Borrowing Santa Cruz County's Organizational Lens to Focus on Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department

Laura Cepoi

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizational development is a fundamental concept in the effort to understand both qualitatively and quantitatively the relationship between an organization and its employees. How the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCHSD) used engagement strategies can inform strategic retention initiatives in Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD). Understanding the choices and implementation roadmaps used can accelerate EHSD's process to achieve similar desired results. By analyzing the organizational development choices of SCHSD, Contra Costa can learn and further develop its retention practices.

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Introduction

Effective organizational development involves planned engagement of staff to gain their feedback, trust and buy-in with a goal of examining and, potentially, improving facets of the organization's culture. How staff treat clients can be a reflection of how the organization values staff. If the organization values staff and creates a workplace where they are engaged and thrive professionally, this will promote the accomplishment of our vision and mission.

Organizational frameworks can be used by directors, managers, supervisors, project managers and staff. This lens can be trained on organization structures and strategies, team effectiveness, leadership development, staff engagement and employee satisfaction. "Organizational Development is the process of increasing organization effectiveness and facilitating personal and organizational change through the use of interventions driven by social and behavioral science knowledge."[1]

Organizational Development allows us to:
- Identify areas of strength and weakness
- Prioritize areas of focus
- Democratize the process of organizational change (by allowing staff at all levels to buy-in/participate

In September 2017, Ellen Timberlake became the Director for the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department. As the Deputy Director for

17 years, she had a clear vision of top priorities for the department. Timberlake hired an Organizational Development Manager, Jennifer Kaley, to address several changes in the department, particularly: (1) the desire to increase staff morale through greater employee engagement, and (2) to improve retention.

Through an organizational development framework, the department has increased staff engagement and employee satisfaction first within the Adult and Long Term Care Services (ALTC) Division and then within the Family and Children's Services (FCS) Division. Key features in the organizational lens used to focus on engagement strategies were:
- Development of division-specific frameworks
- Design, scale and evaluation of the engagement frameworks
- Data analysis

Santa Cruz HSD: Division Specific Engagement Models

The SCHSD Organizational Development manager explained that each division requires its own style of management, while all need to comply with the rules and mission of the agency. Eligibility workers may have a culture of being mindful of timelines to drive their work, while Children and Family Services has an emphasis on safety, permanence, and well-being. "You have to use a different engagement model to find what works best for each division," said Kaley. Increasing staff engagement creates positive organizational change, also called "climate change." Kaley explained that while some climate

1. Chapter 1: "What is Organization Development?" *Organizational Development and Change,* Thomas G. Cummings, 2008

FIGURE 1
Categories Evaluated or Measured in Staff Survey

Organizational Development	Workforce Development	Program Development
Climate & Culture Personal Motivation Decision-making Structure	Supervision Performance Management Job Analysis Work Conditions Onboarding Professional Development	Staffing Caseloads, Unit Specific (APS, IHSS, IHSS PA, Veterans, Clerical) Client Needs Work Impact - Community

change is immediate, it can take three to five years to get to a real "culture change," requiring patience. Focus groups and surveys can offer insight into how current efforts are proceeding and what challenges or obstacles to lasting change could be arising. "One needs individualized engagement to create an overarching framework. Organizational development is all about systems. Engagement is about the individual, you can get creative with that," said Kaley

When the ALTC Director, Mike McConnell, began working at Santa Cruz HSD in 2016. He noted low morale and wanted to understand the causes. Under his leadership, the ALTC Design Team was established to accomplish the following goals: (1) engage and develop the workforce through building a platform for staff input and project management and (2) support division-wide change management efforts and staff-led initiatives, projects, and system improvements.[2] A validated survey for staff feedback was developed with the help of focus groups. The survey structure addressed organizational development, workforce development, and program development. Staff were asked what was working well or where concerns and/or suggestions were. The top three results from the first survey in 2016 were: (1) low staff morale due to self-reported treatment by managers, (2) teams feeling strong at the peer level (this remained high throughout subsequent surveys), and (3) staff feeling trauma around change.

