

SPECIAL AWARDS

Leadership at Top Workplaces lauded for a team-first approach

MICHAEL SCHROEDER Special to the State Journal

Mar 21, 2025

Caring for the mental health of clients requires a lot from counselors like Kelly Michiels-Weldon at Trailways Counseling, whether she's providing outpatient services virtually or at the Waunakee office or helping people in communities throughout the region.

Especially when work demands digging deep, employees say having reliable, caring leaders who have their backs is critical.

"I think that it's important in this field because we do deal with people who are in crises, so it can be really isolating," Michiels-Weldon said. "You need to know that you can call on someone just to get help and support."

Michiels-Weldon and Jill Symanski, a therapeutic mentor at Trailways, said they have just the kind of supportive team dynamic that gives them confidence in the leadership there. Their sentiment is clearly shared by others at Trailways, where partner and director of operations, Angie Grogan, won the special award for leadership among small organizations.

People are also reading...

- 1 **Polzin: How 2 key Wisconsin men's basketball sophomores navigate 'different era' of NIL**

- 2 **Wisconsin appeals court won't stop Musk's \$1M payments to voters after attorney general sues**
 - 3 **Trump's funding cuts threaten Wisconsin Ice Age Trail's projects and programs**
 - 4 **Our endorsement for Wisconsin superintendent of schools**
-

In addition to being accessible to team members, Grogan has drawn on her background in software development to ease administrative burdens.

“Angie and the team designed our own notetaking system — in addition to hiring extra people to help us with our case notes,” Symanski said. She points out that others on the leadership team — partners JoAnn M. Geiger, clinical director, and Sarah Grogan, director of business development — draw on their backgrounds to support the team.

“We believe in the power of a strengths-based team,” Angie Grogan said.

In fact, the Top Workplaces special award for leadership reflects that employees have “confidence in the leadership team” where they work. Based on that, Jeff Lenz, president and CEO at NCG Hospitality, and Steve Jacobson, founder and CEO of Fairway Independent Mortgage Corp., won the leadership special award for large and midsize companies, respectively.

Leading by example — and making sure employees have a voice

Of course difficult — even unpopular — decisions must sometimes be made by leaders. But employees and managers say that to feel supported and for workers to buy in, people at all levels of the company need a voice.

It all starts with listening and getting the opinions of others before making any decision, Jacobson said. Those who work at Top Workplaces also laud leaders for allowing employees to be who they are while giving clear guidance on what’s expected.

“Creating an environment where teammates can be themselves is important,” Jacobson said of his approach to leadership. “We all have strengths and weaknesses,” so he said, “It’s good to let people run in their lanes in safety without interference. We all learn from what we do. If teammates are safe to be themselves — whatever happens is merely a learning experience.”

Employees said leadership at NCG, including Lenz, also allows them the autonomy to grow and develop, while emphasizing the importance of working together.

“It comes down to trying to develop, through our mission and core values, a great culture where we have really highly engaged team members that understand the connection between what they do and the success of not only that individual hotel, but what we do as a company overall,” said Lenz.

Employees, in turn, take their cue from leaders.

“Jeff leads by example, operates with integrity, and is genuine and authentic in everything he does,” said Kari Kruchten, executive administrative manager at NCG Hospitality. She added that Lenz acknowledges and is appreciative of employee contributions and empowers staff by giving them the resources and tools to do their jobs effectively.

Some employers' traits are extra special

Top Workplaces special awards speak to what’s at the core of a positive, productive company culture where employees thrive. They gauge employee agreement with a variety of statements like, “I believe this company is going in the right direction.” Based on responses, companies are honored as exemplars — like Stoughton Health — which got the special award for direction.

“We believe those survey statements, for which the awards are based on, are really meaningful measures of the workplace experience,” explained Bob Helbig, media partnerships director for Energage, which conducts employee surveys.

“In addition to honoring companies as Top Workplaces for their overall scores, we choose to single out companies that have exceptionally high scores in specific survey areas. Chief among them are the leadership awards. We strongly believe that all good things within an organization start with great leadership,” Helbig said.

