

More Prepared for What's Next: Leadership Lessons Amidst COVID-19

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to the nature of our work, the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency, including the Department of Family and Children's Services, must be a responsive and nimble organization capable of quickly adapting to the changes in processes, policies and technology, which guide, direct and support the services provided. The volume and pace of shifts in our work processes not only have a significant impact on the system but also on the staff. The effects on individual staff may manifest as resistance

to change, stress-related health issues, burn-out, and job dissatisfaction. Under the best of circumstances, overcoming these roadblocks can be an enormous task, but when you add a disaster such as COVID-19 to the equation, the situation can become either daunting or a stimulus for evolution. During this time, I have shifted my perspective and used these experiences and challenges to spark growth and development as a leader.

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Introduction

Some remark that social services agencies, including child welfare services, are the “Department of Change.” This perception arises from the frequent changes to the laws, regulations, policies, and practices guiding and directing our work. Agencies and departments must analyze the impact on the provision of services to the community, then convey and implement the changes in operations to staff. The ongoing cycle of new directives with revised or updated policies and processes requires not only the organization but also the staff to be agile and responsive. On top of that ongoing cycle, add a disaster—in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic that drastically changed our provision of services to the community as well as how we work. Unlike many disasters that our state or counties have experienced previously, the pandemic crisis period is not time-limited in its duration before moving to recovery. Our response to COVID-19 has lasted months, and when it appeared our counties or state were ready to begin moving forward into the recovery phase, our momentum was halted due to a resurgence of the virus. The relentless cycle of the constant need to change or adapt can have an impact, which is either positive or negative.

When we began the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development program, we could not fathom what would occur during these months. These experiences have been a catalyst for professional growth and a greater understanding of my role as a leader.

Background

To understand the impact of COVID-19 on the County of Santa Clara Department of Family and Children’s Services (DFCS), it is critical for me to examine the constant shifts in our department preceding the pandemic. For the last four years, it has felt like DFCS has been experiencing a whirlwind of intense change. Within a few weeks of our new assistant director beginning with DFCS, our department director announced she was leaving and departed a short time later. Our new assistant director, who was new to our county and also returning to work in both the public sector and child welfare after a hiatus, found herself charged with leading a department of 600+ employees, while still trying to find her bearings in a county with strong labor presence and significant Board of Supervisors involvement in departmental operations. With the hiring of a new department director, many of us were yearning for a return to stability and a sense of equilibrium in our department with the new leadership. However, our department continued to experience what felt like frequent and sudden shifts in operations. After just about seven months with our department and about one month after our new director started, our assistant director left.

In the following years, our DFCS senior leadership team continued to evolve and our hope for steadiness wavered with the retirement of many tenured managers. Significant shifts in the organizational structure of our department intensified

relations between department leadership and our labor unions. In 2019, the County of Santa Clara was in negotiations with both unions, which represents nearly all of our 600 employees. As negotiations continued, tensions intensified between the county executive management and both unions, CEMA (County Management Employees Association) and SEIU (Service Employees International Union), which represent all department staff. As negotiators struggled to make progress, the union filed unfair labor practice charges against the county and our staff engaged in unsanctioned sickouts and work to rule actions. Finally, in the fall SEIU began rolling strikes at various agencies, departments, and work-sites throughout the county. These rolling strikes hit DFCS at the end of September and the beginning of October.

Shortly after the strike at DFCS, our collective sense of uncertainty intensified with the departure of our director. Contract negotiations focused on settling the division between the two sides on wages and benefits continued through the winter and into spring of 2020.

With our assistant director stepping into the role of acting director, the majority of our key senior leadership positions filled, and contracts finally ratified within the first two weeks of March, the trajectory of our department seemed to be moving in a positive direction and toward the return of a sense of balance. Additionally, while our department had experienced unsanctioned work stoppages and threats of strikes and historically we had struggled with gaining momentum and a sense of urgency around disaster preparedness over the last decade, these events awakened our department leadership to the need to develop an emergency plan.

