

Leadership Development for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

DIANE DELOS SANTOS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of April 2018, 36% of Santa Clara County Social Services Agency staff are eligible for retirement. Filling these upcoming vacancies requires a proactive approach. Sonoma County Human Services Department faced a similar reality in 2008, leading them to implement a Mentor Project in 2013 and an Emerging Leader Track program in 2014. The implementation of these professional development programs

has had positive results for Sonoma County in terms of internal promotions and employee morale. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency can build upon current professional development efforts to tailor similar programs in preparation for filling the impending vacancies by developing the leadership competencies of its staff.

Diane delos Santos, Social Work Coordinator II,
Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

Leadership Development for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

DIANE DELOS SANTOS

Introduction

What happens to a social services agency when 36% of the staff is eligible for retirement? That is the current reality for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. Sonoma County Human Services Department has a couple ways of preparing for this scenario that benefit staff and the community. Through leadership development programs, staff are prepared for upcoming challenges, personal growth and their future career development.

Sonoma County's Approach to Leadership Development

In 2008, Sonoma County Human Services Department discovered that they had a large number of higher level management staff at retirement age and as an organization, they were not prepared to fill the potential loss of the vast leadership that could retire. Sonoma County Human Services Department developed two programs that not only provide staff training for their current jobs, but prepare them to rise to the challenges and the uncertainties of tomorrow. In doing so, the Sonoma County Human Services Department was able to plan for the future and move their talented and committed staff into higher level leadership roles, as other staff transition into retirement.

To address the need to sustain strong leadership and programs, Sonoma County developed the Mentor Project and an Emerging Leader Track (ELT) program. These two programs provide leadership development for the staff of Sonoma County Human Services Department. These opportunities are open to staff from all four divisions within their Human Services Department, including Adult

and Aging, Economic Assistance, Employment and Training, and Family, Youth and Children Services and Administration.

The Mentor Project began in 2013 and is a three-month program in which staff can participate either as a mentor or mentee. The mentors provide three to four hours of time to their mentee(s) each month. Although the mentors are typically at the supervisor level or above, anyone in a leadership role can apply to be a mentor. Likewise, anyone who would like to be a mentee can apply. It is even possible for a staff person to mentor someone and be mentored by someone else simultaneously. Staff are able to take advantage of the program more than one time in order to learn, explore, and build their competencies. The Mentor Project allows staff to learn about other divisions in the department, introducing them to more opportunities in their agency and new ways in which to support their local community.

The Emerging Leader Track (ELT) program is based upon research by Jim Collins (2001) entitled "Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve," which was published in the January 2001 Issue of the *Harvard Business Journal*. Mr. Collins spent five years studying 1,435 companies to learn what makes successful leaders. Sonoma County used the research findings to develop the competencies in their staff to become successful leaders. The ELT program began in 2014 as a four-year program. However due to budget cuts, the program is being reduced to a two-year program.

The ELT program includes three distinct components: training, mentoring and a project. While participating in the ELT program, participants meet for one to two days a month at a location different

from their regular day-to-day work. This allows for focus on the trainings. The ELT program is able to support 25 people in each cohort in the Human Services Department. The cohort has five people from each division. Prior to the end of the ELT program, each participant participates in the Mentor Project as well. As with many leadership programs, there is a project component. Before the participant finishes the program, they complete a project supporting the strategic goals of Sonoma County. In this manner they obtain hands-on experience with their county improvements and systemic changes. The projects have the potential to be adopted by the Department and put into practice. Participants in the ELT program complete the Strength Finder 2.0 assessment from Gallup and Tam Roth to further support their experience. As they are introduced to different divisions through the program, they are able to see where and how they may fit into other areas within the department.

For the first three years of the ELT program there was a budget that included funding for two contracted trainers at \$5,000 each, and an additional \$10,000 to support additional trainers, assessments, supplies, and graduation gifts. As previously stated, the money to support the program was greatly reduced in 2017 to only \$2,500, due to budget constraints. Although there has been a reduction in the ELT budget, the support for the staff to participate in the program remains. While there is only a small staff in place to support the program, leadership is in support of the staff needed and the time away from day-to-day tasks to participate.

Success

Staff development programs provide hidden strengths to an agency by increasing morale and retention. According to an article in *Governing The States and Localities* (February 2017) entitled “Governments are Upping the Professional Development Game,” government entities are using professional development to engage their employees by using tuition assistance and professional development targeted to individual needs, which can increase the

number of internal promotions. The article refers to a study conducted by the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement that determined “professional development is one of the top three factors that keep employees engaged and thus reduce their likelihood of leaving. (The other two are an employee’s own work and the ability of leaders to manage change.)” Human service departments and social service agencies often struggle with staff morale and retention. Many of the jobs in a social service agency are very stressful and there is the potential of exposure to chronic trauma which can negatively affect staff. When an agency invests in the staff, the staff feels supported and satisfaction can increase.

Evaluation of Training

Sonoma County evaluates their training using pre- and post-surveys for their Mentor Project and pre-, mid- and post-surveys for the ELT program. The surveys are used to provide feedback on the effects of the programs on staff and also to make improvements. Overall the Mentor Project and ELT pre-, mid- and post-survey results consistently show an increased staff satisfaction and feelings of being ready to work in a leadership role for Sonoma County Human Services Department. Staff who participate in the programs in Sonoma County tend to stay in their current positions and/or promote within the county. Additionally survey results show that a high majority of staff would recommend Sonoma County as a place of employment.

