Consolidating Programs into a Centralized Mail-in Unit

Lawrence Jones

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The reason for reviewing San Mateo County Human Services Department's retooling of its call center is that Contra Costa County is well on its way to implementing a similar service delivery model. Retooling the call center is an opportunity to review change management, examine the goals San Mateo County envisioned before re-tooling the call center, and examine lessons learned.

Several forces have conspired to compel changes to the means and methods of delivering social services. Some of these forces are:

- Changes in mandates (e.g. the Affordable Health Care Act, aka "Obamacare").
- Changing demography, specifically the "baby boomer" generation reaching retirement age, as well as a diminishing pool of working age individuals.
- Reductions in financial resources available for government services due to the current recession, the growing federal government deficit, and the desire to pay off the deficit.
- Increasing rates of poverty in the US.
- Requirements imposed by court decisions that impact how social services are administered.

The logic is that the fewer dollars used to deliver services (i.e. administration, application review and processing, document storage, case maintenance, etc), the more funds available for services. Social service agencies have turned to technology to help them maximize dollars used to deliver services.

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Introduction

Historically, social services were delivered by establishing a one-on-one relationship between a social worker and a client. San Mateo County wants to establish a "task-based" relationship between the social worker and client. The idea is that a client can call and get their question or concern addressed by anyone who answers the telephone call.

San Mateo County wants to consolidate General Assistance, CalWORKs, CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and all other programs that do not require a face-to-face interaction into a centralized mail in unit. The centralized mail in unit would be supported by a call center. Clients would pick up or otherwise call to request an application, and mail it to the centralized mail unit. Clients would contact the call center with questions regarding the status of their application, or any questions they may have about the social service programs they participating in. San Mateo County hoped it could grant between 40% and 70% of the cases on the first call. The call center would help demystify the social services application and aid approval process. This service delivery model is a "task driven" service delivery model. This model is a radical departure from the historical service delivery model. The call center would also help San Mateo County implement a "no wrong door" service delivery philosophy.

According to "Strategy + Business," there are ten principles of change management

1. **Address the "human side" systematically.** Any significant transformation creates a "people issue." New leaders will be asked to step up, jobs will be changed, new skills and capabilities must be developed, and employees will be uncertain and resistant. Dealing with these issues on a reactive, case-by-case basis puts speed, morale, and results at risk.

2. **Start at the top.** Because change is inherently unsettling for people at all levels of an organization, when it is on the horizon, all eyes will turn to the CEO (or in this case, the department head) and the leadership team for strength, support, and direction. The leaders themselves must embrace the new approach first, both to challenge and to motivate the rest of the institution.

3. **Involve every layer.** As transformation programs progress from defining strategy and setting targets to design and implementation, they affect different levels of the organization. Change efforts must include plans for identifying leaders throughout the company and pushing responsibility for design and implementation down, so that change "cascades" through the organization.

4. **Make the formal case.** Individuals are inherently rational, and will question to what extent change is needed, whether the company is headed in the right direction, and whether they want to commit personally to making change happen. They will look to the leadership for answers. The articulation of a formal case for change and the creation of a written vision statement are invaluable opportunities to create or compel leadership-team alignment.

5. **Create ownership.** Leaders of large change programs must over-perform during the transformation, and be the zealots who create a critical mass among the work force in favor

of change. This requires more than mere buy-in or passive agreement that the direction of change is acceptable. It demands ownership by the leaders willing to accept responsibility for making change happen in all of the areas they influence or control. Ownership is often best created by involving people in identifying problems and crafting solutions. It is reinforced by incentives and rewards. These can be tangible (for example, financial compensation) or psychological (for example, camaraderie and a sense of shared destiny).

6. **Communicate the message.** Too often, change leaders make the mistake of believing that others understand the issues, feel the need to change, and see the new direction as clearly as they do. The best change programs reinforce core messages through regular, timely advice that is both inspirational and practicable. Communications flow in from the bottom and out from the top, and are targeted to provide employees the right information at the right time and solicit their input and feedback. Often this will require over-communication through multiple, redundant channels.

