2016 NPT
Best Nonprofits To Work

It’s Fun, Games, Benefits And Serious Business At The Best Nonprofits
It’s Fun, Games, Benefits And Serious Business At Top Nonprofits To Work

By Mark Hrynka

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America's emblem stands for great strength and long life.

With that in mind, let's talk retirement.
At BoardSource, “The Incredible Co-worker Award” is given away during the monthly staff happy hour. Employees nominate each other and the winner gets a trophy filled with candy and other knock-knacks, along with $100 to use anywhere within the organization. That can be used for anything from hosting a happy hour to bringing cake and ice cream or even hiring a temp if a department needs help. “The team is looking for more opportunities like that as well as thinking about how we’re recognizing service,” Sunderland said.

Employee recognition doesn’t always have to be a big production. During staff meetings, supervisors announce employee anniversaries and other milestones. “We’re really trying to formalize that and other ways to recognize staff,” Sunderland said.

John Banchy tries to keep his ear to the ground and email updates that update employees on changes. CEO Karen Kiely sends a newsletter every other week and all-staff emails that update employees on changes. “We do incorporate Paleo, vegetarian, gluten-free, so a health and wellness task force was formed. The committee is tasked with distributing healthy living information but also bringing food for staff meetings. The initiative aims to make sure staff know about healthy options when it comes to food but also activities. The task force started a scavenger hunt-like challenge to encourage people to take the stairs. Things are hidden in stairwells and employees can win prizes for finding the items.

All or part of employees’ costs for health club memberships or fitness or wellness programs is picked up by 13 organizations. Lansing, Mich.-based Cinnaire (No. 21 overall) goes even further, offering a full gym at its headquarters. In addition, dry cleaning services pick up and drop off weekly for its employees.

Emerge! Center Against Domestic Abuse (No. 34 overall) in Tucson, Ariz., offers 24/7 assistance. A local massage therapist has come in to provide pro bono help to mitigate burnout. Compassion-fatigue sessions conducted by clinic staff help direct service staff members.

“Never underestimate the power of offering a free lunch or coffee or a happy hour,” Kiely said. “We do incorporate Paleo, vegetarian, gluten-free, so we are supporting eating habits.”


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For instance, Springs recognized an employee for always doing an incredible job of showing gratitude to all the people she works with and being on lots of external event committees. The Wishy culminates with a presentation during the monthly staff meeting. Sometimes the committee will organize get-togethers, and organizing get-togethers – which they did when four employees got hitched last summer. “We’ve always done fun stuff together but formalized it in committee,” said Executive Director Karen Wollensak.

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By Andy Sedge

Irish Chertavian, founder and CEO of Year Up, which focuses on volunteer community and experts in the field in an Alzheimer’s Association, coming in second among large nonprofits and 17th overall on the NPT list, also relies on its hiring, on-boarding and staff communication processes to get employees moving, and staying in the right direction. The organization’s on-boarding process, particularly for leaders, chapter executives and the like, has been adjusted for quick assimilation, according to Kate Wollensak, vice president of human resources.

The two-day process takes place at Alzheimer’s Association’s Chicago headquarters. There, new employees are taken on a tour of the library, call center and speak with members of a wide variety of departments. “It’s the mentors, the peers they’ve created,” said Wollensak. “When you have good on-boarding, you’re likely to stay longer. You’re assimilating.” New hires are followed up on with 30, 60 and 90-day touch points to intervene on any early issue. Association leaders rely on The NPT survey and focus groups to help gauge employee satisfaction. Beyond that, a three-Cs approach is utilized, according to Wollensak. There are:

- Communications. Executives consistently send updates to staff to share organizational updates and direction.

- Compassion. What Wollensak referred to as the human side, leaders understand that home issues sometimes come to work and work issues sometimes go home. Leaders are given the ability to offer workplace flexibility such as telecommuting to help staff.

- Collaboration. Task forces, committees and focus groups are used to engage employees in working toward organizational strategy. “It’s easier to get up and go out to work knowing that you’re valued,” Wollensak said. Feedback is used to make adjustments to the organization. In 2015, more attention was placed on professional development per staff request. Alzheimer’s Association will similarly look to enhance its technology in 2016, such as implementing a more easily operational expense reporting system, in response to staff feedback, Wollensak said.

The following pages feature the full list of Best Large Nonprofits to Work for 2016.
Kirk Jewell joined the OSU Foundation as president from the private sector. His profit-centered background led him to quickly reject the foundation’s existing family atmosphere. He was sure to emphasize that staff wasn’t a family, but a team, during the first six months of his tenure.

Well, that was 12 years ago and things change.

“I’ve since come back and apologized to my staff,” Jewell said. “I didn’t know before I got here that an organization could perform as a team, but still care like a family.”

