

Enhancing Leadership Development through Mentoring

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the number of staff eligible for retirement increases so does the need for counties to re-evaluate its leadership development programs and succession plans. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2009-10, Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) began focusing their staff development programs for mid-level management in four areas: supervisory effectiveness, leadership development, project management, and mentoring. Mentoring programs help address the needs of individuals who want to progress to higher levels of management, as well as strengthen the organization as a whole. As the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) addresses its own succession plans, now may be an appropriate time to re-evaluate the benefits of a mentoring program.

Challenges faced by EHSD during implementation of the mentoring program included: transparency, addressing potential increased work demands

for the supervisors and co-workers of participating mentees, and recruitment of mentors. EHSD experienced success in providing awareness of the mentoring program, generating management support, and identifying funding for the mentoring program.

As HSA examines its staff development programs to better address the needs of its employees, the inclusion of a mentoring program should be considered. This process would begin with the formation of a workgroup to identify HSA's needs and goals. If the workgroup identified mentoring as a program need, implementation would then require dedicated funding and staff resources. Executive management involvement could serve to encourage staff participation, and a pilot mentoring program would help refine the mentoring process. All participants, mentors and mentees, would benefit from the mentoring experience.

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Introduction

As the number of employees approaching retirement age increases, counties must begin planning to ensure a continuity of staff to provide services. This increase in retirements often results in a loss of institutional knowledge that counties are struggling to address. Many counties are exploring a variety of strategies to address the issues of leadership development and succession planning. Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) recently piloted a staff mentoring program to support leadership development. San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) is interested in EHSD's implementation of the mentoring program to determine whether a similar program could be a successful component of HSA's leadership development efforts.

Background

The San Francisco Department of Human Resources issued a citywide report in September 2009 to identify the staffing challenges facing city departments within the next 5 years. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2007-08, the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA) had a workforce of 1,930 employees with an average age of 47.3 and an average length of service of 11.8 years. Within the 1,930 employees, 286 or 14.8% are eligible for minimum service retirement benefits, with several job classes appearing to be at a higher risk of staff turnover due to larger numbers reaching retirement age. Among the job classes at highest risk is the manager series (0922 Manager I – 0932 Manager IV). Of employees in those job classes, 24% are eligible for minimum retirement benefits with 7% likely to retire soon (based upon average retirement at 60 years old with 20 years of service). In 5 years, 39% will be eligible for minimum retirement benefits and 22% will likely retire.

During the past three years, HSA has undergone reductions in staff and initiated new staffing structures such as a service call center model. HSA has conducted mentoring programs in the past; however, with these recent adjustments, continuation of the mentoring program was not feasible. Current efforts at HSA to meet the needs of the workforce include management training programs through partnerships with City College and San Francisco State University for college credit.

HSA's mentoring program previously balanced the needs of the agency with the needs of the individual in order to address an area of interest to the agency. The model was based upon the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Program's 15-day project where the available topics of study are pre-determined and not solely driven by the mentee. The mentoring was complemented with other staff development classes and educational resources. The program maintained ten mentees at a time for a 6-month period, and provided them with the opportunity to learn about other areas within HSA, as well as research on topics of interest to the executive staff.

Contra Costa County's Mentoring Program Pilot

The Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) estimates that about one-third of the current workforce will be eligible for retirement within the next 5 years. This will have a significant impact on job classes in executive level management. In FY 2009-10, EHSD re-evaluated its staff development programs and made changes to specifically target the reduction in workforce due to retirements. This included a shift in the focus of leadership development. The trainings provided to

mid-level managers were restructured into four main categories:

- supervisory effectiveness
- leadership development
- project management
- mentoring program

Other initiatives to improve staff development efforts included the provision of online trainings and using the intranet website as a resource.

It was decided that a mentoring program would play an important role in succession planning. A Mentoring Advisory Group (MAG) was formed to develop and implement a mentoring program. MAG was comprised of ten people including current employees and retirees. In FY 2010-11, the redesigned leadership programs including the mentoring program pilot were implemented.

