

# From the Valley to the City: Insights from Santa Clara County's Unit-Based Team

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social service agencies are constantly grappling with change. The County of Santa Clara has adopted the Unit-Based Team (UBT) framework in multiple departments including their Social Services Agency. It is founded on the principle of bringing together natural groups of frontline employees, supervisors, and managers and empowering and equipping them with tools, techniques and resources to work on day-to-day issues that would improve performance,

morale, quality, and access to services. The San Francisco Human Services Agency is facing major business process and automation changes in the near future. It can adopt and adapt elements of the UBT to address not only changes triggered by major events but to begin the process of lasting organizational transformation by allowing individuals, no matter the rank, to start thinking differently about their role as a change leader.

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## Introduction

Looming on the San Francisco Human Service Agency's (HSA) horizon are two near-seismic changes. One has to do with the replacement of the agency's automated welfare computer system, a change that is anticipated to hit in three years and will affect over 1,000 employees and over 250,000 clients. The second – literally seismic-related – involves vacating one of the agency's primary office buildings to bring it up to current standards. The relocation timeline spans several years and entails moving more than six hundred employees, causing disruption to service delivery.

HSA is taking these changes as an opportunity to reevaluate the way it does business. Would services be delivered more effectively if staff is co-located with other city agencies and community-based organizations? How would a change in computer systems affect business processes and data management? The county has some time to prepare but must embrace creative ways of dealing with change in order to effect transformational outcomes.

Across social service agencies, organizations are tapping into strategies capable of transforming operations, and increasingly they are turning to an arsenal of tools and principles under the rubric of quality improvement and innovation. One such tool is Santa Clara County's Unit-Based Team (UBT). A UBT is a group of frontline staff, supervisors, and managers whose work brings them together organically, and who work collaboratively to solve problems, improve performance, and enhance quality. It is founded on the principle that sustainable organizational transformation can be achieved

when the county empowers and equips employees to participate in innovating actionable solutions to issues within a team-based, cross-functional, and collaborative framework. It posits that those who are doing the work may be better equipped to define issues and co-create solutions than those who lead the organization. This paper evaluates how UBTs are used in Santa Clara County and what aspects could be transplanted to the San Francisco HSA to complement assets, tools, and techniques the county already uses.

## About UBT in Santa Clara County

In 2012, the Service Employees International Union approached Santa Clara's Valley Health and Hospital System (HHS) with a proposal to use the unit-based team framework for introducing process improvements ahead of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. They were banking on the results-based success of UBTs at Kaiser Permanente, where labor and management partnered to create a framework for performance improvement and employee engagement by drawing upon established continuous improvement principles and techniques to achieve clinical and operational goals. The proposal was initially met with some resistance but a year and a half later, labor and management issued a joint statement inviting employees, irrespective of rank, to participate in a new way of introducing change. UBT was successfully launched in HHS in 2014.

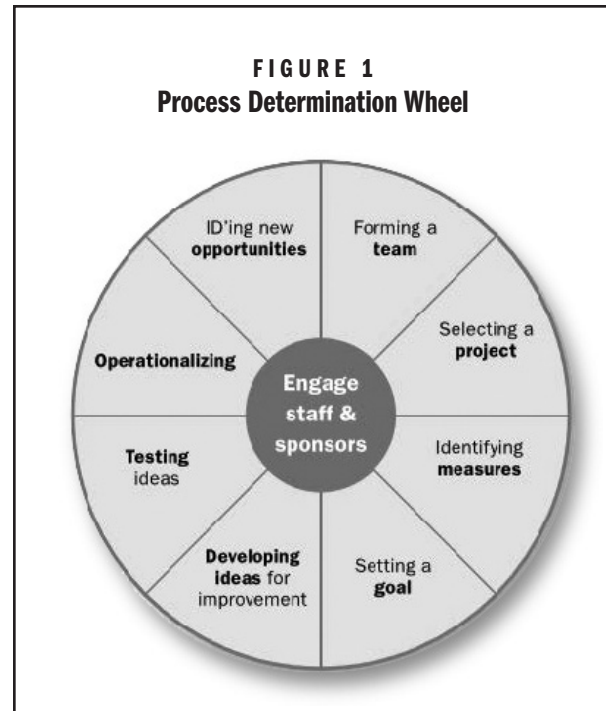
Santa Clara has since embraced UBT, which is now formally administered at the county level by the County Executive Office's Learning Organization

Unit. Riding on the success of the HHS experience, UBT has since expanded to the Social Services Agency (SSA), Library System, and most recently, Vector Control. The services of a consulting firm were retained to provide training on UBT concepts, initiating two waves of UBT cohorts per year. At the Wave 10 UBT launch on February 1, 2019, Landee Lopez, Director of the Learning Organization, spoke of the importance of workforce engagement and how UBTs are a way to amplify the voice of staff and draw upon their collective wisdom to improve the organization.

