

**Counties**

*Alameda  
Contra Costa  
Marin  
Monterey  
Napa  
San Benito  
San Francisco  
San Mateo  
Santa Clara  
Santa Cruz  
Solano  
Sonoma  
Stanislaus*

**Universities**

*Sacramento State  
San Francisco State  
San Jose State  
University of  
California, Berkeley*

**Foundations**

*The Zellerbach  
Family Fund  
van Loben Sels  
Foundation*

**Establishing a Career Development Program As  
Part of a Recruitment and Retention Strategy  
in a Learning Organization:  
Case Studies of San Mateo and Contra Costa Counties**

Sarah Grossi, BASSC Research Assistant

and

Michael J. Austin, BASSC Staff Director

January 2002



---

**Establishing a Career Development Program as  
Part of a Recruitment and Retention Strategy  
in a Learning Organization:  
Case Studies of San Mateo and Contra Costa Counties<sup>1</sup>**

*Sarah Grossi and Michael J. Austin*

**Introduction**

A human service agency can define career development in many different ways. The two case studies described in this paper illustrate some of the similarities and differences in two Bay Area county social service agencies. It is increasingly clear that the recruitment and retention of human service personnel will rely on the comprehensiveness and attractiveness of an agency's career development program. In addition, much can be learned from the ways in which staff utilize and value a career development program. As a result, career development can prove to be an essential element in an agency's efforts to become a learning organization. The two BASSC counties selected for this analysis are Contra Costa and San Mateo because they have taken somewhat different directions in conceptualizing and implementing career development programs. Both counties are searching for ways to address the recent crisis in staff recruitment and retention. Contra Costa is responding to the need to assess the training needs of experienced workers. San Mateo is responding to the demand for leadership development and succession planning as part of a comprehensive staff development strategy that ranges from the least experienced staff to the most experienced.

**The Contra Costa Career Development Strategy**

The Contra Costa County Bureau of Children and Family Services is addressing staff recruitment and retention issues by re-thinking its career development and training services in the context of the learning organization. As a result, the Bureau is developing a new career development program centered around the creation of an Individualized Professional Development Plan (IPDP) for each worker. This plan reflects the worker's personal learning and career goals and serves as a blueprint for his or her career development strategies. Individual workers will be responsible for creating their own IPDPs using data collected from an existing DISC personality assessment tool and a newly created Learning Assessment Tool. The Staff Development Division will administer the program and provide the resources and support to help individuals achieve their career development goals in cooperation with the managers in the Bureau.

**Strategy and Rationale**

Contra Costa's career development strategy evolved from a request by the Bureau's executive team to assess training needs for experienced workers. Issues raised in the

---

<sup>1</sup>We want to acknowledge the valuable assistance from staff in San Mateo County (Madelyn Martin and Donna Wocher) and staff in Contra Costa County (Dennis Bozanich, Lisa Molinar, and their consultant David Hurley).



---

assessment included dilemmas currently encountered in traditional, gathered, social work trainings and current research in effective adult education. Feedback indicated challenges encountered by social workers in the training experience, particularly difficulty setting aside necessary blocks of time (because of the crisis-oriented nature of their work) and resistance against “mandatory trainings” (reflecting the professional value of self-determination and a diversity of personal learning styles). Such factors contribute to “training fatigue” and reduce motivation to attend and fully participate in traditional “one-size-fits-all” trainings. Additionally, research in adult education emphasizes the effectiveness of self-designed models that allow individuals to determine their educational and personal learning needs and the delivery systems to best meet those needs.

The goal of the career development program is to increase staff motivation for training and development by providing tools to identify individual needs and deliver resources in new ways that encourage greater access and enhancement of professional development. The system recognizes that people learn through different means. While traditional trainings will continue in the agency as needed, other resources will include new learning models that are self-paced and self-guided that do not require staff to be away from the work environment (such as desktop delivery of training modules via internet or intranet). Staff will also be referred to resources in the community, such as community-based forums, community colleges, and trainings offered by other agencies.

