

Implementing a Formal Mentoring Program in Contra Costa County

RICHARD BELL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human services agencies are currently faced with the common dilemma of “baby boomer” retirements and public sector funding uncertainties. Recruitment and retention of a qualified workforce has increasingly been seen as a priority for social service agencies. Succession planning and the transfer of institutional knowledge must be a part of any essential strategy for agencies to continue functioning at an acceptable level. One key element of such a strategy should be the establishment of a formal mentoring program. An informal network with people serving as mentors to their colleagues has always existed. A formal mentoring program, however, can provide the structure and means necessary to develop the skills and knowledge for preparing employees for increased leadership roles and a deeper understanding of an agency’s mission.

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Alameda County: Site Visit

The Alameda County Social Service Agency has had a formal mentoring program in operation for approximately ten years. At the start of the program, Alameda County borrowed some of its initial ideas and procedures from Stanislaus County, which had an mentoring existing program at that time. Alameda started their program with ten mentees and ten mentors matched at a one-to-one ratio.

Their current program has many requirements: two levels of supervisory approval; one full day of training; four to eight hours interaction monthly between mentees and mentors; an individualized work plan; and various forms of evaluation. The program extends over an eight-month period and is monitored by an advisory committee. There are currently approximately thirty mentees in the program. There is a pool of approximately thirty mentors that can be pulled from for matching with mentee applicants. The day-to-day functioning of the program is overseen by Staff Development, which also provides the necessary funding for training materials and supplies.

Solano County: Site Visit

The Solano County Health and Social Services Department has also had a structured mentoring program for approximately ten years. It includes many of the same elements that other social service agency mentoring programs have. One of the differences in Solano County's program is its emphasis on strength-based mentoring. A foundation of Solano County's work is the book *Strengths Finder 2.0*, by Tom Rath. The book lays out thirty-four themes: through the use of an on-line tool, participants can determine their primary strengths.

Solano County is considering a change of direction in its mentorship program. While still retaining the basic elements of a formal program, Solano is considering expanding to a strength-based teamwork model. Using the already-established mentoring program, the idea is to establish small, time limited projects for a group of mentees who will complete the project under the guidance of a single mentor to develop leadership and teamwork skills.

A second possible direction for Solano's new program is in the area of employee well-being. All agencies are grappling with a loss of staff time and with low morale because of workload, increasing regulation and oversight, and a lack of public support for social service provision. Solano is exploring the use of the existing mentoring program structure to provide a program for employee well-being.

Contra Costa County: Concept to Pilot

In late fall of 2010 a group of current and retired Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department employees met to discuss the idea of the county establishing a formal mentoring program. The group began meeting on a regular basis to move the idea from a concept to a program.

One of the initial tasks was to review existing programs and determine a model that would be adaptable and workable in Contra Costa County. Material was reviewed from Alameda County's program, "Passing the Torch", which has extensive written material and guidelines. It is currently operated through the county's staff development office. Santa Clara County's program, "A Learning Partnership", is under the auspices of the Mentorship Program Board. Their program runs for 9 to 12 months depending on the interest and availability of mentors.

The group also reviewed material from the Center for Human Services at UC Davis Extension that was developed in conjunction with Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services. Their mentorship orientation goes by the title, “Working with Masters Creates Masterful Colleagues”.

There was also exploration of existing resources that could help with training, monitoring, and evaluation of the final program design. Consultants from a number of private and public venues were sought out for their areas of expertise and their willingness to help Contra Costa get its mentorship program up, running, and successful. Eventually, a Request for Proposal (RFP) was issued and the top respondents were interviewed. Jerry Lew and Associates were selected through the RFP process. This consulting firm has assisted the San Francisco, San Mateo and Alameda County public social service agencies with their mentorship programs.

A key component of moving this program into reality was to ensure commitment and support from agency management at both mid-level and upper-levels. Throughout the process, existing management teams within Contra Costa County’s Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) were utilized to review progress and provide input and feedback. This process created a constant feedback loop that allowed for support even if some decisions were not agreed with.

In February 2011, an announcement went out to all EHSD staff about the Mentor Program Pilot. The announcement included a fact sheet, a mentee application, and guidelines explaining the program’s purpose and design. The decision was made by the mentoring advisory group to determine mentees’ areas of interest before soliciting mentors.

Throughout this period, the group continued to meet and refine the parameters of the program, the materials to be presented, timelines, and the structure of the orientation. Applications to the program were reviewed and an orientation training schedule was established.

The final design of the program runs on a six-month schedule. The pilot is starting with twenty

mentees matched in a one-to-one ratio with a mentor. Participants are expected to attend an orientation, to spend between four to eight hours each month with their mentee/mentor, to complete designated program activities, and to participate in program evaluations and exit interviews. Time spent in the pilot is paid work time but, since the nature of the program is voluntary, there will be no reduction in workload for participants.

Currently, the following orientations are scheduled: a six hour mentee orientation (May 24, 2011); a six hour mentor orientation (May 26, 2011); a three hour orientation (June 6, 2011) for mentee/mentor pairs; and a two hour orientation (June 16, 2011) for supervisors and managers of participants in the pilot.

Conclusion

The commitment to establishing and maintaining a mentoring program in Contra Costa County is already present. This study has shown the value of such a program where it already exists (Alameda and Solano Counties) and the evolving nature of mentoring.

There are a number of possible implications and directions. Mentoring between different agencies within the same county is one possibility. For example, someone in the district attorney’s office could mentor a social services employee. There is also the possibility of mentoring between counties. This would give participants the opportunity to see the process and structure of a different agency in their chosen field.

Once a mentoring program is fully operational, there is minimal cost involved. A major problem at most agencies is the recruitment and commitment of a qualified pool of mentors. Staff at all agency levels have tremendous workloads and carving out time for formal mentoring can be difficult. Supervisors and managers may be fully committed to the program, but unwilling to commit to a process that they may not have the time or resources to follow-through with.

I would also suggest that a more coordinated, cohesive, and regional plan for sharing expertise and

resources be developed. A County Welfare Director Association regional subcommittee is one arena that springs to mind. Such a plan could have oversight from existing training and consultation resources, such as the Bay Area Academy or CalSWEC. By using existing, established mentoring programs, such a group would already have a structure in place to tackle particular issues or strategies.

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