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A tech company, The Forward Internet Group, set us up. When Forward split out to become multiple independent companies we became the foundation of those different companies. We were incredibly excited at the prospect of bringing together the worlds of tech and non-profit. Mainly because we believed that the tech sector had many things that the non-profit lacks but needs. It's disruptive, pioneering and agile. We made it our mission to harness these attributes to create greater social impact. Our performance was mixed. Some relationships with companies were much better than others, giving us fantastic insights into creating a successful corporate partnership.



A beautiful vision

We found it incredibly useful to have a vision for our partnerships with companies. It drove and inspired us. We aspired for The Foundation to become part of the fabric of a company. We wanted the leaders to consider us to be an integral component of their company and for staff to see us as one of the best things about their working life. If we achieved this, we knew we'd mobilise staff, in turn generating expertise and funds for our start-up partners. We made the mistake of not sharing our vision with all the companies we worked with, perhaps fearing that the intensity of the partnership would turn them off. So we didn't excite them as much as we could, nor could they see how everything we were doing pieced together.

Head over heart

We had our greatest success when we became an important cog in the business wheel. For example, our partnership with one company helped create a better workplace to recruit and retain staff, while our partnership with another helped build a stronger team. We found that those companies who considered our work to have commercial benefits had far greater incentive to make the partnership a success and a stronger commitment from the leaders.

So, we discovered the value of working with the leaders to understand how our work could benefit their company, and then shaping our partnership around what this was. We quickly learnt that we needed to spell out these possible benefits - some pictured bake sales and warm fuzzy feelings rather than the infinitely more exciting vision of The Foundation embedded in their organisation and improving their company.



Steering the good ship The Foundation

Although we worked with companies in such a way that would benefit them, we never, ever compromised the big things - our mission and our values. Compromising these was our only big fear of working with companies, but we had nothing to worry about. Instead, our own confidence and knowledge seemed to persuade people to join our journey rather than to try and take us down a different path. Magic happened when our goals and the company's goals were both met so we tried hard to find that intersection. We were happy for staff to shape our work, particularly as it became clear that people engaged more when they had a sense of ownership. So we encouraged people to come to us with their ideas and crack on with making them happen.

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Banter with the bosses

Unsurprisingly, when we built a good relationship with the leaders of the companies, and they became advocates, the partnership flourished. But we could have invested far more time in building relationships with them. It didn't come naturally to us. We were more at home working on the ground with the company's staff and our start-up partners than schmoozing with the company bosses. We tried to influence by demonstrating results 'in the field' rather than wowing people in the boardroom. We knew both were needed but we never mustered enough energy to do something we weren't as comfortable with. This was an important lesson for us, as we could have created stronger bonds with leaders to create stronger partnerships.

Mobilising volunteers

We used similar ways and means to recruit volunteers at different companies but achieved very different results. Why? The reason lies in what's written above. We were only able to mobilise staff if we had a solid foundation in place first – a partnership, agreed with the leaders, built upon a shared vision of our work embedded in their organisation to make them a better company.

Once this was in place, we discovered five things that helped us to mobilise people. First, we made people's participation fun and informal. We made it not feel like work. Second, we recognised that staff were more likely to help if they liked us as people. So we spent time building individual relationships. Third, we were always visible. We communicated to staff at least once a week, and had a presence in their office.



Fourth, we provided opportunities that would resonate with people. We provided developmental opportunities for staff just starting out in their career. And we ran adventurous fundraisers that enabled people to go to places and do things they wouldn't normally be able to do. Fifth, we acknowledged people's contribution, to them and to the peers. A thank you goes a long way.

Managing volunteers

We measured the impact that we were having on volunteers. 100% of volunteers anonymously told us that they enjoyed the experience, while 100% believed that we made their company a better place to work. We put in a lot of effort to achieve these results. We were aware that staff were under no obligation to support us, so we made their experience with us as positive as possible. We did three things well.

One, we excited them by giving them a clear, compelling purpose to their work with us. Volunteers met the organisation they were supporting to inspire and understand the context. Two, we made sure staff mastered new skills so there was something in it for them. Three, we gave them lots of autonomy, so they had freedom to be creative with no one breathing down their neck.

However, we went too far in creating a positive experience. Projects didn't always hit their deadlines as we tiptoed around volunteers. A balance is needed, and we didn't always find it.

"MAGIC HAPPENED WHEN OUR GOALS AND THE COMPANY'S GOALS WERE BOTH MET SO WE TRIED HARD TO FIND THAT INTERSECTION"

insights from our journey

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Day job comes first

Our biggest challenge was recruiting staff to work on projects involving significant chunks of their time. If we did find people to work on big projects they overran. And, of course, this was due to competing demands for their time from their day job. We're gutted we never reached our Holy Grail – integrating volunteer projects into people's day jobs, such that they had an equal footing with their normal work and their performance was measured on their success. Not only would this mean the work gets done, it also provides a more positive experience for staff, not least because they're less stretched. If we had our time over, we'd have more persistently asked companies to take the partnership to the next level.

Endeavour

We underestimated how much blood, sweat and tears is needed to sustain the type of partnership we wanted to create. Like any relationship, we discovered that building a deep, meaningful partnership with a company takes considerable effort. It takes time to build individual relationships with staff, time to oversee their voluntary work and time to recognise their efforts. So we became an overworked team struggling to sustain consistently strong partnerships until we hired a dedicated person to do this for us.



WERE OUR EXPERIENCES OF **WORKING WITH COMPANIES** HELPFUL? THERE'S PLENTY MORE FROM WHERE THAT CAME FROM.

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