The mentoring program pilot began with twenty participants representing all classifications and all bureaus. Over 70 applications were received for twenty slots in the mentoring program. 17 mentors were recruited to support the mentees including three executive team directors. Unlike the HSA mentoring program, mentees were allowed to develop their own projects because EHSD's program is driven by the needs of the mentees.

EHSD faced several challenges during the pilot program including maintenance of transparency, addressing potential increased work demands that may challenge the supervisors of participating mentees, and recruitment of mentors. EHSD's responses to these challenges can help assist HSA in preparing its own mentoring program.

Transparency

EHSD found that transparency was critical to the success of the program. With more applications received than slots available, criteria had to be set and publicized so that everyone was aware of the minimum qualifications for participation and the time commitment required. Staff was also made aware that participation does not guarantee promotion. EHSD learned to address issues early on and provide flexibility wherever possible.

Demands on Supervisors

Supervisors must provide coverage for mentees' regular duties when they are participating in the mentoring program. While mentees benefit from the learning experience, it is important to acknowledge the demands placed upon supervisors so that they can plan accordingly. Supervisors may experience a decrease in staff morale as other employees take on additional workload in the mentee's absence. However, EHSD has emphasized to supervisors that the mentoring program is open to all employees and that the Executive Team encourages staff to apply to assist in their career development.

Recruitment of Mentors

One of the primary challenges in sustaining a mentoring program is the recruitment of the mentor pool. Mentors gain the chance to pass on their organizational knowledge, practice coaching and listening skills, and get a better understanding of the current challenges faced by those eager to advance their careers. However, mentors will need to find the time for mentees in their busy schedules. Past mentors can discuss their experiences to provide advice and encourage new mentors to participate in the program.

While carefully navigating the above mentioned challenges, EHSD's careful planning in the areas of awareness of the mentoring program, management support, and identification of funding also helped to make the mentoring program successful.

Awareness

In order to increase awareness, career path overviews, including the mentoring program, should become part of new hire orientations. The mentoring program provides the opportunity for those interested to take the initiative and invest in the future of the department. The mentoring program was highly promoted by EHSD through emails to all staff, brown bag informational sessions, executive leadership meetings and mid-managers' meetings.

Management Support

Management support is critical to the success of the program. The importance of this initiative was stressed from the executive team level on down. EHSD's mentoring program was led by Joe Valentine, executive director, who was also a mentor in the program. Management support for the program shows commitment to staff career advancement. Once executive staff is on board, mid-management and the rest of staff will follow their example.

Funding

EHSD was able to use savings from their staff development budget. It also shifted funds from other non-priority staff development programs to fund the mentoring program. EHSD contracted with Jerry Lew & Associates to help develop a formal mentoring program and provide consultation services during implementation. The contract with Jerry Lew & Associates was for \$15,000. EHSD found that due to the high level of coordination involved with supporting both mentors and mentees, a full-time person must be dedicated to this program. The support of retirees in the Mentoring Advisory Group who donated their time was another way to minimize costs.

Recommendations

HSA is facing similar workforce issues as EHSD. With the changes in workforce demographic makeup, it is time to re-evaluate how a mentoring program could complement existing staff development initiatives. Steps to be taken include:

- Forming a workgroup to determine HSA's needs and what would work best for HSA. Revisiting the previous HSA mentoring programs to see what worked and what did not.
- Identifying resources for the mentoring program. Determine if, as in EHSD, there are areas of under-spending, under-utilization, or re-adjustments in priorities that could potentially be used for mentoring.

- If the recommendation of the workgroup is to implement a mentoring program, executive staff support will play an important role in its success. Encourage management to participate as mentors and advocates.
- Setting goals and establish the parameters of the mentoring programs, and
- Conducting a mentoring program pilot.

Conclusion

Despite the time and energy required to implement a successful mentoring program, mentoring can offer benefits, such as an increase in staff morale and shared institutional knowledge. EHSD has acknowledged the need to address leadership development and succession planning and is making efforts to improve their staff development programs. HSA should determine how a mentoring program could assist employees in their career development. Participation in a mentoring program offers benefits to participants, mentees, and mentors alike, in addition to contributing to the long-term growth of the organization.

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References

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