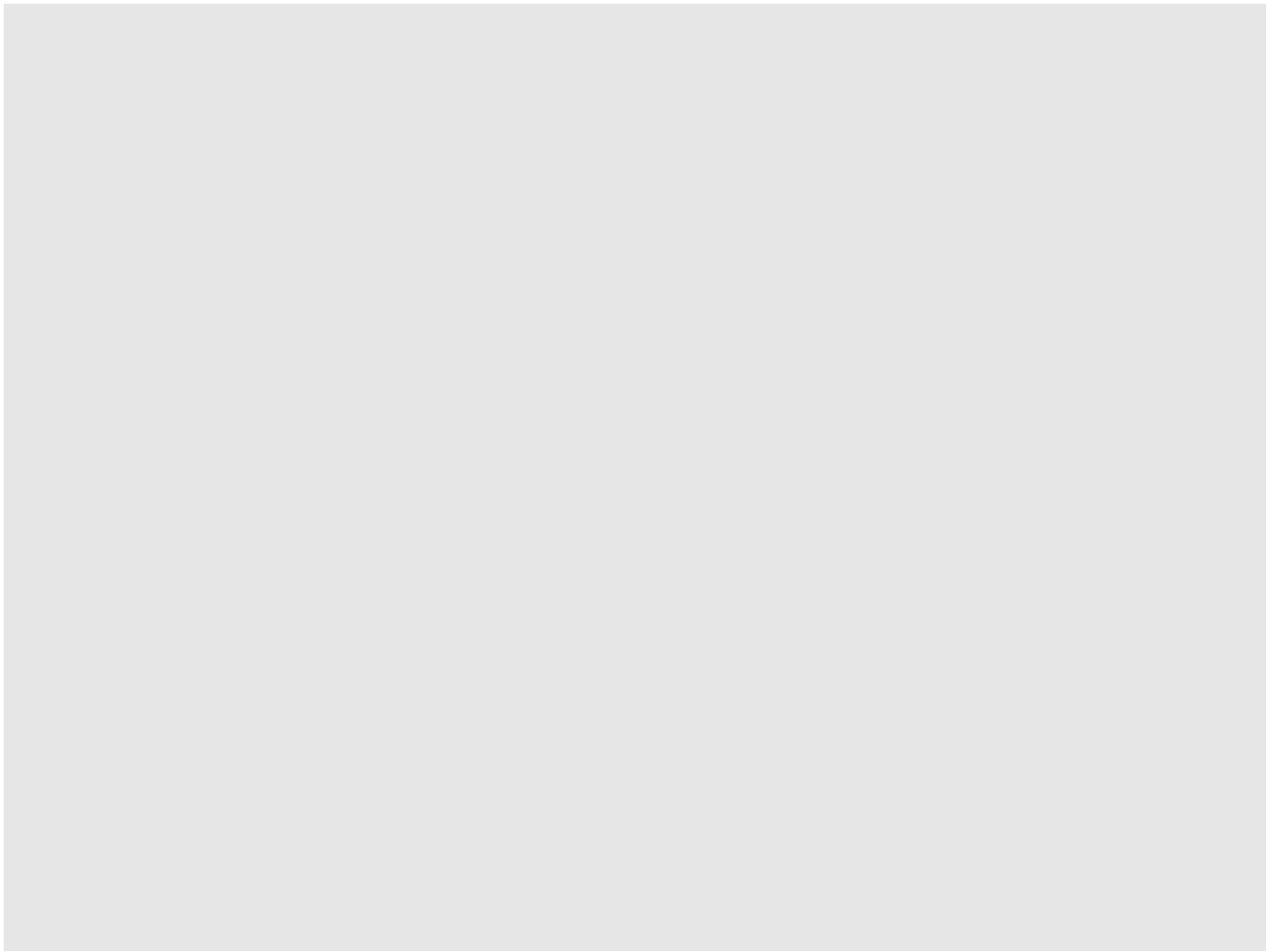
Accordingly, the leadership special award is given to not just one but three organizations — one small, one midsize and one large company.