What's Next—Responding to COVID: A Case Study

Crises tend to have an indelible impact on our memories and our lives. However, when our response to the pandemic began, the magnitude of the impact the crisis would have on our department operations was unimaginable, including specifically how my

own role would evolve. When our county made the decision to significantly reduce the number of staff in the office, I was a mid-level manager of our policy team and oversaw the management of our Administrative Support Bureau's (ASB) office professional team. After receiving notification on the evening of Sunday, March 15, 2020, I quickly contacted the members of our policy team and reported that they should prepare to work from home and only go to the office on Monday to pick up what was necessary for them to work remotely.

Monday morning, after meeting with the leads of the office professional team to strategize which staff we needed to support the essential programs and functions in our bureau, we met with the entire office professional team. After explaining the current situation, and despite having limited information regarding what was to come, I advised the team that those identified to support essential programs or functions would continue to work and the others would be put on paid administrative leave, effective immediately. Team members had many questions, some of which we were unable to answer, and their anxiety was palpable. What we did know was that some of them might end up deployed as disaster services workers. I provided them an opportunity to ask questions and discuss their concerns, promising that our clerical leads would keep them informed. All of this occurred before the County of Santa Clara's Public Health Officer issued the first Shelter In Place (SIP) Order in our state in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, we continually reassessed the essential tasks of our office professional team and re-determined our staffing levels while modifying schedules to reduce the number of staff in the office and ensure we had the minimal level of staff necessary to adhere to physical distancing.

After about a week of working remotely and managing my teams I found myself in the role of ASB bureau manager for the second time in six months. In addition to the ongoing leadership and management responsibilities of the bureau, I worked collaboratively with our program staff, Technology

Solutions and Support (TSS) business representative, and Central Services (CS) staff to identify and fulfill technology needs for our department. Within a few weeks, we were able to deploy cell phones to staff who required the devices to continue their essential work, including several of the new social workers in our training academy so they could continue with their training. Three weeks after the beginning of the SIP, our county was able to deploy laptops and necessary software communication programs to all identified staff who had been placed on paid administrative leave, as well as to other staff who had been rotating in and out of the office, which enabled them to begin working fully remotely. These collaborative efforts with TSS and CS have continued as new needs arise, including technology for another academy of over thirty new social worker trainees that began last month.

As part of our departmental response to the COVID-19 crisis, I worked as a member of our leadership team to develop and message the necessary COVID-19 modifications into our practice and the policies and procedures that direct our staff. We needed to balance the concerns and anxiety shared by staff with the recommended precautions and the need to continue providing services to families and children in our community. It was important to provide staff with venues and opportunities to share concerns and ask questions. We held daily update calls, which later decreased to weekly, sent out emails with written updates and resources for staff and the families served by our department, and maintained a central repository for all communications and resources. During this time it was critical for our leadership team to be a place where staff could openly share their anxiety and worries, receive reassurance and validation, and gain knowledge on how they could complete their required work while minimizing their exposure to the virus.

One of the staff in our bureau whom I supervise worked with me to coordinate our department's contact tracing, notification, and tracking process for staff who tested positive or had direct exposure to a person who tested positive for COVID-19.

Additionally, we began tracking caregivers, children under DFCS supervision, and bio-parents who tested positive, making notifications as necessary. As most situations are unique, we continue to spend a substantial amount of time consulting with managers regarding the necessary precautions and measures which need to take place when staff have been exposed to or tested positive for COVID-19. Often, we are required to make direct telephone contact with our staff who have either tested positive or been exposed. Working collaboratively with our leadership team, we have developed and documented our department's internal protocols for notification and tracking, which we have had to modify and adapt as new circumstances or situations arise. This task requires coordination and partnership with our county's Public Health Department, Central Services, and occasionally, County Counsel.

Getting Ready for What's Next

The last five months at work have been extremely busy and have passed with lightning speed. They have been filled with considerable introspection and lessons learned about leadership and myself. The COVID-19 Response created a "perfect storm" environment for personal growth. These lessons may be the most significant and impactful changes for me in my approach and my role as a leader in our department.

