

GUIDING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AT THE SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HUMAN RESOURCES AGENCY: AN ISLAND AWASH IN A SEA OF CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Each day of my internship at the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency began with a drive down the majestic Pacific Coast from Half Moon Bay to Santa Cruz. As I traveled there that first beautiful sunny morning. I was struck with how remote the location seemed. The coast line would peel away. mile after mile, wave after wave, after wave, until it seemed as though I were traveling across the ocean itself to an island in the middle of the sea. I could not have known then how prophetic may my feelings would be. As I would learn later, Santa Cruz County is indeed an island, an island awash in a sea of change.

EXPECTATIONS

I went to Santa Cruz County to learn about organizational change and transition management. My expectation was to identify the specific methodologies and transition strategies that the Human Resources Agency (HRA) had developed and implemented as part of its overall strategic planning in response to welfare reform. Therefore, I had expected this case study to be an academic exercise in applied theories of organizational change.

However, my experiences in Santa Cruz County were very different from those that I had expected to have. What I learned about organizations in transition met or exceeded my original expectations, but the lessons that I learned did not come from an academic analysis of new paradigms for change. They came instead from a series of participatory exercises designed by my mentor to give me a practical understanding of an entire community struggling with change.

Following is a treatise of the internship that I served with the Santa Cruz County Human Resources Agency. It was my privilege to serve under the tutelage of Mr. Lynn Miller. Director of the Income Maintenance Division (HRA).

A MENTOR PAR EXCELLENCE

Among his other responsibilities, Mr. Miller oversees the Medi-Cal. Food Stamps. General Assistance and (formerly) AFDC assistance programs. [The TANF program was created by 1996 federal welfare reform legislation that essentially replaces AFDC. He is one of a team of Directors and Administrators who report to Ms. Cecilia Espinola. Acting Administrator of the HRA. He plays a central roll in the Agency's on-going response to change, including its response to the implementation of TANF. Mr. Miller is a long term resident of Santa Cruz County who, as both a public servant and private citizen, has participated actively in the changes his community has experienced for more than thirty years.

Mr. Miller was situated perfectly to act as my mentor during my quest to discover how the HRA was making the transition from the "old way of doing business," to the new "moving from welfare to work" model demanded by welfare reform. On my first of twelve days spent with Mr.

Miller in Santa Cruz County, I explained to him my general expectations as set forth above. Together, we mapped out a course of action for my internship that linked essentially two primary elements. First, I would participate in a series of meetings, events and discussions that were selected to give me a meaningful context in which to understand changes that were taking place in Santa Cruz County related to welfare reform. These included activities at the program level, the division level, the Agency level, and the community at large. Second, I would "shadow" him and observe his daily activities to the extent that it was possible and appropriate. Throughout my internship, Mr. Miller was extraordinarily generous with his time and appropriately candid about his observations. He provided portals to his Agency and to the community that it serves. He encouraged me to make my own observations and to develop my own picture of his Agency as it meets the challenge of change.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

A Window to the Programs

To give me some exposure to the daily operations of programs under his charge, Mr. Miller arranged for me to meet the Managers responsible for direct oversight of the Foodstamps, Medi-Cal, General Assistance and AFDC/TANF programs. I met and had several discussions with them. We discussed everything from the manner in which daily operations were structured for each program, to specific labor relations issues, staffing issues, policy matters and, most importantly, challenges brought on by the implementation of welfare reform.

With regard to welfare reform, federal welfare legislation already has mandated that foodstamps be discontinued to certain "able-bodied adults." Implementation of this edict will have serious implications at the program level. For example, it will directly impact the program participants who will lose the benefits while it will simultaneously reduce the number of cases being administered by the program. The reduction in caseload will carry immediate staffing implications for the Foodstamps program together with other related issues. Additionally, it will impact other programs like General Assistance as program participants who were able to stay off such aid are unable to do so after discontinuance of their foodstamps.

A Window to the Division

However, California's Governor Wilson has asked the federal government for a waiver from implementing the discontinuance of foodstamps. As of the time of this writing, it is not known whether the waiver will be granted. The initial decision as to whether to implement the discontinuance now or to wait until it is known whether the waiver will be granted was made by Mr. Miller in consultation with the Acting Administrator of the HRA.

