Several years ago, Wisconsin identified looming skill gaps that could undermine the state’s economic vitality. Wisconsin’s Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards (BAS) knew a key part of the solution: expanding the proven Registered Apprenticeship model to more occupations and industries. So, in January 2015, BAS hosted an Apprenticeship Summit to explore expansion strategies – bringing together industry, workforce, education, economic development, and apprenticeship leaders. Industry leaders included those from industries new to Registered Apprenticeship but facing a skill gap, such as healthcare and information technology (IT). Participants overwhelmingly indicated a willingness to work with BAS to grow Registered Apprenticeship, but the state lacked an infrastructure to handle the interest. They formed a consortium from those interested partners to develop a strategic plan. One key element? Growing a peer-to-peer business engagement strategy.

Around this same time, the U.S. Department of Labor kick started the national LEADERs campaign, recruiting business leaders across all industries to share their success stories. Wisconsin opted to build on this national campaign to create its own state LEADERS program. BAS reached out to all who indicated a willingness to help, as well as other known apprenticeship leaders in the state, to ask them to become a Wisconsin LEADER. BAS targets business LEADERS with the goal of growing their peer recruitment model and encouraging and accommodating a range of partners who want to be apprenticeship champions and take on a leadership role in expanding Registered Apprenticeships statewide. Of the 50+ Wisconsin LEADERS today, more than half are employers and others come from industry associations, unions, technical colleges, workforce, K-12 education, and economic development systems.

In its recruitment materials and application, Wisconsin asks champions to commit to three goals: (1) promote and expand Registered Apprenticeship; (2) embrace and disseminate innovative practices; and (3) increase access to under-represented populations. While Wisconsin asks all LEADERS to agree to these three goals, specific activities are tailored to their interests, background, and time available. Some have time to only lend their name and reputation to promote registered apprenticeship, by allowing use of their logos on marketing materials and/or participating in Apprenticeship Week. Others reach out to peers on the value of using Registered Apprenticeship, in one-on-one meetings or presenting to groups at industry gatherings. Some are willing but feel unable to do peer recruitment, so the state offers training. In every case, the state lets LEADERS spearhead the charge in ways that are rewarding to them.

In the past, Wisconsin reached out to business primarily through broad marketing via its website, mailings, and cold calls from apprenticeship and workforce system staff. Today, Wisconsin relies on peer-to-peer business recruitment strategies, tapping LEADERS to open doors to their networks and leverage industry partnerships and associations to grow Registered Apprenticeship awareness. Thanks to LEADERS, outreach to businesses is more frequently conducted through a team – an experienced industry peer LEADER paired with the Apprenticeship Training Representative (ATR). Often joining are partners from economic development, the technical college (that can provide instruction), and the workforce system

Peer-to-peer works. In other words, “we’re from the government and we’re here to help you” doesn’t go very far. Utilizing our stakeholders, employers understand and trust more the message we have.

- Karen Morgan, Director, Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards
that can provide recruitment and screening. The industry peer helps drive interest and open doors, while the deep expertise of ATRs and proven structure in the state help allay businesses’ remaining concerns.

ADVICE TO OTHER STATES

• Don’t be Afraid to Ask – People are Willing to Help. The LEADERs approach came out of the state’s Apprenticeship Summit, in which participants were surveyed: “Would you be willing to work with us to promote apprenticeship?” According to BAS Director Karen Morgan, “We got an overwhelming ‘yes.’ That was a surprise to us.” After the Summit, Wisconsin also reached out to other known leaders in the state to ask for a commitment directly.

• Look Beyond Apprenticeship-Specific Leaders. While people who understand the apprenticeship model and can articulate the benefits are essential, broader engagement has benefits.

Wisconsin is developing new marketing materials and will be integrating LEADERs and their LEADERs’ stories into a major outreach campaign.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR REPLICATION

• Create a Mechanism to Track Interests and Connect LEADERs. Wisconsin uses a spreadsheet to track and sort LEADERs by the roles they are willing to play, industry sector (if any), target population (if any), and location. BAS shares this information with ATRs and local business outreach representatives so they can coordinate with LEADERs to expand peer recruitment.

• Use a Consortium to Lead the Effort. Wisconsin created an Apprenticeship Consortium at the Summit that includes traditional apprenticeship partners, as well as employer associations from new industries (IT and healthcare). The Consortium developed the strategic plan, which led to adoption of the LEADERs model to grow peer-to-peer engagement. This broad, deep buy-in lifts some of the responsibility off the state agency and encourages continuity in the event of staff changes.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

• Wisconsin continues to reach out to recruit LEADERs, especially in the industry sectors new to Registered Apprenticeship in the state (IT and healthcare), as they move toward a goal of 100 LEADERs.

To learn more, visit:
https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/apprenticeship/default.htm

Find a fact sheet on the Wisconsin LEADERs program here:

Information on the national LEADERs program is available here:
https://www.dol.gov/apprenticeship/leaders.htm

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