

LABOR-MANAGEMENT RELATIONS AT SAN MATEO COUNTY

Rosemary Salters*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This particular project interested me because Human Resources (HR) Department staff spends a disproportionate amount of time advising supervisors and management staff about how to deal with issues and complaints raised by union representatives. Also, agency supervisors and managers spend considerable time responding to numerous individual inquiries and complaints, and attend meetings requested by union representatives.

METHODOLOGY

Because I was new to Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA), I wanted to gather background and historical information. In speaking to others outside of the SSA, I sought information about how other agencies deal with SEIU representatives and if they had more success with their LMT (Labor/Management Team) meetings and, if so, how were they able to accomplish this. Preliminarily, I obtained information from SSA managers, Human Resource Services, IDEA negotiators, and the SEIU Union President. I then interviewed five directors in the San Mateo County Human Service Agency as well as the director of the Human Service Agency (HSA), the employee relations officer for San Mateo County (central personnel) and the president of AFSCME union, which is the largest union in HSA.

The information from the interviews at Alameda County provided a historical perspective on SSA's relationship with SEIU. Although this information was very insightful, it was not appropriate for inclusion in this case study report.

OBSERVATIONS

Interviewees outside of Alameda County SSA shared the following observations:

1. SEIU has significant influence over the operations of the SSA.
2. Many supervisors are reluctant to stand up to union representatives.
3. Supervisors who challenge union representatives are not supported by SSA management.
4. Sometimes, SSA has been misleading about plans that would affect the terms and conditions of union employees' jobs.
5. Most other county departments do not have LMT's. The few that do only have one department-wide LMT (unlike SSA's separate LMT meetings for each department).

Throughout the eight interviews with executive staff and central human resources at San Mateo County, several themes regarding establishing and maintaining good relationships with unions were repeated again and again. They are: a) make every attempt to include the unions in initial plans; b) never surprise the unions; c) be honest and above-board and follow through on commitments and promises. San Mateo managers cited many examples of how they routinely consult with the AFSCME Union Business Agent (AFSCME is comparable to Alameda County's SEIU Union). Often these interactions are quite informal. Due to the trust and respect that the parties have established with each other, managers can simply telephone SEIU to "bounce off" ideas and proposals. Often

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with some “tweaking” of proposals, modified work processes and procedures can be promptly implemented without there being a major ordeal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to differences in their relationship with SEIU, many of San Mateo’s strategies cannot be readily employed at Alameda County SSA. However, SSA might develop a work plan and strategies to improve relationships with its unions.

1. Foster informal relationships with union representatives. This is an opportune time to do this since most of the executive level staff is new to their positions. Since there are new players, the staff has little or no history with the unions.
 - a. Give emphasis to the fact that this is a new administration with different approaches and methods. SSA has a strong desire to work together with the unions.
 - b. Employ informal mechanisms to discuss ideas and upcoming initiatives rather than use the LMT’s. By bouncing ideas off of the unions early on, it may be possible to achieve the results we want, while also crafting programs that consider and incorporate ways to eliminate any points that could later be contentious.
2. Ensure consistency in decision making throughout the Agency. Review, evaluate and document current SSA practices and processes employed in dealing with union issues throughout the agency.
 - a. Identify and eliminate ineffective practices.
 - b. Identify “best practices” used in dealing with unions. Document and include this information in a supervisory manual.

3. Develop a holistic approach to Labor/Management relations. Thoroughly analyze the implications of all union requests and proposals. In addition to viewing only the proposed action, consider the affect(s) upon SSA as a whole. The following are standard criteria that could be used for deciding whether to proceed:

- a. What is the impact on service to our clients?
- b. How and which SSA operations would be affected?
- c. Is this consistent with business practices in other SSA departments?
- d. Is this consistent with how the agency is handling related matters with other SSA Unions (so as not to trigger a “domino affect”)?
- e. How would the action affect employees not represented by the particular union that is making the request?
- f. Would the proposed action cause inequities?
- g. Would this action set a precedent?
- h. What are the present and future costs of any proposed actions?

4. Internally communicate issues and outcomes of LMT meetings. Evaluate and review issues for any implications on other intra-agency operations or plans. Discuss and strategize issues and problems across SSA departments.

5. Provide continuity between all LMT’s. Human Resources (HR) can explore providing staff to attend each LMT with the purpose of developing a reporting mechanism that would track issues and agreements reached at the various LMT’s. Another alternative is to develop reporting mechanisms to keep a record of and compare the issues raised and the agreements from the various LMT’s. There would be several advantages to tracking these actions. First, departments can be forewarned of

union strategies and the issues that they are raising. Additionally, this would give management the opportunity to internally discuss and evaluate concerns and develop comprehensive plans to address issues. Finally, this would assist in bringing about agency-wide consistency in LMT outcomes and practices.

6. Refine SSA mechanisms for tracking, reporting, and reviewing labor and employee relations matters for consistency of application and to identify trends and any arising issues.

7. Establish a central review mechanism to review proposed management actions and decisions affecting union employees. HR can assume one component of this. Grievance data, employee disciplines, and union requests can be compiled and reviewed. This data should also be analyzed to identify any evidence of recurring or potential problems.

8. Implement support systems for supervisors and managers. Advise supervisors of the services that HR currently provides such as coaching on employee discipline problems, and clarification of management rights; suggest and develop strategies for dealing with union problems and problem employees; draft and/or review employee discipline documents and correspondence, and interpret MOU's. The following new programs are also needed:

- a. Develop a "supervisors' academy" for new and current staff and stipulate that all supervisory staff must attend.
- b. Provide on-going training to supervisors and managers on topics of current interest.
- c. Update and expand existing supervisory manual.