Mr. Miller invited me to participate in division level meetings during which he discussed this matter with his staff. Research showed that some counties were implementing the discontinuance now and that others were not. Ultimately, Mr. Miller decided not to implement the discontinuance until it was known whether the waiver would be granted. To paraphrase Mr. Miller's concluding remarks in making that decision, he said that he would rather defend the high moral ground in choosing not to disadvantage unfairly program participants who needed

foodstamps than be guilty of rigidly holding to program regulations that were subject to the Governor's request for a waiver.

A Window to the Agency

I was invited to participate in an HRA Administrative meeting, chaired by Ms. Espinola, Acting Director, and attended by the rest of her executive team. An assortment of Agency wide matters were covered during the meeting. However, the most important agenda item was scheduling a planning session for the ensuing Community Planning forum. The Community Planning forums are an integral part of the HRA's collaborative planning process. They involve the HRA, members of the business community, the State Employment Development Department, County Economic Development, city governments, local CBOs, advocacy groups and many other identified groups and individuals.

The next week, I attended the planning session in preparation for the Community Planning forum. The Community Planning forum was scheduled for the following Saturday and would take place at the local High School. Present at the planning meeting was Ms. Espinola and her executive team, together with representatives from the offices of the State EDD, the Santa Cruz County Economic Development and United Way. I mention who was in attendance to let the reader know what a diverse group of people was present. This is important because what I witnessed there has left a profound impact on me. Never have I seen a group of people with such diverse and competing interests accomplish so much in so little time. Consider the following as background for the planning session that I attended.

The Human Resources Agency (HRA) anticipates that up to three thousand (3000) adults who currently receive TANF benefits may join the County's workforce within the next two years as a result of time limits prescribed by TANF legislation. This means that the HRA must prepare approximately seventy-five (75) to one hundred (100) TANF participants to enter the workforce each month. Of these three thousand adults, approximately eighty percent (80%) are female and about eighty per cent (80%) of those are single parents not receiving child support from the absent father. Accordingly, childcare will be a major challenge for TANF participants as they transition from welfare to work. Moreover, Santa Cruz County has a high unemployment rate. Estimates run from seven percent (7%), to as high as fifteen per cent (15%), depending on seasonal labor patterns. Finally, Santa Cruz County is made up of two regions. The northern region is made up of Santa Cruz and its outlying communities (including the University of California at Santa Cruz) and the southern region is centered around Watsonville and its outlying rural communities. The skills, training needs and educational levels of the TANF populations in these regions differ significantly, making the desired outcomes even more difficult to achieve. Notwithstanding these daunting challenges, the HRA has moved forward to make internal program adjustments and to form collaborations with community members throughout the County.

It is difficult to describe the process that I witnessed at the planning meeting mentioned above. A comprehensive agenda had to be developed for the Community Planning forum that would take place the following day. The easiest way of describing what I saw is to say, simply, that everyone just seemed to "roll up their sleeves" and go to work. This may seem too simplistic, but

it is not. What I witnessed was a true collaboration at work. Over a period of hours, I watched as various members of the group asserted their positions and then entered into open discussions with others. These discussions led to changes, compromises, and ultimately to a better conclusion than the proposal that had first been presented. This might not seem so extraordinary were it not for the fact that it happened repeatedly and consistently throughout the course of the meeting. By the end of the meeting the agenda was complete.

I did not participate in this planning meeting. I was there only as an observer. As an observer I made certain observations about the quality and kinds of communication patterns that I believe contributed to the exceptional effectiveness of the process. First, no one seemed hesitant to express their opinions. In some organizations, one or more individuals may so dominate the process that the others do not come forth with their input. That did not seem to happen there. Second, people appeared open to listening to the views of others. They did not seem to listen defensively. As a result, communication was clear and the group was able to move more rapidly to constructive conclusions. If I would characterize in one word the quality that most seemed to make the difference, it would be "goodwill."

A Window to the Community

The next day I returned to Santa Cruz and participated in the Community Planning forum. I participated in two such community meetings during my internship with Mr. Miller and the HRA. The community meetings included panel presentations from representatives of the groups, stakeholders and organizations listed above. The panel presentations were followed by extensive question and answer periods. After the panel presentations, the audience divided into workgroups and dealt with issues that included:

1. "How can we as a community create, sustain and accelerate the number of livable-wage jobs in our community? and,
2. "What skills and resources are needed to prepare welfare participants to enter the workforce, to move up to a livable wage and to retain stable employment?"