SSA is relatively new to UBT, having launched it as recently as 2017. The UBT initiative aimed to introduce a different way of doing things by (1) enhancing and valuing employee engagement and decision-making within a team-focused environment, (2) addressing challenges within work processes and the environment at large, and (3) developing strong, supportive teams that build on their accomplishments to deliver quality services. Decision-making is guided by a Value Compass – a visual representation developed early on by SSA's UBT Steering Committee as a reminder of the agency's vision to serve, empower, engage, and transform.

### How it Works

The UBT process follows eight steps as shown in the Process Determination Wheel in *Figure 1*. The agency puts out a call for staff to create a UBT, typically made up of employees whose job responsibilities are so intertwined as to form the basis of a natural workgroup. Team co-leads are identified, one from line staff (often, a union shop steward) and a supervisor or manager, reinforcing the UBT's collaborative approach. Co-leads prepare for meetings and huddles, advocate for labor management collaboration, ensure the team is working within charter guidelines, and troubleshoot where appropriate. Each team is assigned a management-level sponsor who legitimizes and demonstrates ownership for change, keeps the UBT visible, allocates resources for success, and supports labor-management collaboration. All team members must complete UBT



training. Each team is assigned a facilitator, a critical role responsible for shepherding the group to arrive at common objectives and ways to achieve them, helping with team development and conflict resolution, and ensuring that team spirit is up and the group stays on track. Facilitators are employees who have applied for and been selected for the role. The employee's supervisor must approve of their participation as it requires a time commitment of eight hours or more per month for an eight-month period. Facilitators receive a two-day training before the launch of a new UBT wave. They are deployed to a UBT where they have minimal to zero knowledge in the subject matter to ensure the facilitator does not take a position in the discussion.

The team selects an idea for a project, typically a problem within their purview involving day-to-day operations, work flows, client services, and issues of quality. Participants go through the exercise of asking if and how improvement can be measured, what data will be used, and if a baseline can be established. With coaching from consultants and facilitators, the team develops a SMART goal – one that is **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-bound (i.e., can be completed within ninety days). Once an

idea is agreed upon, the project proposal is presented to the Steering Committee for formal approval. The Steering Committee includes members from SSA management, union leadership, and line staff representing different bargaining units. It provides guidance on identifying issues to work on, evaluates and approves project proposals, and promotes interest and participation from various divisions and roles within the agency. Regular check-ins are built into the process to foster collaboration. The cohort, leads, facilitators, and sponsors meet monthly to bounce ideas off each other, ask questions and give feedback, tease out potential labor issues, learn about each other's department or division, and exchange contact information. They hold a "report-out" meeting where each group presents a quick status update and receives feedback. This collaborative approach to developing a project concept acts almost as an incubator by which an idea gets fleshed out and specific actionable steps are identified. Throughout the duration of the project, the teams continue to work together with support from allies to select small changes, collect and review data, and test those changes using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle. This teaches the team to rapidly test on a small scale and understand the results, carves out a safe space to make controlled mistakes and an opportunity to debrief so it is a learning experience, reflect and course-correct based on data collected, and test again and make a decision if and when to implement the change on a broader scale.

### **Successes**

At the county level, the expansion of UBT from one county agency to three others, with plans for further expansion, is a testament to the support this initiative has. Plans are underway to hire two project managers in the CEO's Learning Organization Unit. And while these positions are not fully dedicated to UBT, the fact that resources are being committed is an indicator of the value placed on the work the unit does.

At SSA, twenty-seven UBTs have been launched since inception in 2017. At a final report-out held on

March 27, 2019, UBTs from the SSA and Library gathered to share their project accomplishments, lessons learned, and future project ideas. A team from SSA presented their "General Assistance Next Generation" project where their SMART goal was to increase access to General Assistance services by introducing a pilot project to use Skype as a means of conducting client interviews. The team achieved its goal, enabling case workers to interview via Skype, saving the client a trip to a district office. A UBT from a previous wave installed cell phone charging stations in the lobby for clients to use. These are just some of the quantifiable accomplishments, while others are more qualitative in nature. At the same report-out in March, UBT participants shared their learnings. The common thread running through their stories is how some aspect of their behavior and perspective was transformed by participating in a UBT. They lauded the feeling of empowerment they gained when allowed to take informed risks and make meaningful changes. They recognized that they work and communicate differently, in ways that have strengthened team relations. All highlighted the importance of getting buy-in not only from management but also their peers. All were thankful for the opportunity to get to know and interact with staff across departments, job classes, and functional silos. While attainment of the end-goal is a success marker, the insights gained from the journey itself was the bigger accomplishment, because transformation truly begins when each person begins to think that they can actually make change happen.

