

# Optimizing Team Building in County Organizations: Lessons from Two Counties

SARAH HAYES

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The implementation of the Affordable Care Act modified the healthcare environment by requiring more efficient workflow processes and multidisciplinary coordination in order to deliver quality social and healthcare services to citizens. To improve service delivery and health outcomes, leaders from county organizations need to find ways to optimize collaboration, team building, and effective communication. The Workforce Services Bureau managers in Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department participated in leadership development efforts over the last three years, resulting in increased productivity, more efficient workflow due to a more collaborative decision-making process, an increase in transparency, and a willingness of managers to be more accountable for their own behavior.

Napa County is in the beginning stages of a Collaborative Management Initiative aimed toward creating an organizational environment where employees feel safe, respected, and professionally fulfilled, in order to enhance the quality of services delivered to the community. This case study makes recommendations on how Napa County Health and Human Services Agency might enhance its Collaborative Management Initiative through the implementation of lessons learned from Contra Costa County's Workforce Services Bureau leadership development efforts. The key elements required in such a plan would be: one-on-one coaching, practicing skills, long-term commitment, and outcome measurement.

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## Background

Collaboration, team building, and effective communication are words frequently heard in staff meetings of large organizations such as a county Health and Human Services Agency (HHS). County HHS leadership often expresses the desire for services to be integrated or calls for more multidisciplinary team collaboration. This need for integration and collaboration is driven both by desire to use best practices, and by state and federal laws and regulations. The implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the recent Katie A. Settlement Agreement are examples of two such major regulatory actions driving management to enhance collaboration and integration of customer service and quality of care (<http://www.dhcs.ca.gov>). Likewise, best practices ask: How does a large multi-disciplinary bureaucratic organization, like a county Health and Human Services Agency, optimize collaboration, team building, and communication between stakeholders to produce the highest quality social services for our community? This study attempts to provide part of the answer to that question.

## History of Collaborative Management in Napa County

Napa County HHS leadership recognized the value of service collaboration before the changes required by the ACA. Sagely seeking to “regulate the way power is exercised within the agency” (Randy Snowden, former Napa County HHS Director), the agency began the Collaborative Management Initiative in response to agency re-organization. For

the past few years, its purpose has been to create an organizational environment where employees feel safe, respected, and professionally fulfilled, thus better able to support the delivery of quality services to the residents of Napa County.

Napa County Leadership defined Collaborative Management as having the following nine specific characteristics:

- **Shared Power:** Managers share decision making power, when practicable, with all staff.
- **Transparency:** The organization has a default policy of transparency (within the limits of HIPAA and other laws and regulations).
- **Communication:** There is a high level of effective and clear communication.
- **Team Based Planning and Decision Making:** To the greatest extent practicable under the circumstances, staff operates as teams and, within those teams, individuals who will be affected by a decision are required to participate in the decision making process. When a decision cannot be made collaboratively, this must be explained to affected staff.
- **Empowerment and Accountability are Balanced:** All agency staff share responsibility for the operation of the entire agency; in short, all are accountable to all.
- **Hierarchy of Accountability:** There are clear lines of accountability. A staff person is responsible first to their supervisor, second to peers, third to the persons reporting to the staff person, and fourth to the public at large.

- **Senior Management Team’s Responsibility in Agency:** All agency executive managers share in the authority and responsibility of the agency director and assistant director.
- **Division Management:** The management structure of each division shares in the authority and responsibility of the division directors.
- **Coaching:** In many situations, managers and supervisors will function as monitors, coaches, facilitators, and/or resources, rather than as “bosses.” Communication regarding projects is directed to move horizontally and diagonally, rather than just vertically (Snowden, R., personal communication, January 6, 2013).

Using these characteristics, and with help from a committee made up of various levels of staff (i.e. program staff, supervisors, analysts, and division directors), HHSA hired a consultant, *Y’s Change*, for FY 2013/2014 to assist the organization with broadening employee awareness and understanding of the Collaborative Management Initiative.

Over the course of the fiscal year, Napa County HHSA divisions participated in various collaborative management exercises, such as a communication workshop, to assist and educate staff on effective communication skills and to help staff bridge the gap between changes of perception and changes of behavior. Exercises examined misperceptions between conceptual understandings of collaborative management and an organization that actually practices collaborative management principles in its everyday operations (i.e. procedures, policies, and decision making).

