filters' of HR practices (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004, p. 216). Although scholars have suggested that managers are involved in the attribution process (Nishii & Paluch, 2018), it is so far unclear whether managers are antecedents to, or shape employees' attributions (Hewett & Shantz, in press). Future research should therefore employ longitudinal designs (e.g. journaling over time) to explore when and how managers both help and hinder learning from volunteering.

A final aspect is that the interviewer herself co-created the data (Charmaz, 2008; Weenink & Bridgman, 2017).<sup>3</sup> It was only through asking questions about learning from volunteering that employees became angry, defensive, or curious. We cannot claim that employees who became angry or defensive did not learn from volunteering, but only that they rejected that learning occurred (or not) in the interview. It is possible that employees did learn from volunteering, and either consciously chose not to report it, or alternatively, their negative emotions during the interview clouded their memory of learning. This is consistent with research that shows that ‘when individuals experience more extreme negative emotions such as anxiety or anger, their attention is focused not on learning from experience but on how the experience threatens their identity and self-esteem’ (Ashford & De Rue, 2012, p. 151). Although those who take an objective stance to reality may view the co-creation of the data as a limitation, a social constructionist approach recognizes that researchers are always implicated in the data that is created (Weenink & Bridgman, 2017).

An implication for future research is to further explore how employees come to understand what they have learned through volunteering. Reflection may well be important. For instance, Pless et al. (2012) examined an employee volunteering program that used coaching, feedback, yoga, and meditation that triggered reflection and resulted in improved empathy and compassion. Likewise, Bartsch (2012) found that managers who were provided with a coach were better able to recognize how to apply their learning from volunteering experiences to their own workplace. Adopting a social constructionist approach, and using theory on sensemaking is therefore a promising avenue to provide a more fine-grained understanding of how volunteers understand what they have learned, and potentially transfer and deploy learning to other environments.

### ***Practical implications***

Skills-based volunteering positions organizations on a thin tightrope. On the one hand, emphasizing learning from volunteering may alienate some employees, while on the other hand, it may attract others who embrace the idea of learning from volunteering. One argument is that firms should not make mention of *skills-based* volunteering at all; why take the risk of discouraging people from volunteering? Instead, firms should disguise their intention in a mask of virtuosity. We believe that this approach is likely to backfire, as employees will inevitably see through the façade. Instead, firms need to clarify and articulate why it supports skills-based volunteering in the first place. They need to emphasize that skills-based



volunteering can simultaneously meet multiple goals: it can enable employees to engage in charitable giving, while developing their own skills.

Merely espousing the value of volunteering is not enough; managers need to ‘walk the talk’ to ensure that employees attribute skills-based learning as intended. Manager support is crucial for optimizing the success of skills-based volunteering programs. Managers should be provided with training that informs them of the volunteering opportunities that are available, they should actively encourage their employees to volunteer, and they can role model the desired behavior by volunteering themselves (Basil et al., 2008; Grant, 2012). Managers should initiate conversations about volunteering, asking how and what employees learned, while emphasizing the importance of their volunteering work to the charity.

This research may also inform the role that HR, and learning and development specialists in particular, may play in corporate citizenship. In many organizations, employee volunteering programs rest with the CSR department. Learning and development specialists should work together with CSR staff to co-create volunteering opportunities so that employees can lend their specialized skills to charities, develop in new ways, and give back to the communities in which they operate (Hewett & Shantz, 2021). Learning and development specialists could audit corporate volunteering experiences, hold focus groups with volunteers, and document the learning that can take place in various volunteering activities. In this way, employees who wish to develop specific skills can be directed to specific volunteering activities that meet their needs. Furthermore, service-learning could be folded into leadership development programs; leadership skills like empathy and compassion are much harder to teach in a classroom setting, and instead service-learning projects may provide a platform for developing these types of skills.

Our research has also identified the importance of providing opportunities for employees to reflect on their volunteering experiences. Interviewees described the interview as a venue for sensemaking, which helped them to identify and articulate skill development. In order to maximize learning gains, firms should organize sensemaking sessions to provide the time and space for employees to reflect (Ashford & De Rue, 2012). We found that some employees left the interview feeling a greater sense of personal and organizational pride, a deeper appreciation for their firm, and with a new determination to increase their development through volunteering.

## **Conclusion**

Skills-based volunteering offers an intriguing promise: employees donate their skills to benefit others and develop new ones along the way. For approximately two-thirds of our respondents, skills-based volunteering

largely delivered on this promise. However, the remaining volunteers responded to questions about learning from skills-based volunteering with either disdain or defensiveness, rejecting the notion that learning can arise from volunteering. Drawing on abductive insights that blend several theories, we explain how employees respond to their employers' efforts to facilitate learning from volunteering.

