

The Politics of Executive Entry: The First Year as General Manager of the San Francisco Department of Social Services

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The goal of this case is to describe the process of executive entry and the way in which new executives can create a new vision and position the organization for the future. The case includes the experiences of the General Manager (GM), Department of Social Services (DSS), San Francisco, during the first year of his appointment in 1993. The case describes the challenges faced by a senior administrator of a social service agency in a large metropolitan city facing significant social problems, a diverse population, strong interest groups and a shrinking budget.

Executive entry is defined as “the personal process of managing oneself in order to lead others” when entering in an organization new to the executive (Austin, 1989). The process involves the executive in rapid and intense learning about the organization, its staff, and its environment in order to develop a vision for the organization and herself/himself. The new General Manager spent a hectic year making important programmatic changes in the San Francisco Social Services Agency as he quickly became aware of the agency’s politically charged internal and external environment.

While the Bay Area is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, the city and county of San Francisco has a diverse population of only 752,000 (47% white, 28% Asians, 14% Hispanics and 11% African Americans). The city and county has been facing increased social problems, especially in the areas of homelessness and violent crime, along with five years of budget deficits (1988-93) related to the recession in the state economy, reduced state support and local collective bargaining agreements. In 1993 the San Francisco Department of Social Services had a budget of approximately \$300 million with 1300 employees serving over 80,000 clients.

The new General Manager is a 52 year old San Francisco native and was appointed at the end of December 1992. Prior to assuming the position he was the President of Hathaway Children’s Services, a private Southern California

residential treatment and special education program for abused, neglected and emotionally disturbed children. His previous administrative experiences included the positions of the Executive Director of the California Association of Services for Children, Executive Director of the San Francisco Boys Home, and Executive Director of ChildHelp, Los Angeles. He was also the President of the Los Angeles Children Roundtable, a group of 70 public and private sector leaders working with county government and the schools to improve services for children and families. He holds a Masters degree in Social Work from the San Francisco State University.

Entering A Highly Politicized Environment

In addition to the significant social problems, the position of General Manager is extremely high-risk and stressful due to the existence of strong advocacy and interest groups and an influential media. The new incumbent experienced a number of politically volatile situations soon after taking charge.

One of the first such experiences involved his decision to remove some children from a foster home who were perceived to be at risk. The case came to his attention since he was also serving at that time as the Acting Assistant Director of Children Services to cover the responsibility of a vacant senior management position. In view of the gravity of the situation, he approached the court to obtain permission to remove the children. The judge denied the request. The GM, while receiving conflicting input from staff, was in a fix as he was well aware of the danger that the children would be in over the weekend at the foster home. Thus, he took the risky and unusual decision of removing the kids

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despite the court decision. The judge held him in contempt of court and sentenced him to six weekends in the Sheriff's Work Alternative Program. There he spent time with those held on drug charges, robbery, and assault who found it hard to believe that the judge had sentenced a county agency director to do time.

No sooner had the GM done his time, then the department was awash in negative newspaper publicity related to a senior manager who was arrested on federal drug charges and taken away in the middle of a meeting in the GM's office. The incident seemed to have been preplanned by the District Attorney's office to embarrass DSS as it occurred at 10:00 am and was reported in the 11:00 am morning edition of the local newspaper. This incident reflected part of the adversarial relationships which had evolved among various city departments in San Francisco. The GM decided to retain the manager after he was released on bail, especially since the indictment indicated that he was unknowingly implicated. The GM's decision was criticized in the press and different parts of the community. It became very clear to the GM that the local media had the power to disrupt the work of public agencies. The principle of standing up for staff who are innocent until proven guilty or for children in dangerous situations were clearly tested in the first few months on the job.

The GM also learned about the difficulties involved in dealing with personnel and civil service rules as he attempted to retain an outstanding African-American worker when it was discovered that there were a number of felony charges on her record, most of which were subsequently dismissed. Although the worker had disclosed all felony charges at the time of her hiring application, she inadvertently forgot to mention two misdemeanor offences. The DSS Personnel Division wanted to have her fired for failing to disclose the misdemeanors. In view of the outstanding performance of the worker, the GM worked with Probation, the court, and the DA's office and was able to retain her.