9. Develop an SSA philosophy and an agency-wide operational strategy to reinforce communications

and training thus providing support for new staff and clarification for long-term managers.

10. Embark on a long-term goal of reducing the number of LMT's to one agency-wide session (or eliminating LMT's altogether). An overhaul of our business practices would be required to eliminate this type of forum.

11. Have a labor/management retreat. A critical first step toward improving labor/management relations at SSA is to have a retreat (facilitated by an outside consultant) that includes all of the unions and the executive committee. This would be a suitable forum to improve these relations, as well as the skill and awareness level of executive staff.

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INTRODUCTION

I choose to study labor/management relations at San Mateo County because they have very positive relationships with their unions. Moreover, traditionally the county has been able to work collaboratively with its unions in developing and implementing complex organizational change projects as well as working through day-to-day issues and problems. This topic was of particular interest to me because the relationship between the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) and the Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO (SEIU), which represents the bulk of our employees, is divisive and contentious. This hampers service to our clients and creates an enormous drain on agency productivity.

BACKGROUND

As the new Director of Human Resources for the Social Service Agency (SSA), a large amount of my time was being spent in frequent and lengthy “meet and confer” sessions with employee unions. Even though many hours were spent in meetings, there was little or no progress toward resolving the issues under discussion. Often, these “meet and confer” conferences commenced only after the SSA operating departments had spent extensive time and resources meeting and discussing the same issues with the unions during numerous Labor Management Team (LMT) meetings, but had failed to reach resolution.

I sought to gain direct knowledge of how to accomplish the following:

- improve relationships with employee unions
- build trust and mutual respect between SSA and employee unions
- implement work processes and policies that enhance service to the clients
- substantially shorten the “meet and confer” process
- work collaboratively with employee unions

METHODOLOGY

Because of my newness to Alameda County Social Services Agency, I had discussions with managers within SSA and interviewed managers from county human resource services department (central personnel) to gain background information and historical perspective on agency relations with the unions. In addition, I interviewed a chief negotiator from Industrial Employers and Distributors Association (IEDA), Alameda County’s contractor for labor negotiations. By coincidence, I learned that IEDA also negotiates San Mateo County’s union contracts so I had the benefit of speaking to someone with first-hand knowledge of the operations and practices of both agencies.

I held interviews with five directors in the San Mateo County Human Service Agency as well as the director of the Human Service Agency (HSA). The employee relations officer for San Mateo County was also interviewed extensively to gain the perspective of the central personnel department. Additionally, I met with the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union, which is the largest union in HSA. Information from previ-

ous discussions that I had with the president of SEIU was also incorporated although this was not originally part of the methodology plan.

This case study focuses on relationships with AFSCME and SEIU because they are the largest unions in the respective agencies representing the bulk of the employees.

OBSERVATIONS

The two counties are dissimilar. San Mateo County HSA is much smaller in terms of clients served and its number of employees. The methods in which the agencies communicate with the unions are very different. HSA managers and managers in all other San Mateo County departments regularly contact AFSCME to informally discuss ideas and desires to ascertain any objections or concerns the union may have. Often, issues can be discussed and modified in a few telephone conversations and implementation can take place within a very short timeframe. A common thread throughout the interviews with HSA directors, central personnel, and the AFSCME Local 3916 President was that the focus is on service to clients. All attribute the positive relationships with AFSCME to its president, who they consider a person of high integrity and who has a cadre of responsible representatives working on the union's behalf. The interviewees individually identified the necessity of keeping the unions apprised of agency plans as critical to maintaining a good relationship. San Mateo County managers believe that unions have a legitimate role and they must work together as partners. Each of the individuals I interviewed also stressed that clear, honest and open communication with the unions are essential.

The HSA, and AFSCME have a habit of agreement and believe in working together in good faith. They

are able to freely exchange ideas and proposals. This commitment is evident from leadership at the top, including the board of supervisors, county manager, HSA director, and the executive team. Cooperation and good faith problem solving are the norm. Both HSA and AFSCME agree that this has not been easy.

Complex and difficult problems are dealt with by management and union working together sometimes in large committees who meet frequently to sort through issues and to craft satisfactory solutions. One example of this is how they approached Welfare Reform. Committees of 100-150 people representing a large consensus of viewpoint successfully worked together for approximately two years on issues such as job restructuring, caseload standards, "banked" cases, and whether or not certain work warranted pay differentials.

For many years, Alameda County Social Services Agency has had problematic relationships with its unions. The consensus of the persons that I interviewed is that there are several areas in which the agency can improve its relationships with the unions. They are:

- follow-through with commitments and standards
- improve credibility by correcting valid problems
- forewarn employee unions of planned modifications
- meet all negotiated obligations

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons I learned are fundamental. It is possible to work with unions in a forthright manner, using a high degree of integrity. As is the case for any personal good relationship, the commitment of both parties is required.

- personal relationships are the foundation of positive labor/management relation
- the relationship itself must be made a priority
- difficult problems can be solved cooperatively in a public sector union environment
- management and unions must find a common ground on which to work and solve difficult problems
- management must be open and honest in communicating with employee unions
- unions must be open and honest in communicating with management
- both parties must have the common goals of providing effective and quality service to clients.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the very different history and labor management relations climate within the two counties, many processes and methodologies employed by San Mateo County could not be readily implemented by Alameda County Social Services Agency. None-the-less, Alameda County can begin to mend relationships with the unions using San Mateo County's strategies. My recommendations are:

1. Foster informal relationships with union representatives. This is an opportune time to do this since most of the executive level staff is new to their positions. Since there are new players, the staff has little or no history with the unions.
 - a. Give emphasis to the fact that this is a new administration with different approaches and methods. SSA has a strong desire to work together with the unions.
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