While these exercises were helpful steps toward enhancing collaboration and answering the question of how county government can collaborate, build teams, and effectively communicate, they did not provide a structured format for Napa County leadership and staff to continually practice the skills learned, nor did they provide a plan for long term commitment to Collaborative Management. The observations of leadership development gained from Contra Costa County’s Workforce Services (WFS)

Bureau may provide a useful structure on which the Collaborative Management Initiative might be able to fortify its efforts.

### **History of Leadership and Organizational Development in Contra Costa County**

Contra Costa County’s Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) was recently faced with severe effects from the recession, budget cuts, retirements, and layoffs, resulting in many years of institutional knowledge and supervisory experience leaving the agency. In FY 2009/2010, the EHSD director proposed that the managers from each bureau receive leadership development training to provide leadership guidance and stability in order to assist them, and the remaining staff, through this challenging time. The EHSD executive team encouraged the management team to attend a supervisor training facilitated by the Center for Human Services affiliated with University of California, Davis (UCD) Extension program (<http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/>). The managers attended the training three to four days every other month for one year.

The training helped the managers in identifying dysfunctions such as poor morale, productivity issues due to underperformance, and hard-working staff burning out and/or feeling undervalued due to taking on some of the responsibilities of other underperforming staff. After this training, it was quickly evident to the executive team that the EHSD system could be greatly improved by changing the negative habits of the organization and identifying ways to boost morale and productivity. Specifically, the WFS Bureau managers who attended felt motivated and inspired by this new perspective. Dialogue was initiated about the needs of their bureau and staff. Over the course of the following two years, the WFS Bureau managers dedicated time on a monthly basis to work with UC Davis consultants, particularly Gary Izumo, on leadership development. During FY 2012/2013, managers participated in a total of thirteen leadership and organizational development sessions that included both workgroups and individual coaching, totaling a cost of \$53,295.00. The

project was funded from Contra Costa County's training budget.

### **Key Elements of the Leadership and Organizational Development Training**

There were three key elements to the success of the leadership and organizational development training that the WFS Bureau management team identified as critical in learning to collaborate better, build efficient teams, and learn effective communication skills. Those three key elements were:

- Monthly workgroups,
- One-on-one coaching, and
- Practicing skills learned in the workplace

WFS Bureau managers participated in monthly workgroups, which concentrated on the concepts drawn from the book *Strengths Based Leadership* (Rath, T. and Conchie, B., 2008) and strategies on how to build an effective team, including the ability to disagree on ideas or concepts, hold each team member accountable, and focus on collective results; as well as establishing trust and the willingness to commit to decisions (Izumo, G., 2012, *Healthy Team Performance, Leadership Development–Workforce Services Bureau*, lecture conducted from Contra Costa County EHSD, Martinez, CA).

Mr. Izumo informed the managers that in order to build an effective team, the most important attributes they can have as leaders are authenticity, trustworthiness, the ability to have difficult conversations on the fly, assumption of positive intent, and learning to let go.

Because the continued success of the program is contingent upon each manager's ability to be accountable to their unit/team and their effectiveness as a teammate, the managers also attended one-on-one coaching with Mr. Izumo where they were able to work on modeling and improving accountability. Mr. Izumo clarified to the managers how coaching is not therapy by explaining that it is an opportunity for the managers to look at their own behaviors and contributions to the team's dynamics for good or for ill. Mr. Izumo reiterated to the managers in

coaching sessions that practicing the skills learned and accountability for one's actions and team are vital to the success of changing the organization's dynamics. The actualization of the concepts and skills taught in the workgroups depends upon the reinforcement of practice if they are to create change in behavior patterns in real activities.

Managers were encouraged to read *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, D., Patton, B., and Heen, S. 1999) to educate themselves about how to communicate effectively in cases where workplace conversations with staff may be perceived as emotional and/or confrontational. Mr. Izumo asked the managers to identify possible areas of conflicts or potential situations of challenge, then gave the managers an assignment to have that "difficult" conversation with their employee(s), and finally, asked them to report the results during their subsequent coaching session. These assignments assisted the managers with translating the skills learned in the workgroups to real work situations and to greater accountability within their units.

### **Challenges, Success, and Obstacles Overcome**

The WFS Bureau managers in Contra Costa faced two major challenges to their leadership development efforts during the last year: expanded workloads and changing team dynamics due to the hiring of new staff. The WFS Bureau won a contract to be a call center for the state program, Covered California (a part of ACA). The implementation and day-to-day operation of the call center was and is an extremely time consuming endeavor for the WFS Bureau managers, which resulted in less time spent on leadership development workgroups and/or in one-on-one coaching sessions. The resource demands of the Covered California call center required hiring new staff and new managers who lacked the same leadership training. Further, integrating new managers into the leadership development workgroups altered the team dynamics, thus slowing the progress the teams made with building trust, communication skills, and team building.