As if public ridicule in the press was not enough, the charged issues of racism also emerged, requiring more attention and problem-solving skills. A white manager turned down a request from an African-American clerk for leave to study French art in Paris on the grounds that it was not relevant for the clerk's job. When rebuffed, the clerk offered to study the French welfare system instead. The manager responded by saying that she could not foresee the benefits from having a clerk study the French welfare system. The clerk, who had worked previously at NAACP, claimed racial harassment and the incident received considerable

negative attention from NAACP. The incident highlighted the importance of using more diplomatic and sensitive communication in such situations as well as citing the risks of losing the vacant position due to tight budgetary conditions.

The GM also ran afoul of one powerful state legislator who wanted him to fire a manager from the previous administration. When the GM refused to comply and wrote a letter to the legislator, the letter was reported in the press. This prompted the legislator to suggest to the Mayor's office that the GM should be replaced. Nothing came out of it, but it was another distraction. These events demonstrate how seemingly small matters can explode into extremely volatile situations in a highly politicized environment and take attention away from addressing the agency's primary responsibilities. They highlight the degree to which political considerations compete daily with administrative decision-making in public agencies.

Providing Leadership On Key Administrative Issues

Besides the external political pressures mentioned above, the new GM also had to give immediate attention to a wide range of programmatic issues within the agency in the areas of General Assistance, Homeless Programs, Family and Children Services, Adult Services and Personnel. For instance, when he took over, the agency was out of compliance with the state child welfare regulations, faced the threat of a law suit by a children's advocacy group, and was requested to eliminate 100 positions due to budget cuts. The GM made a number of strategic decisions to deal with the issues in each of these areas.

General Assistance and Homeless Programs

Important programmatic changes were made in the General Assistance (GA) and Homeless programs. The department worked actively to avoid cuts in the grants for GA clients in view of the high cost of living in San Francisco. In spite of the budget cuts, the county was able to avoid a cut in the GA grant, double the amount spent on employment and training services for GA clients, and maintain the current level of spending for homeless service providers. This was made possible by the approval of Proposition V placed on the local ballot, a controversial initiative developed by the Mayor and DSS. Under its provisions, the county began a program for electronic finger printing of GA clients in order to prevent clients from receiving duplicate aid. The county also increased sanctions for program violations and fraud from 14 days minimum to 30 days, with the provision to

increase progressively to 60 and 90 days on repeated violations. These measures were designed to save the county approximately \$1.25 million per year.

It is estimated that two-thirds of the homeless population contacted by DSS outreach staff is on SSI or GA. The county has also assigned additional outreach workers under the Matrix program (the Mayor's controversial program designed to move the homeless off the streets into housing) to go out with police officers. The outreach workers have contacted over 1000 individuals and have referred 300 of them to emergency housing and signed voluntary agreements with 200 of them for directly deducting rent from their GA checks when assigned to low-rent hotels.

All of these measures, including the Matrix program, Proposition V and mandatory housing, have come under heavy attack from advocate groups who brand them as infringing upon the freedom of choice of clients. DSS expects future litigation over some of these measures, even though the county feels that it is only asking the clients to fully meet the current requirements of the program. The department feels that the success of such measures will allow it to better serve clients and avoid cutting the GA grant.

Family and Children Program

The goal of the children's services program for 1993 was to develop a corrective action plan to comply with state child welfare regulations and a family preservation program to target the disproportionate number of African American children in foster care.

The Department had been out of compliance with state requirements pertaining to performance evaluation and reporting in its child welfare program since 1986. During 1993, the state approved, with some revisions, the corrective action plan developed by DSS. The results for the first quarter of FY 1994 showed that the department was able to make significant progress in this regard. However, the county is still facing the threat of a lawsuit from the Youth Law Center which feels that the DSS has taken inadequate steps to address issues such as visitation of foster children and access to health and dental care. The department feels that a lawsuit at this stage would undermine the progress made so far.