The first-year survey results had specific comments about people. Recommendations to avoid this type of feedback would be to limit responses to just "yes" or "no" if there is contention. In the second survey, a year later, there was a 20% improvement in positive responses. By the third year, a few categories still rated as low (e.g. staff decision making) but overall there was progress toward the goal of retention. The ALTC Design Team, made up of leadership and line staff representation from each program, discusses survey results and selects the priorities to work on; they are transparent about information shared and their process in choosing priorities. The chart in *Figure 1* shows the categories evaluated or measured under each area.[3]

The Design Team fostered trust within the ALTC Division by ensuring that priorities were chosen from survey results. In this way, the information was transparent to everyone. Some of the feedback from the ALTC Design Team merited immediate implementation due to ease of implementation such as: division-wide meetings, exit interviews, communication about staff changes, clinical supervision plans, and overtime and flex time training.

Another finding was that when leadership focus shifted from responsibilities to relationships, line staff began to exhibit greater participation, according to Kaley. "Everyone expects leadership to be the expert but if you are not speaking to the line staff

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2. ALTC Design Team & Implementation Workgroup Road Map

3. ALTC Survey Response Organizational Development Table

you will not have the most effective solutions. The goal is to create an environment where people feel like they are making a difference. This will improve engagement and employee satisfaction," said Kaley.

Supervisor coaching style is becoming a focus in HSD; due to the efforts in ALTC, there is now an emphasis on ensuring psychological safety at work through team process. In a typical governmental framework, power is hierarchical. When a flattened organizational framework is used, staff at every level are involved and engaged to improve culture, which is why engaged teams are so important.

The Design Teams reviewed the new research which came from a Google initiative, *The Aristotle Project*, on why some groups are more effective than others. Results showed that it has nothing to do with age, experience or education. Generally, team success comes when everyone works well together and respects each other. "Studies show that groups tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly and find better solutions to problems. Studies also show that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction."[4] The key findings from the Aristotle Project indicate that the following elements make effective teams: psychological safety, dependability, structure and clarity, meaning of work, and impact of work.

These findings are reflected in the ALTC survey questions and initiatives that the Design Teams undertook to foster employee engagement work.

Leadership at ALTC and FCS used the organizational development lens to evaluate and improve the following areas: recruitment, onboarding, supervision, leadership development, retention, and professional development opportunities. Survey results were shared with staff and the union and administering the survey has now become standard practice in ALTC and FCS. Kaley looked at ways to create space for staff to build outlets for shared celebrating and recognition, which in turn creates connection. A number of improvements were offered to staff,

including emphasis on self-care in the onboarding process, additional professional development opportunities, career coaching, mentor programs specifically created for the individual, exit interviews, and "stay" interviews (currently piloting). Twenty-five percent of those staff from the first cohort of the mentor program have already promoted within HSD. "Stay" interviews ask employees what they need to be happy or if they are looking for another position; this practice began in response to high turnover in social workers.

Engagement Strategies for Family and Children Services

The Family and Children's Services (FCS) Division at HSD embarked on an organizational development process of improvement in the summer of 2017 following the success of ALTC. They began with facilitating roundtable discussions (similar to the Design Team in ALTC) and then deployed an employee engagement survey. They used the data from the discussions and survey to identify specific areas for improvement within workforce development, organizational development, and program and practice development. They identified 15 improvement themes and attached goals for the theme and status for possible inclusion in the Organizational Development Plan.[5] Themes specific for FCS are indicated in *Table 1* (next page).

These themes are similar to those expressed in the ALTC Division, though emphasis and specificity were different in how goals were defined. The process was similar in that a follow-up engagement survey was distributed to staff after getting feedback. After analyzing feedback from the 2018 FCS Roundtables (the equivalent to the Design Team for ALTC) and survey, compared to the 2017 baseline survey data, new areas for improvement were identified. A comparison of 2017 to 2018 Employee Engagement Survey responses indicated either the same level or an increase in level of satisfaction. Though the level

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4. "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team," The New York Times Magazine, 2/28/2026

5. Family & Children's Services: Employee Engagement Survey and Roundtable Feedback; Santa Cruz Human Services Department, September 2018

