

## **IMPROVING LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT**

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The assignment relative to the Bay Area Social Services Consortium, was to choose a topic, and through my internship, write a paper about my observations. The topic of interest to me is Labor Relations and Personnel. This interests me for several reasons, particularly because of my management status, and the various labor relations and personnel problems that exist in Alameda County. My goal was to look at how one department dealt with the everyday conflicts that can occur between labor, management and other staff members, while trying to create an environment of support to do business differently in these challenging times. I hoped that through my observations, research and comparisons I could implement some of the strategies in Alameda County Social Services that are successful in San Francisco County.

My major program focus has been to observe two committees that are co-chaired by Labor and Management. The Diversity Task Force and the Affirmative Action Committee. These committees are representative of the commitment of the San Francisco Department of Social Service (SFDSS) to create and maintain a collaborative working relationship with labor and the staff. It is also indicative of their commitment to be responsive to the suggestions and the needs of the staff.

I have found that my internship in San Francisco County has been very exciting. San Francisco County has a strong diverse, well represented urban population. There are approximately 740,000 people in San Francisco county and they all feel that they are a special interest group. This platform sets well for having a well thought out and workable machinery to effectively implement change through a collaborative relationship with labor the entire workforce, and the community. However, this endeavor takes a great deal of hard work and vision by management and also by labor members. Through my internship I discovered that San Francisco Department of Social Services had experienced many of the same problems that Alameda County had experienced in dealing with labor.

Often when management thinks of the term labor relations, immediately the word union pops into our heads. The word union can evoke many feelings in a manager. The feeling of conflict, frustration and sometimes even helplessness. So why is it that many managers have so many negative feelings about unions? Is it because we feel that union officials are unreasonable and unenlightened people? Is it because we feel a sense of impending doom when discussing sensitive issues with labor? Is it because we see labor officials as forever taking an adversarial stance when approached by management to work in a collaborative manner, on a specific topic? Have we ever stopped to really think about the complexities of the very delicate relationship between labor and management? Well I think that we all have at some point in our careers thought about this issue. But what if any are some of the strategies that we can use to improve the relationship between labor and management? Are we really willing to take a long hard look at the behavior of labor as well as our own, and commit to making the necessary changes to improve communication and remove the barriers to a true partnership? But as we all know, change is hard. Change is anxiety producing especially when it is seen as being forced upon us. Now more so than ever in the field of Social Services we are faced with many challenges.

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Changes in how our business is being regulated at the state and federal levels, are a great challenge. Not only are our resources decreasing but there is an increasing need and demand for our services. We must do business differently in order to remain effective and competitive in the changing of the various social programs. But in order to make the necessary changes we must work collaboratively with labor, and with each other. We must establish a new relationship with labor. Establishing new relationships requires listening, creating a climate of respect and trust, and coming to understand the mutual benefits that will occur if partnership relationships are firmly established. We must do this with the clear goal of valuing the diversity of our workforce , both ethnically and culturally. And we must include all levels of staff in the discussions for change. Without involvement there is no commitment.

Due to racial and cultural tensions in the San Francisco County Department of Social Services, the General Manager embarked on a goal to improve communication with all staff and to also improve labor relations. Ways that the department attempts to accomplish this are as follows:

- 1) Through an intense diversity training for all staff.
- 2) Through the work of two very important task force committees.
  - A. The Diversity Task force
  - B. Affirmative Action Task force.
- 3) Through a formal selection process for the committee members that was very involved, and deemed important.
- 4) Through ongoing support from an outside diversity consultant group, to work with the Diversity Task Force and the Affirmative Action Task Force. And to assist with improving communication within the organization.
- 5) Through an intensive supervisory training model, that is designed to help set outcomes, and standards for performance, through the use of a new evaluation tool.

The mission of the San Francisco Department of Social Services is to provide financial assistance and social services to eligible needy persons in order to-

- meet their basic needs,
- help maximize the individual's potential for self-sufficiency,
- stabilize families.

The services must be delivered in a humane, respectful and compassionate way and in an efficient, effective and timely manner.

SFDSS in recent years have faced many cultural and ethnic challenges. There have been various charges of racial discrimination by the department against employees. Also the labor unions surveyed DSS employees regarding civil rights and discrimination against employees at DSS. 30% of DSS employees responded to the survey. 24% of the workforce believed that they had been discriminated against-16% based on race and 20% based on favoritism. There have been

hearings on various cases and none of them sustained charges of discrimination against the department. However it was apparent to the General Manager that racial and cultural tension did exist, and these issues had to be addressed in a formal manner. There are three areas of concern that DSS is working to address:

1. Cultural/Ethnic challenges, worker to worker and worker to client.
2. Ethnic disparity between workforce and client population.
3. Advancement of minority workers to management.

