



Creating A Mental Health-Friendly Workplace: Grants Plus

Before Lauren Steiner founded Grants Plus, she had a hard time finding a fulfilling job that allowed for balance between her work and her personal life. She believed most organizations mainly seemed interested in “What can you do for us?” She decided to create a place where she would want to work and where employees would be acknowledged as whole people. In 2007, Steiner founded Grants Plus, which she built with a focus on the importance of health, well-being, and work enjoyment.

If I created a work environment that put my health and well-being in a prominent place, then it would allow me to do the best work I can do.

~ Lauren Steiner, President and Founder

Initially relying on subcontractors to start the business, Steiner hired the first full-time employees in 2011. Since then, Grants Plus has grown by 20 to 30 percent annually. By 2017, it had 17 employees. As the company grows, the leadership team continues to ensure Grants Plus is a happy and healthy place to work.

History Of Workplace Health At Grants Plus

Although Grants Plus emphasized mental and emotional health from the start, in 2014 Steiner made a formal commitment to have Grants Plus be a mental health-friendly workplace. She found the American Psychological Association (APA) Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award criteria and created a task force to review company practices and make improvements based on APA standards. The task force branded this the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Initiative (PHWI). Grants Plus won the APA award for the state of Ohio in 2015, and it won the national award in 2016. As Grants Plus grows and adapts, it continues to use the APA award criteria as a framework for its workplace health program. This helps the company maintain its focus on employee happiness and health while also providing a structure for its approach to the PHWI.



Grants Plus: At A Glance

Location: Cleveland, OH

Size: 17 employees

Industry: Fundraising consulting firm serving primarily non-profit organizations

North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Sector:
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services

Psychologically Healthy Workplace Initiative

The PHWI at Grants Plus supports:

- A culture that promotes not only excellence in work but also responsiveness, openness, and fun
- Emphasis on employee engagement and feedback
- Dedication to investing in employees to promote mental health and well-being through:
 - Personal health and wellness benefits
 - Flexible work arrangements
 - Extensive professional growth and development

APA Categories Of Psychologically Healthy Workplace Practices

APA identifies five categories of psychologically healthy workplace practices:

1. [Employee involvement](#)
2. [Work-life balance](#)
3. [Employee growth and development](#)
4. [Health and safety](#)
5. [Employee recognition](#)

Grants Plus Nurtures A Mental Health-Friendly Workplace Culture

Healthy Culture Reflected In Values, Leadership Approaches, And Regular Interactions

Part of the Grants Plus vision is for its business model to be seen as an ideal outside the industry. Leaders want to be known for having an exceptional culture, reputation balanced with work/life, and smart, happy employees. When talking about Grants Plus culture, employees describe it as responsive, adaptable, welcoming, open, and intentional. They note that Grants Plus values—truth, bravery, hard work, laughter, excellence, and teamwork—are intentional and used, even during biannual employee performance reviews. One employee commented, “I got a rating on laughter!” While Grants Plus cares deeply about its reputation for excellence and client satisfaction, leaders know that it’s not enough to focus on these outcomes alone. Leadership cares about not just the end result but how they get there. Were they truthful? Were they brave? Did they have some fun and laugh? Did they work collaboratively? This approach helps shape the culture at Grants Plus.

Steiner and team leads make a habit of acknowledging employees’ nonwork lives, celebrating success, and reminding employees of the resources available to support their well-

being. In one monthly all-staff meeting, Steiner kicked things off with an ice breaker, inviting everyone to share something they accomplished before age 18. At the end of this activity, everyone in the room was engaged, there was a lot of positive energy and laughter, and everyone knew a little bit more about each other. Steiner makes a point of starting with these kinds of activities at each meeting. A team lead uses a similar approach. She begins each meeting by having team members share news—good or bad—from their lives. Birthdays, holidays, and work anniversaries are celebrated at monthly staff meetings, and employees can post celebration notes through companywide social media to highlight excellent work or client satisfaction.

Steiner also takes advantage of in-person meetings to remind employees of the benefits available to them. During an all-staff meeting, she encouraged employees to take advantage (as appropriate) of free counseling sessions available through the employee assistance program. Employees say Grants Plus is walking the walk, with the emphasis on a healthy culture embraced every day from the top down.

Support For A Healthy Culture Affects Approach To Client Management And Interaction

Grants Plus leaders recognize that their clients’ cultures can be very different from their own. It actively seeks out clients who value mental health and employee well-being, and it clearly communicates the company culture to clients by outlining contracts with expectations about work hours and turnaround time. Leadership will negotiate with clients or even cancel projects if employee health and well-being are compromised.

The Chief Executive Officer of a local organization commented on how Grants Plus helped him and his organization during a crisis period when his Development Director left with little notice. He said, rather than focusing on revenue, Grants Plus helped to “keep our reputation together and begin to heal the organization itself.” He added that Grants Plus staff served as a lifeline, stepping in to fill his organization’s needs and ultimately helping him identify a new Development Director. Grants Plus was so successful that this organization no longer needs the firm’s services.

