

Mutually Beneficial – A Relationship Within an Agency

Eduardo Alaniz

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The County of Santa Clara is currently engaged in a county-wide initiative called “Just Culture: Empowering Excellence.” Its main focus is to create and foster a work culture of trust and fairness. Napa County has a similar model that is currently being implemented, with promising and positive results. In 2016, Napa County’s Health and Human Services Agency invested in and introduced its staff to the Mutual Learning Approach model in an effort to improve Napa County’s agency communication between staff and management. The Mutual Learning Approach aims at embracing organizational mutual leadership, thus producing high quality performance, strengthening working relationships and improving overall individual satisfaction. With its five core values at the heart of the initiative, employees are able to share their thoughts and feelings without fear, ask questions and understand others, make informed choices, and be held accountable for them --- and do so with compassion. Since implementing the Mutual Learning Approach agency-wide in June 2016, Napa County has experienced a positive impact in the employee and supervisor relationship. In fact, one hundred percent of employees who took the full workshop reported that they found the workshop to be a valuable experience and highly useful in improving their daily work interactions. This approach has proven to be invaluable to Napa County as it continues to see the positive impacts that the implementation has had on the overall culture of the agency. In observing their meeting, it is clear that employees have embraced the new culture and have seen the fruits of their labor. Not only has Napa County

invested in providing its employees with an initial training, but it has also followed up by providing ongoing training and resource materials such as posters. As such, it would benefit the County of Santa Clara to adopt a similar campaign strategy to re-launch its current Just Culture initiative by providing all employees with easily accessible resource materials and ongoing training.

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Background

The County of Santa Clara (SCC) is home to diverse communities in a highly populated area. The ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of county residents are vast in scope and make up the thriving metropolitan area known as Silicon Valley. For disenfranchised populations, the County of Santa Clara provides services that enable residents to access the resources they need for a minimal standard of living. The Social Services Agency's (SSA) mission is to provide resources and opportunities in a culturally responsive manner to enhance the quality of life in our community by protecting, educating and empowering individuals and families. In order to provide quality services to the community, the agency must create and foster a work culture of learning and empowerment, and provide opportunities to elicit valuable input from staff. Once staff's work needs are met, they can provide quality services to the community. As a managing member of the SCC SSA Staff Development and Training team, considering new and different ways to improve current processes for staff and clients is an ongoing priority.

In order to advance a culture of learning and provide empowerment opportunities, the county's Mission, Core Values and Vision were implored to adopt the "Just Culture" model. In May of 2016, SCC launched a county-wide initiative, "Just Culture (JC): Empowering Excellence." The SCC initiative aimed to foster a work culture of trust and fairness where each employee is accountable for his/her actions, a culture that supports an environment that learns from its mistakes and errors, allowing for improvements in the organization. Just Culture creates a common language, improves communication in the workplace to promote trust, and reduces fear

among staff. JC fosters a culture of shared purpose, promotes transparency in work processes and interactions and links job responsibilities to desired outcomes for both the customer and the employee. The elements of JC involve the interactions between:

1. Systems and procedures, which aim to design systems that support the county's work, design processes of accountability and articulate the mission, and goals into meaningful metrics;
2. Leadership behaviors which include being accountable, communicating clearly and managing to the values and behaviors of JC; and
3. Individual behavior which includes being accountable, communicating clearly and supporting the efforts to improve as a county.

JC aligns the county's mission, core values, vision elements and departmental strategic plan[s] and, like a compass, it guides the work to sustain an environment where staff at all levels feel comfortable and safe disclosing errors and finding ways to prevent them from occurring. There are three different types of errors and behaviors: human error, at-risk behavior and reckless behavior. Each situation calls for a different level of interaction between the manager and employee depending upon the severity of the error or behavior. JC incorporates Merit System Rules and does not replace or change any of the existing county policies or contracts. The purpose is to find a middle ground between punitive and blameless. The middle ground is one where problems are assessed correctly and discipline is used when necessary.

JC training was conducted as instructor-led courses, training members of county executive and management teams and individual contributors. JC is now available as a web-based training for all staff to completed.

