

# **County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency's (SSA) Voice Videocast: An Employee Engagement & Well-Being Strategy**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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The link between employee engagement and organizational effectiveness is broadly accepted, and there is a large body of evidence that identifies core elements and indicators of engagement. Local government is a unique context for examining engagement because public sector effectiveness encompasses public policies and programs that directly impact our communities and the lives of residents. Unfortunately, employee engagement continues to decline across the board and there is little consistency in the strategies and structures utilized to cultivate engagement. The pandemic served to elevate

the relevance of engagement for resiliency and revealed shortcomings of making only superficial efforts. The trajectory of Santa Clara County Social Service Agency (SSA) Videocast exemplifies the decision-making and investments needed to achieve authentic employee engagement. The key lesson explored in this case study is not the specific features of the videocast, but rather the importance of leadership's commitment to developing a framework for employee engagement and infrastructure investments needed to build and sustain a culture of engagement.

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## Introduction

Employee engagement emerged as a concept in the 1990s and has become a much-touted proxy for organizational effectiveness. More encompassing than employee satisfaction, it's understood as the extent to which an employee will perform as a direct result of their emotional attachment to the organization. County governments provide a unique context for examining the role of employee engagement as a means of realizing the public mission. In the public sector, engagement parameters align with factors important for building public trust in government, which is critical to all public sector work.

There is no shortage of data supporting the linkage between the level of engagement and organizational success across multiple dimensions. In general, engaged teams demonstrate increased productivity, revenues, client satisfaction, retention, work quality, cost savings, attendance, and better safety records. Disengaged employees, on the other hand, cost billions annually. Losses related to public programs and client services are hard to quantify, as are the effects of increased workload stressors on staff that remain in the midst of attrition. In terms of recruitment, retention, and succession planning, authentic engagement is fundamental to realizing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. It is also key to attracting millennials who demand a dynamic work culture that embraces change and growth. Nothing has put employee engagement at the forefront of organizational concerns quite like the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic highlighted that employee and organizational health are inseparable and that employee engagement is central to organizational resiliency. The Disaster Service Worker (DSW) Program for local emergency response exemplifies the

importance of high levels of engagement for planning and executing operations during times of stress and uncertainty.

Despite the prevalence of engagement strategies, baseline levels of public sector engagement continue to fall, as do employee perceptions of their employer's concern for their wellbeing. This case study illustrates how leadership strategies can provide the commitment and cohesion necessary to achieve improved engagement outcomes.

## Background

The rationale for this case study is to glean lessons from Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA)'s experience implementing strategies aimed at building a culture of employee engagement that can be applied to Monterey County. Despite their differing demographic and socioeconomic makeup, the counties share similar origins, structures, and initiatives with respect to the early stages of engagement efforts. The case study highlights a divergence in how SSA leadership viewed and approached employee engagement as a result of focusing events that raised concerns about workplace culture and morale and led to cultivating engagement as an indispensable tool for communication, crisis management, and operational viability. Lessons learned mirror research that underscore the role of leadership, reciprocal communication, investment in resources for sustainability, data to set or adjust direction, and most importantly, engagement as *both* a means and an end.

In 2018, Monterey and Santa Clara Counties each undertook county-wide employee engagement surveys to inform various loosely related employee wellness strategies. The initiatives were spearheaded by Human Resources Department (HRD) in Monterey and the County Executive Office in Santa Clara. Internal conditions accelerated by the

onset of the pandemic affected the development and direction for both counties.

### *County of Monterey*

Championed by a County Supervisor and guided by the County Administrator, the County of Monterey HRD's inaugural annual employee engagement survey was launched in 2018. Since the impetus of the initiative was to assess employee needs and engagement across county departments and develop targeted solutions, it included a directive that individual departments develop customized SMART goals<sup>1</sup> and action plans guided by findings. The 2018 and 2019 surveys revealed employees wanted better communications and more opportunities for career development due to a void left when the Learning and Development Dashboard was disbanded because of budget cuts. Not long after developing a set of goals based on survey findings, a sequence of internal and external events abruptly changed the focus and execution of the engagement initiative. A subsequent change in philosophy relaxed the accountability requirements and allowed for departmental discretion in how to respond and follow up on survey findings. Not long after the onset of the pandemic, the county focused engagement surveys and strategies more specifically on crisis communications and assessing emergent workforce needs, particularly to support telework and address COVID-19 protocols. Even though the 2021-2022 annual surveys were shaped by pandemic issues, responses continued to echo earlier surveys around the topics of work/life balance, workload, career development, telework, and compensation. In response to the findings, the HRD, developed county-wide career development and employee engagement portals to serve

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<sup>1</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound goals

as a repository of resources and tools for employees and managers. The engagement portals reflect declared executive support for strengthening employee engagement while the new LLE<sup>2</sup> portal responds to an expressed desire by employees for more career development opportunities. Both portals, however, are self-directed resources and individual department heads are no longer required to develop formal engagement goals and strategies tailored to their departments.

