Team Rubicon arrives in the Philippines within days of Typhoon Haiyan, Nov. 12, 2013. It took top honors in the study.

Photo by Kirk Jackson.

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 Hrynna

There was a significant reduction in force (RF) at BoardSource three years ago, in addition to the departure of its chief executive officer. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that aims to strengthen nonprofit board leadership, has been working hard ever since on its organizational culture.

“We had a very short timeframe to get staff together. It was traumatizing, for staff that was kept, too. Creating a good working environment and culture was the number one priority for us,” said Marci Sunderland, vice president of human resources.

Two-thirds of the staff members were with the organization before the 2013 reorganization.

“We created an internal task force that looked at where we were as an organization, where we wanted to be, and how we get there,” Sunderland said. They used an internal survey to get feedback from staff members and then hosted brown bag lunches to drill down deeper and eventually put together an organizational culture statement.

It must have worked because BoardSource was among the first-time organizations to grace The NonProfit Times’ Best Nonprofits To Work 2016. With 30 employees, BoardSource ranked 12th among 18 nonprofits in the small category and 23rd out of 50 overall.

“One of the things we were aiming for was to be able to go through this process as a base year, and what feedback we got going through this process to see how we can make BoardSource better,” Sunderland said.

Among the many returning organizations from 2015 is Team Rubicon, which ranked second, overall second last year but this year took the top spot. The nonprofit has 44 employees, including 31 at its Los Angeles-area headquarters, to qualify in the small organization category.

The sixth annual report is compiled with the help of Best Companies Group, Inc. (BCG). The Harrisburg, Pa-based firm conducts a thorough organizational assessment. It’s a multi-part process designed to gather detailed data about each participating nonprofit. The organization completes a questionnaire and then employees complete a confidential survey. Sources outside the organization also are contacted.

Collected information is combined to produce a detailed set of data enabling analysts to determine the strengths and opportunities of participating organizations. Workplaces are ranked based on this data and then the Employer Benchmark Summary is returned to each participating organization.

Managers at each nonprofit must complete the Employer Benefits & Policies Questionnaire (EBPQ), collecting information about policies, practices and demographics. The Employee Engagement and Satisfaction Survey consists of approximately 78 statements that employees respond to on a five-point agreement scale.

Results are analyzed and categorized according to eight core focus areas:

- Leadership and planning;
- Corporate culture and communications;
- Role satisfaction;
- Work environment;
- Relationship with supervisor;
- Training, development and resources;
- Pay and benefits; and,
- Overall engagement.

The organization selects the list of nonprofit on the list of 50 nonprofit on the list of 50 nonprofits from which the top 50 are ranked based on this data and then the Employee Engagement and Satisfaction Survey consists of approximately 78 statements that employees respond to on a five-point agreement scale.

A good salary and benefits package will always be a good draw for a nonprofit, and the Best Nonprofits To Work are no exception. The overall average exempt salary was $74,351 among this year’s 50 nonprofits. Five organizations boasted an average exempt salary of more than $100,000:

- Birthright Israel Foundation, $133,328
- Century Housing Corp., $113,749
- Cinnabar, $113,675
- National Community Association, $106,700
- National Office of Communities in Schools, $105,335

Beyond a good paycheck, a common thread among this year’s Best Nonprofits To Work was employee appreciation. Sometimes that included a monetary prize or bonus. Some 44 organizations have a formal program to recognize staff.

Top-ranked Team Rubicon last year instituted a quarterly award for staff called “The Teddy.” That’s on top of the existing, less formal and more casually named “Get Sh*t Done” award. The currently quarterly accolade is now awarded monthly and includes a big mug and glass plate – “A cheers to you” – with nominations submitted by directors to human resources each month.

“The Teddy” was inspired by a famous quote in Teddy Roosevelt’s 1910 speech, “The Man In The Arena” delivered in Paris. It embodies the concept of daring to be great, which sometimes might lead to failure, but daring with the best intentions always will have support.

Nominations can be submitted quarterly by staff members at TeamRubicon.org. Anyone is eligible for nominations, which go directly to CEO Jake Wood. The winner receives a golden teddy bear, certificate presented by Wood, a profile on the organization’s career page, and a cool $100 in cash. Correctly answering some Team Rubicon trivia questions from the CEO could yield additional cash.

Team Rubicon revamped its employee recognition program to align with cultural principles that were codified earlier in 2015, according to Candice Schmitt, director of human resources.

Putting it in writing was important after making some support functions and added some capacity to remote staff and allow employees to focus on the mission and supporting our volunteers,” she said.

