

Engaging Staff in Achieving Agency Goals: A Case Study of San Mateo County's Collaborative Performance Management System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"When employees have a line of sight, they can see the connection between their everyday work, and something larger."

—Russ Linden

As with most other public agencies throughout the State of California, San Mateo County is adopting methods necessary to achieve the highest level of effectiveness and efficiency. In an effort to achieve this goal in 2010 the county implemented the use of an online module, Collaborative Performance Management System (CPMS), to assist with managing organizational and individual performance.

Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department is dedicated to making a difference through the values of effective practices and excellent service. At this time, the cost of CPMS makes this tool fiscally prohibitive to the department; however, aspects of CPMS can be integrated into the department's business practices. Some of these include:

- developing and providing periodic training to all staff on collaborative performance management
- creating a line of sight between agency goals and
- establishing employee objectives and quarterly reviews of progress

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Introduction

Public service organizations face various challenges: heightened constituent expectations, diminishing budgets, increased scrutiny and management of a changing workforce. Of these factors, the workforce is the variable that organizations have a direct influence over and when managed effectively can give an organization the competitive advantage necessary to face many other challenges. With the use of technology, San Mateo County has created an online venue for employees to engage in personal and professional development, while contributing towards the agency's goals.

San Mateo County

San Mateo County is located in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay Area. The county has a budget of \$1.2 billion and approximately 5,000 employees to serve a population of over 700,000 residents. As a county, San Mateo has had a long-term focus on quality performance. The county understands the many benefits of measuring performance on a continuous basis. Internally measuring performance allows the county to evaluate efficiency and effectiveness. After all "there is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all" (Fischer, 2001). As public sentiment towards privatization continues to grow, performance measurements allow public agencies to demonstrate competency. As Human Services Agency Director Beverly Johnson explains, "quality performance programs keep public agencies in a competitive edge."

Yet continuous quality performance can only be achieved when the workforce has the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to meet the demands of the job.

Since 2007, San Mateo County has been using a learning management system (LMS)¹ administered by an outside vendor to manage staff trainings. In May 2010, the entire county adopted the use of the Collaborative Performance Management System (CPMS) module within LMS to assist with performance management. The use of CPMS is being rolled out in phases to county staff and at the time of this case study CPMS was available to a pilot group of 400 employees. CPMS serves as an electronic venue for employees and supervisors to collaboratively and continuously review individual performance. Three key features of this system are: having the goals of the agency, director, and direct supervisor displayed for line staff, the ability for employee's to link their objectives to the agency's goals, and a mechanism is in place within CPMS for quarterly progress meetings. CPMS performance management can be seen as a four phase cycle:

I. Pre-planning

Supervisor reviews employees:

- prior year's accomplishments
- job specifications
- contribution toward departmental and unit goals

¹ Cornerstone OnDemand, Inc. Learning Management System provides templates and easy tools necessary to publish and deploy media-rich content. www.cornerstoneondemand.com

Employee completes self-review

II. Performance Planning and Goal Setting Session

Supervisor and employee meet to:

- Discuss and agree on goals for the year
- Discuss and agree on priorities and expectations
- Clarify performance factors important for job success
- Discuss role employee plays within functional area
- Determine competency and levels of proficiency essential for success
- Create and align employee goals
- Conclude by documenting plan on CPMS

III. Ongoing feedback and coaching

- During regularly scheduled supervision meetings and during day-to-day contact supervisor provides value-added feedback and coaching
- Quarterly Interim Progress Meeting to evaluate progress on achieving objectives and the relevancy of objectives to current assignments

IV. Performance Review and Evaluation

Employee and supervisor:

- Discuss performance related to the expectations set at the beginning of the cycle based on the status of goal action plans
- Supervisor prepares evaluation document

Problem Statement

“Organizations consist of a group of individuals all driving towards one goal and to be effective, everyone needs to understand and focus on their strengths” (Gelink, 2011). While this is true, what may be added to this is that for an organization to be most effective, everyone needs to understand the organization’s goals and how what they do contributes towards these. When employees cannot clearly see a link between what they do (performance objectives) and what the agency’s goals are (strategic

objectives), they may not perform to their full potential. Creating that ‘line of sight’ has an effect that can empower staff to be creative, innovative and proactive in achieving objectives.

The challenge for organizations is to keep staff engaged in individual and collective performance management. Performance management is defined as “the systematic process by which an agency involves its employees, as individuals and members of a group, in improving organizational effectiveness in the accomplishment of agency mission and goals” (OPM, 2012). Performance management is not meant to replace the annual evaluation process; rather it creates a culture of continuous feedback and transparency.

Impact

Managing performance is vital to an organization. In social services, the workforce is an important, if not the most important, resource. In fiscal terms, personnel accounts for the biggest budget line item. Most importantly, it is the staff who are instrumental in making a difference in the lives of community residents. Discussing performance objectives annually does not encourage staff participation in managing objectives. Including staff in managing their performance allows an organization to achieve its goals, improve labor relations, and foster employee professional development.

Engaging each member of the organization in developing individual objectives that can be linked to the agency’s strategic goals empowers employees. By participating in this process the employee is better able to understand the agency’s goals, develop a sense of purpose by connecting their duties to the agency’s goals and develop a sense of responsibility for achieving objectives since s/he was involved in the process.

A collaborative process fosters an environment where professional development is encouraged. This presents an opportunity to increase the hiring, retention and promotion of staff. Organizations where professional development is encouraged tend to attract more qualified applicants. Staff that receives

the support and mentoring necessary to gain the skills required for promotion remain in the organization; minimizing the loss of organizational knowledge and recruitment costs. Professional development also contributes to “sharpening the saw,” improving staff knowledge, skills and abilities (Covey, 2004). In a time where change is significant, rapid and constant professional development provides employees with the tools necessary to adapt.