This case study discusses the effectiveness of county-wide initiatives and what learning opportunities are available for staff to contribute to making county initiatives successful.

Background of Interest in the Topic

As a manager with SSA Staff Development & Training Department, I am interested in employee professional and personal development while aligning with SCC SSA's strategic goals and initiatives. Being in a position that allows me to see the big picture while being in the weeds, I recognized that the county needs to develop trainings that will bridge the gap between county-wide initiatives and staff engagement/participation. How does the county increase staff involvement with county initiatives that come from the top down? Are there enough check-ins enough with our staff? Is leading by example enough to engage staff members?

Mutual Learning Approach

In 2016, Napa County Health and Human Services (HHS) introduced a transformational approach to team leadership agency-wide. This initiative came in response to a need for improved communication within the Employment Services Department in 2011. The Mutual Learning Approach moves away from a unilateral mindset and instead aims to embrace organizational mutual leadership that includes five core values designed to tap into staff's mindset and behaviors in order to produce high quality performance, strengthen working relationships and improve individual satisfaction. Roger Schwarz and Associates, owner of the Mutual Learning Approach, states that Mutual Learning allows leaders and their teams to work more effectively since the values, assumptions and behaviors of the Mutual Learning Approach are common sense, but not common practice in the workplace (Schwarz, 2012).

After receiving a positive reception from staff, the Executive Management team bought into the idea of presenting Mutual Learning Approach leadership training from the top down. The five core values of the Mutual Learning Approach are:

Transparency: Sharing all relevant information, including thoughts, feelings and strategies, with the appropriate people at the appropriate time.

Curiosity: Asking questions to learn and understand others and help take interest in what others feel, think, and say.

Informed choice: Building on information that is generated through transparency and curiosity. Informed choice means making decisions, and maximizing others' abilities to make decisions, based on relevant information in a way that builds commitment.

Accountability: Expecting to explain reasoning, decisions and actions. It is not sufficient to simply tell others what you said, what you did, or what you decided. It is necessary to explain the decision process, the who, what, when and why. By helping others understand the thinking process, it reduces the chance that people will misinterpret the intent.

Compassion: Without compassion, the Mutual Learning Approach feels hollow and robotic. It is this emotional glue that holds all the core values together that makes this approach effective (Schwarz, 2012).

In June 2016, a half-day agency-wide training of the Mutual Learning Approach was held for line staff and followed up by a four-day workshop in August 2016 for the members of the HHS Agency Senior Management Team and the Collaborative Management Ambassador. Shortly thereafter, the Mutual Learning Advisory Team was created to help improve business processes

and continue the push of the Mutual Learning Approach initiative. The goal of the advisory committee is to improve processes using the core values of the Mutual Learning Model. Advisory members and decide on which business process they want to enhance and then make recommendations.

In March 2017, I had the opportunity to sit in on a meeting structured on the Mutual Learning Approach for the first time. Listening to line staff share ideas while applying the Mutual Learning core values was an eye-opening experience. The meeting commenced with all attendees reviewing the core values in order to enable them to implement this approach as they participated in the meeting. To ensure this approach was used throughout the meeting, staff had a guide of the core values directly in front of them as a resource. In the meeting, morale was high. Staff in attendance were unequivocally applying the Mutual Learning Approach. The approach allowed conversations to flow. As expected meetings are prolonged since implementing the Mutual Learning core values is relatively new to all staff in a workgroup setting.

It was great to see the impacts of the Mutual Learning Advisory team, especially considering only one of the advisory members received the intense four-day workshop while everyone else on the advisory team received only the half day training. It is impressive to observe staff's buy-in to the initiative. A similar approach could have a very positive impact Santa Clara County.

Mutual Learning Approach Successes

In order to measure the effectiveness of the Mutual Learning Approach, Shannon McDermott (2016) conducted a survey to understand the impact by measuring effectiveness of training activities within the following four levels:

1. Reaction: Were people satisfied with the training?

2. Learning: Did knowledge change as a result of the training?
3. Behavior: Did people act differently after the training?
4. Outcomes: Did the training produce results for the target group?

