

# **County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency Leadership Development Program: A Leadership Development and Employee Engagement Opportunity for Alameda County**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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In today's fast-paced and highly competitive workforce, employees place a high value in career progression, leadership development, and space for engagement. This case study examines Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency (SSA) Leadership Development Program (LDP), implemented in the spring of 2021. The program was developed following an agency-wide staff climate survey which indicated that staff were looking for opportunities to receive more career development and leadership experience as well as a space for

engagement. The Santa Clara County SSA LDP model is unique in structure and framework due to a "self-leadership" concept that aims to promote an environment for building trust. By implementing the cohort-based blended model, the training program creates space for aligning individual values with the core values of the Agency. The goal of this Case Study is to explore the valuable aspects of this LDP and incorporate it into the existing Leadership Programs in Alameda County.

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## **Introduction**

It is no secret that professional and leadership development, trust, and staff engagement are closely intertwined. Studies have shown over decades that employee engagement and retention is directly influenced by the respective organization's commitment to staff opportunities for growth. When Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency (SSA) administered an agency-wide Climate Survey in 2019, the results were not surprising. The common theme was that employees placed a high value on career growth, with a desire for more leadership development training, which would then create opportunities for engagement. Santa Clara County SSA's response to the climate survey was to create an agency-wide Leadership Development Program (LDP) where staff from different parts of the organization would come together and have conversation about values, behaviors, and practices of leadership. At the core of this program are value-based leadership learning outcomes, a racial equity approach to design and implementation, employment of best practices, and alignment with agency culture change initiatives. Studies indicate that organizations require a paradigm shift in leadership in order to find different ways of establishing trust, creating high performance, engagement, and motivation. They require leaders who are self-aware and can connect with and develop other leaders. The LDP of Santa Clara County SSA incorporates self-leadership, self-awareness, organizational alignment, and belonging into the cohort curriculum. Alameda County Social Service's Climate Survey findings in 2021 also suggested a link between career progression and leadership development, and opening the path to engagement, trust, and collaboration.

## **Background on Employee Performance Factors**

This section examines the level of influence each performance element has over the other and how the impact can be positive or negative. Trust can be a critical relationship factor between a worker's performance and operational success. According to a study published by Harvard Business Review, leaders who are invested in their employee's skill growth and enhancement are more likely to be trusted by their subordinates compared to leaders who do not empower their employees (As cited by Wong, 2020). When developing Santa Clara's LDP, the Executive Team used employee feedback from the survey to create opportunities for more employees to hone skills and develop a pipeline for future leaders to grow and contribute to the organization.

Exploring leadership development and engagement, according to Forbes Magazine, opens opportunities for staff to learn new skills, interact with all levels of leadership, and enrich new career paths, staff are more inclined to be engaged, committed, and motivated. In general, learning and development initiatives demonstrate that the agency values their employees as individuals. It has been demonstrated that if employees cannot trust their employers to fulfill the commitments they have made or open avenues for career progression, their levels of engagement could decrease, and they might become more likely to withhold their best efforts. According to Brodzik et al. (2022), if employees trust their employer's commitments to their growth and leadership roles, employee engagement levels can increase up to 20%, and the likelihood that employees will leave the organization decreases by 87%. Studies have shown over decades that staff engagement and retention is directly influenced by the respective

organization's commitment to employees' professional growth (Citation needed).

The Santa Clara County SSA Executive Team supported developing an agency-wide LDP wherein participants from various departments and job classifications could come together to align their approach to leadership with the values of the SAA.

## **Background on Santa Clara County SSA**

Santa Clara SSA is one of the largest public agencies in the area, currently employing over 2,500 staff consisting of five departments: the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), the Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS), the Department of Employment and Benefits Services (DEBS), the Office of Veterans Services (OVS), and the Agency Office (AO/DOS). Similar to other counties in the country, Santa Clara County is experiencing the impact of the "Great Resignation" and the loss of experienced supervisors and managers to retirement. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought uncertainties in the workplace, increased workload, and low morale. The Agency Director, Bob Menicocci, chose to focus on SSA employee engagement, leadership and career development opportunities, and a culture of inclusivity. This prompted the agency to conduct a Climate Satisfaction Survey. The findings indicated staff and management sought more professional and leadership development training, engagement strategies, and cross collaboration opportunities among departments.