The past 12 years at the organization in Stillwater, Okla., have been a culture adjustment for Jewell and the foundation. There was a lot of “kumbaya” and a lack of accountability early on, Jewell said. While he has softened his style, expectations have also been elevated. “The way I describe the culture we are striving for is ‘exceeding expectations and having fun with it’,” Jewell said.

The result is becoming this year’s second-ranked organization in The NPT Best Nonprofits to Work survey and top medium-sized nonprofit.

Much in the same fashion as OSU Foundation’s culture change, many organizations on the list have worked in recent years toward trying new strategies in employee engagement, hiring, managing work-life balance and gauging success. The difference between top places to work and those off the list this year is razor thin in areas such as role satisfaction (91 percent to 82 percent) and engagement (92 percent to 82 percent). The differences are narrower than that of large and small organizations and illustrate how far a little extra effort can go.

OSU Foundation holds a staff retreat each spring featuring team-building exercises such as a riff on speed dating that enables staffers to learn something about one another. The retreat also serves as a preview for the upcoming fiscal year that begins in July. A few months later, in early August, the organization hosts a year-end celebration featuring the awarding of a dozen culture-value obelisks to staff members.

Employees, excluding leaders, also receive a team bonus of up to 5 percent of base pay for performance as it compares to annual goals at the year-end celebration. Bonuses are typically on the high end, Jewell said, with the notable exception of the recession-hit 2008-09 fiscal year when staff decided not to take the $300,000 to $350,000 cumulative bonus to protect from further staffing cuts.

Jewell leans on his “Director of Mirth,” an honorary position typically held by the head of human resources that helps carry the organization’s culture. “I’m an accountant. I’m not fun by nature,” Jewell said. “My wife is. I always try to find people who have fun.” Each month, fundraisers who have raised $1 million or more get to talk about their work over cookies and punch. Ice cream socials are also planned during the year.

The foundation’s voluntary turnover rate

Continued on page 8
We have a lot going on year end, but if your work slows the company down for that two weeks," Lakes Capital Fund, in Lansing, Mich., is meting the organization to say to the individual that we ing a leadership role in organizing a semi-annual program, and 34th overall. Emerge! offers clients 24/7 crisis support, which takes a toll on employees, and pay attention to departures not meeting the typical profile. Employee appreciation is promoted throughout the year with events such as the annual potluck arranged by the club, quarterly team building and monthly staff meetings featur- ing activities and snacks. Emerge! operates a "Wax bucks" program in which employees give the fake currency to their coworkers for going above and beyond. Accumulated bucks lead to prizes such as gift cards and Emerge! swag. "Essentially, it's employee- rier. EDGE incentivizes employees to hit the gym, eat right and go for regular medical, dental and vision check-ups to receive points. Points can lead to money toward a gym membership, wireless headphones, Fitbits and entry into a cash drawing. The points system is used to help the demographic of the center's workforce. The vast majority of employees are women with an average age of 33, according to Jefferies. Most of the employees are married with children and have limited time for themselves. "They always put themselves last and we wanted to make a fun way to have some incen- tive to take care of themselves," Jefferies said. Some employees have lost in excess of 70 pounds with the help of the program. Those efforts have been met with a streamlined health plan that no longer differentiates between exempt and non-exempt employees. All employees were transitioned to a health program this past September in which Brighton foots 90 percent of the tab. A discount program by the carrier helps employees pay for their share at next to no cost. Brighton, the second ranked medium-sized organ- ization and fifth overall, has its turnover rate almost in half since 2011, from 33 to 17 percent. "It’s our employees are telling us what's going on," Jefferies said. “They are driving changes. They hold themselves and us accountable.” Kimberly Sanchez, executive director of Community Legal Services of Mid-Florida (CLSMF) headquartered in Daytona Beach, Fla., has been on both sides of that exchange within the past two years. Sanchez worked as a staff attorney at the nonprofit for about seven years before moving up to deputy director. CLSMF’s longtime executive director retired about six months in, thrusting Sanchez into the interim and then fulltime role. CLSMF, the 24th ranked medium-sized nonprofit and 47th overall in the NPT Top 50, has long boasted a quality benefits program including 100-percent premium coverage for em- ployee health and dental. Sanchez has looked to make her mark by continuing to show staff that they are valued and looking for ways to improve organizational operations. Sanchez practices an open-door policy and sends handwritten birthday and Christmas cards to staff, Employees are engaged in the strategic planning process and progress is marked during quarterly staff meetings during which client ac- colades are highlighted. “I really try to engage and include staff in our vision so that they have some ownership in the organization, so that they don’t feel like they’re just coming to work for a paycheck,” Sanchez said. “My staff wants to be part of something.” An operations position was created to help collect, track and analyze data in an effort to keep CLSMF ahead of the curve. Internally, giving employees measurable provides them with goals and keeps everyone accountable, mission- driven and motivated, according to Sanchez. People want to know that they think are genuine with them and in line with their goals. "That’s easy." 2016 Medium Nonprofits Top 50 - 249 employees | Rank | Organization Listing | U.S. Employees |
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<td>The Achievement Network (AANet)</td>
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Downtown Streets Team (DST) has been adding staff during the past several years, which got Eileen Richardson thinking about how to retain those employees. Over the years, people tend to need a break and they end up going to another organization or switch jobs. “It’s a self-imposed sabbatical of sorts,” said Richardson, DST’s executive director.