Of course these questions only served to raise more questions by the group. But the process of working through various scenarios began to produce a variety of alternative strategies that heightened the awareness of all involved. As a result of these meetings, the HRA is educating the community about welfare reform while developing a comprehensive implementation plan at the same time. The process of community planning is moving along toward recommendations that the group will bring to the Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors soon.

What the Shadow Knows

In addition to participating in the events set forth above, it was my great pleasure to "shadow" Mr. Miller on most of the days I spent in Santa Cruz. For example, on the first day alone, Mr. Miller gave me a full tour of the of the HRA's complex located on Emeline Street in Santa Cruz. Then we traveled to Watsonville to another service center and did the same. We then traveled to another location in Watsonville where Mr. Miller introduced the keynote speaker to an audience

at one of the local CBOs. Finally, we traveled to another community outside Santa Cruz where Mr. Miller made a cable TV announcement in support of yet another local organization.

During such excursions and after all of the events set forth above. Mr. Miller would share candidly his observations, insights and experience. Additionally, we would discuss various pending matters, including some that fell within areas of my expertise. Throughout all of these discussions, Mr. Miller added depth and context to the images of his community that I was assimilating. And most importantly, he never painted a portrait for me. He simply provided me with the materials and handed me the brush.

TWO ISLANDS AWASH IN A SEA OF CHANGE

One of my first realizations after talking to people in Santa Cruz was that I was a member of a population group that I did not even know existed. I was from "over the hill." I learned quickly that you are either from the local areas, or you are from "over the hill." Santa Cruz County is bordered on the West by the sea and on the East by the Santa Cruz Mountains. It is isolated from San Francisco on the North and from Monterey on the South by long stretches of isolated beaches and coastline. As a result, people in Santa Cruz County, I believe, feel an intensified sense of belonging to their community because it is so isolated and because it is a very special place. Perhaps this shared commonality forms the basis of the extraordinary team work that I saw at work at virtually every level of the HRA and at the Community Planning forums.

To this extent, Santa Cruz County is an island. However, I discovered that it is not one island, but two islands. The northern island with its tourism, light industry, small businesses and the University, is considered (by some) to be urbane and tolerant of change. The southern island with its extensive agricultural history and strong traditions is considered (by some) to be more resistant to change. And yet at the Community Planning forums, in collaboration with the HRA, I saw these two islands merge into one greater community focused upon the challenge of change.

LESSONS LEARNED

We are All in This Together

As obvious as it may seem, traveling to another county to see how they are managing welfare reform taught me that we are, indeed, all in this together. Participating in discussions about welfare reform in Santa Cruz County was as if I had never left home. It was "deja vu. all over again." And yet. I took away from the experience a more profound understanding of our Counties' shared challenges than I could have gained in any other way.

Collaboration Works

If it is true that we are all in this together, then it is true that our greatest resource is ourselves and each other. It was obvious from the discussions that we had at the Community Planning forums that no group or single entity there was equipped to handle the challenges of welfare reform alone. But together, they began to formulate strategies that will form the basis collaborative actions to be taken later. They began to form new partnerships based upon a

common goal. The goal was to assist program participants to enter the workforce and to move from dependency to self sufficiency.

Goodwill is the Key to Success

As I explained earlier, if I had to use just one word to describe the quality that made the HRA planning meeting so productive, it would be goodwill. Goodwill can be defined as attributing good intentions to the actions of others. Such a positive approach to communication fosters clarity and mutual respect. With goodwill, one hears what is being said, rather than what one wants or expects to hear. Moreover, it was goodwill, I believe, that enabled the different interest groups from both the northern and southern islands of Santa Cruz County to find common ground and to begin seeking collaborative solutions.

RECOMMENDATION

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) should continue to make every effort to enhance the quality of communication within the Agency and should focus upon the importance of practicing goodwill. More specifically, the HSA should develop an "Internal Mediation Program" that would be available to all staff to assist them in resolving their conflicts on the job. Unlike a "grievance" system, such a mediation program would not be adversarial in nature. Rather, it would foster team building by assisting employees at every level to work together to solve their own disputes.