Contra Costa’s career development strategy focuses on the learning needs of individual

staff, rather than the training needs of the agency. Experienced worker training is therefore re-conceptualized as an individually assessed and acquired means of continuing education rather than a primarily top-down, organizationally-driven exercise. By asking individual staff what he or she needs, rather than exclusively relying on what he or she thinks the department needs, the Staff Development Division is fostering a new, more personal relationship with the worker. This relationship conveys an organizational vision of the worker as valued and unique and with career development potential within the Bureau. This approach reinforces the importance of building upon the specialized skill sets and experiences that staff members originally brought with them into the Bureau.

The Staff Development Division decided to engage an independent contractor from outside the Bureau to design and implement this strategy. This decision was based on (1) unit staff not having enough time to develop the program due to existing workload, (2) the expertise and credibility an outside consultant brings to the project, and (3) the availability of funding for consultant services. The consultant is currently working with Staff Development Division to create the assessment tools, Individual Professional Development Plan format, and implementation plans.

### **Individualized Learning Assessment Tool**

The Learning Assessment Tool, currently in the design and refinement process, assesses the learning needs of staff based on professional social work competencies. It is derived from published competency inventories (compiled by CALSWEC and the states of Maine and Texas) that identify



---

core skills necessary to be a child welfare worker, supervisor, and manager. Competencies are grouped together in general areas of focus. For example, areas of focus for social workers include interviewing, assessment and case planning. Areas of focus for supervisors include program administration, staff coaching and mentoring, and community relations. Each area of focus has approximately six to fifteen specific competencies associated with it. An example of areas of focus and associated competencies for supervisors is included in Attachment 1.

The Staff Development Division is in the process of refining these competency lists to create two manageable self-assessment tools (one for social workers and one for social work supervisors) that utilize a 7-point Likert scale. To create the social work supervisor assessment, the management team and a core group of social work supervisors are reviewing the list of about 100 identified competencies to select approximately 50 items of highest priority. Feedback from both groups will be compared and a final instrument will be constructed.

The instrument will be electronically administered and scored (however the option to complete the assessment on paper will be available for those not comfortable with the electronic format). It will also collect data on worker attributes, such as educational level and years of experience, that will inform individualized assessment. For example, new worker will not be expected to have the same level of competence in all areas as someone with many years of experience.

## **DISC Personality Profile**

The DISC is an existing personality profile assessment (with known validity and reliability) that indicates the relative importance of four personality factors: 'Dominance,' 'Influence,' 'Steadiness,' and 'Compliance.' A complete DISC questionnaire contains twenty-four questions with two possible responses for each question (one 'most' and one 'least' for each of the items). The responses are calculated and analyzed manually to produce a DISC 'profile' that provides respondents with insights about their motivations, aversions, and general style of behavior applicable to a workplace environment. The DISC was chosen over other profile systems because it was well received when administered in a combined Emergency Response and Court Unit as part of the New Worker Training Unit and it is already familiar to supervisors who have attended the Bay Area Academy. It provides staff with common, non-judgmental language to describe personality and communication styles. The Staff Development Division will create materials to accompany the profile to help staff and supervisors interpret the DISC results and apply them to the career development process. Such information will include how to determine learning models that are best suited to one's personality profile and career goals.

## **Implementation**

The career development program will focus initially on the Social Case Work Specialist and Social Work Supervisor positions in the Children and Family Services Bureau (where competencies have been identified and assessments are being developed).



---

Eventually, the program will be offered to all 300 staff in the Bureau. The program will be piloted in two to three units where staff are known to be receptive to career development activities. The DISC and Learning Assessment Tool are estimated to take 30 minutes each to complete.

The information from the Individual Learning Needs Assessment and DISC will be processed and scored to create Individualized Professional Development Plans. The IPDP form is being developed and will resemble a case plan as it draws upon competency assessments to create professional development objectives. The Staff Development Division will be responsible to follow-up with the IPDPs and ensure that workers have access to the resources needed to implement their plans. Aggregate data will also be available to the Staff Development Division to assist with agency-wide staff development planning and needs assessment.

The career development program is not mandatory for staff, and will be marketed as a helpful tool assist staff in personal and professional development. Staff “buy-in” and “follow through” are essential for success. The initial response from supervisors indicates that staff may not feel safe enough to honestly evaluate their competency skills without fear of negative consequences on subsequent performance evaluations. To address this issue, the Staff Development Division plans to educate supervisors and staff about the difference between learning outcomes and performance standards. The career development strategy is meant to enhance the ability of workers to perform their jobs and grow professionally. It will be a replacement for the existing performance evaluation processes. While

the inability to meet performance standards may involve a lack of appropriate training, many other factors may contribute to inadequate performance.

