

# Engaging Grant Resources to Implement Small Business Advisor Program

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## Precursor Grant Catalyzes Small Business Advisor Program

In 2017, Central Iowa Works (CIW), a workforce intermediary housed at the United Way of Central Iowa, was developing a strategy to improve the well-being of the small business community in Des Moines. They observed that small business was the absolute lifeblood of the economy in a mid-sized city like theirs, and that improving outcomes for workers would mean improving results for the small companies that employed them.

That year, CIW received a Reimagine Retail grant through the National Fund for Workforce Solutions with support from the Walmart Foundation. They determined to use this grant funding to launch a small business advisor program that matches small business owners with qualified business advisors with relevant industry experience. These advisors would mentor and coach the entrepreneurs with a goal of making jobs better for business impact.

When searching for business advisors, two candidates quickly rose to the top for CIW: Vicki

Comegys and Kristen Amfahr-Cox. Both had previously engaged CIW for resources to make workforce improvements at their respective organizations. Both had extensive experience in business, especially in the hospitality and retail industries. Kristen had for years worked as a general manager and in other leadership roles for hotel brands such as Marriott, Staybridge Suites, and Choice Hotels, while Vicki had long a leadership role at the Greater Des Moines Visitors Bureau. In their business roles, both had long demonstrated a deep affinity for people and a commitment to being employers of choice.



As part of the larger initiative, the two business advisors completed the Good Jobs, Good Business toolkit training facilitated by Pacific Community Ventures (PCV), a nonprofit community development financial institution (CDFI) with a mission to invest in small businesses and create good local jobs. PCV equips coaches with the tools to support local businesses that receive loans through CDFIs and are investigating their labor practices by providing training and workshops on

## **Good Jobs, Good Business Toolkit Dimensions of Job Quality**

- **Employee compensation**

Ways employers can provide competitive wages to attract and retain workers.

- **Scheduling and paid leave**

Stable scheduling and paid leave policies to help improve retention and business performance.

- **Hiring and professional development**

A single process to hire, train, and professionally develop talent to grow within the company.

- **Employee engagement**

Provide a variety of business benefits through an engaged workforce including increased productivity and turnover reduction.

- **Health benefits**

Employer-subsidized healthcare to attract and retain employees while improving employee wellbeing and productivity.

- **Retirement and wealth building**

An employer-sponsored plan to increase employee job satisfaction and reduce turnover.

mentorship, trauma, business, and tactical advice on implementing their proprietary toolkit that assesses job quality dimensions.

Armed with their deep industry knowledge and PCV training, Vicki and Kristen jumped into building relationships with local employers. While business owners saw the value business advisors could bring, they expressed deep concerns about the time and financial commitment required. The advisors collaborated with CIW to provide \$1,000 stipends that helped incentivize local employer participation. With employer relationships blossoming, the project was underway.

CIW received a subsequent grant Redesigned Jobs, Resilient Workers (RJRW) from the National Fund with the support of the Prudential Foundation, to build on the success of the Reimagine Retail grant. With additional resources available to help employers interested in improving the quality of jobs and career paths of their workers, CIW knew Vicki and Kristen were the perfect fit.

While a stipend was provided for business advisors working with the RJRW program, the amount wasn't enough to cover a full-time salary. Fortunately for CIW, Vicki and Kristen's passion for working with employers and personal resources and circumstances made it possible for them to sign on as business advisors for a second time. Between CIW's extensive network and the business advisors' preexisting employer relationships developed during the Reimagine Retail grant, Vicki and Kristen hit the ground running and quickly recruited local businesses to participate in RJRW.

Recruitment efforts proved fruitful as Vicki and Kristen ultimately engaged 15 local organizations that employ a total of more than 1,000 workers in the retail, hospitality, warehousing, transportation, and logistics markets. Employers' goals were wide-ranging as some focused on attracting and retaining talent, such as the team at Global Source Distribution and Midland Credit Union, while other employers, like Cindy's Boutique and Hope Agency NP, focused on improving job satisfaction and increasing training opportunities for incumbent workers, respectively.

Guided by the promised grant deliverables of training 125 individuals and providing the tools needed to raise incumbent worker pay, the two advisors followed a similar process with each employer to uncover their unique business imperatives and perceived organizational barriers.

## Employer Engagement Process

- **Conducted** an initial conversation with members of the leadership team to uncover operational strains and how to deploy their experience and PCV training to make improvements.
- **Delivered** the PCV Good Jobs Survey to elevate employee voice and gather their perceptions of the organization.
- **Analyzed** the employee survey data to uncover opportunity areas and illuminate discrepancies in perceptions of the organization between leadership, management, and employees.
- **Translated** the employee survey findings for the leadership team.
- **Brainstormed** initiatives with the team, guided by survey findings, to improve the job design and business performance.

