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**Case Studies of Contrasting Human Resources Models in County  
Social Service Agencies:  
Implications for Fostering the Development of Learning  
Organizations**

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## Case Studies of Contrasting Human Resources Models in County Social Service Agencies: Implications for Fostering the Development of Learning Organizations<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Recruitment and hiring of qualified staff is an on-going challenge in the public social services sector. The Monterey County Department of Social Services and the San Mateo County Human Services Agency offer contrasting models of internal (Monterey) and external (San Mateo) personnel recruitment systems that support a learning organization. In the search of “best practices,” these case studies briefly examine the two personnel systems in order to identify factors that contribute to their effectiveness.

### Monterey County: An Internal Human Resources Model

The Monterey County Department of Social Services (DSS) provides an example of a personnel system where the Human Resources (HR) unit is located inside the agency in order to meet recruitment and staffing needs. The Monterey County structure provides a contrast to other Bay Area counties where the Human Resources systems are centralized in the County Administrator’s Office. Monterey’s HR Department does not perform all personnel tasks related to recruitment and hiring, but works in conjunction with the Merit Services Systems (a state-wide agency contracted by several California counties to provide recruitment services) to facilitate

the standardization in job applications and screening.

When a DSS division needs to fill a personnel vacancy, the division manager contacts the HR unit to gain assistance in documenting the need and discussing how to meet it. The initial contact is with a Principal Clerk in the HR department. Depending on the nature of the personnel need, discussions may also include a Staff Services Analyst or members of Staff Development. In the case of new positions or a new program, the Principal Clerk involves an Analyst to determine how existing job classifications can be best used to meet the staffing needs.

Once a staff need has been documented and an appropriate job classification identified, the Principal Clerk contacts the Merit Systems Services staff in Sacramento to launch the recruitment process. In the case of a standard vacancy, the clerk is notified automatically when the incumbent resigns. The clerk gets a list of individuals who have applied and been tested for the vacant position. The clerk then works with the manager to set up a hiring committee, contacts candidates, and sets up interviews. The clerk acts on behalf of the agency to facilitate communication with the applicants. Once the candidate is selected for a position, the Personnel Clerk makes the job offer, handles salary negotiations, and sets up training.

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In cases where the Merit Systems lists are exhausted, a recruitment effort is launched. The Personnel Clerk initiates the recruitment by coordinating with Merit Systems. Such coordination includes facilitating manager review and updating job announcements, setting up testing dates, coordinating testing panels, etc. If an oral examination is required, the Principal Clerk helps arrange the expert panel, usually consisting of a department staff member, a community member with relevant subject matter expertise, and staff member for another social service agency, possibly a neighboring county. In areas of chronic staff shortages, such as some social worker classifications, the recruitment process is ongoing.

The HR Department maintains a cooperative and flexible relationship with staff at Merit Systems Services. The department has extensive contact with Merit Systems staff related to social worker recruitment, including input into recruitment materials and advertisements, and attendance at job fairs. HR staff report that Merit Systems has been helpful in streamlining the system so that recruitment efforts are integrated rather than duplicated by staff at the two agencies. There is a clear understanding of the responsibilities of Merit Systems and of the HR Department, but also an on-going dialogue and flexibility that recognizes and utilizes strengths of each system. Merit Systems is responsible for placing advertisements, testing services, screening and acceptance of applications, and administering lists. Human Resources provides extra recruitment efforts (such as job fairs, placing additional advertisements, and interaction with Social Work schools). Principal Clerks also are involved in mailings of targeted lists and proctoring exams.

From the Human Resources perspective, Merit Systems Services offer a fair and objective screening and recruitment process with high professional standards. In Monterey County, the relationship between HR and Merit Systems enhances the agency's ability to work toward meeting personnel goals. HR staff point out, however, that use of Merit Systems' "hand's off" approach could lead to extra bureaucracy and barriers to applicants if there was not a commitment on the part of both sides to ongoing communication, flexibility, and streamlining the process.

### **Unique Factors of Monterey's Internal HR Model**

Monterey's internal HR structure enhances the abilities of the Principal Clerks and Staff Analysts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique aspects of social service job functions. HR staff are able to understand and successfully communicate within the agency culture because of their daily interaction with staff members. As a result, the internal HR unit can gain more of an overall and in-depth perspective of the department's unique staffing issues than may be possible with a traditional, centralized HR unit that works with multiple county departments. From a manager's perspective, this translates into spending less time educating staff in a centralized personnel system about social service needs and job classifications.