In the summer of 2020, a framework for a LDP was submitted to the Agency Executive Team. The program's focal point was to create a platform for staff from across the agency to engage and share ideas, values, practices, and behaviors of leadership through the lens of self-leadership,

self-awareness, leadership alignment, equity, inclusion, and cross level collaboration. A 10- week agency-wide LDP was created in which participants participate in authentic conversations about self-leadership and self-awareness, which promotes trust and engagement. This is a cohort-based learning module with a self-guided independent study that consists of equitable principles and practices. Key values employed in the creation of the program included Adult Learning Theory, Experiential Education, cohort-based model, and with consideration of racial equity and social justice. This program uniquely combines staff and leadership at all levels to explore how their approaches to leadership align with the values of the Agency. Having supervisors, managers, and line staff all together in the same program contributes to more opportunities for cross collaboration and engagement. The small group cohort establishes a channel for communication with peers.

## **Self-Leadership Module**

The 10-week program focuses on self-leadership, self-awareness, creating an atmosphere for belonging and organization alignment. The program consists of a four-part modular learning experience and centers participants' lived experience, both as leaders and as individuals who have been led by others, to determine the elements that have shaped their unique values and practices of leadership. The program incorporates independent coursework, project-based learning, cohort experience, and networking opportunities that enhance both individual and group development.

### *Cohort Structure and Benefits*

There were three cohorts of participants representing:

- Front Line Workers and Clerical Staff
- Supervisors of front line/clerical staff
- Mid-level managers

The cohort-based training program is a new concept that creates space for aligning individual values with the core values of the Agency. This approach fosters a culture of trust, respect, and teamwork, which can improve employee engagement and job satisfaction. Cohort-based learning successfully provides an environment where participants look to each other for insight and diversity of thought to help inform their perspective. Each participant experiences the opportunity to engage in both small and large group cohorts as well as a group research project.

#### *Small Cohort*

The small cohort establishes opportunities for information sharing and strengthening trust among peers. This cohort is divided by job function within the agency. Small cohorts meet twice during the program and their topics of discussion include self-awareness and praxis. Benefits include similar language, similar challenges, support, collaboration, trust and engagement.

#### *Large Cohort*

The large cohort includes all LDP participants and meets four times during the program. The pilot round included a total of 28 participants. The main topics discussed during the meetings are creating an atmosphere of belonging and organizational alignment. Some of the major benefits of this cohort include cross classification communication, thought provoking activities, leadership skill building, exercising trust, equity and engagement.

#### *Research Groups*

In addition to the small and large group cohorts, participants are randomly selected to work together and explore an agency initiative and how these initiatives envision leadership. The research groups consist of a member from each classification and collaborates on a specific initiative existing in Santa Clara County. The goal of this part of the program is for members of the group to build trust, recognize the expertise in the group and strengthen communication among staff and leadership.

### **Program Evaluation**

The implementation of the pilot identified both benefits and areas for improvement. Overall, the LDP has been a resounding success from the pilot stage to present. Participants unanimously agreed that they learned more about themselves and the concept of leadership than anticipated. Topics of self-awareness and creating an atmosphere of belonging had a notable impact on most participants. Almost all (91%) participants strongly agreed that participation in the LDP was a valuable investment in their professional development. Participants also noted a greater desire to create an inclusive workplace where all employees feel they belong. Participants remarked on the effectiveness of the group project in supporting collaboration, understanding across departments, and deepening their knowledge of a specific agency initiative. Facilitated cohort meetings created opportunities for peer-to-peer learning through interactive activities, small and large group discussions, and independent reflection.

With any new initiative that an organization implements there come some challenges. In reviewing the overall program, the participants felt like more time needed to be allocated to each topic and on participants' schedules to complete assigned work in

between each cohort meeting. The participants also shared that there were some challenges with putting what they learned into practice due to heavy workload, time constraints, and the amount of support received from their supervisors. There was a mixed perspective throughout the program regarding the non-immersive learning experience. Some believed that this should have been a singular immersive experience that occurred over a shorter time and through consecutive meetings. People were challenged with balancing their workload with the program material.