### *Santa Clara County*

Santa Clara County's employee engagement initiative had similar origins but took a slightly different direction due to decisions made by leadership in response to internal and external challenges that elevated the importance of engagement to organizational functioning and effectiveness. The annual engagement survey was initiated in 2018 at the county level by the County Executive's Office (CEO) to inform disparate employee engagement and wellness strategies, including the Center for Leadership and Transformation. At the same time, the CEO conducted outreach to individual department heads to investigate a possible coordination of multiple engagement efforts. Meanwhile, in SSA, there was a change in executive leadership tasked with strategic planning goals that expressed a desire to be more data-driven. During this time, two focusing events in 2019 markedly strained employee relations and morale just preceding the emergence of the pandemic. The Gilroy Garlic festival shooting occurred within the county's jurisdiction and resulted in the death and injury of SSA employees. Later that same year, the county and its employees were

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<sup>2</sup> Leadership and Leadership Exchange is Monterey County's repository of career development resources, online training, leadership podcasts, and coaching programs

embroiled in contentious labor negotiations that left a lingering imprint on employee relations, which was further exacerbated by workplace uncertainties that arose with the onset of the pandemic. These new opportunities and tensions prompted SSA's Director, Bob Menicocci, to prioritize employee engagement at the department level as a means for both healing internally and better serving the community. This decision included a commitment to dedicating agency resources to building the infrastructure necessary to support and sustain authentic employee engagement. SSA took a county-level initiative and built a department-specific model for engagement rooted in theory, guided by a formal framework, and driven by data. The point of divergence in how the two counties came to view and approach engagement illuminates important lessons for implementing initiatives.

### **Santa Clara County SSA Voice Videocast**

The trajectory of Santa Clara County SSA Videocast is a case study that exemplifies the decision-making and investments needed to realize authentic employee engagement. SSA's initial engagement effort began in the form of a "roadshow" in which the executive team visited agency departments in-person to share updates, field questions, and address concerns. The intent was to de-silo the agency and create a forum for two-way communication. The pandemic ultimately shaped its current format, which is the live virtual SSA Voice Videocast. The larger lessons focused on here, however, are not about specific features of the videocast, but the importance of leadership's commitment to developing a framework and building the infrastructure to achieve engagement goals and outcomes.

Championed by the director and approached in the spirit of SSA's guiding principle to operate as a "learning organization," the agency made considerations about the infrastructure needed to support and sustain engagement. Key strategic decisions involved investing in the development of a clear theoretical framework to set direction and a formal implementation strategy to ensure successful execution. Integral to both components of the planning phase was the commitment of leadership and the ethos that engagement is as much a process as it is an end goal. The SSA director's decision to dedicate a staff member to develop a framework on which to design the program set the stage for broad buy-in and cultivated a foundation for feedback and learning. The development phase took place over six months and involved repeated and broad consultation with executive teams and staff. Rather than assign the project to a staff member, the process itself was an exercise in engagement and inclusiveness in the course of defining engagement along with establishing goals and indicators of success for which to design its strategic pillars. The approach accounts for the agency culture, systems, and structures that both reflect and support engagement.

Although they weren't wholly discrete phases, leadership took the time to formulate a theory of engagement and then develop an implementation plan. First, SSA defined engagement in terms of supporting staff development, creating an environment of open communication, and a culture of inclusivity to inform decision-making. Desired goals of engagement were defined in terms of outcomes for employees *and* clients. The end goal for employees is to ensure connection, that employees feel valued, and increased retention. Other short- and long-term goals relate to improving client experience, client satisfaction, and long-term individual, family, and

community level outcomes. Strategies are developed according to the five main pillars that support the framework. The pillars are: (1) ensuring communication, (2) promoting wellness, (3) fostering healthy relationships, (4) focusing on recognition, and (5) nurturing growth and development. The framework's pillars serve as guideposts for engagement strategies, which include surveys, mentoring, teleworking, human-centered design, and the SSA Voice. Although the SSA Voice is one strategy that supports SSA's engagement framework, it plays an integral role in modeling and animating engagement by facilitating two-way communication, continuous dialogue, and recognition.