## Notes

1. The first author conducted all interviews with managers of the programs, and employee volunteers.
2. The first author manually coded all of the data and excerpts were sense-checked by the second author.
3. We thank a reviewer for sharing this insight.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## ORCID

Kiera Dempsey-Brench  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2685-7814>

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

## References

- 3M. (2021). *3M impact: Skills-based service program*. Retrieved July 29, 2021, from [https://www.3m.com/3M/en\\_US/company-us/about-3m/3m-impact/](https://www.3m.com/3M/en_US/company-us/about-3m/3m-impact/).
- Ahmad, I., Shazad, K., & Zafar, M. A. (2017). Impact of corporate social responsibility attributions on workplace deviance behaviors. *Journal of Managerial Sciences*, *11*(2), 157–172.
- Alfes, K., Antunes, B., & Shantz, A. (2017). The management of volunteers: What can human resources do? *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, *28*(1), 62–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1242508>
- Allison, L. D., Okun, M. A., & Dutridge, K. S. (2002). Assessing volunteer motives: A comparison of an open-ended probe and Likert rating scales. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *12*(4), 243–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.677>
- Antonetti, P., & Maklan, S. (2016). An extended model of moral outrage at corporate social irresponsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *135*(3), 429–444. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2487-y>
- Argyris, C. *Strategy, change and defensive routines*. Pitman, Boston (1985).
- Argyris, C. (1990). *Overcoming organizational defences: Facilitating organizational learning*. Pearson.

- Argyris, C. (1994). Good communication that blocks learning. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(4), 77–85.
- Ashford, S., & De Rue, S. (2012). Developing as a leader: The power of mindful engagement. *Organizational Dynamics*, 41(2), 146–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2012.01.008>
- Averill, J. R. (1983). Studies on anger and aggression: Implications for theories of emotion. *American Psychologist*, 38(11), 1145–1160. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.38.11.1145>
- Bartsch, G. (2012). Emotional learning: Managerial development by corporate volunteering. *Journal of Management Development*, 31(3), 253–262. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711211208880>
- Basil, D. Z., Runte, M. S., Easwaramoorthy, M., & Barr, C. (2009). Journal of Business Ethics. *Company Support for Employee Volunteering: A National Survey of Companies in Canada*, 85(2), 387–398.
- Booth, J. E., Park, K. W., & Glomb, T. M. (2009). Employer-supported volunteering benefits: Gift exchange among employers, employees, and volunteer organizations. *Human Resource Management*, 48(2), 227–249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.20277>
- Bowen, D. E., & Ostroff, C. (2004). Understanding HRM-firm performance linkages: The role of the “strength” of the HRM system. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(2), 203–221.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>
- Brockner, J., Senior, D., & Welch, W. (2014). Corporate volunteerism, the experience of self-integrity, and organizational commitment: Experience from the field. *Social Justice Research*, 27(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0204-8>
- Caligiuri, P., Mencia, A., & Jiang, K. (2013). Win-win-win: The influence of company-sponsored volunteerism programs on employees, NGOs, and business units. *Personnel Psychology*, 66(4), 825–860. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12019>
- Caligiuri, P., Mencia, A., Jayne, B., & Traylor, A. (2019). Developing cross-cultural competencies through international corporate volunteerism. *Journal of World Business*, 54(1), 14–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2018.09.002>
- Charmaz, K. (2008). Constructionism in grounded theory. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 397–412). The Guildford Press.
- Chartered Institute of Personnel Development. (2021). Employer-sponsored volunteering. Retrieved March 30, 2021, from <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/strategy/volunteering/employer-supported-factsheet>
- Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose. (2020). Giving in numbers: 2020 edition. New York: CECP, 2020. Retrieved February 4, 2021, from <https://cecp.co/home/resources/giving-in-numbers/>.
- Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., & Stukas, A. A. (1996). Volunteers’ motivations: Findings from a national survey. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 25(4), 485–505. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764096254006>
- Clary, E. G., Snyder, M., Ridge, R. D., Copeland, J., Stukas, A. A., Haugen, J., & Miene, P. (1998). Understanding and assessing the motivations of volunteers: A functional

- approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(6), 1516–1530. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.6.1516>
- Cook, J., & Burchell, J. (2018). Bridging the gaps in employee volunteering: Why the third sector doesn't always win. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 47(1), 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764017734649>
- Cronin, T., Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2012). Wal-Mart's conscientious objectors: Perceived illegitimacy, moral anger, and retaliatory consumer behavior. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 34(4), 322–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.693347>
- De Roeck, K., & Delobbe, N. (2012). Do environmental CSR initiatives serve organizations' legitimacy in the oil industry? Exploring employees' reactions through organizational identification theory. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 110(4), 397–412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1489-x>
- Donia, M. B., Tetrault Sirsly, C. A., & Ronen, S. (2017). Employee attributions of corporate social responsibility as substantive or symbolic: Validation of a measure. *Applied Psychology*, 66(1), 103–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12081>
- Ekman, P. (1999). Basic emotions. In T. Dalgleish & M. Power (Eds.), *Handbook of cognition and emotion* (pp. 45–60). Wiley.
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Gatignon-Turnau, A. L., & Mignonac, K. (2015). (Mis)Using employee volunteering for public relations: Implications for corporate volunteers' organizational commitment. *Journal of Business Research*, 68(1), 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.05.013>
- Gephart, R. P., Topal, C., & Zhang, Z. (2010). Future-oriented sensemaking: Temporalities and institutional legitimation. In T. Hernes & S. Maitlis (Eds.), *Process, sensemaking, and organizing* (pp. 275–312). Oxford University Press.
- GlaxoSmithKline. (2020). *Employee volunteering annual report 2019–2020*. Middlesex: GSK, 2020. Retrieved July 29, 2021, from <https://www.gsk.com/media/6245/gsk-employee-e-volunteering-annual-impact-report-2019-2020.pdf>.
- Goodenough, W. H. (1997). Moral outrage: Territoriality in human guise. *Zygon*, 32(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.671997067>
- Gordon, P. A., & Gordon, B. A. (2017). The role of volunteer organizations in leadership skill development. *Journal of Management Development*, 36(5), 712–723. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-06-2016-0099>
- Grant, A. M. (2012). Giving time, time after time: Work design and sustained employee participation in corporate volunteering. *Academy of Management Review*, 37(4), 589–615. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2010.0280>
- Haas, M. R. (2006). Knowledge gathering, team capabilities, and project performance in challenging work environments. *Management Science*, 52(8), 1170–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1060.0530>
- Hansen, H. (2008). Abduction. In D. Barry & H. Hanson (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of new approaches in management and organizations* (pp. 454–463). Sage.
- Heider, F. (1959). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. Wiley.
- Hewett, R., & Shantz, A. (2021). A theory of HR co-creation. *Human Resource Management Review*, 31(4), 100823. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100823>
- Hewett, R., & Shantz, A. (in press). The role of line managers in the formation of employees' HR attributions. In A. Bos-Nehles, K. Townsend, & K. Jiang (Eds.), *Research handbook on HRM and line managers*. Edward Elgar.
- Hewett, R., Shantz, A., & Mundy, J. (2019). Information, beliefs, and motivation: The antecedents to human resource attributions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 40(5), 570–586. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2353>
- Hewett, R., Shantz, A., Mundy, J., & Alfes, K. (2018). Attribution theories in human resource management research: A review and research agenda. *The International*

- Journal of Human Resource Management*, 29(1), 87–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2017.1380062>
- Hu, J., Jiang, K., Mo, S., Chen, H., & Shi, J. (2016). The motivational antecedents and performance consequences of corporate volunteering: When do employees volunteer and when does volunteering help versus harm work performance? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 137, 99–111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2016.08.005>
- Jones, D. A. (2016). Widely assumed but thinly tested: Do employee volunteers' self-reported skill improvements reflect the nature of their volunteering experiences? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 495. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00495>
- Kaarbo, J., & Beasley, R. K. (1999). A practical guide to the comparative case study method in political psychology. *Political Psychology*, 20(2), 369–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00149>
- Kashdan, T. B., & Silvia, P. J. (2009). Curiosity and interest: The benefits of thriving on novelty and challenge. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 367–374). Oxford University Press.
- Kelley, H. H. (1973). The processes of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 28(2), 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034225>
- Low, J. (2019). A pragmatic definition of the concept of theoretical saturation. *Sociological Focus*, 52(2), 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2018.1544514>
- McCallum, S., Schmid, M. A., & Price, L. (2013). CSR: A case for employee skills-based volunteering. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 9(3), 479–495. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SRJ-04-2012-0053>
- McShane, L., & Cunningham, P. (2012). To thine own self be true? Employees' judgments of the authenticity of their organization's corporate social responsibility program. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 108(1), 81–100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1064-x>
- Muthuri, J. N., Matten, D., & Moon, J. (2009). Employee volunteering and social capital: Contributions to corporate social responsibility. *British Journal of Management*, 20(1), 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2007.00551.x>
- Nishii, L. H., & Paluch, R. M. (2018). Leaders as HR sensegivers: Four HR implementation behaviors that create strong HR systems. *Human Resource Management Review*, 28(3), 319–323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmmr.2018.02.007>
- Noonan, W. R. (2008). *Discussing the undiscussable: A guide to overcoming defensive routines in the workplace*. Wiley.
- Pajo, K., & Lee, L. (2011). Corporate-sponsored volunteering: A work design perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99(3), 467–482. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0665-0>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Peloza, J., Hudson, S., & Hassay, D. N. (2009). The marketing of employee volunteerism. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 85(2), 371–386.
- Peloza, J., & Hassay, D. N. (2006). Intra-organizational volunteerism: Good soldiers, good deeds, and good politics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 64(4), 357–379. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-005-5496-z>
- Peterson, D. K. (2004). Benefits of participation in corporate volunteer programs: Employees' perceptions. *Personnel Review*, 33(6), 615–627. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00483480410561510>
- Pless, N. M., Maak, T., & Stahl, G. K. (2012). Promoting corporate social responsibility and sustainable development through management development: What can be learned from international service learning programs? *Human Resource Management*, 51(6), 873–903. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21506>

