



Empowering Employees To 'Find Their Why' For Wellness: Great River Energy

Great River Energy (GRE) is committed to a rewards-based, or "carrot," approach to employee wellness. Over the last 10 years, the program has seen steady or improved health outcomes and high participation rates. Company employees, program staff, and leadership attribute the success of the program to a culture that cares about and empowers employees, diverse and dynamic well-being opportunities, and the program's high visibility throughout the company.

GRE's Wellness Program

A focus on wellness has been a part of GRE since 1982, beginning with weekly walks for employees and healthy food options in the cafeteria at discounted prices. In 2007, GRE engaged a private vendor to administer its Health Management Program (HMP), which set up a financial incentive structure and online portal for the program. Over time, the program evolved and expanded its definition of wellness beyond physical well-being to include financial; intellectual and personal; emotional, mental, and spiritual; and community well-being.

GRE's wellness program is led by Jason Vollbrecht, Leader, Benefits. Carol Jacobs, Benefits Analyst, supports the program, and Kandace Olsen, GRE's Chief Culture Officer, provides input and approval when needed. GRE's corporate and employee-driven wellness offerings are largely organized through the HMP and the HMP portal. The HMP is available to all employees and their spouses or domestic partners, regardless of insurance status. Employees can earn up to \$1,000 each year for participating in the program; they can earn \$300 for completing a health risk questionnaire, and an additional \$700 for completing a biometric screening and participating in a wide variety of programs and events.

Employees may earn points toward the \$700 through company-led wellness programs and events, as well as through opportunities provided by the private vendor. Many of these activities come from GRE's wellness committees, which are employee-driven groups that plan wellness challenges, events, and educational offerings. As GRE expanded the wellness program, it integrated new offerings into the incentive structure. For example, employees can earn points for using GRE's employee assistance program (EAP), which offers eight free mental health sessions per year and other assistance with stressful life events. The GRE wellness



Great River Energy: At A Glance

Locations: Headquartered in Maple Grove, MN, with additional sites in Minnesota and North Dakota

Size: Approximately 264 employees at headquarters and 613 employees at other sites

Industry: Electricity

North American Industry
Classification System (NAICS) Sector:
Utilities

program team partnered with staff from GRE's retirement group to develop opportunities for financial well-being. Employees can earn points for attending financial education sessions, for meeting with financial advisors, or for viewing information online related to their retirement plans.

Workplace Health Awards

- Well Workplace Award, 2017 (Gold Level)
(sponsored by the Wellness Council of America)
- 100 Healthiest Workplaces in America Award,
2014–2017 (sponsored by Healthiest Employers)

GRE's Success

Multiple national awards have recognized GRE's success, and participation in the HMP has stayed consistently high. Between 83 percent and 85 percent of GRE employees





GRE's headquarters are set on a lake with a one-mile walking path around it. The company's wellness program includes a weekly walk that started in 1982, but the program has since grown to promote a broader definition of employee well-being.

participated in biometric screening and health risk assessments each year since the HMP was fully underway in 2008. In 2017, 68 percent of all employees earned the full \$1,000 incentive for their participation in the program. The company also observed steady or improved health outcomes. For a cohort of 438 employees who participated every year from 2008 to 2016, GRE saw overall improvements for blood pressure (from 37 percent with blood pressure lower than 120/80 in 2008 to 43 percent in 2016) and HDL "good cholesterol" (from 77 percent with HDL numbers higher than 40 in 2008 to 89 percent in 2016).

Employees said the program promotes camaraderie with coworkers, helps them realize why well-being is important, helps them achieve work-life balance, and makes them feel more energetic and more productive at work. Recent retirees have even requested continued access to the HMP. GRE's board of directors, interested in leading by example, recently requested the opportunity to participate in the program, without the financial incentives.

GRE's wellness program costs just three percent of the overall benefits budget. Vollbrecht noted the importance of having the wellness program budget as a dedicated line item. "If we need to reallocate dollars, we do," he said. "Just having a specific, dedicated line item for us shows that the company cares. It's not like we're trying to beg, borrow, and steal from a different line item [to make wellness happen]."

GRE's Approach Helps Employees Discover Why Their Wellness Is Important

Although outsiders may assume that the financial incentives are the carrot, the real motivations seem specific to each employee—GRE's program encourages employees to "find

their why," which has come to overshadow the financial incentives. These incentives show employees that GRE is fully invested in their well-being. The program's approach is successful because it is part of a culture that cares about and empowers employees, has diverse and dynamic offerings, and its emphasis on wellness is obvious throughout the company.