Equilibrium Attained through Flexibility and Resiliency

As indicated earlier in this paper, for quite some time I have yearned for a return to an organizational state of what I perceive to be stability and equilibrium. I rationalized that if we could just reach that elusive state, we would have time and energy to address the challenges and changes we needed to make as a system. Now, I recognize that while the culture in our organization may have transformed through the years, the more significant impact on my perception is the place from which I am viewing and responding to these changes. When I was carrying a caseload or supervising a unit carrying caseloads, my perspective

was much more micro-level, focused on the policies, operations, and systems that affected how services were delivered to families. As my career has progressed and I have moved into administrative- and management-level roles, the changes I encounter are on a macro-level. I viewed the constant sea of change as unpredictable, complex, ambiguous, and overwhelming, and the pandemic amplified these feelings and beliefs.

Until very recently, I had found myself feeling mired in and overwhelmed by stress and realized I needed to shift my attitudes to reignite my passion for my work. In her presentation at BASSC, Evelyn Hengeveld-Bidmon led us through a discussion on the distinction between managing and leading. While this was not necessarily new information, it was very impactful at the time. My struggle between resisting change and yearning for stability was keeping me from growing as a leader. Through self-reflection and discussions with colleagues and mentors, I discovered two areas in which I needed to develop in order to begin getting myself back on course. First, I needed to not become stuck when encountering obstacles or challenges in projects or persevere on plans that had gone awry.

Additionally, the BASSC presentation “Leadership Development through the Art of Improvisation” led by Kenn Adams was an extremely valuable opportunity to learn and practice flexibility, resiliency, and other leadership skills. Initially, this activity was far beyond my comfort zone, and I was over-thinking the activity. With a little bit of time, I learned to sit with my feeling of discomfort and not allow it to paralyze me. The rules of improvisation of being spontaneous, making your partner look good, and building on your partner’s ideas resonated with me as among the basic principles in leadership.

I have realized in my own leadership development my need to be able to regroup, shift directions, and try a new path. When faced with changes, I needed to become more agile and respond differently to unique situations. I needed to be flexible and resilient (Price & Lisk, 2014). Over the past few months, I have begun to shift my perspective

to see these changes as challenges and opportunities to transform the services we provide in the field of child welfare. Additionally, when we had a challenge previously, it was difficult for me to sit in a place of uncertainty and not jump immediately to try to problem-solve. I am now embracing the well-rounded solutions that often result from increased collaboration. At times, the amount of demands still feels overwhelming, but I am continuing to work on not letting the volume of work consume me.

Empathy with a Side of Vulnerability and Humility

While I have never had an issue with personal accountability, integrity, or authenticity, other softer skills of leadership have felt more obscure to me. Empathy with the children and families came easily for me as a social worker. My struggle has been with others. Colleagues would mistake my introversion for being distant, uninterested, or uncaring, though that was not my intention. When in the office, I tend to focus on the work and am not one who enjoys engaging in “small talk” or socializing. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the social worker in me came out; I felt the need to make sure my staff and colleagues were holding up. However, I continue to stretch myself beyond my comfort zone, in efforts to learn more about my staff and colleagues. As part of my professional development, I am striving to be more attuned, to listen for understanding to the needs and feelings of those with whom I work. When meeting one to one with staff, I now begin with a personal check-in as to how they are doing in general. With those who have shared some of their individual life situations about ailing parents or their worry for their children, I may ask more specifically about their situation. When discussing work-related issues, I find myself listening more, acknowledging their work, and expressing confidence in their ability to address or handle the work before us. I am by no means perfect in my efforts, but I can see how these actions are having a positive impact on our communication, trust, and partnership.

I am not sure if our department’s growth in this area is due to my efforts to demonstrate more

empathy and to connect on a deeper level or because of substantial increase in the volume of work added by COVID-19. What I do know is that I have become more at ease with not having all the answers, and with this I have increased my willingness to trust in the ability of others, to ask for assistance, and to delegate. The current environment has created the opportunity for me to share openly my shortcomings, mistakes, and areas where I am trying to grow. All of these opportunities allow me to be more open to listening and valuing others' ideas and opinions and to engage in problem-solving discussions. As leaders during the COVID-19 response, we are responsible for creating a safe space for staff where managers hold staff concerns and fears with humility and empathy. While we must also take action in response to their worries, it is equally—if not more important—for us to show empathy by letting them know we hear and understand their concerns. As Theodore Roosevelt stated, “No one cares how much you know, until they know that you care.” Leadership is not a tangible task or skill to be learned, but rather a craft that must be continually developed and honed.

Acknowledgments

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References

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