The Bureau is in the process of considering aspects of the program related to supervisor involvement and staff privacy. Supervisors may be asked to assess staff so that they can compare this perspective with the worker’s self-assessment to better develop an accurate picture of their learning needs. Supervisor assessments, however, may have implications in labor contracts or make staff less likely to want to participate in the program. The Staff Development Division is also in the process of deciding whether it will collect copies of the Individual Professional Development plans for all staff or ask individuals to transmit their learning needs to the Staff Development Division while keeping their plans private. Allowing staff to maintain privacy may positively impact the levels of participation.

### **Challenges**

The ability to develop a Learning Assessment Tool that accurately measures competencies for all 300 positions within the Bureau is a major challenge. For example, the Social Work Supervisor assessment will be adapted for other mid-level managers, but competencies for other positions will need to be identified in order to create a Learning Assessment Tool. The resources needed to identify competencies and create assessments for all staff positions in the agency will be substantial and will affect the speed with which the career development program can be expanded to serve staff inside and outside of the Bureau of Children and Families.



---

Ensuring that the Staff Development Division provides adequate resources and referrals to meet the needs of each IPLP is another challenge to the success of the career development program. If the Division cannot follow-through with staff as promised, frustration and mistrust will increase and staff retention will be impacted negatively.

Successful implementation requires the Staff Development Division to operate as a “learning organization” that models for the whole Bureau how to learn new skills, adapt, and find creative solutions in a changing environment. For example, being adaptive may include providing a new intranet learning management system available on the desktops of all employees. On a larger level, this process involves moving all staff from simply seeing training as a top-down, organizationally driven mandate to viewing it as individually-oriented assessments leading to continuing education and professional development. Management support for this shift in the organization’s culture has been and will be essential.

The implementation of the career development strategy is based on a paradigm shift from the old menu of training programs to the new learning models. This can only happen over time, as staff adjust to alternative modes of learning. It is expected that traditional training sessions will continue to be utilized as more self-guided training activities are introduced due to the limited availability of social work training tools that focus on individually guided and self-paced methods. The goal of the career development strategy is to create the infrastructure needed to make the transition from traditional training events to different

modes of professional learning that will impact the career development and retention of Bureau staff.

### **Summary**

Contra Costa’s Bureau of Children and Families career development strategy focuses on accurately assessing the learning needs of individual staff and providing resources to meet those needs. It is based on the belief that such individualized attention, combined with the provision of resources in new ways will increase staff motivation to participate in career development activities within the Bureau and the community. This investment in staff development is intended to impact increased retention, enhance succession planning, and improve service delivery outcomes.

### **The San Mateo Career Development Strategy**

San Mateo Human Service Agency (HSA) has created a comprehensive staff development strategy to address leadership development at all levels of the agency and affect change on individual, group, and systems levels. The strategy is a five-component Leadership Development Program developed and monitored by the agency’s executive team. The Leadership Development Program is an outgrowth of their efforts to adopt and implement the principles of a learning organization, with career development representing one aspect. The program encompasses a holistic approach to personal development, professional development, and career planning based on top-management’s support for long-range effort to improve the organization’s problem-solving and renewal process.



---

San Mateo's career development strategies reflect the top-management decision to seek more staff involvement in decision making as well as collecting and utilizing staff input on process and program issues. It is based on the belief that such an approach will produce higher levels of job satisfaction and motivation, reduce feelings of alienation from the agency, improve retention, and positively impact service delivery to the community. The agency's commitment to Organizational Development (OD) is reflected in the OD responsibilities of the Manager of the Human Resources and Development Unit (HRD). This new unit will be expanding beyond training to include consultation and assistance to program managers as well as ongoing support and resources for the new Leadership Development Program.