GRE Helps Employees "Find Their Why"

A true motivation for employees is not going to be dollars and cents. You really have to be supportive of employees in finding their personal why? Why do I want to lose weight? Why do I want to focus on this high risk of type 2 diabetes?

~ Carol Jacobs, Benefits Analyst

Why It Works

Wellness Is Part Of A Culture Of Caring And Employee Empowerment

GRE's overall culture served as a foundation from which the wellness program grew. Olsen shared, "Companies that haven't defined their culture but want to launch a wellness program are going to have a lot of difficulty. Our wellness programs really evolved from our culture." GRE pays careful attention to its culture, which is reflected in Olsen's title and role of Chief Culture Officer. She oversees employee engagement and development, human resources, and corporate communications and works to ensure that GRE reflects its corporate culture externally to stakeholders in the same way that the company promotes its culture internally. At GRE, a culture of caring about employees and empowering them to take action is central to the success of its program.

Safety is also part of GRE's culture, with care for employee safety efforts extending to the home. Employees regularly receive safety messages and take-home items, as a reminder to make good decisions about their physical safety. Items include protective eye wear, ear protection, life jackets, and sun block. Employees also receive annual fire extinguisher training.

Our employees are our most valued asset, and of course we want them to live healthy, happy, productive lives, so this is our contribution to that.

~ David Saggau, CEO

Our management and our employees believe in what we are doing here as far as wellness goes, and I'll say that from the bottom of my heart. People care.

~ Jeff, Facilities Maintenance Coordinator

GRE's wellness program promotes employee responsibility for their own wellness through access to resources, education, wellness reminders, and activities. Many employees noted that they see the wellness programming as a natural extension of the company's care for their personal safety.

In 2015, GRE brought in worksite wellness experts to audit wellness culture throughout the organization, through an employee survey and employee interviews. The wellness experts used the results to better communicate to employees that they had permission to focus on personal wellness during work hours. Employees noted that support comes from the top down.

The culture of caring and empowerment is also seen in GRE's emphasis on an employee driven approach. GRE encourages employees to join employee-led groups that align with their interests. GRE offers many options for employee involvement through safety committees, a long term health care strategy team that makes health care plan decisions, an inclusion committee to ensure that all perspectives are represented, groups that review and revise company values, and wellness committees. These committees of volunteers who are passionate about wellness solicit feedback, conduct employee surveys, share employee feedback at monthly meetings, and plan and promote activities and events. GRE's emphasis on caring and employee empowerment seems to be one reason employees enjoy working at—and staying with—GRE. The company has low overall employee turnover, with a 2013–2017 average of 5.2 percent.

I feel empowered. I feel fortunate that I work for a company that values my wellness—that values me being healthy, and the best employee I can be, and the best person I can be.

~ Chris, wellness committee member and
Leader of Executive Services

Wellness Is Highly Visible

GRE takes advantage of multiple channels and approaches to communicate wellness to its employees and make programs visible across the organization. CEO David Saggau has

participated in GRE's weekly walks around the lake, and Olsen is often seen working out at the fitness center.

To maintain a high profile, the wellness committees reach out regularly through activities, events, and even small gifts. For example, North Dakota employees received valentines promoting heart health that contained dark chocolate, olive oil, and healthy recipes. Events and reminders are features of monthly department meetings. In addition, employees learn about wellness events through the company intranet, emails, employee mailboxes, posters, bulletin boards, and a quarterly wellness newsletter mailed to their homes. The program also relies on word-of-mouth about activities or challenges, which encourages friendly competition—whether among coworkers and teams, or between GRE and other companies. Employees noted that almost everyone talks about wellness at GRE, and publicizing wellness helps them make it a priority.

Wellness Offerings Are Diverse And Dynamic

GRE offers an array of opportunities in which employees can participate. In addition, new program components are regularly introduced to maintain participation and adapt to the changing needs of employees.

[There are] such a variety of programs and opportunities ... I think there's virtually something for everyone.

