



Grant Spend Management Workshop

The 3W method for efficient grant expense tracking

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Who

Introduction

What this workshop covers

Participants will leave able to...

- Spot the structural reasons grant reporting feels harder than it should.
- Use the 3Ws to code every expense with its full meaning.
- Build cleaner staff-facing lists for categories, programs, and funding sources.
- Assess whether a spreadsheet or accounting platform is structurally ready.

WHY

Why reporting feels harder than it should

“Do we have the budget for another delivery of trees?”

A real weekend question from a staff event. The issue was not mission, effort, or budget literacy. The issue was that program expenses were not current enough to answer with confidence.

The cost of incomplete coding

Decision time

Leaders cannot answer budget questions quickly.

Confidence

Teams rely on memory, guessing, or after-the-fact cleanup.

Trust

Reporting becomes detective work instead of simple review.

Pressure shows up in very practical moments — not just at month-end.

CORE IDEA

The real problem is not effort — it is structure

Most finance systems are built for financial statements. Nonprofits operate through programs, activities, restricted funds, reimbursement cycles, and reporting obligations.

When coding structure is weak

Expense occurs

Context sits in memory, email, note on receipt

Someone reconstructs the story later



When coding structure is clear

Expense occurs

Coding system captures full context

Spending data is report ready

A system that depends on memory and hope eventually fails.

HOW

Grant Spend Management, taught through the 3Ws

At its core, the method makes every expense carry its full meaning.

W1 What it was

W2

Expense category

Examples: supplies, contractor fees, training, travel

Derived from Chart of Accounts

Capture this every time.

HOW

Grant Spend Management, taught through the 3Ws

At its core, the method makes every expense carry its full meaning.

W2 What it was for W2

Program, project, or activity

Examples: youth program, outreach, general operations

Capture this every time.

HOW

Grant Spend Management, taught through the 3Ws

At its core, the method makes every expense carry its full meaning.

W3 Who pays for it

W2

Funding source

Examples: Grant A, Foundation B, general operations

Capture this every time.

WHAT

Grant Spend Management through the 3Ws

At its core, the method makes every expense carry its full meaning.

W1 What it was

Expense category
Examples: supplies, contractor fees, training, food

Capture this every time.

W2 What it was for

Program, project, or activity
Examples: youth program, outreach, general operations

Capture this every time.

W3 Who pays for it

Funding source
Examples: Grant A, Foundation B, general operations

Capture this every time.

W1. What it was

This is the expense category. It usually comes from the chart of accounts, but it should be plain enough that staff can choose correctly.

Good W1 examples

Supplies

Contractor fees

Training

Food

Travel

Equipment

What W1 should do

- Give one clear category name for one kind of spend.
- Shorten overly long staff-facing category lists.
- Shorten Chart of Accounts by removing duplication

Instead of Program A – Supplies, Program B – Supplies, and Program C – Supplies, keep one clear Supplies category and let program allocation live in W2.

W2. What it was for

This is the work the expense supported: the program, project, activity, or general operations.

Examples

Youth program
Outreach
Community garden
Shelter operations
General operations

Why W2 matters

True cost of delivery

You can see what a specific activity actually costs.

Clearer variance explanations

Purpose is already recorded before anyone writes the report.

General operations is valid

Not every expense maps neatly to a frontline program — and that is okay.

W3. Who pays for it

This connects each expense to the correct funding source.

Examples

Grant A
Foundation B
Provincial grant
Municipal contract
General operations

**This is where restriction, compliance,
and funder reporting live.**

- Track drawdown against the right fund earlier.
- Give leaders decision-grade visibility into which funds are healthy or tight.
- Create a clean trail from receipt to purpose to funding source.

WHAT

Why Grant Spend Management works

The 3Ws capture context up front so each expense is report -ready from day one.

For finance

Cleaner reporting, cleaner review,
and a defensible trail.

For leaders

Faster answers to budget questions
and better visibility.

