

Leadership at Every Level: Santa Clara County's Leadership Development Program

TOYA ADAMS, MPA
SOLANO COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenge of identifying and cultivating leadership at every level is a familiar issue for many, if not all, public service agencies. However, the growing challenge has been exacerbated by the aftereffects of COVID and the great resignation. Social Services Agencies (SSA) have found it more challenging now than ever before to recruit, retain, and identify quality leadership from the external and internal labor force. Many of the existing staff are leaving for a plethora of reasons, such as the wave of baby boomers entering retirement and the private sector's generous remote working options. As more supervisors, managers, and executive leaders exit the workforce for various reasons, there is a greater sense of urgency to identify, develop, and nurture leadership prospects within the organization's existing workforce. High vacancy rates, challenges to delivery service

models, and the increasing demand to cover multiple duties, projects, and tasks have soured the current managers, supervisors, and lead staff from pursuing promotional opportunities within their prospective divisions and organizations. The attrition rate is faster and more significant than any of the recruitment and onboarding efforts attainable by Social Services Agencies. Santa Clara County recognizes the importance of professional purpose and values and built their program on the premise that fulfilled employees stay with organizations where they feel a sense of connection and belonging. This program case study will review some of the highlights of the program and present justification for adopting a similar program on a smaller and more attainable scale within Solano County.

Toya Adams, MPA, Health Services Manager,
Solano County Department of Health and Social
Services, Family Health Services

Introduction

Many public service agencies have a heightened sense of urgency to harvest existing leaders' knowledge with impending retirement dates, or to manualize processes for the custodians of critical information and operating practices. However, a more significant issue is the need for leadership to develop interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and awareness, and cultivate a cohesive organizational culture for existing and incoming managers, supervisors, and line staff. There appears to be a workforce-wide disconnection between leadership and the teams they are intended to support. Line staff report they feel leadership needs to understand the challenges direct services providers face. At the same time, managers and supervisors must contend with mounting and unmanageable workloads and the need to wear numerous hats due to attrition. Managers and supervisors are slowly coming to the realization that the culture and motivations of their subordinate staff are not that of the traditional workforce from 25-plus years ago.

Currently, most organizations have multiple generations of employees working together, and their motivations, methods of communication, and productivity can vary based on their lived experiences and priorities. Each generation enters the workforce bringing with them their beliefs, behaviors, and cultural norms from their perspective labor force entry. These differences can be a barrier to communication, engagement, and the execution of workplace productivity and operations. According to *5 Strategies for Creating an Inclusive Workplace*, "Leaders need to create a safe team environment where all employees can speak up, be heard, and feel welcomed" (Jain-link et al., 2020). Administrators will need to approach

generational differences from an all-inclusive lens, with the intent to create belonging for all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, and identities.

Limitations of Traditional Approaches to Leadership

Many Social Services Agencies focus on leadership training from a Human Resources lens, concentrating on following application practices to complete a task. Some of the regulatory training include Progressive Discipline, Risk Management, the Americans with Disability Act, Anti-Harassment, Evaluations Practices, Contracts, and Budget Oversight. All the mandatory training is necessary, but there is also a need for culturally inclusive and human engagement aspects of leadership. The required training courses are process-focused, but managing staff is another skill set that requires ongoing learning and development. According to *Why Leadership Training Fails - and What to Do About It*, "Learning does not lead to better organizational performance because people soon revert to their old ways of doing things" (Beer et al., 2016). Leaders do not intentionally abandon skills learned but struggle to balance competing priorities and regress to old ways of engagement. Many of the practices that leaders intend to improve by attending training are entrenched in the culture of the organization.

Some common issues lead to a lack of follow-through in skills learned during leadership training. Breakdowns in communication, lack of collaboration, authoritarian leadership methodologies, and failure to create alignment and buy-in are a few issues that prevent sustainable change. Too often, leadership conforms to the previous attitudes and behaviors that lead to a divided culture from which they attempt to promote change. The competing priorities

and the disconnect from the administrative or executive level create an environment that does not allow leadership to thrive and often leads to burnout.

Santa Clara County's Approach to Leadership Development

As many Social Services Agencies attempt to recover from the turbulent impact of COVID on the workforce, and the need to compete with private sector's allure of higher wages and generous teleworking options, Santa Clara County recognized the need to develop a leadership program that would offer personal leadership awareness and growth, and messaging and communication development, with the intent to improve internal promotion opportunities. Santa Clara answered the call from internal agency stakeholders who wanted a multi-layered Leadership Development Program (LDP) that looked for leadership at every level. This new initiative birthed "an agency-wide initiative open to all staff, no matter their job class" (Bryers, 2022). The program cohort allows a total of 37 participants from three distinct classifications of staff:

- Emerging Leaders: 18 slots allocated for front line workers, which includes clerical staff.
- Front-Line Leaders: 14 slots allocated for supervisors. Some participants are management analysts, and do not have direct reports, but manage programs.
- Senior Leaders: 5 slots for three levels of program managers.

