



The Founder's Give-Back Playbook

Building a for-good arm into your startup — the right way, at the right time.

Prepared by **Nikki Lasley** · Social Impact & CSR Strategy · nikkilasley.com

The cheapest, highest-leverage moment to commit to social impact is when your equity is worth almost nothing. A pledge you make today — before your cap table fills with investors and before a liquidity event — costs little now and can be worth millions to your cause later. Atlassian, Coinbase, and UiPath set aside shares early and turned modest founder generosity into some of the largest philanthropic endowments in tech.

This playbook shows you how to build a credible for-good arm from the pre-seed or seed stage — what to pledge, how to structure it, and the five decisions that actually matter.

WHAT'S INSIDE

1 The four ways to give

2 Why do this at pre-seed / seed

3 How the equity pledge actually works

4 The five decisions that matter

5 Where to start, by stage

6 Common pitfalls to avoid

7 How I help founders do this

1 The four ways to give

You don't have to choose just one, and you don't have to give exactly 1%. This framework — popularized by the Pledge 1% movement — is deliberately flexible. Most early-stage companies start with one or two and grow into the others.

EQUITY

A slice of your shares

Set aside ~1% of company or founder shares that funds impact at a future liquidity event.

Best for: almost every startup — the signature early-stage move.

PRODUCT

Free or discounted access

Donate licenses, subscriptions, or access to nonprofits at little marginal cost.

Best for: SaaS & product companies.

PROFIT

A share of what you earn

Direct a percentage of profit or revenue to grantmaking or an employee match.

Best for: companies with real revenue.

TIME

Paid volunteer hours

Give your team paid time to volunteer — hands-on or skills-based.

Best for: teams building culture from day one.

★ Advisor's note

For pre-seed and seed founders with little revenue and small teams, the **equity pledge is the anchor** — nearly free today and structurally the most valuable later. Layer in time or product once you have a team and a shippable product.

2 Why do this at pre-seed / seed

You control the cap table

Before a board of voting investors, a founder can authorize a pledge with minimal friction — far easier than after a priced round.

The math favors you

You commit while shares are nearly worthless, so it barely registers today. Deduction and impact both land later, at liquidity.

It compounds into culture

Built in at seed, it's who you are — part of recruiting, customer story, and team identity. Bolted on at Series C, it reads as PR.

3 How the equity pledge actually works

This is the part founders find intimidating — and where an advisor adds the most value. Two clean ways to execute, plus one structure that keeps your options open.

OPTION A

RECOMMENDED

Warrant agreement

A binding contract giving a nonprofit partner the right to buy shares at a nominal price at liquidity. Real and enforceable — and the tax deduction lands at exercise, when you're most likely profitable.

OPTION B

Share reservation

A board resolution reserves shares for future issuance. Non-binding, but signals strong commitment — ideal when you haven't chosen a nonprofit partner yet.

🕒 Where the shares go: a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF)

A DAF lets you take the deduction at liquidity while deciding **later and gradually** which causes to support. For early-stage founders still shaping their focus, it's almost always the right vehicle — far simpler and cheaper than a private foundation.

⚠️ The one clause founders forget: the "top-off" provision

Every future round dilutes your pledge along with everything else. Include a top-off (anti-dilution) provision in the original board resolution so the pledge is replenished to its target percentage as you raise. Miss this, and a 1% pledge quietly shrinks to a fraction of itself by Series B.

4 The five decisions that matter

Answer these five and the pledge is substantially designed.

1 **How much?** 1% is the default and the norm — but the number can be anything meaningful and sustainable.

2 **Company equity, founder equity, or both?** Company equity is common while the cap table is founder-controlled; founder equity avoids board approval entirely.

3 **Warrant or reservation?** Binding-and-specific vs. flexible-and-open.

4 **What vehicle receives it?** A DAF is the low-friction default; a private foundation only at real scale.

5 **What's the cause thesis?** Even a one-line focus ("education access," "climate," "our community") makes the pledge tangible. It can evolve.

5 Where to start, by stage

The right first move depends on whether you've priced a round yet.

Pre-seed

Founder-equity pledge via a founder/board resolution plus a share reservation; open a DAF when ready.

Why: minimal legal work, zero board friction, maximum flexibility while everything is still in flux.

Seed

Formalize a ~1% company-equity pledge with a top-off provision; add a warrant if the cause partner is chosen; layer in employee volunteer time.

Why: you now have a board and a team — lock in the structure and start building the culture piece.

6 Common pitfalls to avoid

✗ **Skipping the top-off provision** — the single most common and most expensive omission.

✗ **Waiting for "later"** — every round raises the cost and lowers your control.

✗ **Over-engineering the vehicle** — a private foundation at seed is usually premature; start with a DAF.

✗ **Locking into a cause too rigidly** — a DAF plus a broad thesis keeps you free to focus as you learn.

✗ **Treating it as a marketing checkbox** — a credible commitment needs a named owner and real follow-through.

7 How I help founders do this

Setting up the structure is the easy part. Turning good intentions into measurable, lasting impact is the work — and it's what I do.

DIAGNOSE

Review your stage, cap table, cash, and cause interests to recommend the right pledge mix and structure.

STRUCTURE

Turn your decisions into a clear brief your counsel can draft from, top-off provision included, and manage the DAF setup end to end.

ACTIVATE

Define a focused impact thesis, choose vehicles and partners, and build a simple measurement framework.

SUSTAIN

Stand up light-touch governance and reporting so the commitment survives every future round.



Start with a 30-minute diagnostic

If you're advising a founder — or you are one — the first move is to size the pledge and pick the structure. Everything else follows from that.

Nikki Lasley

Social Impact & CSR Strategy

nikkilasley.com

San Francisco Bay Area — working with clients everywhere