The Sonoma County Human Services Department staff are well-informed about the Mentor Project and ELT Programs through email communication and on-going conversations. The staff know the programs as opportunities, and they can apply any time the applications are being accepted. Due to the limited space in the ELT program, staff may have to apply more than one time before being accepted.

Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) has over 2,600 employees throughout four different departments (Aging and Adult Services,

Employment and Benefits Services, Family and Children Services, and Agency Office). According to Santa Clara County SSA Human Resources Department, over 36% of SSA staff is eligible for retirement in Santa Clara County as of April 2018. Approximately 10% of staff who are from the supervisor level or higher are at retirement age. At any moment, one or hundreds of people can retire from Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, leaving a significant gap in leadership. Knowledge of these statistics can inform the type of program needed to develop staff's leadership competencies and prepare them to step into leadership roles at higher levels. This information can also indicate where organized staff development opportunities are needed.

After being hired in Santa Clara County, new eligibility workers attend six months of training and new social workers attend 13 weeks of Induction Training. After taking the time to hire and train employees, retaining them is critical. Before these workers even start their day-to-day job functions, the county has already invested a great deal of time, money and resources. If adopting the Mentor and ELT programs in Santa Clara County helps to retain employees because they feel valued, are being developed professionally, and are being introduced to new opportunities, then the investment will be well made.

Recommendations

Due to the minimal cost and time needed for the Mentor Program, it is something that can be implemented in Santa Clara County. While with any new program the preparation can be the biggest cost, Sonoma County is willing to share any of their tools, planning and lessons learned to support Santa Clara County with implementation. Recommendations for the planning and implementation of a Mentor Program include:

- The Mentor Project can be built upon a previous mentor program which had been established in Santa Clara County, and was supported through a position in Staff Development.
- Santa Clara County's Unit Based Team (UBT) process can be utilized to plan for the implementation of a Mentor Program. The UBT process is a collaborative effort with staff from all levels, the unions and executive leadership for systemic change. The Mentor Program can start small and build upon its successes to support the agency as a whole. The early implementation for a Mentor Program could start this year with UBT support and executive sponsorship.

The implementation of the Mentor Project would also support the agency's efforts to become a coaching organization.

The ELT program has many more layers and has additional costs. The program removes staff from their day-to-day job functions for one to two days a month. As the majority of speakers and trainers for the program tend to be internal personnel, they need to spend time away from their day-to-day functions for the training and development sessions. Additionally, the speakers and trainers who are from outside of the county will need to be compensated for their time.

The preparation and support for such a program needs dedicated staff. Sonoma County staff support comes from their Staff Development Unit and a Leadership Development Workgroup comprised of staff from all levels. Together they prepare the trainings. Although there is a higher cost of time and money for the ELT program, there are savings as well. Investing in the development of staff improves retention, which can offset the costs of on-boarding new staff.

One of the challenges when implementing a new program is determining who will be in charge of the development and sustainability. One question to ask, "Is there a department that is already doing something similar and build upon it?" In Santa Clara County there is an organized and dedicated Staff Development and Training Department that is committed to supporting the SSA staff. Although they offer many trainings and types of staff development, there is nothing like the Mentor or ELT

programs in Sonoma County. Recommendations for increasing leadership development in Sonoma County include:

- Build upon an already established program to provide dedicated support for the specific needs for leadership development in Santa Clara County Social Services Agency. The Learning and Employee Development (LED) Department, which supports all Santa Clara County departments, has begun a Leadership Development program for all county staff. The program and courses are offered quarterly and are available in the classroom and online. Anyone employed by Santa Clara County can sign-up for a course or follow a curriculum in order to earn a certificate. Although the certificate program offers flexibility to complete the certificate without a time limit, it does not offer the organization, guidance, bonding or professional networking of a cohort. The cohort approach of the ELT program offers a level of cross learning from participants throughout the program. LED can support the implementation of a leadership development program specifically for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency through collaboration with Staff Development and by providing training supports. Staff Development would need dedicated staff to support and sustain the program.
- Work with the Labor Unions to support staff. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency has very active labor organizations and should partner with them to support this process. These programs are intended to be assets for their members. There are no immediate concerns that the labor unions would withhold their support for implementing these leadership development programs. Although union members who participate in the Mentor Project and ELT Program would have a workload impact, their participation in the leadership programs is voluntary. The County and the labor unions have been actively

working together to make progress in many areas and this is another opportunity for that to happen.

Santa Clara County provides many training and development opportunities to staff. Using what is currently available and the information provided in this case study, the current efforts can be tailored to support SSA with an organized professional development program. Implementing a Mentor Program and ELT Program will prepare the current dedicated staff to build their leadership competencies, obtain success in their professional growth and continue to support their local community and fulfill the impending need, as 36% of SSA staff is at retirement age.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Sonoma County for allowing me to learn about their program. Thank you to Francine Conner, Organizational Development Manager, and Kiergan Pegg, Department Human Resources Manager, for the time, guidance and information you provided. I would also like to thank Santa Clara County for supporting me to participate in the BASSC program. I would also like to thank Marie Sanders, Santa Clara County BASSC Program Liaison, for guiding me through this career development opportunity and Mark Lapiz, Management Analyst Program Manager III, for his ongoing support during this program and with my overall professional development.

References

- Collins, Jim. "Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve." *Harvard Business Journal*. January, 2001.
- Barrett, Katherine and Richard Greene. "Governments are Upping the Professional Development Game." *Governing The States and Localities*. February, 2017.