Workplace Health Awards

- Psychologically Health Workplace Award, 2015 (sponsored by the Ohio Psychological Association)
- Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award, 2016 (sponsored by the American Psychological Association)



In 2017, the Grants Plus team (seen here) hosted a celebration marking two milestones: 10 years since it set out to assist organizations in seeking grants, and \$100 million in grant funding raised in partnership with clients. Clients and community members are invited to join such celebrations.

Beyond The Workplace: Sharing A Healthy Culture With Clients And The Community

Grants Plus sponsors client and community events that showcase healthy cultures. For example, Grants Plus once sponsored a comedian to add some fun and laughter to a client networking event. The company sponsored another event, for clients and friends, about achieving happiness.

A former client commented on Grants Plus' success with bringing clients and community together to think differently about work and client relationships. Grants Plus also weaves health and well-being topics into its newsletters for clients, partners, and community members.

Employee Involvement And Feedback Shape Grants Plus Culture

Recognizing the importance of involving employees in meaningful ways for job satisfaction, morale, and overall happiness,¹ Grants Plus promotes employee involvement. With employees working remotely much of the time, leaders recognize the need to support team building and collaboration. One approach is a small-team or "pod" structure. This includes a lead and two to five staff members. Pods meet regularly to discuss best practices, resolve client issues, and stay abreast of companywide issues. They also support employee involvement and team building by planning outings during paid work time. Examples include an escape room adventure and a shuffleboard outing.

¹American Psychological Association (APA), Center for Organizational Excellence. Resources for employers: employee involvement. [cited 2018 March 2]. Available from: <https://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/creatingahealthyworkplace/employeeinvolvement>.

From the very beginning, my unique offerings, talents, skills, and interests were nurtured and acknowledged. . . I always felt like I could bring my honest feedback or concerns about my role, about my interests, my frustrations. . .and that I was always heard.

~ Dana, Director of Client Engagement

At Grants Plus, employees have many venues to provide feedback on what works and what doesn't, and the company works diligently to incorporate changes based on that feedback. Opportunities for employee feedback include a communication platform for internal suggestions.

Steiner takes advantage of the small size of Grants Plus by conducting one-on-one meetings twice a year with all employees, as well as quick informal polls. At an all-staff meeting, she learned that most employees would be interested in a professional development session focused on financial planning, and she made a note to work this into the professional development calendar.

Grants Plus partnered with a firm that specializes in workplace culture to develop a quarterly survey and collect anonymous employee feedback in five domains of company culture. The survey includes two open-ended questions on what the company should keep doing and stop doing. Since Grants Plus began using the survey in 2014, overall satisfaction (across all survey items) has been at 83 percent or higher, with an average of 90 percent. Leaders set annual

Grants Plus Culture Survey

Sample statements from the five domains:

- Mission, purpose, and values. "I understand what my company does for its clients."
- Culture. "I feel engaged." "Grants Plus allows me to achieve an effective work/life balance."
- Organizational structure. "I know who I can go to when I need to solve problems or have ideas."
- Leadership. "My skills and talents are utilized effectively." "I am empowered."
- Team. "People have each other's backs here." "I am comfortable with conflict here."

goals for overall satisfaction, and when satisfaction scores dip in any area, or they receive consistent feedback on open-ended questions, they work to address the problem. Grants Plus shared one example.

In April 2014, 70 percent of responding employees agreed with the statement, “I am comfortable with conflict here.” That score was below standard, so Grants Plus arranged a professional development session on managing conflict, with exercises for employees. The company also bought all employees a book, “The Power of the Positive No.” In the next quarter, 100 percent of responding employees said they were comfortable with conflict. Leaders emphasize and model Grants Plus values, especially bravery, which they define as being willing to take on tasks outside of your comfort zone and learn while doing, being proactive, and not waiting to be asked to take initiative. By clarifying expectations to avoid conflict or speaking up to resolve conflict, employees can relieve stress and direct their mental energy productively.

In both the January 2017 and April 2017 culture surveys, Steiner received feedback that tracking time spent on different projects was stressful, and employees didn’t like how taking a break from their work extended their day. Although she couldn’t change the need for employees to track time, she did start a paid, personal wellness time benefit (described below in Employee Health and Wellness Offerings) midyear. She noted that she didn’t know if it would work as a long-term solution, but through anecdotal feedback in both the July and October surveys, employees expressed that they felt heard with regard to this issue. She looks forward to seeing how this new benefit affects employee satisfaction.

Investment In Employees Helps Sustain A Healthy Culture

Employee Health And Wellness Offerings

When Steiner started Grants Plus, she knew it was important to directly support employee health, including mental health.



Grants Plus staff participated in a modern dance session with professional dancers, which ended with a discussion about connections between the experience and everyday work challenges.