Continued on page 4
America's emblem stands for great strength and long life.

With that in mind, let’s talk retirement.
Continued from page 2

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 knick-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.

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By ANDY SIGEDE

Gerald Chertavian, founder and CEO of Year Up, which focuses on helping young adults in urban communities, likes to think of himself as a “chief people officer.” The organization already boasts a competitive salary, up to 5 percent matching on contributions to employees’ 401(k) plans and four weeks of vacation after the first year. But, Chertavian is keeping his ear to the ground.

Boston-based Year Up collects staff feedback through a variety of means, including surveys and questions submitted anonymously in a town-hall style format. Questions are “voted up” by staff and are answered by organizational leaders via video call to Year Up’s staff in 13 regions. More flexible work schedules evolved from staff response. Year Up staff members now have the option of starting their workday earlier, later or to work four 10-hour days as opposed to the typical 9-to-5, five days per week.

“It requires constant listening, attention and willingness to adapt,” Chertavian said of management. “Not a day goes by in my life as a CEO that I don’t express my sincere appreciation.”

Managers at CAP Tulsa, an anti-poverty and childhood education organization in Tulsa, Okla., take a few approaches for making sure staff members feel included and valued, according to Karen Kiely, chief operating officer. Kiely issues notes to staff every two weeks, recognizing things such as grants received or employees featured in news articles. The HR team collects accomplishments such as promotions, earned degrees, certifications and speaking engagements and highlights them quarterly on the organization’s homepage.

“This is a very complex organization,” Pitchett said. “There are a lot of things that we do around our mission. I think folks who come here, it’s not something that they can pick up after a few weeks. We have an extensive on-boarding process. I’ve been here just under two years and I’m still learning.”

AHA, headquartered in Dallas, Texas, places a good deal of accountability on leaders to ensure that each of the organization’s 3,000 employees feels important and in the loop. The everyday effort is HR supported, but leader driven, Pitchett said. Metrics such as turnover rate, which stands at about 13 percent, are monitored as a lack of retention slows progress.

“Leaders understand that they own those conversations with their folks,” said Pitchett. “At the end of the day, when their folks aren’t engaged or understand what they’re supposed to be doing, it surfaces pretty quickly.”

AHA ranked 14th overall and first among large nonprofits on NPT’s Best Nonprofits to Work list. All five large organizations have appeared on the list at least once in the previous reports, meaning that sustained employee satisfaction and engagement are possible, but seldom easy or direct.

Straightforward metrics, such as liking the work one is doing (96 percent), enjoying coworkers (96 percent), and satisfaction with salary and benefits (90 percent), are among the key metrics separating large organizations that made the list and ones that didn’t make the cut. Less tangible benchmarks such as feeling treated as a person as opposed to a number (91 percent of large organizations on the list as opposed to 67 percent not on list), trust in leaders calling about employee wellbeing (91 percent to 64 percent), and feeling as though quality work is properly recognized (82 percent to 57 percent), are just as prevalent.

“People inherently want to be a part of a successful team. We have to keep our eye on the prize and that’s being the best we can be in accomplishing our mission.”

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 on 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.
BY ANDY SEGEDIN

Kir 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 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

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stands at 8 percent and leaders have worked to-ward improving employee satisfaction through surveys and with an employee advisory board. The board, comprised of about 10 elected em-
ployees, vets staff ideas and suggestions and brings them to leadership. Additional emphasis was placed on finding strong fits in the hiring process, Jewell said, a priority given that the foundation plans to hire 20 development officers before its next campaign in about three years.  

“We kid around it as the gauntlet,” Jewell said. “You’re going to meet a lot of people. We now are at a place where, if people see a red or orange flag around someone’s fit (within the or- ganization), they will vocalize it. We try to be more intentional about the culture fit.”

Kessler Foundation in West Orange, N.J., is similarly dependent on the hiring process to fos-
ter a positive work environment. The foundation serves individuals with disabilities. It had a vol-
untary turnover rate of 12 percent last year, but has managed to retain nearly 100 percent of manag-
ers and scientists in recent years, accord-
ing to Roger DeRose, president and CEO.  

When changes do occur, as they did a few years ago when two research directors de-
parted, Kessler relies on target interviewing to find strong replacements. Prospective additions meet with representatives from several disci-
plines within the organization — each with a very specific focus for their questions that highlight areas including teamwork, communications and problem solving.

The process prevents applicants from be-
coming prepped early on by the types of ques-
tions they will field and also provides a greater understanding of the individual, DeRose said. The interviewers get together and discuss the focus of their meetings and their impressions.  