The survey conducted indicated that 100% of staff found the workshop to be a valuable experience and highly useful for improving daily work interactions. Survey results indicated that the Senior Management Team and Collaborative Management Ambassador are supportive of implementing Mutual Learning across the agency. Staff found that the principles of Mutual Learning were now being reflected in the organizational culture. Survey results indicated that staff were experiencing high degrees of trust, respect and openness within the organization. Ninety-one percent of participants generally agreed that their colleagues are well-intentioned, and 82% of staff felt they were treated fairly by their supervisors. The survey reflected that the majority of participants feel their supervisors truly believe that good ideas come from all members of the group and that everyone is encouraged to participate in meetings. Sixty-three percent of staff felt that senior leaders were approachable, and the exact same percentage of staff felt comfortable voicing their views if they disagreed with their supervisors.

Although early in the implementation phase, the results of the approach have been positive and encouraging feedback has been received. It will take numerous years of continual practice of the Mutual Learning Approach leadership style to truly see an organizational cultural shift; however, Napa HHS is on its way.

Embedding Mutual Learning Approach

In “The Role of Training in Organizational and Employee Development” (Vuta and Farcas, 2015), the authors argue that organizational investment in trainings “increases quality process of

communication with supervisor and colleagues, improving teamwork ability, efficiency of time management, improving the quality of workplace results and increasing the chances of promotion.” The article also states that a process with effective measures is needed to support the professional development of employees. Napa County’s Human and Health Services Agency’s implementation of the Mutual Learning Approach was a refreshing experience to witness for three reasons:

1. HHS is fostering an organizational culture of trust, respect and openness.
2. HHS is grooming future leaders. For the most part, counties do not have a Staff Development Department that offers leadership trainings with an emphasis in providing leadership skills to non-current leads and supervisors or managers.
3. The Mutual Learning Approach increases awareness and performance.

Throughout HHS offices, one can find posters on the walls depicting core values of the Mutual Learning Approach. Staff are often seen walking through the hallways carrying lanyard cards containing these core values. Mutual Learning Approach is well promoted and supported and permeates throughout the work environment at Napa HHS.

Recommendations

Napa County’s Human and Health Services Agency continues to do an outstanding job with the ongoing implementation of the Mutual Learning Approach. From its first introduction in 2011 and the 2016 agency-wide initiative roll out, Napa County continues to invest and provide Mutual Learning trainings on an annual basis to ensure its continuing success. HHS has fully invested in embracing an organizational mutual leadership model. A recommendation would be to take a chapter from Napa County and invest in a similar promotion of content to move

towards the agency's vision. The commitment to implement and practice the Mutual Learning Approach at Napa County is an strategy that can be adopted at Santa Clara County and be used for marketing both county or agency-wide initiatives. These are some recommendations for Santa Clara County to consider implementing:

- An intentional re-launching of “Just Culture: Empowering Excellence” web-based training, and moving forward, promoting the initiative activity on a yearly, ongoing basis.
- Providing Just Culture course material on county websites and Intranet for easy access.
- Publishing testimonials from county departments and agencies that provide teachable feedback relating to Just Culture via email as end-of-year recognition to encourage participation.
- Investing in office promotional materials, such as posters, lanyards, pens, etc.

Investment

SSA Staff Development and Training Department is committed to invest in employee development and help bridge the gap between initiatives, larger county mission[s] and agency strategic goals. An example of this is the recent launch of the “Back to Basics Employee Development” training series, which aims to provide all staff with non-mandatory leadership training. This is a valuable opportunity where Staff Development and Training can engage staff that will then be more receptive to future initiatives. Staff Development and Training will be providing SSA line staff in non-management positions with leadership skills that will empower them and bring forth the skills needed to participate in a culture that accepts its mistakes and errors with the goal of improving the workplace. To begin, Staff Development and Training will offer professional development classes, such as Resume Development, Interviewing Techniques,

Leadership Skills and Having Difficult Conversations with Team Members. Staff Development and Training will start offering classes in May 2017 and will continue to provide professional development training to staff moving forward.

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