*Customer Service and Visibility:* The ability of Monterey HR staff to have daily and in-depth understanding of the agency occurs within a culture that highly values customer service. The success of Monterey's internal HR structure is attributed, in part, to the county-wide commitment to enhanced external and internal customer service practices. Such responsiveness and



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emphasis on delivery of comprehensive services has been articulated as a county value and a department value. For the HR staff, this commitment to customer services translates, in part, into making a conscious effort to be a visible presence within the agency and to develop and maintain relationships with staff that facilitate an “open door” policy. HR staff spends time at each of the agency’s five sites, reinforcing the notion that HR is a part of the same team, understanding issues specific to different workgroups and offices, and encouraging staff to use the department as a resource.

This emphasis on customer service is intended to reduce barriers to navigating “the system” and increase staff’s understanding of career options and available resources. By reducing these barriers to accessing information about human resources issues, Monterey’s internal HR structure helps to foster job satisfaction and retention.

For example, an employee approached an HR Analyst to discuss career opportunities outside the agency. The Analyst was able help the employee examine the array of career options inside the agency. As a result of the employee’s personal connection with the Analyst and the Analyst’s ability to give a broad perspective on employment opportunities at the agency, this employee stayed at the agency and the personalized intervention had a clear impact on staff retention issues.

*Commitment of Necessary Resources:* The ability of an internal HR system to deliver high quality customer service is predicated on the availability of sufficient HR staff. In the case of Monterey, there are approximately 14 staff members in the Social Services Personnel division of the

Human Resources and Staff Development unit to serve an agency with approximately 700 staff overall. (See HR organizational chart, Attachment 1.) In addition, the Social Work Trainers in the Training division are also active in recruitment efforts, particularly for social workers. Without this staffing ratio of approximately one Personnel staff member to every 50 employees, an internal HR department (utilizing Merit Systems Services) would be seriously hampered in its ability to deliver high quality, comprehensive services.

### Summary

Several key factors have been identified as contributing to the success of the Monterey internal Human Resources approach. Because they work within the same organizational system, HR staff have an in-depth understanding of departmental issues, policies, strategies, and challenges. Also, the articulated value of customer service, physical proximity, and agency culture help to reduce barriers to gaining access to HR expertise. While some HR functions are provided by an external agency, staff have developed and maintain a positive, flexible, and collaborative relationship with the contracted Merit System agency. Most importantly, DSS has made the commitment to create and appropriately fund the infrastructure necessary to make the internal HR model successful. In the case of Monterey DSS, a ratio of approximately 14 HR staff to 700 employees overall is necessary for the department to function. Without such a commitment to secure and maintain the infrastructure, it would be impossible for the department to provide the level of customer service necessary to meet the needs of the agency and the community.



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## **San Mateo County: An External Human Resources Model**

The case of San Mateo Human Services Agency (HSA) is an example of a personnel structure in which a social service agency utilizes the county's centralized Human Resources unit to meet its recruitment and staffing needs. While the external personnel structure is the most common in Bay Area counties, San Mateo county has developed a unique relationship between the HSA and the Employee and Public Services (EPS) unit under the auspices of the San Mateo County Manager's Office. This partnership differs from traditional relationships characterized by rigidity, isolation, and an "us versus them" mentality.

The relationship between HSA and EPS represents a new approach to collaboration that embraces the learning organization philosophy of creating flexible, responsive agencies able to cope with increasingly complex environmental challenges and service goals. To better meet HSA staffing and recruitment needs, new roles for the EPS Analyst and HSA representative were developed in order to reflect the customer service approach shared by HSA and EPS, as well as the integrated service delivery model embraced by HSA. These customer service strategies, reflected throughout San Mateo County agencies, have helped to create an inter-agency relationship characterized by responsiveness, flexibility, and creativity.

### **Support for Change: Institutional and Individual**

Creating a new relationship between HSA and county centralized human resources required procedural and systems changes as well as a shift in organizational culture. In order to achieve this, support was needed at

the executive and operational levels in both departments. In the past there was a "us vs them" climate between EPS and HSA. To address this "disconnect," a new collaborative relationship was developed by using a partnership approach to all aspects of personnel management including the development of recruitment brochures and outreach strategies.

The change to a more integrated, collaborative approach with EPS was supported by the HSA executive team, reflecting their recognition of a link between effective staff recruitment and retention and the success of the organizational goal of service delivery to the community. On a structural level, such support is reflected by the agency's commitment to locate the responsibility for Human Resources in the portfolio of a senior administrator so that personnel issues are a standard agenda item at HSA's bi-weekly Executive Team meeting. This provides the executive team with the opportunity to maintain on-going involvement in personnel issues and strategies. It also represents a continuous renewal of their commitment to the learning organization principles in the area of the human resources development.