7. **Assess the cultural landscape.** Successful change programs pick up speed and intensity as they cascade down, making it critically important that leaders understand and account for culture and behaviors at each level of the organization. Companies often make the mistake of assessing culture either too late or not at all. Thorough cultural diagnostics can assess organizational readiness to change, bring major problems to the surface, identify conflicts, and define factors that can recognize and influence sources of leadership and resistance. These diagnostics identify the core values, beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions that must be taken into account for successful change to occur. They serve as the common baseline for designing essential change elements, such as the new corporate vision,

and building the infrastructure and programs needed to drive change.

8. **Address culture explicitly.** Once the culture is understood, it should be addressed as thoroughly as any other area in a change program. Leaders should be explicit about the culture and underlying behaviors that will best support the new way of doing business, and find opportunities to model and reward those behaviors. This requires developing a baseline, defining an explicit end-state or desired culture, and devising detailed plans to make the transition.

9. **Prepare for the unexpected.** No change program goes completely according to plan. People react in unexpected ways; areas of anticipated resistance fall away; and the external environment shifts. Effectively managing change requires continual reassessment of its impact and the organization's willingness and ability to adopt the next wave of transformation. Fed by real data from the field and supported by information and solid decision-making processes, change leaders can then make the adjustments necessary to maintain momentum and drive results.

10. **Speak to the individual.** Change is both an institutional journey and a very personal one. People spend many hours each week at work; many think of their colleagues as a second family. Individuals (or teams of individuals) need to know how their work will change, what is expected of them during and after the change program, how they will be measured, and what success or failure will mean for them and those around them. Team leaders should be as honest and explicit as possible. People will react to what they see and hear around them, and need to be involved in the change process. Highly visible rewards, such as promotions, recognitions, and bonuses, should be provided as dramatic reinforcement for embracing change. Sanction or removal of people standing in the

way of change will reinforce the institution's commitment.[1]

It appears that the San Mateo County Human Services Agency and senior management followed the ten principles listed above, resulting in a successful implementation of a new service delivery model. Some of the successes include:

- Open and honest communication throughout the organization during the implementation process. This included weekly communications between staff and the first-line supervisors, as well as regular communications from middle and senior level managers.
- Communication that flowed both ways, from the top down, and from the bottom up.
- A department head who took ownership of the project, and made a compelling case to staff why the change was needed.
- Consultants brought in to assist middle and senior managers anticipate staff and public reactions to change. The consultants also provided tools for the managers to address concerns and stress staff and the public would experience while the new process was implemented.
- Questions and concerns raised by staff and managers addressed as the project moved forward.

The financial implications of this service delivery model cannot be underestimated. This service model allows social service agencies to reduce the size, number, and related costs of buildings needed in order to deliver services. Instead of having several buildings scattered over the entire county, they can be replaced with a few buildings that house staff only. These new buildings do not require waiting rooms, interview areas, or security guards. The client is not dependent on the availability of a specific worker to address changes, concerns, or emergencies that may arise while they are receiving assistance.

Outside forces are compelling Contra Costa County to change its social service delivery model. Contra Costa County would be wise to review the method employed by San Mateo County to change its service delivery method. San Mateo County is well on its way to successfully re-tooling its service delivery model using the ten principles discussed above.

Recommendation & Conclusion

The cost to implement this retooling model is minimal. Contra Costa County can use its existing contracts with UC Davis and Intelegy to implement this change model. The county can also use its existing Information Technology infrastructure to communicate with staff. Senior management has already committed to the change. Senior management needs to present its business reason for the change to staff, and adhere to the remaining change principles listed above to ensure a smooth transition to its new service delivery model. The return on investment will be in the form of increased employee morale, better customer service, and a drastic reduction in the cost to administer cases (i.e. overhead). The biggest savings will be a reduction in the number of buildings that have waiting rooms and interview areas, and the overall number of offices needed to deliver services.

Acknowledgements

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1. John Jones, DeAnne Aguirre and Matthew Calderone, "10 Principles of Change Management", published April 15, 2004 by Booz and Company in *Strategy + Business*, Issue 35.

8 General Assistance/General Relief clients that are fulfilling their Employment Services work requirement.