As they used their conversations and survey results to brainstorm initiatives with each employer, Vicki and Kristen intentionally matched the proposed solution to each employer's unique business imperatives and capabilities. Through their conversations with employers, various tailored solutions emerged such as:

- Creating apprenticeship programs comprised of various free or low-cost resources including:
  - Department of Labor funding.
  - Penn Foster: an online learning portal that provides affordable certification programs.
- Developing supervisory capacity by partnering with programs such as Dale Carnegie Leadership Institute, which offers an 8- to 12-week course focused on upskilling incumbent workers through developing leadership skills.
- Improving and/or implementing employee listening and communication mechanisms.

## Business Advisors in the Field

### Employee Engagement Survey Reveals Opportunity Area at Silent Rivers Design + Build



While serving on a local arts council, Vicki connected with Chaden Halfhill, owner of design and construction company Silent Rivers Design + Build. Throughout their conversations, Vicki learned that Silent Rivers was struggling to retain its staff following an exodus of managers in 2017. As Chaden and his Director of Operations, Jessica Bishop, rebuilt the workforce in subsequent years, key new hires struggled to assimilate into the company culture, leading to a workforce of approximately 85% new hires at one point.





When the pandemic hit, Silent Rivers experienced another round of mass turnover, and Chaden and Jessica knew they needed help. When Vicki approached Chaden about participating in the business advisor program, he jumped at the chance.

The two business advisors kicked things off by facilitating a conversation with the leadership team to uncover opportunity areas. Using the information gleaned from the leadership team conversation, the business advisors tailored the employee engagement survey to match Silent Rivers' operational issues and capture employees' perceptions. Once the survey results were in, the business advisors reviewed the responses with the leadership team, detailing areas of variance between employee and management perspectives and uplifting common themes to help Silent Rivers align the survey findings with targeted initiatives for the greatest impact.

***“[The business advisors] were instrumental in guiding us through [brainstorming initiatives] and helping narrow down the survey topics to common themes that will have an impact and how they align with our company values and our company goals.”***

**Jessica Bishop**

Operations manager, Silent Rivers Design + Build

Industry-wide supply chain issues resulting from the pandemic left the Silent Rivers leadership team stretched thin with minimal bandwidth to take on a large overhaul. So, the leadership team decided to focus on smaller, more targeted initiatives for maximum impact.

Jessica combined employee suggestions from the survey write-in section with the ideas surfaced during the leadership brainstorming session and worked with the business advisors to generate a list of potential initiatives. She then arranged a

series of employee feedback sessions to validate the findings and collect employee perspectives prior to launching the initiative. Using the input gathered from employees, the leadership team settled on two areas of focus: improving employee communication mechanisms and upskilling incumbent workers.

To improve employee communication mechanisms, Silent Rivers focused on two initiatives:

- Increased frequency of one-on-one conversations between management and employees to uncover roadblocks to success.
- Reordered flow of organizational communication so that new information is first communicated by managers at department meetings before being reinforced by the leadership team at all-staff meetings.

To upskill incumbent workers, Silent Rivers implemented the Dale Carnegie course focused on breaking down key elements of leadership, navigating difficult conversations, and connecting with individuals from various backgrounds.

Using their resources, the business advisors were able to provide Silent Rivers' leadership with scholarships to send select team members through the Dale Carnegie program. Jessica noted that members of the team who completed the training have used the insights to coach other team members on having difficult conversations — an exciting impact multiplier.



## Replicating the Small Business Advisor Program

To build a similar program, the business advisors and employer suggest:

- **Engaging employers that are ready** and invested in job quality efforts — stay away from those looking for a quick fix.
- **Explore available resources** to help offset employer costs. Vicki and Kristen had very little time to engage employers but were able to arrange for small stipends to help incentivize employer participation.
- **Match the skillset** of business advisors with the needs of leadership for targeted initiatives.
- **Source external talent** with business backgrounds to ensure those in the coach role can, “talk the talk,” when coaching small business owners. Consider the following to identify coaches:

- Look for champions within your targeted industry who are already taking steps to improve the workforce at their own organizations.
- Source from certification programs, such as PCV, for recent graduates focused on gaining experience.

***“[The business advisors] worked with our leadership team providing support, education, and brainstorming. They were an amazing resource for helping our leadership team navigate the changes of employee engagement, employee expectations, and situations that come up.”***

Jessica Bishop

Operations manager, Silent Rivers Design + Build

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### About National Fund for Workforce Solutions

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions envisions an equitable future where all workers have the resources required to thrive, race does not dictate employment outcomes, and all jobs are good jobs. We are a recognized leader in establishing and scaling effective strategies that foster racial equity in the workforce to help communities thrive. Our dynamic national network is comprised of more than 30 regional workforce collaboratives that convene cross-sector stakeholders and align resources toward collective action for greater impact in local communities.