Despite its small size, Grants Plus offers health insurance with mental health coverage. For each enrolled employee, insurance fully covers up to 20 outpatient visits per year (after the employee meets the medical deductible). Grants Plus also offers an employee assistance program with up to four free counseling sessions. Weekly “Mindful Mondays” feature a Grants Plus employee guiding employees in a 15-minute meditation (in person or virtually). In late 2017, the company began providing employees with an annual “Wellness Credit” of \$150 to use for personal wellness (e.g., for Weight Watchers or to purchase a gym membership or fitness or yoga classes). Grants Plus also introduced 30 minutes of paid time for daily personal wellness. Employees can choose how and when to use this time during the workday, whether to volunteer at a child’s school, walk the dog, practice yoga, or commute at quieter times.

Flexible Work Arrangements And Attention To Workloads

At Grants Plus, recognizing employees as whole people involves recognizing their full lives outside of work and varying needs to support a work-life balance. Grants Plus embraces flexible work hours and location for all employees. Other than some in-person staff and client meetings, employees are able to work from home or other locations of their choosing. The company doesn’t expect them to be available outside of their scheduled hours for meetings. In addition, employees have flexibility during the workday, as long as they communicate their plans ahead of time. Shannon, a Consultant, noted the flexibility helped to remove a lot of pressure. In addition, she saves money by commuting less and needing a smaller professional wardrobe.

If I don't have time to do physical activity... I wouldn't be able to bring my best to my work... There isn't a sense of being boxed into a schedule that wouldn't allow me to tend to these other areas of my life.

~ Dana, Director of Client Engagement

Grants Plus works to accommodate personal needs. Several employees work less than a 40-hour workweek, but remain eligible for many Grants Plus benefits. Emily, a Senior Consultant and mother of two young children, has worked for five years as a part-time employee (22 hours per week), allowing her to have both a fulfilling career with professional growth and “adventure days” with her kids. Another employee said the flexibility allowed her to attend an early evening yoga class, knowing that she could complete her work later in the evening, if needed. Employees appreciate that when they are on vacation, managers do not expect them to check email or be available in any way. Leaders regularly check in with staff about workload, adjusting it as needed to ensure balance.

Employee Testimonials: Recognizing Skills And Talents

An employee shared with Steiner that she enjoyed the editing process, believing she had a talent for uncovering gaps, improving writing, and providing feedback to writers. Identifying a need for editing, Grants Plus was able to create a new role for this employee as an in-house editor. The company began offering editing services to clients directly. These efforts help employees use skills fully, leading to happier staff and growth for the company.

Employee Growth And Professional Development

Steiner recognizes Grants Plus employees as the company's greatest asset, and she believes that it is important to invest in helping employees improve their craft and themselves. As reinforcement of the connection between professional development and psychological health,² Grants Plus employees say they feel valued and acknowledged. It invests in employee careers through mentoring and extensive internal and external professional development opportunities. Grants Plus pays for up to 50 work hours per employee per year for external professional development opportunities. Monthly all-staff meetings include a professional development session on wellness topics such as conscious leadership, mindfulness, work-life balance, or personal safety; or on career topics such as leadership, writing and editing, and time management.

Challenges And Future Plans

As the company grows, Steiner is always thinking about how Grants Plus can sustain its wellness offerings and healthy culture. She is dedicated to maintaining the Grants Plus culture, even as the company becomes more virtual and it gets harder to bring all employees together. To help ensure a sustainable approach, Steiner regularly consults with experts, including her Chief Financial Officer.

Going forward, Steiner wants to build a psychologically healthy community of practice with other organizations. She feels so strongly about the benefits of emphasizing psychological health and well-being that she'd like to be able to better spread the message to other businesses.

Advice For Other Employers

Steiner encouraged other companies (or departments within a company) interested in psychological well-being to pick something in their culture that isn't working and make changes. She encouraged them to be sure to mix in some fun, which is an important element of psychological health. "Be together as people, and maybe laugh," Steiner said.

Recommendations For Action

- Learn more about the [APA recommendations for creating a psychologically healthy workplace](#).
- Consider assessing your organization's culture. One no-cost resource is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Healthy Worksite Program Health and Safety Climate Survey (INPUTS).
 - [Survey](#)
 - [User Manual](#)
- If you are in a leadership position, consider how your engagement with other leadership and employees affects organization culture.
- Consider how you can help employees more easily meet their wellness needs, whether you allow flexible scheduling to incorporate wellness breaks into the workday or offer wellness opportunities on paid employee time.

The [CDC Workplace Health Resource Center \(WHRC\)](#) is a one-stop shop for organizations to find credible tools, guides, case studies, and other resources to design, develop, implement, evaluate, and sustain workplace health promotion programs. Visit <https://www.cdc.gov/WHRC> to find more case studies of workplace health programs in the field.

²American Psychological Association (APA), Center for Organizational Excellence. Resources for employers: employee involvement. [cited 2018 March 2]. <https://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/creatingahealthyworkplace/employeeinvolvement>