It’s not just the top executive that an employee thinks about in regards to leadership, either. It’s also their experience with a direct manager that can raise or lower the quality of their work experience. Energage asks employees if they agree that, “My manager helps me learn and grow. My manager cares about my concerns.” Based on a high rate of positive responses to that statement, West Bend Insurance Company won the special award for managers.

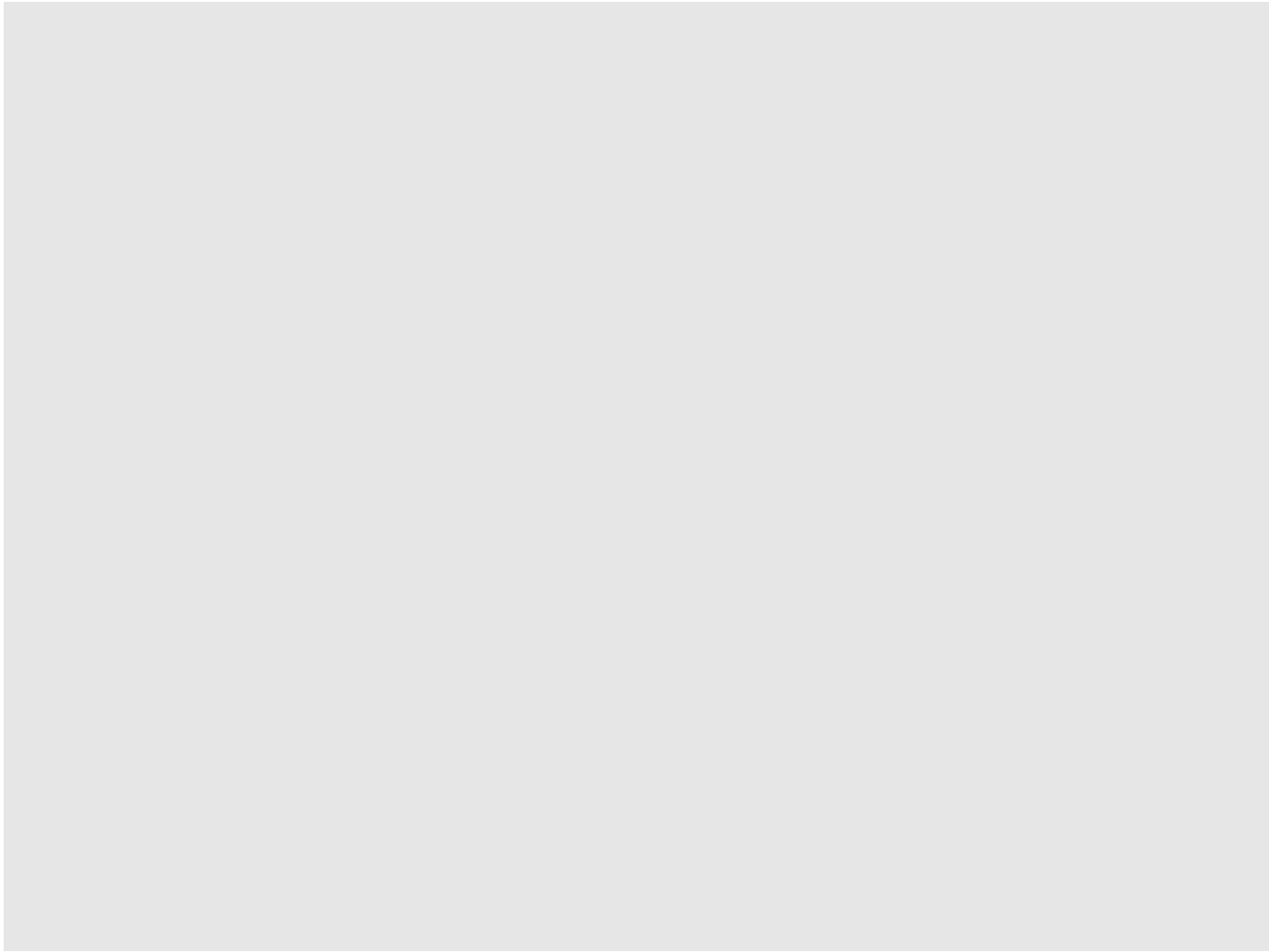
In total, 16 Top Workplaces special awards winners are honored (including those three companies that won for leadership) in 14 different categories. That includes the new ideas special award given to Fall River-based metals manufacturer EK for encouraging new ideas; the values special award given to an organization operating by strong values — convenience store and gas station chain Kwik Trip; the communication special award denoting that employees, “feel well-informed about important decisions at this company” won by Madison-based Wind River Payments; and the work-life flexibility special award given to Madison-based life sciences company Promega.

