

Charity begins at home . . . and ought to stay there most of the time

By **Robin E. Shea** on March 18, 2011

The Wall Street Journal had a good [article](#) this week about Girl Scout cookie sales at the workplace and how much charitable solicitation (if any) should go on at work.



Before I say another word, let me make one thing perfectly clear: I am 100 percent pro-charity. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have incomes ought to be as generous as possible in supporting our communities and those who are in need. I also think it's admirable that employers want to be good corporate citizens.

I have no problem with individual co-workers helping their kids sell whatever overpriced product they have to sell to keep their schools solvent (wrapping paper, pizza dough, whatever), or with putting their kids' Girl Scout cookie order forms in the break room. I had school-age kids once myself, and I was always grateful to get some help from my co-workers so that my kids could meet their various sales quotas. Now that my kids are grown, I am happy to return the favor by purchasing from the next generation. (Plus, that school wrapping paper *totally rules*, man.)

What I do think employers should be careful about is other charitable or political solicitations, and especially those made by persons in authority. The reason is simple -- just because you support a given cause doesn't mean that your employees do, and because you're the boss they may feel pressure to do your bidding anyway. Here are four reasons I would be cautious about soliciting for charities at work:

1. They gave at the office. *This is an expression.* My point is that you don't know what your employees do with their salaries. Maybe they waste it all on booze and cigarettes and potato chips, Manolo shoes, and the Playboy Channel. In which case it might be good if they put it to better use. But it's more likely that they are already using their hard-earned money to support their children's schools, contribute to their places of worship, help the homeless man on the street corner who Will Work for Food, and pay for their elderly mother's nursing home care. Not to mention making house payments in a bad market, paying inflated prices for vegetables and gasoline and home heating oil, and paying off their own student loans while simultaneously trying to scrape together enough to send their kids to college in a few years. If the latter is the case, they may not appreciate being made to feel that they could jeopardize their standing at work (which pays for all these things) if they don't squeeze out a little more blood to support their boss's favorite charity.

2. Your cause may violate *their* religious beliefs. Even if your cause is not explicitly "religious" in nature, it may still take positions that violate the religious beliefs of some of your employees. And even if you are sophisticated enough to know about Title VII's religious accommodation requirement and allow employees with sincere religious objections to "opt out," it can put them in an awkward position at work and make them feel that they are not perceived as "team players."

3. If it's a political cause, you *really* ought to know better. This may be an apocryphal story, but it's so good (bad) I can't resist using it. I was told that an employer in the 1990's "encouraged" all of its employees at a manufacturing facility in the United States to write letters to Congress encouraging the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement ("NAFTA"). Many of the employees did not support the NAFTA because, like Ross Perot, they were afraid that it would result in their jobs' being sent out of the United States. On the other hand, they were uncomfortable saying no to their employer because they were afraid they'd endanger their jobs for *that* reason. The facility at which this allegedly occurred is now closed, and as far as I know the work performed there is now being done somewhere south of the border.

My workplace has a vast diversity of political beliefs, and I suspect yours does, as well. I would never assume that my co-workers shared my beliefs on *anything*. There's a reason that it's considered good manners to keep our political views to ourselves except for discussions with our family and close friends, and people who we know share our views. *And everyone else in the world via the internet, of course.*

4. If you allow solicitations for charity and politics, you may also have to allow unions to solicit.

Although the law allows limited charitable exceptions to a no-solicitation rule (such as an annual United Way campaign), you generally cannot make too many exceptions or you'll have to allow unions to do it, too. Something to think about.

OK, OK, you may say, but what can we do to be a "nice corporate guy or gal" without making our employees feel threatened? Here are a few suggestions:

*If you solicit for a charitable organization, be very clear in all communications that you are not trying to pressure anyone and are just letting them know about the opportunity "as information." It's even nice to acknowledge that you realize they may already have financial/charitable obligations that preclude them from helping your cause.

*I hope this one goes without saying, but just in case -- if someone refrains from supporting your organization, LET IT GO. Don't "keep score," and don't assume they're just a cheapskate. If the objection is based on religious beliefs and you hold that against the employee, you may even be violating the law.

*If you are helping a political candidate or a political cause, again make it clear that you are letting people know about the opportunity but that there is no "expectation" whatsoever. One of the partners in my office regularly brings candidates for office around to "meet and greet." He's let us know more than once (and in writing!) that he is not necessarily endorsing these individuals and is not trying to pressure anyone to even vote for them, much less donate to their campaigns. Although the partner's own views are known, he has taken exactly the right approach and as far as I know has not caused any discomfort or hard feelings.

(One final caution: Be aware that even if you take these precautions, my Point No. 4 about union solicitations is probably still going to apply.)

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