The support of the top management of EPS is also critical to an effective relationship with HSA. While HSA initiated the dialogue, EPS was receptive to increased collaboration between the two departments. From the EPS perspective, an enhanced collaborative relationship can provide more effective service to the assigned department, especially since both departments share a commitment to customer service.

The willingness of the individuals involved in both departments to be leaders and change agents has been identified as another key element that enabled the establishment



of this personnel systems model. Embracing the learning organization concept, those individuals were willing to take the risk, move outside of their traditionally prescribed roles, and attempt new and innovative system development. These individuals were willing to develop and model the type of communication, respect, and trust that is necessary for this model to be effective.

### **New Roles and Systems for Addressing Human Resources Needs**

To create this new relationship, the HSA Deputy Director invited the EPS Analyst to collaborate in the development of a partnership that was responsive to changing HR needs in HSA. Since all personnel actions are the responsibility of the HSA Deputy Director, she is the liaison responsible for on-going, direct communication with the EPS, as well as monitoring and trouble-shooting all departmental communication with EPS. She is actively involved with the EPS Analyst in creating and implementing recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies, as well as facilitating the EPS liaison's understanding of HSA's unique culture and personnel, policy, and program issues.

As the HSA/EPS collaboration has evolved, the Deputy Director has delegated some aspects of communication with the EPS liaison to the HSA Human Resources and Development Unit that reports directly to her. A Personnel Supervisor (who reports directly to the Manager of Human Resources and Development) communicates regularly with EPS liaison regarding departmental matters. The Deputy Director, however, continues to meet monthly with the EPS liaison and remains actively involved in the collaboration.

The EPS Analyst assigned to HSA works solely with the agency of approximately 700 employees. The Analyst is responsible for working with the department to meet its recruitment and staffing needs, and she is the central contact for all personnel requisitions. The EPS Analyst is that she is also actively involved in HSA personnel issues on strategic and policy levels in order to provide her with an in-depth understanding of HSA's unique personnel and program issues. As a result, the EPS Analyst is assigned to HSA by the Director of EPS who reports to the County Manager. By participating on multiple levels, the Analyst receives all personnel requisitions from managers and directors. She meets regularly with the HSA Deputy Director and has access to the agency director. She is also the identified contact for any HSA staff member seeking career coaching or assistance with navigating the civil service personnel system.

The EPS Analyst also sits on the intra-agency Human Resources Policy Team and inter-agency Bay Area Human Resources Committee. Additionally, the EPS Analyst participates in the HSA Client Empowerment training program by providing workshops for CalWORKS clients on how to apply for and secure a job with San Mateo County. Such utilization of the Analyst as a resource for promoting the empowerment of clients reflects the high level of integration into the department and acceptance by staff. In these various roles, the Analyst spends a significant amount of time in all HSA offices throughout the county, and thus is a visible reminder to staff of the link between the departments. HSA staff are encouraged to contact the EPS Analyst for answers to their questions and career advice.



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The EPS Analyst reports directly to the Employment and Public Services Director. They meet bi-weekly to provide an update on the work with HSA and to get advice and insight from the county perspective. The Analyst gets administrative support from EPS office assistants and specialists to assist with applicant tracking and notifications (although she does not supervise those positions). In addition, she has access to an Employee Relations Manager, Benefits Department, Risk Management Department, and EEO officer (see EPS/HSA organizational chart, Attachment 2.)

Even though the EPS Analyst is technically external to HSA, there is a significant investment in collaborative strategies and approaches to meeting personnel needs and addressing problematic situations. For example, the high level of HSA investment in the EPS Analyst position is reflected in financial sponsorship of the Analyst to attend a national Human Resources conference.

### **Elements of a Successful Partnership**

*Communication and Trust:* The on-going formal and informal communication between the departmental liaisons is a key element in the interdepartmental relationship building. Through regularly scheduled monthly meetings to assess and review current recruitment and staffing issues in the agency, the liaisons discuss strategy, policy, and various internal and external issues that may be affecting agency personnel. Prior to the meeting, the Analyst carefully reviews vacancy reports and open personnel requisitions to ensure that vacancies are identified and recruitment proceeds in a timely manner.

In addition to the monthly meetings, the liaisons also communicate on an on-going

basis. This relationship helps to create an environment that facilitates teamwork, identify the EPS Analyst as part of the team, and foster respect and communication from all staff members.