- Podsakoff, P. M., MacKenzie, S. B., & Podsakoff, N. P. (2016). Recommendations for creating better concept definitions in the organizational, behavioral, and social sciences. *Organizational Research Methods, 19*(2), 159–203. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428115624965>
- Rodell, J. B., & Lynch, J. W. (2016). Perceptions of employee volunteering: Is it “credited” or “stigmatized” by colleagues? *Academy of Management Journal, 59*(2), 611–635. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0566>
- Rodell, J. B., Breitsohl, H., Schröder, M., & Keating, D. J. (2016). Employee volunteering: A review and framework for future research. *Journal of Management, 42*(1), 55–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206315614374>
- Romani, S., Grappi, S., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2013). My anger is your gain, my contempt your loss: Explaining consumer responses to corporate wrongdoing. *Psychology & Marketing, 30*(12), 1029–1042. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20664>
- Saetre, A. S., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2021). Generating theory by abduction. *Academy of Management Review*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2019.0233>
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline*. Century Business.
- Shantz, A., Saksida, T., & Alfes, K. (2014). Dedicating time to volunteering: Values, engagement, and commitment to beneficiaries. *Applied Psychology, 63*(4), 671–697. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12010>
- Society for Human Resource Management. (2019). *Doing well by doing good*. Retrieved March 30, 2021, from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/doing-well-by-doing-good.aspx>
- Steimel, S. (2018). Skills-based volunteering as both work and not work: A tension-centered examination of constructions of “volunteer. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29*(1), 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9859-8>
- Suinn, R. M. (2001). The terrible twos—Anger and anxiety: Hazardous to your health. *American Psychologist, 56*(1), 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.1.27>
- Verdinelli, S., & Scagnoli, N. I. (2013). Data display in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 12*(1), 359–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691301200117>
- Vian, T., McCoy, K., Richards, S. C., Connelly, P., & Feeley, F. (2007). Corporate social responsibility in global health: The Pfizer Global Health Fellows international volunteering program. *Human Resource Planning, 30*(1), 30–35.
- Vlachos, P. A., Panagopoulos, N. G., & Rapp, A. A. (2013). Feeling good by doing good: Employee CSR-induced attributions, job satisfaction, and the role of charismatic leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics, 118*(3), 577–588. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1590-1>
- Vlachos, P. A., Panagopoulos, N. G., Bachrach, D. G., & Morgeson, F. P. (2017). The effects of managerial and employee attributions for corporate social responsibility initiatives. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 38*(7), 1111–1129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2189>
- Vlachos, P. A., Theotokis, A., & Panagopoulos, N. G. (2010). Sales force reactions to corporate social responsibility: Attributions, outcomes, and the mediating role of organizational trust. *Industrial Marketing Management, 39*(7), 1207–1218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2010.02.004>
- Weenink, E., & Bridgman, T. (2017). Taking subjectivity and reflexivity seriously: Implications of social constructionism for researching volunteer motivation. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 28*(1), 90–109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9824-y>

- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409–421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>
- Weiner, B. (1979). A theory of motivation for some classroom experiences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71(1), 3–25. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.71.1.3>
- Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92(4), 548–573. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.92.4.548>
- Yang, Y., Secchi, D., & Homberg, F. (2018). Are organizational defensive routines harmful to the relationship between personality and organizational learning? *Journal of Business Research*, 85, 155–164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.12.036>