### **Human Resources Policy Team**

The origins of the Leadership Development Program can be traced to the agency's establishment of a Human Resources Policy Team in February 1999 to examine staff development and personnel issues as part of implementing the BASSC recommendations for becoming a learning organization. This team consists of about 20 HSA staff from various disciplines and levels of the organization and is chaired by the Director of Planning and Development. Team members either volunteered in response to an invitation to all staff or were recruited from underrepresented units to ensure agency-wide representation. For over two years the team has met monthly to address human resource development issues. In its first year, the Human Resources Policy Team focused on introducing the learning organization concepts to all staff by creating a two-day, off-site conference in November

2000 (attended by one half of the agency each day). The conference was marketed to staff as an agency-sponsored career development workshop ("Taking Flight Towards Our Future") that focused on the challenges and opportunities facing human services agencies. The conference included a presentation by the agency director with Q&A, break-out sessions (informational interviews for career advancement, career counseling services, career assessment tools, and the Family Development Credential Program). The conference was well received by staff and the evaluation indicated an understanding of the learning organization concept, appreciation of HSA's commitment to the concept, and a strong desire for assistance in creating an individual career development plan, enrolling in continuing education, and participating in a mentoring program. There was also interest in the agency's collaboration with the community colleges, especially the Human Services Certificate, the Family Development Credential, the Community Health Worker Certificate, the Accelerated Associate in Arts (AA) degree programs, and four-year college professional degree programs.

### **The Leadership Development Program**

Based on the success of the career development conference, the Human Resources Policy Team developed the Leadership Development Program in order to link the career interests of staff with the organizational interests of senior management. The mission of the Human Resources Policy Team is to create, support, and monitor a formal Leadership Development Program that reflects existing opportunities and fosters an environment in which new opportunities will continue to evolve. The Policy Team has proposed a



---

Leadership Development Program that consists of five components: 1) Alternative Career Development Opportunities, 2) Career Planning, 3) Educational Development, 4) Mentoring, and 5) Succession Planning as illustrated in Figure 1.

The mission of the leadership program is to offer an array of opportunities for all staff to develop careers and enrich their personal lives. It is designed to meet the needs of individual staff and the agency as a whole. On an individual level, the program addresses issues of recruitment and retention by creating a package of professional development benefits that are attractive to staff. On an organizational level, the program recognizes and addresses the critical need to prepare staff with the skills needed to assume leadership roles within the agency. The outcomes of each of the five components are defined in Attachment 2.

The Alternative Career Development Opportunities component (Attachment 3) identifies and encourages participation in internal and external opportunities for career development. The goal is to create and encourage challenging assignments that allow staff to explore new roles. For example, oral board or committee participation is encouraged as an internal learning opportunity and workshop attendance is encouraged as an external opportunity for alternative career development.

The Career Planning component (Attachment 4) includes services designed to assist with short and long-range planning. The mission statement of this component makes a clear connection between individual development, progression to new career

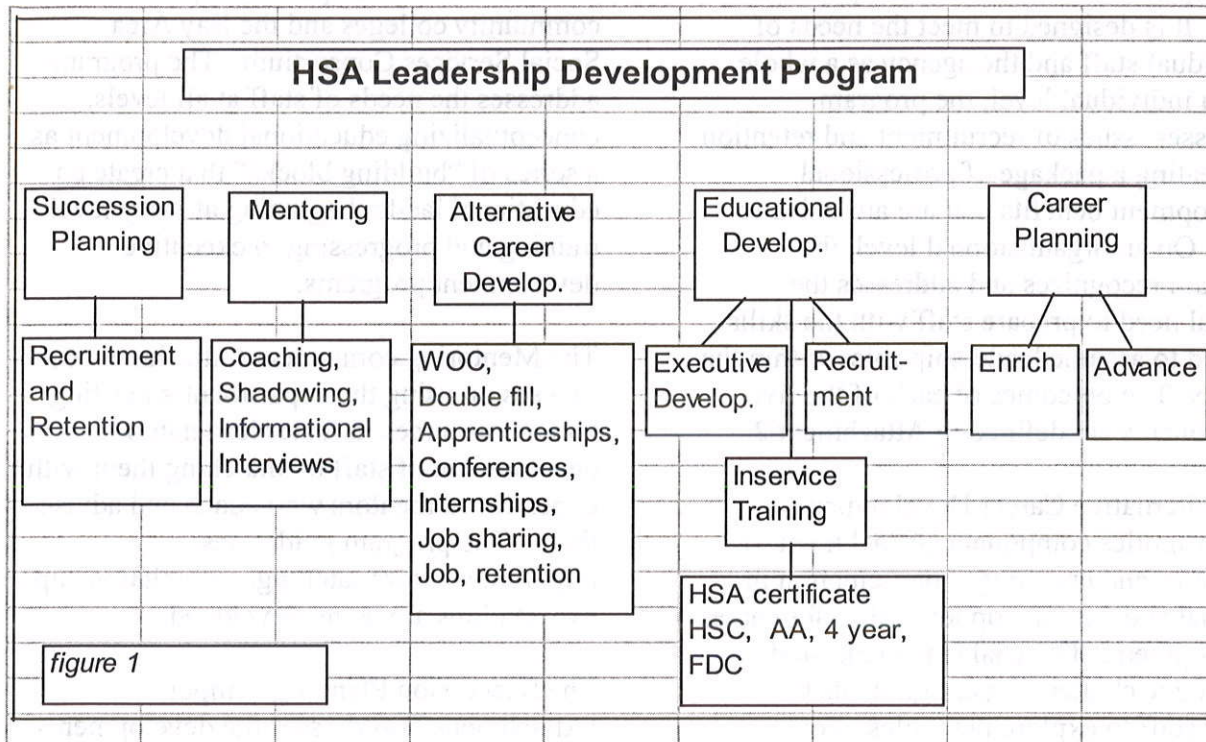
roles, and organizational development. This component introduces the concept of career assessment and individual development plans that are part of bi-annual performance evaluation. This strategy is further developed in the Succession Planning Component.