For fundraising

Funding gaps show up earlier,
while there is still time to respond.

Plain terms: the general ledger tells you what kind of expense it was. The 3Ws tell you what it was, what it was for, and who should pay — the full story staff, funders, and leaders actually need.

DIAGNOSTIC

Three signs your current coding structure is working against you



People cannot code without guessing

If staff regularly ask “What do I put this under?”, your categories are too vague or too numerous.



Program spend and remaining funding are hard to see

If it takes multiple spreadsheets and dead reckoning to understand funding balances, the system is not giving usable visibility.



Leaders cannot answer funding questions quickly

If “Do we have funds for this?” triggers cleanup and detective work, the coding structure is adding friction.

Quick prompt: Which one costs your team the most time right now?

IMPLEMENTATION

Build the three lists before you build the workflow

List 1 — What it was

Use a short staff-facing category list. Plain language. Staff should be able to choose in under 10 seconds.

Red flag: the same expense category appears multiple times just because different programs use it.

List 2 — What it was for

Match how the organization actually delivers work: programs, projects, activities, and general operations.

Red flag: staff create ad hoc names for the same work.

List 3 — Who pays for it

Use a clean list of active funding sources, including general operations.

Red flag: expired funds still shown as active or funding information gets mixed into program labels.

CODING EXAMPLE

Make every expense carry its full meaning

5001-03-14

One code, all the context

5001

Supplies and equipment

03

Riparian restoration

14

Watershed Riparian Resilience Program grant

This is the key shift: keep one clean expense category and let W2 and W3 carry program and funding meaning in their own fields.

A simple manual tracker

Simple Manual Budget Tracker					
Grant	Jones Fdn. \$5000		Calgary Fdn. \$10000		
Program	Book Program		Urban Weed Wackers		Total
Expense Category	Budget	Spent	Budget	Spent	
5001	\$100.00	\$44.00	\$2,500.00	197.00	\$241.00
5002	\$500.00	\$125.00	\$1,000.00	64.00	\$189.00
5003	\$1,000.00	\$674.00	\$3,000.00	2,211.00	\$2,885.00
5004	\$400.00	\$22.00	\$500.00	112.00	\$134.00
5005	\$1,500.00	\$849.00	\$2,000.00	1,104.00	\$1,953.00
1001	\$1,500.00	\$384.00	\$1,000.00	664.00	\$1,048.00
	\$5,000.00	\$2,098.00	\$10,000.00	4,352.00	\$6,450.00
	Balance	\$2,902.00	Balance	5,648.00	

The point is not the spreadsheet. The point is the structure underneath it.

Can your financial platform support the 3Ws?

The framework is software-agnostic. Labels do not matter. Structural separation does.

Expense type

What it was

Travel
Supplies
Contracted services
Equipment

Class

What it was for

Youth outreach
Community garden
Shelter operations
General administration

Customer/Department

Who pays

ABC Foundation 2026
Provincial Grant 2024–25
Municipal contract
Unrestricted donations

Critical rule: each W must live in its own reportable field.

The structural test

If you cannot produce these three reports cleanly, the structure is not aligned yet.