~ Sandra, Director of Corporate
Business Development

GRE also makes access to wellness opportunities as easy as possible. Employees can participate individually, as part of a GRE team, or with their families. Staff can adjust their schedules so they can work out at the fitness center during the workday. GRE holds many events during the workday. For employees who prefer to participate outside the workday, GRE also offers activities on weekends. Many employees noted how much they appreciate GRE-sponsored wellness activities that were open to their families and felt that getting to know coworkers and their families helped increase camaraderie and support for work-life balance. Staff can also earn points for doing external activities. Employees appreciated that at GRE, well-being is about more than being physically active and eating well, and that at different stages in their lives they may need to focus on a particular dimension of health, such as planning for retirement.

Vollbrecht and Jacobs manage program change by identifying what is working well and what is not. They work closely with their HMP vendor, benefits broker consultants,

There is a financial incentive ... but personally, I value much more the general knowledge and awareness ... and the fact that it's benefiting myself, my wife, and the little one at home ... if there wasn't that consistent reminder, likely I wouldn't think about it as much as I do.

~ Reese, Leader of Operations and Maintenance Support

and health insurance provider for recommendations on improving biometric outcomes, reducing health care claims, and improving overall participation. They also rely on employee feedback, most of which comes through the wellness committee members. Employees also share their feedback directly with Vollbrecht or Jacobs. Vollbrecht and Jacobs also reach out to sites where they see lower participation to find out how they can support wellness at those sites.

The wellness committees also play an important role in keeping the program fresh. When committee members plan for the year ahead, they consider which past events worked well and new offerings to introduce. They use employee

feedback to help guide their decisions. Vollbrecht noted the importance of this approach, "We encourage our committees to have their own personality and individual identity. They understand their work groups, their cultures, and their families. They do a great job of making it their own and helping employees 'find their why' with wellness and well-being."

Challenges And Future Plans

Although GRE takes pride in a wellness program that is dynamic, leaders noted it can be challenging to recognize when an element of the program or company culture is getting in the way of promoting employee wellness and to make the appropriate changes. For example, GRE used to have a requirement that spouses/domestic partners participate in the health risk assessment and biometric screening for employees to earn the full financial incentive. GRE became aware that it was difficult for spouses/partners to attend on-site events so updated the requirements to make their participation optional.

Going forward, GRE is exploring how to include children in the wellness program. The goal is well-aligned with GRE's culture of caring for employees and their families.

GRE Employees Have Many Ways To Practice Wellness And Earn Points Toward Incentives

- GRE-sponsored events and opportunities
 - On-site fitness centers at four locations, open 24/7 to employees and families
 - Walking path around the lake at headquarters, basketball courts (some sites)
 - Educational sessions on topics such as financial or emotional wellness, boat safety, and more
 - Healthy-eating events, such as Pass the Produce, Taco 'Bout Wellness, Sizzling Salads
 - Family-friendly events, such kayaking, bowling, YMCA day
 - Nutritional counseling (covered by GRE), coaching for wellness goals
- Wellness opportunities outside of work
 - Physical: Take a fitness class, join a sports league, participate in a walk or run event
 - Intellectual and personal: Attend a training/conference/show, read a book, go to an art museum
 - Financial: Attend a financial seminar or class, fund an emergency savings account, contact employee assistance program to discuss financial stressors
 - Emotional, mental, and spiritual: Set a 30-day personal challenge, talk to a counselor or clergy, contact the employee assistance program, take a stress management or meditation class
 - Community: Volunteer, donate blood, attend a community event, help a neighbor

Advice For Other Employers

- **Make sure your culture supports wellness:** Build wellness into the existing culture and help employees identify their motivation for wellness.
- **Start small and build from success:** Start simple, such as with a health risk assessment, and build on successes. Allocate resources based on need, and make changes to program elements that don't work.
- **Ensure support and commitment at all levels:** Upper and middle management should encourage and model participation and support employees to engage with wellness. Give employees the opportunity to help direct wellness programming.
- **Be flexible in your approach and offer a diverse program to employees:** Focus on multiple aspects of well-being, and offer a variety of events and ways to participate to attract more people to the program.



“Community” is one of the five well-being dimensions GRE promotes for its employees. One popular way that employees participate is by volunteering—either on their own or at events sponsored by GRE.

Recommendations For Action

- Learn more about [creating a culture of health](#) and [leadership commitment and support](#) to help ensure the success of your wellness efforts.
- Review [Health Risk Appraisals at the Worksite](#) to understand how you can use health risk appraisals as one tool to learn more about your employee population.
- To provide diverse wellness offerings, learn what you can do to support employee [financial health](#), [stress management](#), [social connectedness](#), [sleep](#), and [work-life balance](#).

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.