SFDSS was under a great deal of scrutiny regarding compliance with civil service rules. While none of this scrutiny resulted in findings of discrimination, it was apparent that the Department of Social Services must aggressively address issues of racial and cultural differences. Ways in which they are attempting to address these issues are as follows:

### **DIVERSITY TRAINING**

Though state law requires The Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide cultural awareness training to all public contact staff the department has always trained all staff in this area. But the past training have sometimes fueled tensions rather than resolve them. For that very reason the Department of Social Services under the Direction of Brian Cahill put great effort into soliciting staff input and seeking out a constructive training model. They contracted with Jerry Lew and Associates, an outside Consulting Firm for this very important training. The training focuses on individual self knowledge, cross cultural relationships, and development of effective communication skills needed to understand, respect, and work within those differences. It also includes training in the American With Disabilities Act (ADA), AIDS/HIV issues, and Sexual Harassment. This training is non-threatening, but highly instructive. And the staff response have been very positive.

Also included in the diversity training contract was the creation of a standing diversity task force. The composition is a cross section of department staff, to be a forum for analyzing and discussing issues and needs regarding diversity. This included ongoing training, and developing recommendations to ensure meaningful results from the task force efforts.

### **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION TASK FORCE:**

Another way in which SFDSS is trying to address the needs of the department is through the work of an Affirmative Action Task Force. This committee is a joint union-management committee and its purpose is to help the department with recruiting and promoting qualified employees from the communities of color as well as to help prepare line workers for promotion by helping with several tasks:

- Development of exams that truly measure the qualities that are needed in workers and managers
- Development of "exam prep" training that prepares workers to take promotional exams. Also assist in the development of a management preparation training program.
- To help prepare line staff who desire to promote into management.

In order for these task forces to be effective, the correct group of people must come together. The goal was to assemble a group that was a representative cross section of DSS staff. The effectiveness of a temporary group like a task force is almost entirely dependent on the selection of members. Since a task force has no final decision making power, its strength comes from the process of inclusion. These two task forces are an excellent example of how management and labor are trying to work together in a collaborative way. The process of meetings and committees is by far the most prevalent way that we in the field of social services make decisions, analyze data and discuss important issues. It is very important that the committee is able to set goals and objectives that are clear and important to the entire organization. All members of the committees agreed that this issue of communication in a diverse and fair environment is of great importance.

The DSS went through a formal selection process for the two task forces. A selection committee did the work. A memo was issued to encourage all interested staff to apply for participation in the task force by completing an application form. This memo came from the General Manager, Brian Cahill. This memo showed the importance of the task force and their duties. By the General Manager sending out this memo to all staff, he set the tone for the entire agency. The memo also showed his sincere commitment to the process of involving all staff members in this process. The selection process was based on information provided on written applications and oral interviews of applicants. Written and oral responses were rated. The decision was made as to who would make the best committee members based on discussions of the task force, the mission and criteria, and the diversity needed for the task force. The task force consists of a cross sectional group of employees from top management, to line staff and also labor representatives, all of who feel that the issues of diversity and affirmative action are very important. Labor and management appointed their representatives to each task force. Other staff members went through the selection process. Each committee has a mission statement, along with goals and objectives for the year.

### **DIVERSITY TASK FORCE MISSION STATEMENT**

The purpose of the SFDSS Diversity Task Force is to assist the Department to create an environment that continuously meets the service needs of the public, improves staff moral, and promotes change by recognizing and respecting the value of differences, enhancing communication, building cooperation and learning about others.

#### **Task Force Goals:**

- To improve responsiveness to the needs of SFDSS clients.
- To maintain a work environment that is responsive to staff needs.
- To ensure the organization's ability to be flexible and adapt to changing needs.

### **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION COMMITTEE MISSION STATEMENT**

To advise the Department and to make recommendations to the Department, Department of Human Resources, and the Civil Service Commission in the areas of

- • Recruitment
- • Promotion
- • Examination
- • Training
- • Selection

for minorities, women, and persons with disabilities, and insure that department's policies and practices in these areas meet labor force standards and needs of the department's diverse client population.

## **SUPERVISORY TRAINING MODEL**

The third way that SFDSS is trying to improve communication, labor relations and implement changes in the department is through a Supervisory Training Module. This training program is designed for all levels of supervisory staff. Its focus is on the enhancement of management skills. The plan for training consists of three phases:

- Phase I: Dealing with problem performance and grievances.
- Phase II:
  - Part 1: Decision making, role of the supervisor and use of an updated departmental handbook.
  - Part 2: Managing Diversity
- Phase III: Performance monitoring and appraisal, communication and teambuilding.