Most staff members have been at DST from one to four years. Richardson implemented a sabbatical program last year in which employees are entitled to four weeks. “It’s a vacation to do whatever you want to do,” she said. On top of accumulated vacation time, it could mean as much as six to seven weeks of time off.

The sabbatical is meant for employees “to truly get out of the rat race for a bit,” Richardson said. “One of our keys to success is we want them to take a break – but come back to us,” she said.

Training, career advancement, and staffing levels were areas where organizations in the small category of the Best Nonprofits To Work really distinguished themselves from those that didn’t make the list.

Each nonprofit completed the Employer Benefits & Policies Questionnaire (EQ) from Best Companies Group (BCG), providing information about policies, practices and demographics. The Employee Engagement and Satisfaction Survey features 78 statements that employees respond to on a five-point agreement scale, such as “Agree Somewhat” and “Agree Strongly.”

Among small organizations, the biggest disparity between those on the list and those that didn’t make it were in the categories of:

- Leadership and planning, where small nonprofits that made the list scored 93 percent versus 78 percent;
- Training, development, resources, 86 percent versus 72 percent; and,
- Overall employee engagement, 94 percent versus 81 percent.

Where small organizations diverged was among initial and ongoing training, encouraging staff to explore growth and advancement within the organization.

Within the categories, small organizations on the list distinguished themselves from those not on the list in areas such as:

- Providing as much initial and ongoing training as needed;
- Encouragement to explore growth or advancement opportunities within the organization; and,
- Understanding what’s expected for career advancement.
There was a wide disparity among small nonprofits when it came to staffing levels being adequate to ensure quality products or services, and satisfaction with tuition reimbursement benefits.

“We’re in the people business. We have to back each other up. We can work hard to get four people jobs, and if suddenly all four people have an interview the next day, you need to tap some co-workers to handle that. It’s all about teamwork,” Richardson said.

“Other agencies are so bogged down by their funding. Some advertise that 60 percent of your job will be paperwork. What caseworker went to school to do that? I don’t want someone who studied the current system because the fact is the current system doesn’t work; it hasn’t worked,” Richardson said.

At Team Rubicon, CEO Jake Wood often pushes employees to consider their work-life balance and take a personal day or two after a busy period. When an event takes place over a weekend, such as the annual leadership conference, employees are encouraged to take one to two days off for personal matters, according to Candice Schmitt, director of human resources. “It often comes after lots of operational meetings, if people aren’t taking time off,” she said. “It’s easy around here, in tight offices, you see people throughout the day. It’s easy to pick up on it when burnout rates are getting high,” Schmitt said.

Wood has at times required staff to even take a one-week “staycation” to catch up with family and friends.

Team Rubicon also tries to create a buddy system with new hires. About half of new hires have some prior exposure to the organization but it’s such a tight-knit group that it can be intimidating, Schmitt said. New hires are paired up with people who started around the same time.

Some veterans struggle with a structured environment, so they might be paired up with someone who’s on their team or a manager taking them under their wing or looking out for them, Schmitt said. “It’s a very informal program,” she said. “It’s just something we do to support new hires and some of our vets who have a tougher time in this professional environment,” Schmitt said.

After a significant staff reduction three years ago, leaders of BoardSource in Washington, D.C., have worked hard on organizational culture. They created an internal task force that looked at where the organization is, where it wants to be, and how to get there. An internal survey was used to get feedback from staff, followed by some brown bag lunches to drill down deeper and compile an organizational culture statement.

“Definitely doing it from within was key to our success,” she said. “We actively work our culture. We do a lot of things. We’ve defined it. We may not be at it every single day but actively try to live the culture,” said Stephanie Springs, CEO of Make-A-Wish Illinois. “It comes through in how we approach the work we do, comes through in social things we do, in performance management, try to reinforce, live the culture. I think that’s a big piece of why people like it here,” she said.

“There’s a collective understanding across this organization of why we’re here. It goes into a collective passion of why we’re here: Make things better for families going through something really difficult,” Springs said. NPT