Santa Clara County's LDP is a 10-week leadership program that is highly interactive and self-led. There are four core program modules: Self-Leadership, Theories & Styles, Messaging & Communication, and

Leading Others. Enrollment is voluntary, and participants are expected to commit to their leadership development journey. Participants have the support of program facilitators, yet their experience and takeaways are unique based on their level of engagement. The learning modules are designed for large and small cohort engagement. The large group allows for cross-collaboration of various positions. Larger group engagement promotes learning activities that build awareness and connection while allowing insight and exchange of values, intended to create cultural cohesion. In comparison, the smaller cohort allows social learning opportunities that are unique to common position duties and experiences. The smaller cohort also focuses on the participant's individual leadership development.

The program coordinator and their team of facilitators approach this program from an executive coaching perspective by encouraging the participants to chart their path through self-discovery and collaborative learning, which leads to professional development. Overall, participants noted "a deepening of self-knowing, an increase in an understanding of how to work with others, and a greater commitment to the agency's values and initiatives" (Bryers, 2022). Although the program is self-guided, there are expectations for completing a minimum of 85% of the learning activities. The program provides a layered approach, instruction tools, and a weekly menu of learning materials in a combination of articles, podcasts, videos, and webinars. The LDP program is intentional when identifying maximum participation from various staff classifications to round out the cohort balance of perceived power among members. The LDP program intends to promote a collaborative culture while creating opportunities for leadership

development that reinforce the agency's values and mission, thereby cultivating agency alignment. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Social Services Agencies Leadership Development Program *Learning Objectives*

1. Identify personal attributes, routines, practices, approaches, etc. that reinforce self-leadership; both areas that one has developed and those for continued attention and growth.
 2. Describe values of self-leadership that are in alignment with the agency's values.
 3. Explore the ways in which lived experience regarding identity, culture, privilege, and oppression shape one's relationship with leadership.
 4. Describe the concept of bias and the ways in which bias can influence leadership.
 5. Describe skills and knowledge that support one's capacity for self-leadership and respective areas for personal development.
- (Bryers et al., 2023).

Implications for Solano County

Solano County needs to cultivate a county-wide cohesive culture, while providing leadership with the tools necessary to foster inclusion and psychological safety among staff. According to a report received by Solano County human resources, there have been a total of 37 supervisors and managers who have left the county since 2017 for various reasons. The main reason noted was retirement. The rate of turnover is not as concerning as the lack of important information sharing and transfer of knowledge that can be lost when a leader leaves. Solano County would benefit from an internal promotional pipeline, similar to the Santa Clara County LDP, where future leaders can be identified, groomed, and coached to fill impending vacant leadership positions. A leadership program could give future managers, supervisors, and lead staff the benefit of mentorship from the leaders who currently occupy supervisor or management positions.

Solano County has experienced disruptions to the organization's workforce that are not

mutually exclusive to Solano County but are being felt industry-wide. The adoption of a well-rounded leadership program could be a 3-to-5-year future goal. There are some smaller steps that can be taken by existing leadership while it works toward stabilizing the existing workforce environment.

Short and Long-Term Recommendations

A robust program with the depth and fullness of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agencies (SSA) LDP will require dedicated staff to be assigned to the coordination, facilitation, and ongoing oversight to ensure the success of the program objectives. This could be a costly initiative and should be a future goal. In the interim, a short-term, less costly, alternative would be to create a smaller internal consortium comprised of managers and supervisors from various departments. The consortium would have the following short-term objectives:

- Create a work group that collaborates and communicates with

administration based on feedback from their perspective divisions, departments, and staff.

- Create buy-in for interpersonal skills training and promote attendance by intermittently decompressing the workload of attendees.
- Identify and research cost-effective training with a "train the trainer" component.
- Promote inclusive culture change on a small scale. Participation in the consortium should be on a volunteer basis with participants who are mission and vision driven and take ownership of the program development.

Longer term recommendations that would help develop to a fuller Leadership Development Initiative could include:

- Conduct a root cause analysis to examine the top three reasons past and future managers and supervisors leave. A root cause analysis will help identify not only the reasons, but aid leadership in implementing recommendations and supports that will mitigate the circumstances associated with the resignations. The county conducts an annual employee engagement survey, and this information could be reviewed and incorporated into the annual strategic needs assessment.
- Identify and prioritize funding programs and resources that may have a significant cost, and be mindful of how such programs can cultivate and reinforce an inclusive culture that values psychological safety. Skills learned must be modeled and supported by creating

space and opportunities to actively demonstrate inclusive behaviors intended to foster cohesion among the existing workforce.

- Support existing managers and leaders by making it a priority to build rapport and establish trust with subordinate staff. This can be accomplished by being available, accountable, and accessible to staff within their prospective divisions. The support would be a no-cost option, and would require a growth mindset intended to improve relationships. It would require time and a commitment to the effort.

The foundation of transformational and efficient leadership is relational, and one cannot successfully lead staff without having relationships built on trust, organization alignment, collaboration, and inclusion.

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