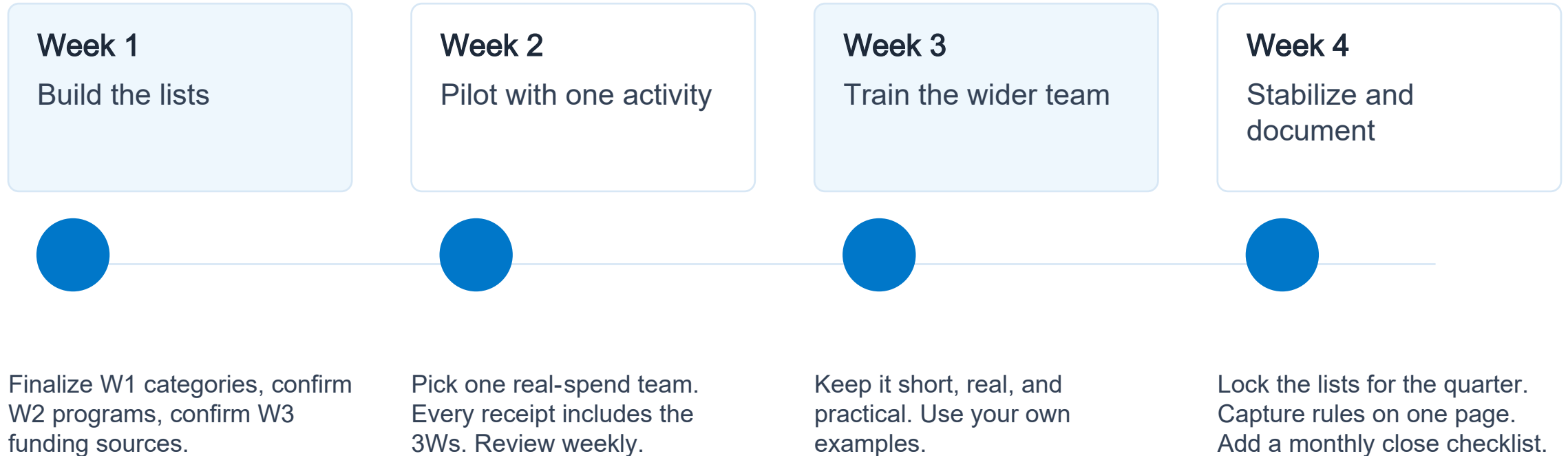
Expenses by category
Expenses by program
Expenses by funding source

What success looks like

- Leaders can answer program budget questions confidently.
- Funding balances are visible without manual reconstruction.
- Reporting requires review rather than detective work.

ROLLOUT

A practical 30 -day implementation plan



Train staff without adding burden

“This is not extra work. It is work you are already doing, moved earlier so it is lighter later.”



Why we are doing this

Remove future cleanup and create clarity.



Teach the 3Ws

What it was. What it was for. Who pays.



Use real examples

Three examples from your own organization.



Set the standard

Every receipt includes the 3Ws before finance sees it.

OUTCOME

Funder reporting that does not require reconstruction

Before

- Chase receipts, notes, and email threads.
- Reclassify expenses before the report can even start.
- Guess allocations weeks after the spend happened.
- Explain variances with weak evidence and low confidence.

After

- Totals by category are already done.
- Totals by program are already done.
- Totals by grant or funding source are already done.
- The report becomes assembly, not investigation.

EXERCISE

Workshop exercise: build your own test 3W structure

List your W1 categories

What are the fewest expense categories your team needs to code confidently?

List your W2 programs and activities

How does work actually get delivered? Include general operations if it applies.

List your W3 funding sources

Which active grants, contracts, or internal pools should remain on the list?

Set three simple rules before you leave the room: If an expense supports multiple programs, we will... If an expense could fit two funders, we will... When unrestricted applies, we will...

When you are ready for real time

Grant Spend Management started as a manual method. GrantPulse grew out of the same logic once it became clear the biggest breakthrough was capturing the 3Ws at the moment of spend.

Manual method first

A strong place to begin for many organizations.

- Simple spreadsheet or finance workflow
- Staff learn the structure
- Reporting gets cleaner quickly

What changes in real time tracking

- Leaders see funding balances in real time
- Grant reporting data is pre populated
- Field staff can see available balances
- All grants displayed as clear graphics in one place
- Staff time to record an expense less than 45 seconds
- Replaces manual workflow

CLOSE

Next steps and Q&A

A good next step after this session

- Run the diagnostic with your team.
- Draft the three lists and test them.
- Pilot for 30 days before expanding.

If you want help setting up Grant Spend Management manually — or moving toward real-time capture with GrantPulse — let's talk.

Email

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Website

grantpulse.co

Free e-book