Common causes of stress in the workplace include unclear work assignments or conflicting roles, lack of control over work, lack of participation in decision-making and not feeling acknowledged for a job well done (Michie, 2002). Employee stress has a significant impact on both the employee and the organization. Increased stress in the workplace has been linked to poor health outcomes including increased risk of heart problems and depression. It also decreases productivity through increased absenteeism, employee turnover, and poor levels of customer service.

Effective performance management can also assist in maintaining positive labor relations. Clear, open and continuous communication fosters trust. Periodic joint review of objectives and progress diminishes the instances where employees are surprised about the content of their evaluation. Gabe Aponte and Anne Weiss, employee and supervisor respectively in San Mateo County's Human Resources Department Training and Development Division, shared that one of the benefits of CPMS has been the transparency and open communication it promotes. It eliminates the element of surprise during the annual performance meeting since the content of the evaluation has been discussed throughout the year.

Causes

So why with all the benefits of effective performance management do organizations face performance issues? Impediments to effective performance management in organizations include lack of time, training and resistance to change.

The art of supervision has many challenges, one of which is time management. Supervisors play various roles. They provide subject matter expertise and support to general operations, serving as advocates, linking organizational goals and service delivery, and, perhaps most vital to organizational success, they train, evaluate, counsel and discipline staff. Almost all of the responsibilities assigned to a supervisor have deadlines; however, outside of evaluation dates there are no other pre-determined times for reviewing objectives or performance per se. Supervision meetings are often-times consumed with addressing time-sensitive items, special projects, or complex situations. While these moments are opportunities to build rapport and coach staff, the opportunity is often missed throughout the year to reflect on the relevancy of objectives and/or link accomplishments to goals. “For many employees a face-to-face performance review is the most stressful work conversation they'll have all year. For managers, the discussion is just as tense” (Knight, 2011). This may be because the annual evaluation appointment is the one time of the year where these items are explicitly discussed.

Effective performance management requires training that is constantly reinforced. Often employees do not receive training on how to actively participate in their performance plan. Unless these trainings are held on a consistent basis the information remains underutilized. Logistics and/or limited training staff are some of the reasons why organizations are unable to provide continuous training in this area.

Lastly, effective performance management requires active participation on the part of both employee and supervisor. This may be a change in practice for some in the workforce. Unlike any other time in U.S. history, up to four generations are working side by side. Some employees may not be comfortable or may need training on how to actively participate in performance management, including developing professional goals or completing a self-assessment of performance.

Implications for Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County is located at the north end of the Monterey Bay. The county has a \$506 million budget and approximately 2,200 employees to serve a population of over 260,000 residents. As has already been established in this case study, effective performance management is essential to the optimal use of the human resource factor.

Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department (HSD) provides services to families, veterans and aging and dependent adults. HSD values excellent service, partnerships, and effective practice; the department's staff is at the core of these values. In an effort to support these values HSD maintains a learning management system (LMS²) that supports the development, delivery, and management of all HSD learning and development programs.

The advantages of San Mateo County's LMS are that it is maintained by an outside vendor; it has the capacity to store and share information between parties, and is used county-wide, diminishing the costs per department. The advantages of HSD's LMS are its relatively affordable cost and the ability to customize trainings to the needs of the department. The development of training material may, depending on the subject, be labor-intensive.

Recommendations

Based on apparent effective practices in San Mateo County's performance management system, recommendations for Santa Cruz County are as follows:

- **Centralize location of resource information.** This is consistent with HSD's strategic response of improved access to information and data. Maintaining material related to performance management in the Online Learning Center will allow all staff, employees, and supervisors to access information related to trainings in one specific location.
- **Develop online training on collaborative performance management for all staff.** Provide online

training to staff at all levels. By having training material available online, staff can refer to the material as necessary throughout the year. There are various presentations and articles available online that HSD can use to minimize the costs of developing training.

- **Require ongoing participation on collaborative performance management training.** In order for information to be captured, it has to be repeated often and in various forms. Requiring staff at all levels to participate in online training every two years reinforces to staff the importance of the subject and keeps the information present in staff's minds. Online training minimizes the disruption to work operations and allows employees to complete the training at a time that is most convenient.
- **Institute 'cascading objectives'.** "Cascading objectives" is the term used to describe the linking of strategic goals all the way from operational objectives to an employee's individual objectives. Each division within the department should share with all staff the department's goals as they apply to the division. Within each division, units should hold a discussion and identify the departmental goals that are applicable to them. Once these have been identified unit supervisors should have a discussion with unit members to link the employee's objectives to those of the unit. This makes it clear to employees the impact their job has on achieving the agency's goals.
- **Schedule quarterly progress review meetings.** This may increase the time staff spends throughout the year discussing their performance. However, this should minimize the time spent at the end of the evaluation period gathering documentation to support evaluation ratings. Quarterly review should also assist the organization in addressing performance deficiencies sooner. Finally, this may diminish the appeals of evaluation ratings.

² Online Learning Center. <http://learningcenter.bra.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/>

Conclusion

The Cornerstone Learning Management System (CLMS) has allowed San Mateo County to promote the idea of engaging staff in professional development while meeting organizational goals. Although this system is not available to Santa Cruz County's Human Services Department due to cost, some aspects of this system can be incorporated into the department's practices to achieve a similar outcome.

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