Having one facilitator assigned to each small cohort and a separate facilitator for the large cohort created a siloed situation where topics, large group discussions, and independent study were not intentionally connected to one another. Also, there was inconsistent coaching provided to each of the group research teams by the program facilitators. It took multiple interventions to get Directors to outreach and provide support to managers to identify possible applicants from the management pool to attend this program.

## **Implications for Alameda County**

The purpose for selecting this case study was to obtain ideas and lessons from Santa Clara SSA's innovative approach to leadership development training that may have implications for Alameda County SSA. Alameda County SSA is also invested in professional development and leadership training for its employees. A similar Climate Survey was conducted in Alameda County SSA in the spring of 2021. The results were very similar to that of Santa Clara County SSA, indicating that staff were unclear about the pathway between career advancement and promotional opportunities. One effect of this lack of clarity was a reduction in trust and engagement. Alameda County SSA's

Strategic Priorities also identified professional development, engagement, recruitment, retention, and succession planning as some of the goals for the agency to focus on in the coming years. Santa Clara's SSA LDP model for engagement can be looked to as a guide.

Alameda County SSA's Strategic Priorities identify professional development as an area of focus: "Investing in the workforce through retention, professional development, and succession planning." Some strategies to accomplish these goals would be creating more professional development opportunities, focusing on building cross level communication and trust, and engagement strategies. Agency leaders recognize a growing need for cross collaboration, leadership opportunities, and a focus on equity and inclusion training. Currently, the following leadership and professional development trainings exist in Alameda County SSA: Leadership Development Series Training for First Line Supervisors; Leadership Training Series for Second Line Managers; Building Blocks of Supervision and Management for First Line Managers; and Leaders of Tomorrow for Non-management Staff. In addition, SSA's Workforce and Benefits department and Adult and Aging department have implemented their own mentorship programs for staff.

While these efforts are positive steps in supporting staff and enhancing the agency, Alameda County SSA historically seeks opportunities to enhance existing programs. It is recommended that Santa Clara's SSA LDP model for engagement and professional development be looked at as a guide to enhance Alameda County's existing training. This can be done by including a learning experience wherein staff from across the agency explore values, practices, and behaviors of leadership as they perform



their professional role. The goal for Alameda County SSA going forward would be to adopt certain valuable concepts and practices of Santa Clara County's LDP for implementation as supplemental opportunities.

One recommendation would be to **apply key elements of Santa Clara's LDP and develop two full-day workshops**. The workshops would be an extension of the existing Leadership Training Series (LTS) (first and second level managers) and Leaders of Tomorrow (LOT) (non-management staff) training in SSA. The concept of small and large group cohorts would be included in the workshops. The participants would be the same individuals who completed LTS and LOT. The workshops with the large cohort would include first line management who attended LTS together with emerging leaders who already completed LOT training. The workshop with the small group cohort would include first level and second level managers. The purpose of creating these workshops is to expand on leadership and professional development opportunities by having staff from various levels come together in both large and small group style workshops. The focal point for both workshops would be self-awareness, creating an environment of belonging, self-leadership, and organizational alignment. There are many benefits to implementing Santa Clara's LDP in this format.

The first benefit to this change would be keeping costs at a minimum leveraging existing LDP programs that the agency has invested in. With the workshop model as an added component to the existing leadership training, the participant selection for each of the cohorts will already be in place. This eliminates the application process, saves time and resources. Looking at the current

process of selecting participants, there seems to be a reasonable number of staff representing the four or more sections within the agency. Having this in place is important to create an atmosphere of diversity and inclusion. Another important benefit to having the workshops would be to promote engagement, reinforce self-leadership, and build an environment for trust and cross-level collaboration.

Every new initiative implemented by an organization comes with its challenges. One of the main areas to consider would be the time commitment required of participants to attend the workshops. Staff shortages, increased workload, low morale, implementation of a new database (CalSAWS), and lack of supervisor support might be some contributing factors. Also, with the low trust environment identified in the Climate Survey, staff may not openly engage and share their concerns and feelings when put together in the same workshop cohort as management. It is important to emphasize that having the Agency Executive Team's support and continuous promotion will be essential for moving forward with this new initiative.

Despite possible challenges, incorporating a modified version of Santa Clara's LDP program into the existing Alameda County SSA leadership program is highly recommended.

## Acknowledgments

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