

Growing Leaders in Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

SHERYL THOMAS-WASHBURN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As federal, state, and local government workers age and retire, the cultivation of impending leaders is essential to an agency's long-term health. Yet, while many maintain lists of mid-level managers who could step into the shoes of a senior leadership position, they may be ill-prepared to do the jobs for which they have been called to fill.

A study of the Sonoma County Human Services Department's Emerging Leaders Track program and Mentor Project reveals potential for not

only leadership development training, but also offers proven methods for moving new learning from concept to action. They have effectively provided a formal structure for organizational knowledge transfer, thus lessening transition-related disruptions and improving efficiency and employee effectiveness. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency can adapt a similar model for its own efforts in alignment with existing Manager Core training.

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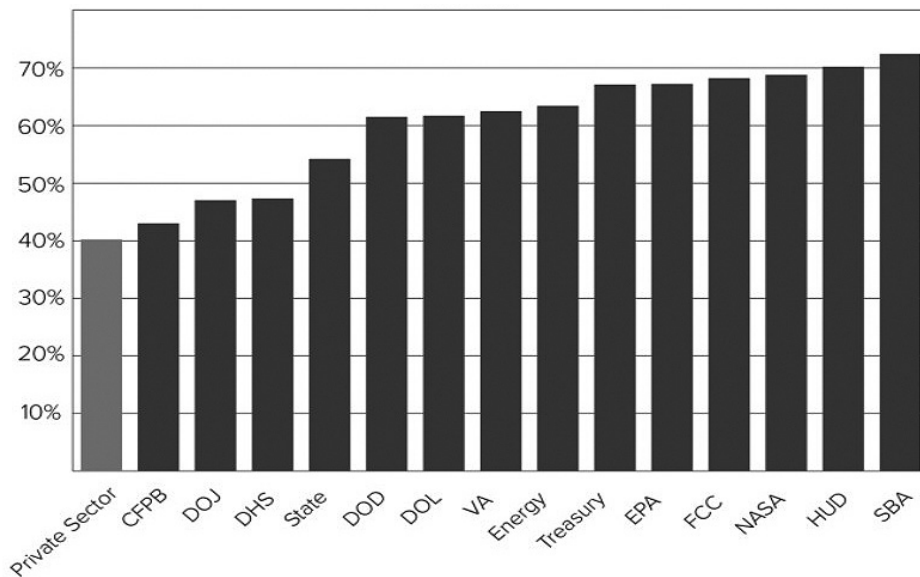
Introduction

In 2016, according to Donald J. Trump’s birth certificate, the United States elected the oldest new president in history, age 70. Congress too has been getting consistently older. According to *The Membership of the 115th Congress: A Profile*, it is “among the oldest in U.S. history” with the average age of the House at 57.8 and the Senate at 61.8 (2018, p. 2). Also, according to the *Census Bureau: Office of Personnel Management* (2018), “workers age 45 or older are a majority of nearly every agency in the federal government” as shown by the percentages of selected agencies in *Figure 1*.

Censusreporter.org (2018) reports that while the average age of a Californian is age 36.5, 32% of

California’s population is age 50 and over, a strong indication of the continuing wave of workers retiring in all industries. County workers too fall into this category as proven by Santa Clara County’s Social Service Agency where “as of April, 2018, 36% of Santa Clara County Social Services Agency staff were eligible for retirement” (Hartman, 2019). As the U.S., and specifically Santa Clara County government workers, age and retire, what could be more vital to county government’s long-term health than the choice and cultivation of its future leaders? And yet, while many maintain meticulous lists of mid-level managers who could step into the shoes of a senior leadership position, many may be ill-prepared to do the jobs for which they will be called upon to

FIGURE 1
Percentage of Workers Age 45 or Older in Federal Government Agencies



Source: Census Bureau: Office of Personnel Management

FIGURE 2
The Sonoma County Human Services Department
The Mentor Project Goals

- Increase employee job satisfaction
- Increase employee commitment to HSD
- Prepare staff to fill vacancies in leadership positions created due to retirements
- Improve job performance in current positions

Source: *The Sonoma County HSD Mentor Project Summary, Courtesy of Sonoma County Staff Development*

fill. In addition, challenges may also include a lack of mentors and personal networks.

Sonoma County has seemingly prepared for these and other challenges by marrying a professional leadership development program with a mentoring program, designed for optimal growth, development, and potential identification of leadership talent.

“Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”

—Jack Welch, Former CEO, General Electric

Sonoma County: Building Leaders for Today and Tomorrow

In 2008, like other government agencies, Sonoma County’s Human Services Department (HSD) recognized they were losing a large number of key leaders due to turnover, retirement, and new initiatives. Also, during the same time, outcomes of a survey designed to measure employee engagement exposed a low level of job fulfillment as there were concerns regarding a seeming lack of opportunities for growth and development within HSD. As a result, the Leadership Development Workgroup (LDW), occupied predominantly by line staff, was created. LDW developed two very unique programs which identified critical talent within HSD, focused development efforts, included employee accountability, and built a mentoring program. The programs were the Mentor Project and the Emerging Leader Track (ELT).

The Mentor Project

The Mentor Project, introduced in 2012 “is an internal staff development program” (Conner, N.D.) intended to “foster departmental knowledge transfer and skill development as increasing numbers of HSD staff become eligible to retire” (Conner, n.d.). Mentors, who consist of leadership from all six HSD divisions, partner with mentees whom are mostly direct-service or line-level positions from all job classes. The three-month program requires a commitment of four hours each month during which mentors meet with a group of two to four mentees addressing topics and literature in the mentor’s field of expertise. Several mentee participants also undertake supplemental projects in an effort to stretch their learning.

Goals and measurements were created to address areas identified in initial surveys as challenging, which included job satisfaction and commitment to the department. The initial outcomes gathered through pre- and post-surveys revealed that excellent work conditions increased by 23%, job alignments increased by 20%, and a ‘sense of being’ increased by 8%.

At its best, mentoring can be a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development. Its effects can be remarkable, profound, and enduring; mentoring relationships have the capacity to transform individuals, groups, organizations, and communities (Ragins and Kram, 2007). An effort to avert a crisis became an opportunity for transformation as reflected in the aforementioned outcomes. Employees felt valued from

FIGURE 3
The Sonoma County Human Services Department
The Five Levels of Emerging Leader Track

- **Level 1:** Highly Capable Individual – “Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills, and good work habits.”
- **Level 2:** Contributing Team Leader – “Contributes individual capabilities to supervising the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting.”
- **Level 3:** Competent Manager – “Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of pre-determined objectives.”
- **Level 4:** Effective Organizational Leader – “Catalysts commitment to and vigorous pursuit of, a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.”
- **Level 5:** Leader 5 Leader – “Self-directed development and training.”

Source: *The Sonoma County HSD Emerging Leader Track Summary, Courtesy of Sonoma County Staff Development*

the agency and held value for the agency. While most county governments look externally to source key talent, Sonoma County began its first steps in creating a pipeline to be successful in the future. As of 2018, a total of 274 mentees and 110 mentors had participated over a period of seven years in the Mentor Project with an average yearly ratio of 1:2.5 mentor to mentee.

Emerging Leader Track (ELT)

The ELT began in 2014 as a four-year program designed to provide greater educational depth, skill development, and HSD understanding that the Mentor Project does not offer. ELT is “based on a study of 1435 companies conducted by author and Professor Jim Collins, the goal of which was to determine what sets some organizations apart from others in achieving real greatness” (Collins, n.d., p. 1). Built on the success of a program originated in Contra Costa County, it also blends in elements of “the leadership academies previously conducted by Sonoma County HR” and incorporates contracted resources from external organizations and consultants that are “subject experts” (Collins, n.d., p. 1). It also includes the HSD tour which allows participants to spend time in each HSD division meeting with senior leaders.

ELT develops employees for higher level opportunities by providing “a track of development from the time the person joins the organization to when they achieve their highest level” (Conner, n.d., p. 1). There are five levels in the ELT, completed in sequence, but entry points differ based on education and experience. The program has six components including cohorts of 25 with five people from each division, level two and three “Supervisory Effectiveness Programs,” participation in The Mentor Project prior to Level 3 entry, a monthly discussion group named Symposium, completion of an Inspiration Lab project that is tied to the strategic plan and has the potential to be adopted by or put into practice by the department, and the Strength Finder 2.0 Assessment from Gallup and Tam Roth.

The ELT has since become a two-year program supplemented with the Mentor Project for three months each year. They have also incorporated a book entitled *Your Leadership Legacy – Why Looking Toward the Future Will Make You a Better Leader Today* (Galford & Maruca, 2006). Galford and Maruca train the future leaders through a lens of “it’s never too early to think about the kind of influence your leadership will have after you’ve retired or taken a position with another company” (2006, p. 4). They continue, “In fact, we believe that

the earlier leaders begin to consider their leadership legacy, the better leaders they will be” (Galford & Maruca, 2006, p. 4).