TABLE 1

FCS-Specific Improvement Themes Identified in Roundtable Discussions and Employee Engagement Survey

Organizational Development	Workforce Development	Program Development
Communication	Recruitment & Staffing	Safety Planning
Positive Reinforcement	Leadership Development	Strategic Decision Making Tool
Employee Recognition	Supervision	Safety Organized Practice
Staff Retention	Cross-training & Cross Knowledge	Technology
Agency-wide Standards & Expectations	Professional Development	Internal Processes & Procedures

of increase was not as significant as ALTC's, it does reflect a strong incremental increase in satisfaction. As part of their Organizational Development plan, the FCS Division developed a Retention Workgroup for the purpose of identifying and addressing ways for the division to increase employee retention. The workgroup produced both a final retention plan and a series of proposals for division-wide improvement. The final retention plan contained eight proposals with robust suggestions, with staff responsible for implementation. The proposals addressed appreciation and recognition, establishment of supervisorial standards (e.g., skill building, coaching, consistency), communications, new worker induction, union proposals, and incorporating 360 evaluations.[6] The recommendations are division-specific, and they also reflect an open dialogue between staff at all levels who are engaged in making their division stronger, more effective, and trauma-informed. Employee engagement is very visible; even though some of the proposals seem to require much thought and work they do not reflect significant financial resources, aside from staff time. For example, there are no proposals for additional consultants, higher pay, or more benefits. Overall the proposals have a theme of improved communication and clarity.

"We know that the best initiatives come from the ground up, answers and solutions come from people at the ground level who are doing the direct

6. Family & Children's Services: Employee Engagement Survey and Roundtable Feedback, September 2018

service every day. This is where supportive leadership is needed, not directive leadership," said Kaley.

Recommendations for EHSD

Building on Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) commitment to training, leadership development and innovation, there are ways to empower bureaus to achieve organizational development outcomes that will be specific and meaningful to each bureau. Lessons learned from Santa Cruz HSD show that organizational development can be used for issues that EHSD is actively investing in, such as recruitment, onboarding, retention, evaluation, and leadership development. Santa Cruz HSD has applied these concepts to plans that are actionable to shift the agency's culture in a respectful and positive framework for all employees. In 2017 EHSD spent $150,000 on the Millennium Group to provide leadership training at EHSD. In 2019 "Next Level Leadership" training was offered to staff to supplement the 2017 training. The contents of Next Level Leadership training focused on individual development and self-care strategies for the employee. Although both trainings reflect commitment to professional development at EHSD, they did not take root in the culture; an organizational development lens could enhance how what we learned becomes actionable within the department. The following recommendations are offered for consideration based on the organizational lens borrowed from Santa Cruz County:

- Assign the EHSD Strategic Initiative Team focused on retention to apply organizational development tools to develop an overarching design that can be modified to the needs of each bureau.
- Provide staff development and/or personnel support to assist one bureau at a time to launch organizational development initiatives. The time investment would include modeling initial focus groups to gather information needed to be included in a survey. Support may be needed to ensure that focus groups feel psychologically safe and do not degenerate into complaint sessions. Assist with selection of the bureau members to participate in the initial focus groups to ensure a positive tone.
- Build support networks with other counties that are developing organizational development programs to share knowledge and experience. We share unions and mandates and many of our themes overlap; this can help assist bureaus in identifying engagement models that are right for their teams.
- Develop Exit Interviews with more intent so that we can evaluate if the separation is a retention problem. Additionally, develop Stay Interviews that ask employees what would make them happy or if they are looking for another position.
- Review Leadership Development Training options to ensure that team strengthening is included and that strong relationships are built for effective communication and coaching.

The implications of these recommendations would have the largest impact on staff time for both Personnel and Staff Development, as both these divisions have natural alliances with organizational development and would have the most innate talent to provide design recommendations to bureaus. The Policy and Planning Bureau also contains resources with regard to effective survey design and measurement. Initial design teams and focus groups in Santa Cruz County demonstrated that much could get done without significant disruption to staff time if effectively structured decision making was used.

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