The Educational Development component (Attachment 5) focuses on opportunities that have been created in partnership with community colleges and the Bay Area Social Services Consortium. The program addresses the needs of staff at all levels, conceptualizing educational development as a series of “building blocks” that create an educational ladder beginning at entry-level training and progressing to executive development programs.

The Mentoring component (Attachment 6) focuses on using the department’s existing human resources to foster leadership development of staff by matching them with experienced mentors who coach and advise them. The program guidelines, requirements for matching, and relationship expectations are being developed.

The Succession Planning component (Attachment 7) addresses the development of staff at all levels for advancement into positions critical to the agency’s success. This strategy includes identifying unique leadership competencies, conducting an assessment of each participant’s strengths and areas of improvement, developing an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for each participant, providing the option of a mentor to support the implementation of the IDP, and establishing outcome measures to evaluate and track program effectiveness. This leadership development and succession planning process is currently being

Figure 1





---

implemented with the HSA's executive team. The agency plans to open it to all staff members in the near future.

San Mateo's decision to begin the implementation of IDPs linked to succession planning at the executive level sends a clear message to all staff that human resource development is an agency priority that will involve all staff, including the Director. The focus on the leadership development of top managers is designed to ensure that managers are prepared to support staff in the human resources development process. This approach enables managers to receive the necessary tools to accomplish this task, such as dialogue outlines using a strengths-based approach. From the OD perspective, modeling of career development behavior on all levels of the agency is important, as is the focus on understanding organizational, as well as individual development needs. As a comprehensive IDP program becomes available to all staff, the focus on individual needs for professional development should increase along with an understanding of how staff fit into the agency's future directions.

### **Implementation of Individual Development Plans**

The IDP implementation process began in July 2000 when the HSA's Executive Team members identified and agreed upon a set of leadership competencies for the agency. They decided to use the competencies for recruitment, succession planning, and leadership development for directors, managers, and supervisors in the agency. The goal of this program is for individuals to work with the competencies to assess their current strengths and gaps in performance in order to design and implement an Individual Development Plan.

Some of the resources for implementing the plans include developmental assignments (job rotation, job enlargement, etc.), relationships (mentors), and skill-based training.

To facilitate the IDP process, the Human Resources and Development Manager, together with an outside OD consultant, worked with the managers and directors to select 10 critical leadership competencies for attention in the first year (Figure 2). Examples of these competencies are accountability, result orientation, and "big-picture" thinking. Managers and directors use these competencies to assess themselves, where they feel the strongest and where they feel the most need for development. Along with the self-assessment, the assessment of each manager and director is completed by 2-3 peers and the Director. This information is then compiled and used to create Individual Development Plans.