The development of SSA illustrates the second notable takeaway, which is SSA's application of implementation theory to invest in building a sustainable infrastructure that supports engagement. Attention was given to the structure of teams and processes to facilitate design and stimulate learning. Horizontal and vertical teams were strategically identified and are guided by data-driven iterative processes. Executive teams are essential for ensuring commitment and resources, cross-agency teams support initiatives that address the five pillars of engagement, and SSA staff are the source for generating ideas, identifying issues, and providing feedback. The information collected is part of the data used to "steer design" along with evaluative data to assess the reach of efforts and achievement of goals. An essential part of data collection is how it's used both to realize two-way communication *and* fuel continuous improvement. On one hand, a core tenant of engagement is ensuring employees are heard, appreciated, and informed. On the other hand, data must be collected and incorporated to strengthen the practice and culture of engagement. This involves developing processes that can

utilize data to accomplish both these dimensions of engagement. For example, upon learning that client-facing staff have the lowest engagement rates, SSA employed Human Centered Design to identify specific issues and tailor targeted engagement approaches. In this sense, processes reinforce engagement by sharing information and soliciting input, and then incorporating data into designing effective responses to findings.

## Recommendations

The transferability of a particular engagement initiative or strategy from one county to another must take into consideration comparative context. Differences in demographic, socioeconomic, and administrative structure are relevant factors as they speak to resources available for departmental investments and scope-of-need in the population served. The underlying takeaways are, however, generalizable. Employee engagement is central to workplace culture, organizational effectiveness and resiliency, DSW operations, and public service outcomes. Engagement is also key to achieving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) goals in terms of recruiting, succession, and retention. As such, it's an initiative that more than pays for itself and can be scaled to Monterey County Department of Social Services (MCDSS)'s administrative structure. The core elements for realizing authentic engagement involve defining purpose and goals and developing infrastructure to sustain efforts, which includes processes that incorporate data to ensure learning and accountability.

MCDSS can benefit from securing executive leadership's commitment to prioritize engagement, evaluating the current state of employee engagement, taking inventory of



existing engagement strategies, and leveraging HRD resources to flesh out engagement goals and develop a cohesive action plan. Santa Clara County's model for engagement can be looked to as a guide with an important caveat; the counties' demographics, socio-economic composition, and structure of government are significantly different, which has implications for county and departmental resources. Specific strategies or initiatives may not be replicable due to disparities in financial, human, and organizational resources. Nevertheless, MCDSS can employ existing resources and use guiding principles from Santa Clara County's experience tailored to MCDSS's context.

First and foremost, executive leadership's commitment is essential to launching an overall engagement strategy. HRD's employee engagement office is a valuable resource to assist the department in refining goals and formulating an action plan. The planning stage should include an inventory of the department's existing engagement resources and strategies such as staff development, employee recognition, and mentoring program. Developing a framework and supportive infrastructure should involve engaging leadership throughout the process, beginning with the executive team and extending to leadership teams across divisions.

Second, the annual county-wide surveys provide baseline and department-specific data that can be used as a starting point. However, data collection should be evaluated and augmented to improve indicators and support program design and learning. This is an opportunity to investigate, identify and address differences in engagement across departments, job classifications, and employee demographics.

Third, there are several existing engagement resources and programs at the county level

that can be leveraged as part of a more cohesive engagement framework including the Health Department's wellness program and HRD's LLE and engagement portals.

Fourth, MCDSS has an opportunity to revive and augment the director's dialogue to activate ongoing two-way communication and de-silo the department, both to support morale and instill a common sense of purpose with respect to mission. In addition to department direction and division updates, collecting employee questions, concerns, and observations in advance would help identify issues for targeted executive response. Similarly, follow-up on how concerns were or will be addressed would serve to reinforce acknowledgment and consideration of employee input.

Lastly, careful attention must be paid to establishing a learning mindset and an embedded process that ensures sustainability of engagement efforts. This is not a discrete effort that can be designated to a program manager or department; it is an ongoing effort that must be informed by employees. Realizing authentic engagement is an investment toward cultivating a healthy, inclusive, generative workplace culture, which requires continuous leadership support and staff involvement. Thus, process development is key to ensuring that data is used both to identify what is (and is not) working, set direction, and course-correct.

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