Whatever the workplace culture is like — whether a company excels or struggles in specific areas — it’s a safe bet that at most companies the tone is set by leadership. There’s strong correlation between the leadership award winners and where the companies rank on the Top Workplaces list, Helbig said.

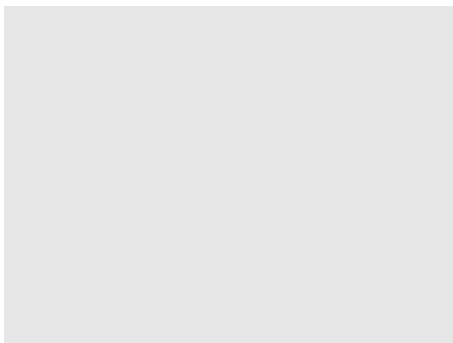
“We’ve always said the best things in an organization start with great leadership,” he reemphasized. “It’s very common that those leadership award winners are among the higher-ranking companies on the list.”



Grogan



Lenz



Jacobson

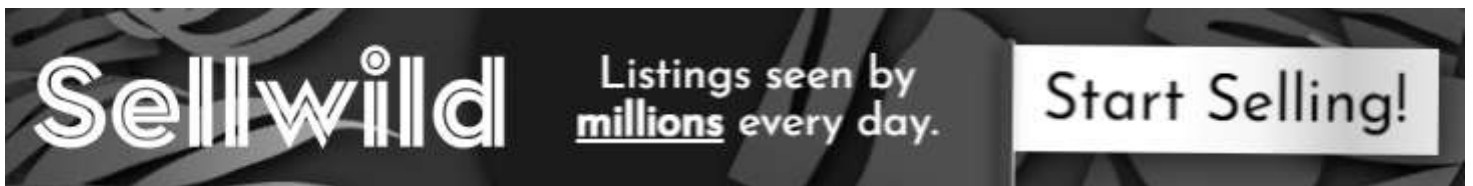
“It’s good to let people run in their lanes in safety without interference. We all learn from what we do. If teammates are safe to be themselves — whatever happens is merely a learning experience.”

Steve Jacobson, Fairway Independent Mortgage founder and CEO

“We believe in the power of a strengths-based team.”

Angie Grogan, Trailways Counseling director of operations

NCG Hospitality CEO Jeff Lenz says it's important that team members "understand the connection between what they do and the success of not only that individual hotel, but what we do as a company overall.”



Marketplace Sell Your Items - Free to List

[Visit Full Marketplace](#)



Twisted Copper Strand

\$14

[LIBBY B. | sellwild.com](#)



Star Wars" Darth Vader Women

\$23

[FRANK S. | sellwild.com](#)



Tom's Women's Grey Casual Shoe

\$15

[AM R. | sellwild.com](#)



Playstationfour

\$111

[KEITH J. | sellwild.com](#)

Free shipping on orders +\$50

Check our best sellers

philosophy.com



**2024
Mercedes-**

\$86,965

**LOTLINX A. |
sellwild.com**



**Vintage
Y2K**

\$38

**ELOISE E. |
sellwild.com**



Powered by **Sellwild**