The ten core competencies in the assessment process are also being used to create a matrix of identified strengths possessed by the members of the management team. This resource grid will give managers and directors a clear picture of their specific strengths needed to facilitate learning and development using mentoring and peer coaching. For example, a manager who identifies "leveraging the organization" as an area of focus may observe a peer who identifies it as a strength when engaging in community relations and negotiations.

The Individual Development Plan will identify 2-3 areas where the manager develops a strategy to enhance those competencies. Future IDPs will be included in an individual's annual performance

Figure 2

Competencies for HSA Managers  
Areas of Focus for 2001

◆ <b>Accountable</b>	◆ <b>Result Oriented</b>	◆ <b>Big-Picture Thinker</b>
◆ <b>Facilitator</b>	◆ <b>Intellectually Flexible</b>	◆ <b>Champions Change</b>
◆ <b>Manages Relationships</b>	◆ <b>Manages Score</b>	◆ <b>Leverages the Organization</b>
◆ <b>Innovative</b>		



---

appraisal (see Attachment 8). This reflects a management philosophy that ties manager competencies to the agency's values, strategic direction, and service outcomes.

### **Summary**

San Mateo HSA's career development strategy is a comprehensive approach to creating a learning organization using OD principles. Guided by the Human Resources Policy Team that represents all agency levels and disciplines, HSA has launched a Leadership Development Program that offers career development opportunities for all staff. The program is being implemented by top management in order to model the use of Individual Development Plans as a tool to enhance individual competencies and improve agency service outcomes for clients.

### **Exploring Similarities and Differences between Contra Costa and San Mateo**

Contra Costa County Bureau of Children and Family Services and the San Mateo Human Service Agency both seek to address recruitment and retention of human service personnel through career development strategies. Both agencies recognize a connection between staff retention and the availability of opportunities for professional and personal development. However, Contra Costa's strategy is in response to the training needs of experienced workers in one section of the agency, while San Mateo's strategy is part of a comprehensive, agency-wide human resource development plan utilizing the principles of Organizational Development.

Contra Costa's career development strategy focuses primarily on individual training

needs based on the belief that meeting these needs will improve staff motivation and development and, ultimately, service outcome. San Mateo's career development strategy focuses heavily on both individual and organizational needs, reflecting the work of the Leadership Development Policy Team to clearly link individual development with the changing needs of the agency and its environment.

Each career development strategy employs individual development plans, however differences in implementation strategies also reflect the tension between individual and organizational goals. In San Mateo, individual development plans are initially being implemented among top management and will cascade down to front line staff in the future. This assessment process is mandatory and tied to performance evaluations. In contrast, Contra Costa's implementation begins with line staff and supervisors, expanding to the rest of the agency in the future. Self-assessment and creation of an individual development plan is an optional benefit provided to staff, in part because of labor-related implications to requiring competency assessment of non-management staff. At the same time, Contra Costa is choosing not to make individual development plans mandatory or tied to performance evaluations out of concern for staff motivation, buy-in, and support of the program. This is less of a concern in San Mateo because most aspects of the Leadership Development Program (such as a well-developed Educational Opportunities component) are already in place, and the well-represented Leadership Development Policy Team is supported by a staff demand for career development opportunities and rewards.

---

## Implications

The preliminary experiences in San Mateo and Contra Costa counties have implications for the other counties in the Bay Area that anticipate the development of new career systems. Some of the implications include the following:

- 1) Dedicated staff and information systems are needed to launch and expand an internal agency career development system. Since this is a new function, it will need the experience of the current staff development and human resource staff as well as the support of new staff to administer the program with regular updates and new program additions.
- 2) An evaluation component will be essential to monitor the new career development system, especially its impact on:
  - annual performance appraisals,
  - recruitment of new staff,
  - retention of current staff,
  - leadership succession and promotion,
  - modification in merit systems rules, and
  - the quality of client services.
- 3) Special attention will be needed to design and assess a culturally competent career development system in terms of its impact of promoting cultural diversity throughout all levels of agency staff.
- 4) Whether agencies proceed to implement a new career systems from the top-down (San Mateo) or the bottom-up (Contra Costa), special attention needs to be paid to securing career systems expertise inside or outside the agency with respect to both the design and implementation of a new career development system.