### **Challenges and Growing Pains**

In the five years since inception, Santa Clara County has encountered some obstacles that go with growing and scaling the UBT initiative. They include the following:

- UBT has yet to reach a tipping point where the need to innovate and improve becomes part of the culture and where staff readily engage;
- Individuals report of being "volun-told" to participate, and are often not given adequate time to fully engage;

- UBT team resources are stretched. The person or unit responsible for UBTs at the county level and at the individual agencies are not dedicated resources;
- Expectations, roles and responsibilities are not clearly set, leading to confusion and lack of buy-in;
- Management sponsors sometimes do not show the level of commitment needed to drive the effort forward;
- The county continues to rely on an outside consultant to provide training and facilitation. A plan has yet to be set in place to transfer knowledge;
- Each of the agencies use different tools and techniques to measure impact, from surveys to debriefs to interviews, but there is not a defined and agreed-upon set of metrics nor is there a consolidated database to capture and mine data. Although to address this, the Learning Organization is in conversation with the Office of Data Management to develop a database to collect information on teams, project details, results and other data points.

### San Francisco's Innovation Office

HSA has made strides in cultivating a culture of innovation and collaboration by investing in an Innovation Office (IO). The IO was established in 2014 with the intent to design better systems and services. It started out with one full-time employee, a Design Anthropologist, and has since expanded to a team of four acting as internal consultants providing impartial assistance to various agency stakeholders.

Like the UBT framework, the IO's approach is based on the well-established disciplines of Human-Centered Design, Lean Process, and Behavioral Economics. The IO and UBT both aim to foster a new way of working by engaging staff at all functional levels and disciplines to work together to improve customer experience and service delivery. Both the IO and UBT are similar in their approach to introducing change, advocating the use of the Rapid Improvement Model to achieve big gains from small,

rapid tests of change. This approach reduces the risk of failure and allows for an iterative process of planning-doing-studying-acting, creating a space for experimental risk-taking.

### Recommendation

The HSA is currently in the process of defining its strategy and direction in regard to upcoming changes, and workgroups are sure to come in its wake. More than ever, the county needs to lean into proven ways to effect transformational change. Replicating the UBT framework in its entirety is not recommended; rather, San Francisco can benefit from adapting some elements to reinforce and expand on the work of its Innovation Office.

To begin, it is recommended that key stakeholders (e.g., the executive team, line staff, middle managers, and the IO team) pay a visit to Santa Clara County. At the cost of a trip to the valley, San Francisco could ask to attend cohort and report-out meetings and talk to individual facilitators and participants to get a glimpse of UBT mechanics and team dynamics. Engaging key players in the UBT network (i.e., SSA, County Executive Office, Health and Hospital) in a session of brainstorming and sharing of best practices and lessons learned would be instructive in understanding the strengths and challenges of building a county-wide, replicable, and scalable model. This contact should be initiated within the next three months to gather as much information as possible in light of process improvement workgroups that are planned to be set up in the near future.

It is recommended that the following elements of the UBT are adapted to San Francisco's needs:

- Establish at least one line staffer as co-lead in process improvement workgroups. One of the guiding principles of the UBT is that it be helmed by co-leads, ideally one frontline and one supervisory-level staff, but always with at least one line staffer. While managerial perspective and clout is important, it is critical to give staff who will be most impacted a seat at

the leadership table. They come up with great ideas because they are the ones in the trenches and see where the pain points are and how best to resolve these. Giving staff a voice ensures they will be the same voice to champion the change to their peers. Having line staff participate in workgroups is not a new idea, but the county needs to be more intentional in proactively including them as an equal voice and ensuring they remain engaged. The UBT definition of co-leads should be enshrined in a workgroup charter and set clear expectations about roles and responsibilities. It is critical to create an ecosystem that allows staff to fully engage and sustain momentum by providing adequate time for staff to participate, getting buy-in from supervisors and co-workers, leveraging the expertise of the Innovation Team to provide training and mentorship, embedding participation into performance measures and incentives, creating paths for career development, and recognizing contributions and giving small rewards to drive motivation and participation.

- Implement a facilitator training program. The role of the facilitator in a UBT is critical and defined. A facilitator is expected to refrain from taking a particular stance in the discussion; rather, the facilitator is someone who acts as a thought partner, assisting a group of people in understanding their common goals and helping them to find ways to attain those goals. Ask to audit Santa Clara's facilitator training session; establish a process for individuals to apply as facilitators (as doing so signals a commitment to the task); and partner with the Innovation Office to train and provide ongoing coaching in the arts of facilitation, communication and conflict resolution. Build a similar ecosystem described above to nurture interest and long-term participation. Deploy a facilitator to a program or division of which that facilitator has minimal knowledge. Santa Clara County has the advantage of having a pool of facilitators

coming from multiple agencies but HSA can somewhat replicate this by deploying facilitators to a program/division they are not familiar with. This will enable cross-departmental communication, break down silos, and allow the facilitator to maintain a neutral perspective.

These recommendations should first be deployed in small, measurable, rapid tests of change, and evaluated using the plan-do-study-act process. With HSA getting ready to set up process improvement workgroups, it would be entirely feasible to begin a pilot experiment with two to three of the workgroups within the next three to six months. The cost to county should be zero to minimal as the recommendations use existing employees and leverage existing expertise within the IO.

Whether brought to bear through a unit-based team model, an Innovation Office, or some other framework, a culture of innovation and continuous improvement can only take root when an organization has the courage to lead from the middle, in the spirit of mutual respect and collaboration that cuts across hierarchies and functional boundaries.

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