This training is an attempt to do business differently in SFDSS. The training will focus on the role of the supervisor as a critical part of the management team. Here again the General Manager of the department has set the tone for the department by expressing in written form to all supervisory staff the expectation, and reason for the training. The reason for the training is to strengthen, encourage and develop the largest segment of the management team. And to encourage senior managers to change their behaviors to allow supervisors to be managers. By strengthening the management team it is hoped and expected that many of the communication problems will decrease. Supervisors will be able to consistently apply department policies and procedures. There will be more risk taking to encourage creativity among all staff members to think of ways to do business differently.

Another aspect of the supervisory training in dealing with problem performance is a new performance management and appraisal process. This process is a more interactive approach to evaluations, in that the supervisor and the worker discuss and define job standards and the critical job elements of each standard. This process is ongoing throughout the year. There is an employee performance log that is updated quarterly, enabling each employee to know where they stand in performance at all times. Finally, there is an annual evaluation. It is the belief that this process will take some of the of the mystery and stress out of the evaluation process, and help the process to be the management tool for positive performance that it is intended.

## **CONCLUSION**

During my internship I observed many meetings and training sessions. I was particularly impressed by the genuine interest of the staff in the topics presented. I was impressed by the labor representative's relationships with management. It seemed as if everyone truly had a sense of "we are in this together". There was no real undercurrent of adversarial posturing even when discussing real work issues and problems. There was a real problem solving spirit involved in these discussions. This meant to me that the staff and labor representatives felt that they were being heard and their suggestions were being taken seriously and that they were part of the team. The managers felt that they too were being heard and valued as managers and true members of the team.

The task force members all seemed to work as a team. They were excited and committed to the goals of their committees. Each member completed tasks that were assigned to them in a timely manner. They really seemed to care about making changes to do business differently. And they felt that they were supported by the General Manager and the Executive Staff.

The charges of discrimination and unfairness have decreased. The grievances have decreased. Employees are more aware of the cultural and ethnic issues. There is an openness to discuss issues in a calm and effective manner. There is a willingness to accept and respect the differences of others.

The selection process for the task force and committees has resulted in a more diverse group that is truly more representative of the vast views of the staff members. This has resulted in a general dissemination of a renewed attitude of staff, management and labor in the commitment of working collaboratively on problems and issues.

### **Relevance for Alameda County:**

I feel that the processes that I observed in San Francisco County are very relevant to Alameda County. We are currently still experiencing some of the issues that San Francisco has faced. Though the process of improvement is continuing in SFDSS, they have made a real effort to address some of the complex issues.

### **Recommendations for Alameda County:**

- (a) Alameda County Social Services Agency should invest in its management team by planning and designing a supervisory training program to ensure consistency in personnel policies and procedures. This should include setting performance standards for each job classification and designing a new process for evaluation of all staff members.
- (b) In an effort to do business differently we should look at how we staff our task forces and committees. The process should be more formal, and include an application process. All employees should have a chance to participate in the application process.

- (c) Our Diversity Training program should be trained by an outside consultant group for the entire staff. All Social Service staff members should be trained ASAP
- (d) The outside consultants should work with Social Services Diversity Task Force and the Affirmative Action Task force to assist us in the following areas:
- Continue to develop our long term diversity objectives for our diversity task force and our affirmative action task force to work on issues in our agency.
  - Develop strategies to include more staff members in the process by creating a formal mechanism *for* input.
  - Assist in the recruitment of workers and managers and that are consistent with our strategic plan and Agency Mission.
  - Make recommendations to the civil service commission.
- (e) Both the Diversity Task Force and the Affirmative Action Task Force should be more visible in the Agency. Activities should be planned to get input from all staff regarding the issues of Diversity and Affirmative Action.

Certainly all the answers to Labor Relations and Personnel issues relative to the successful and smooth operation of a Social Services Agency are not contained here. However, I feel that this paper represents a benchmark from which we can begin to develop and approach these issues in a concise, systematic and new way

The experience I have had and my involvement with the BASSC has been invaluable. I will use all of this material in my professional development. Certainly SFDSS did not have all of the answers. However, they were faced with similar problems and designed a method of effective implementation and operation. Therefore as a result of their successful methods, they were used as my model. Again, hopefully this will serve as a basis for meaningful dialogue in regards to Alameda County and its mission.