The county is also working on developing a plan for improving family preservation services. The department launched a community planning body composed of representatives from community organizations, parents, foster parents, service providers, schools and other public agencies

to develop strategies for early intervention and family reunification. DSS is also participating in the newly formed Children's Collaborative Planning Committee, a group consisting of department heads, community leaders, and elected neighborhood representatives. The group has adopted a set of planning principles to guide decisions on the Proposition J Children's Fund allocations and the development of a comprehensive public/private neighborhood based planning process for all family and children's services in the city. There is an ongoing tension between those who focus on the distribution of the Proposition J funds and those who want to concentrate on planning and decision making related to all city funding for family and children.

Adult Services

Adult services, like the GA and Homeless program, were new to the GM since he had spent his entire career in children's services. In spite of this challenge, he was able to guide the following DSS initiatives by including senior staff in testifying before the Board of Supervisors and negotiating with state and federal officials to: 1) develop a community-based consortium to improve the quality of in-home support services (IHSS) for adults along with plans to develop a provider referral system to better serve the entire community, 2) obtain a \$ 1 million increase for the GAIN program which will allow increased job training and placement services for AFDC clients, 3) start new outreach efforts to reach the elderly and disabled population in the Food Stamps program, and 4) deploy more Medi-Cal workers at clinics and community centers to better serve clients needing perinatal care.

Personnel Changes

A \$ 15 million cut in the DSS budget led to the elimination of 100 positions (37 employees were laid off while over 60 employees were reassigned). Some African-American workers charged that the layoffs were discriminatory against them and challenged the agency. However, upon investigation, the Civil Service Commission ruled that the layoffs were done in compliance with its requirements without any discrimination against any ethnic group or program. However, the Commission pointed out the need for more sensitivity in communicating layoff decisions.

The department is exploring the possibility of obtaining Civil Service Commission cultural competence waiver to recruit more African-Americans for specific positions in view of the high number of African-American clients served by the agency. DSS is also working under a court

ordered mandate to hire workers who speak Spanish, Russian, Cantonese and Vietnamese. As part of the GM's plans to increase the percentage of African American staff at all levels, DSS was able to hire an exceptionally qualified African American Assistant General Manager for Family and Children's Services.

Conclusion

The case highlights the challenges confronting a new director of a large urban county social service agency. It describes the process of dealing with a variety of interest groups impacting administrative decision-making in times of shrinking financial resources. It emphasizes the need for administrators to be fully aware of political environments and the need to develop skills to deal with the cross-currents of public agency administration. Based on the experiences of the new GM at San Francisco, the following ten lessons can be useful for senior administrators taking up new assignments in public agencies:

- 1 Stick to the important priorities even when distracted by local politics or controversies
- 2 Develop a "thick skin" to handle the assaults on your position and a sense of humor to handle the ridiculous
- 3 Engage in daily management activities with an eye for the immediate issues as well as the more long range issues (it is important to develop and articulate one's own agenda in the first year but also to understand that only 10% of one's time will be available to pursue the agenda)
- 4 Use the position as a "bully pulpit" to do what is right for clients and staff

- 5 Pay attention to small problems knowing that they can quickly escalate into large problems
- 6 Understand there is a mentor role with staff (taking staff to Board of Supervisors meetings)
- 7 Assess your preparation for assuming a politicized position by noting your capacity to think on your feet (e.g. prior experience as a crisis intervention worker proved to be very helpful)
- 8 Recognize that dealing with multiple and unexpected crises can be scary but also addictive
- 9 Be open to learning new issues (came from a background of family and children's services and had to learn quickly about adult services and homeless population)
- 10 Feel secure enough to be able to resign the position at a moment's notice and make sure to find a supportive spouse prepared to handle change.

Discussion Questions

- What were your reactions to the multiple challenges confronting the General Manager?
- Which leadership qualities are most difficult for you to envision as part of your management style?

References

- First Year Review Report, General Manager to staff.
- Austin, M., 1989, "Executive Entry: Multiple Perspectives on the Process of Muddling Through", *Administration in Social Work*.