Despite the challenges and workload pressures, the teams recognized the positive changes and progress they made in the workgroups prior to all of these structural changes, and continue to be motivated to participate in the leadership development efforts. Although Contra Costa County did not have structured data indicators to measure the outcome(s) of the leadership development program due to its unfinished implementation, the success of the program is evident anecdotally or qualitatively by the verbal reports of the managers. The managers reported that the workgroups and individual coaching sessions resulted in fewer hidden agendas, enhanced manager and staff problem solving communication (as opposed to going straight to their supervisors), increased productivity, and more efficient workflow due to a more collaborative decision making process despite heavier workloads. Furthermore, managers observed more transparency (i.e. more conversations about trust and willingness to be vulnerable with one another), a decreased level of harmful competition, and more constructive discussions on methods for deterring negative actions more immediately. However, the managers agreed that these behaviors and positive changes are at serious and immediate risk of loss if they are not supported by continued practice and skill building.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Napa County**

The Contra Costa County WFS Bureau leadership development program highlights four critical items that have implications for the Napa County Collaborative Management Initiative: coaching, continual practicing of skills, long-term commitment to leadership development in both time and resources, and outcome measurement. Napa County is just beginning to integrate its Collaborative Management concepts. It has already issued summaries of the nine collaborative management characteristics to employees, hired a consultant, selected “ambassadors” from each division to champion its efforts, and provided a communication workshop for all employees. However, Napa County lacks an implementation plan for

training senior managers and a business plan for how the initiative can withstand workload demands. The following are recommendations to Napa County HHSA leadership for further implementation of the Collaborative Management Initiative:

- **One on One Coaching:** If Napa County HHSA leadership wants their organization to experience the cultural shift that will reap the benefits of collaborative management, it would be prudent for them to employ an outside consultant, such as *Y's Change*, to conduct one-on-one monthly or bimonthly coaching sessions with its 28 senior management staff, including the HHSA director, division deputy directors, and division program managers. Although essential for behavioral and organizational change, this one-on-one coaching takes staff time and is costly. Monthly one-on-one coaching sessions for all would likely start at \$100,000/year. Considering the coaching may need to continue another year to truly influence behavioral change and instill the collaborative management culture, this figure may not be feasible. However, having only bi-monthly coaching sessions could reduce the cost to the \$50,000/year range.
- **Practicing of Skills:** The element that may have been the single most positive factor in Contra Costa's actions is the expectation that each manager would practice the skills learned and then be accountable for them; first to the coach, and then to others in the team. Both Mr. Izumo and the WFS Bureau managers reiterated that the concepts and skills taught in both the workgroups and the coaching sessions were dependent on continual practice to create behavior change. This one-on-one coaching is the most critical factor for obtaining this accountability. Napa County HHSA staff has received a communication workshop from *Y's Change*; however, it was only one workshop. That can only impart theory, not initiate practice. It would benefit managers and staff to have a structured place and time to practice the skills learned in the workshop.



- **Long-term Commitment to Leadership Development:** Contra Costa County WFS Bureau managers have been involved in the leadership development program for over three years. It is this commitment and continued practice that helped break negative patterns and behaviors and improved employee communication and collaboration. At times, the commitment was challenged by workload demands and staff turnover. In order to really change the culture of Napa County HHSA, it would be important for staff of all levels to see that the Collaborative Management Initiative is taken seriously and will be embedded in Napa County HHSA. One way to communicate this commitment to staff would be to add an analyst or program manager position to the Quality Management Division or Administration Division, who could act as an ombudsman or voice from the outside, and whose responsibility would be to continually train and educate staff on collaborative management via live coaching, workshops and newsletters, and to monitor outcomes and progress of the Collaborative Management Initiative.
- **Measuring Success and Productivity:** Although the verbal report from the Contra Costa County managers regarding the success of their leadership development program is certainly valuable, Napa County would benefit from developing a process to more systematically measure the success of the Collaborative Management Initiative. This can be done by continuing to examine the results of the biannual employee surveys as well as by adopting a more systematic measurement system, such as adding to each division's Quality Management Dashboard a collaborative management indicator to be reviewed at least quarterly. Although in some divisions' staff productivity may be difficult to measure, it would

benefit those divisions that can run staff productivity reports to do so in order to see if productivity has increased or decreased as a result of implementation of the Collaborative Management Initiative.

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