“A lot of presidents and CEOs [will say] ‘We became the best business because of time off, salary, the work environment is flexible and comfortable. We invest in employees,’ ” DeRose said. “Everybody is going to say those types of things. But I really think it comes down to, what is the mission of the organization and can people relate to that mission?’

That isn’t to imply that Kessler, the sixth-
rated, medium-sized organization and 13th overall, switches to autopilot once a hire is made. A spot bonus for meeting and exceeding expectations is one method used to convey ap-
preciation. For example, a scientist who wins a grant for the foundation will immediately receive a spot bonus from a few hundred to a few thou-
sand dollars based on the grant size. Similarly, an employee might receive a spot bonus for tak-
ing a leadership role in organizing a semi-annual foundation meeting.

“It’s not just the scientific wins. It’s also rec-
ognizing smaller performance achievements in the organization to say to the individual that we appreciate the work that you are doing,” DeRose said.

Quality work at C Finna, formerly Great Lakes Capital Fund, in Lansing, Mich., is met with some end-of-year time off. “We kind of slow the company down for that two weeks,” said Mark McDaniel, president and CEO, of the holiday season. “It’s almost a two-week holiday. We have a lot going on year end, but if your work is wound up, you don’t have to come in.”

Cinnaire takes a few outside-the-box ap-
proaches when it comes to time off. Employees are provided with time off for volunteer service. McDaniel recently unveiled an unlimited em-
ployee vacation plan, which is not tied to earned or accrued time. Employees may take as much time off as they like provided goals are met and a workflow problem isn’t created by the absence.  

“It’s contrary to everybody’s thoughts on va-
cation,” McDaniel said. “I’ve been studying this for a year. The biggest message to people is ‘We trust you. We’re all professionals, we shouldn’t all judge your vacation time.’ ”

The time off hasn’t restricted Cinnaire’s lead-
ers’ ambition. The organization slots in at 21st in The NPT survey, eighth among medium-sized nonprofits and hopes to become one of the five largest community development financial insti-
tutions in the country within the next 10 years.  

Cinnaire employees sketch out organiza-
tional growth during an annual two-day summit, which focuses on specific growth themes. Sum-
mits are structured to promote employee growth and provide optimum service while also attempting to make work more engaging and less draining for staff.  

Emerge! experienced a 25-percent voluntary turnover rate last fiscal year. Burnout and em-
ployee moving on to pursue advanced degrees are common, making traditional methods of evaluating turnover poor indicators of morale, Mercurio-Sakwa said. Instead, Emerge! con-
ducts satisfaction surveys throughout the year and pays attention to departures not meeting the typical profile.  

Employee appreciation is promoted through-
out the year with events such as the annual potluck arranged by the culture club, quarterly team building and monthly staff meetings fea-
turing activities and snacks.  

Emerge! operates a “Wow bucks” program in which employees give the fake currency to their coworkers for going above and beyond. Accu-
mulated bucks lead to prizes such as gift cards and Emerge! gear. “Essentially it’s employee-
ner. EDGE incentivizes employees to hit the gym, eat right and go for regular medical, dental and vi-
sion check-ups to receive points.  

Points can lead to money toward a gym membership, wireless earphones, 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 Jeffries. Most of the employees are married with children and have a limited time for them-

ers. “They always put themselves last and we wanted to make a fun way to have some incen-
tive to take care of themselves,” Jeffries said.

Some employees have lost in excess of 70 pounds with the help of the program. Those ef-
forts have been met with a streamlined health plan that no longer differentiates between ex-
empt 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 or-
ganization and fifth overall, has cut its turnover rate almost in half since 2011, from 33 to 17 percent. “It’s our employees are telling us what’s going on,” Jeffries 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 lifelong executive director retired about six months in, thrusting Sanchez into the interim and then fulltime role.  

CLSMF, the 24th ranked medium-sized non-
profit and 47th overall in the NPT Top 50, has long boasted a quality benefits program includ-
ing 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-
count is 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 benefits provides them with goals and keeps everyone accountable, mission-
driven and motivated, according to Sanchez.

Her relatively quick climb up the ladder pro-
vides Sanchez with the credibility of still being one of the staff. Asked what she would share with other leaders based on her perspective, Sanchez emphasized honesty and directness. “I think the answer is candor, transparency and communication,” she said. “I think that’s really it. People want to know that everybody that they think is being genuine with them and in line with their goals. That’s what they want.”
Best Small Organizations
Fighting burnout keys success at small organizations

BY MARK HRYNAK

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.

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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 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.