

The Winona County Reemployment Training Academy

I. Overview: Innovative Best Practice

This practice involves the Dislocated Worker Program during a large layoff. WSA 18 assembles a group meeting of the people from a layoff, invites the general public—primarily members of the public who are already laid off—and anybody else who is interested, to a group meeting in a large auditorium at the local technical college. There is a quick presentation by the staff of the WorkForce Center on the Dislocated Worker Program and what benefits are available for those people who are eligible. Then we proceed into a presentation by the local technical college staff. The local staff give a presentation on the major occupational disciplines, primarily those that are in demand in our particular labor market, and those things that are necessary to be successful in those occupations—the job requirements in addition to the pay and the outlook in our specific area—and also those things that are necessary from an educational standpoint from the local college. After this presentation, the staff is available to answer questions, specifically from anybody who may be interested in that particular occupation or trade, and also to find out what their particular needs are. This results in a couple of rather unique things. Because it is a group of people mainly from the same employer—friends and coworkers who have worked together—natural cohorts or peer groups set themselves up. Because there is a definite need and the numbers are there, we are able to use both the regular curriculum of the technical college and custom training to meet the needs of these particular job seekers right away, rather than wait until the beginning of a semester or comply with many of the other normal procedures that MNSCU institutions would have to go through.

II. Job Seeker Impact

The benefits for the job seekers are multiple in nature. The obvious one is that the fear factor is taken away when this is done in a group setting and with their coworkers, and in our particular setting because the tech college is extremely responsive, and our WorkForce Center is actually located in the tech college. The job seekers quickly identify with the counselors, both at the WorkForce Center and the instructors, as their friends and neighbors because we all live in Winona County. A major benefit of course is that there is no time lag waiting for the regular MNSCU semester to start. We actually start these classes as soon as possible after the initial academy meeting. There is no need to wait for the start of a semester, and in fact, normally what we do is start them in the middle of whatever semester we are in. Most of the layoffs have occurred when we have been able to take advantage of the summer months, when most of the technical college classrooms are empty and we can set up special classes for our Dislocated Workers. This is a benefit both for the job seekers and obviously for the school because they get to set up a group of people who are highly motivated. In fact, during at least one of our academies, people were able to put a whole year's worth of study into the summer sessions, and in September they could start the second year of a program in the regular curriculum.

III. Community Impact

The impact on the community is that those people who are laid off, in addition to the normal shock and dismay of people losing their job, are quickly reinvigorated in pursuing their educational opportunities and the training that is necessary for them to continue in

the job market. Because they are immediately brought in as a group, the knowledge of the occupations that are out there and what the requirements are, there is not the normal lull when people are still in the shock period and trying to figure out what to do with their lives; because of this academy they are able to get on with their lives much quicker than normal. They obviously know a lot of their coworkers, and by the time they get into the regular curriculum, the fear of going back to school that many of them have—not having been in school for ten or twenty years—has normally dissipated because they have been to class in the tech school, they know their instructors, and they see that the average age at the tech school is a lot older than they had originally thought. Obviously the best impact for the community is that these people are getting state-of-the-art skills and are back in the job market. Especially when the recovery is starting to make itself known, these people will have the skills necessary to reinvigorate Winona County.

IV. Those Involved

Those who are involved are the WorkForce Center staff; our local WorkForce Investment Board (WIB), the private sector members have recommended which occupations are in demand; the admissions office Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical; the counselors from the school; the heads of the major divisions of the school, in particular the Dean of Curriculum, Tim VanLoon; and the President of the School, Mr. James Johnson who serves on the WorkForce Investment Board, whose strong commitment to this process carries through to his staff. The dedicated counselors of the Dislocated Worker Program of our local WorkForce Center cannot be overlooked. They have been through this on several occasions, they know how to handle large layoffs, and they know how to get people back to work as quickly as possible and with the upmost respect for the clients that we deal with.

V. Leveraging and Aligning Resources

The leveraging of outside resources I suppose would be not only the Dislocated Worker Program through the Winona WorkForce Center; the information that we get from Job Service, specifically the labor market information, the employment rates; the information we get from MNSCU, the state-of-the-art instruction, the most up-to-date occupations that are being taught in MNSCU, from the so-called green jobs, wind energy, nanotechnology, and the composite information; all of which between the tech college and the labor market information of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) make this process successful.

VI. Replication

This particular best practice is easily replicated in other parts of the state when there is a strong commitment by the local WorkForce Investment Board and the local MNSCU institution. We are fortunate in our case that the president of the local technical college serves on our WorkForce Investment Board and our director has close ties with the local technical college by serving on several of their committees. It has been our experience that once the WorkForce Center and the college staff get together, they realize that they have common goals, the common customer base—both the job seekers and businesses—and it is just a natural fit. The added plus of having long-time cohorts and friends going to school at the same time make this a natural and should be easily replicated throughout the system.