There is also an added element of accountability in which each ELT participant builds a development plan outlining their commitment to follow-through which they share with their supervisors for support. Also of note is that program participants are required to reapply each year as there is no automatic advancement.

HSD utilizes pre-, mid-, and post-surveys to evaluate ELT and offer feedback. Most recent evaluations showed continuous improvement in work satisfaction and confidence to move into higher leadership positions.

HSD is currently evaluating the existing engagement activities, researching best practices, and recommendations based on academic research as well as employee feedback. An employee workgroup has also been created to develop a plan to increase performance, increase client service, and reduce turnover. A consistently engaged HSD team intends to enhance existing and create new engagement activities for new and current employees, develop an onboarding plan that will engage employees with HSD values from the start, provide timely, accurate, supportive, and reliable services by having an engaged workforce, increase staff morale and resiliency and improve employee retention by connecting staff to mission, vision, and values, cultivate exceptional professional growth with more knowledgeable and promotable staff, and establish a system for engagement and re-engagement that includes training and activities for new and ongoing employees and experienced staff in activities that increase historical knowledge retention (Conners, 2019).

Santa Clara County – SSA DFCS Transfer of Learning

The mission of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) is to provide resources and opportunities in a culturally responsive manner to enhance the quality of life in the community by protecting, educating, and empowering individuals

and families. The vision is to serve, empower, and transform (Social Services Agency County of Santa Clara, 2019). It consists of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS), Employment Benefits (DEBS), Family and Children’s Services (DFCS), and the Agency Offices. A fairly large agency, Santa Clara County has over 2600 employees. Similar to agencies nationwide, SSA has struggled to maintain staffing levels, having 36% of SSA staff eligible to retire (2018). A mass exodus could happen at any given moment, leaving a gap in leadership and historical knowledge of the agency.

As noted in the Santa Clara County’s 2019-20 budget proposal, county leadership wants the Santa Clara County to be a “Learning Organization” (2019). Santa Clara County SSA is ahead of the task as it already participates in BASSC on a yearly basis, sending six participants for the 2018-19 BASSC Executive Development Program. In addition to focusing on the development of new and growing leaders in SSA’s DFCS, as it is in the midst of a large-scale reorganization, there is great movement toward the county’s desire to be a learning organization. DFCS immediately commits to new social workers in DFCS as they join the organization and must graduate from a 13-week Social Worker Induction Training. There is also continued training available through the Bay Area Academy, Title IV-E Trainings, and the SCCLearn tool which offers one-day workshops led by subject experts.

While BASSC is embraced by all SSA managers, DFCS also has a rich amount of training tools available. It has adopted Manager Core training by Peter Dahlin, a series of six training modules inclusive of a comprehensive series for Child Welfare Managers, linking to the themes of the other cores for workers, supervisors, and executives, also used by Santa Clara County. It includes Foundations for Managers, Effective Relationships as a Manager, Strategies for Effective Organization, Growing and Sustaining Effective External and Internal Teams, Essentials for Resource Management, and Strategic Thinking & Planning Tools for the Manager. There is also training available through the Bay Area Academy, University of California, Davis, ALIA, and

the Table Group. Also, staff historically has been encouraged to seek mentors within the organization, and recently, a workgroup has been established to organize a mentor project similar to the one in Sonoma County.

Recommendations

Santa Clara County is rich in training options, specifically for supervisors, managers, and executives. The ongoing challenge is how to move new knowledge from the head and put it to intentional, organized usage, and inclusion of an organized mentor project to be in alignment with the Learning Organization initiative by Santa Clara County. Some basic recommendations should include the following:

- Utilize the structure of Sonoma County's ELT design, replacing *'Levels'* with *'Cores'* to maintain current continuity;
- Create structured processes for program facilitation, and application inclusive of all trainings currently required;
- Build-in time for practice and skill development to support deliberate transfer of learning from head to action;
- Create an action strategy by participants outlining their planned usage of the new tools, skills, and knowledge;
- Connect the goals of the action strategy to each participant's supervision and performance evaluation, further supporting the continued transfer of learning from head to action;
- Partner with the creation of a newly proposed new SSA mentoring program (still in concept stage) aimed at increasing morale, resiliency, job satisfaction and employee engagement, with an expectation to improve employee retention;
- Utilize SSA Staff Development Staff to design, implement, facilitate, and evaluate;
- Continue use of Title IV-E funds for training support as Santa Clara County SSA DCFS already mandates these trainings for assorted staff much of which is funded through Title IV-E support;

- Partner with Sonoma County for assistance as needed in the program development;
- Identify actual goals and outcomes, track the results through the most viable measurement tool, and communicate results for feedback.

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