*Mutual Investment in Creative Problem-Solving:* Greater integration increases the incentive of both departments to find mutually beneficial solutions to problematic situations. The EPS Analyst is uniquely positioned to understand and balance the needs of both HSA and her department seeking creative solutions to systemic barriers. In the past, such barriers added time and frustration to the hiring process. The EPS Analyst describes her goal as “creating effective strategies within existing organizational structures.” Achieving this goal involves an in-depth understanding of systems, HSA trust in her expertise, ongoing support from the EPS Director, and the capacity to problem-solve with county HR staff. Given such conditions, the HSA Deputy Director and the EPS Analyst are able to develop strategies to work effectively together. As a result, a true partnership has evolved. For example, joint efforts are made to design and conduct searches so as to generate job candidates lists that meet the needs of HSA and capture candidates appropriate for future anticipated openings.

Another example is the HSA senior management decision to foster a system that encourages staff to “work out of class” as a strategy to allow for greater staff development opportunities. Such a strategy, while potentially beneficial to the staff involved, is administratively time consuming and requires careful monitoring and management. The support of the EPS Analyst helps ensure that this is a successful staff development strategy, rather than a bureaucratic nightmare.



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*Byproducts of Collaboration:* Staff involved in the HSA/EPS collaborative effort report that there have been unexpected positive byproducts of the cooperative relationship. The success of the partnership with EPS around recruitment and staffing has contributed to other successes including improved employee relations, staff satisfaction, and expedited reclassifications. The relationship serves as a model of cooperative behavior between departments, leading to more effective communications and a willingness to address disagreements constructively and with mutual respect.

## Summary

Several key factors have contributed to the success of the collaborative relationship between San Mateo HSA and the county's centralized HR department. These include the initial vision at the executive level to create a flexible and responsive partnership. With such support, new roles and systems were created within the existing county HR structure using a customer service orientation. The success of this partnership is based on the integration of the "external" HR liaison into the "internal" agency operations, resulting in on-going communications and creative problem solving.

## Conclusion

The Monterey and San Mateo case studies contain a number of similarities and differences. The primary similarities include the following:

1. Personnel strategies are developed from the perspective of a global understanding of the agency and thus are integrated into larger departmental strategies of customer service and staff retention.

2. HR staff and the internal "customers" are inter-dependent and the success of each is tied to the other.
3. Both HR models require the support of agency executives. In the case of Monterey, support is critical to ensure appropriate staffing levels. In the case of San Mateo, support is critical in modeling and maintaining effective communication within the culture of both agencies. The major differences are reflected in the location of the HR unit (inside or outside) and the size of the HR staff.

## Implications

Several lessons and implications can be drawn from these case studies of the Monterey and San Mateo human resource systems.

- 1) The success of future staff recruitment and retention processes will depend on the nature of the relationship between the agency's human resource capacities and those of the county administrator's office. The potential for efficient and effective human resource processes rests on structures and relationships. The two case studies describe a decentralized merit system county (Monterey) and a combination of centralization (CAO) and decentralization (San Mateo). Each county needs to assess its structures and relationships in order to expedite the following recruitment/retention activities:
  - Examination development and/or administration
  - Recruitment announcements and how costs for advertisements are covered (centralized or decentralized)

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- Location of responsibility for Oral Board examinations
  - Number of names available on the roster for recruitment per vacancy
  - Nature of the flexibility of civil service policies and procedures
  - Location of internal HR staff in relationship to top management
  - Nature of centralized county HR (facilitating vs policing)
- 2) Effective internal HR requires ongoing employee relations activities to facilitate recruitment and retention processes. In essence, staff retention begins with the staff recruitment process as prospective applicants see our current staff are supported and helped to learn and grow professionally.
- 3) Effective communications and relationship development are the foundation for efficient HR processes, whether operating in a decentralized environment where many of the HR staff are inside the human service agency or a centralized environment where most of the HR staff are located in the County Administrator's Office. Lead time to plan for staff growth, reduction, and transfer is essential for both the HR specialist and the agency's program manager. Building understanding between HR and program staff requires effort, time and trust in order to learn about the issues that each faces in carrying out their respective responsibilities.
- 4) The linkage between HR staff and the fostering of a learning organization can be found in the careful monitoring of the "pulse" of employee relations with respect to the ongoing gathering and interpreting of HR data (job satisfaction information, career advancement inquiries, benefits counseling, processing annual leave information, analysis of exit interview data, follow-up with those who were unsuccessful in securing a job offer, etc.). HR staff often have access to the formal and informal aspects of the organization's culture and climate.