

# Managing Transitions

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faced with a 15% reduction in funding for its Head Start/Early Head Start programs, and following three years of already steep budget cuts, Contra Costa County's Community Services Bureau (CSB) finally faced the inevitable: staff layoffs. Using the Transition Management Team (TMT) model created by William Bridges, CSB was able to navigate the emotionally and organizationally treacherous waters of this transition in a way that provided regular two-way communication between management and line staff, dispelling rumors and sharing

much-needed information. TMT also created a support system for staff with 1:1 peer counseling; workshops addressing retirement, job search, and mental health issues; and an informational binder to help laid off staff deal with the very real financial, mental health, and health issues they would be dealing with once cut loose from the county. The following case study details the CSB process of creation and implementation of the TMT model and its implications for Monterey County's various transitions.

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## Introduction

Change is constant, and change is everywhere in social services. As trainer Peter Dahlin stated, “We ought to be called ‘the Department of Change.’” For Monterey County, several changes were occurring that necessitated a study in the broad theme of transitions. Last year, Community Benefits went from geographically based, walk-in service centers to a single, task-based call center. Newsletters came out detailing the changes, with a timeline marking each stage of progress. There were meetings and ice cream socials, and teams of people gathering to discuss the change and disseminate information.

Within Family and Children’s Services, two smaller changes were being implemented, both beginning in May 2013. The first involved a policy for rotating through non-case management positions. Essentially, there are times when it is necessary to move staff from one position to another to meet a business need. Historically, the people in non-case management positions, such as the Team Decision-Making meeting facilitator, screener, and court officer, have not moved around as much as everyone else, yet those positions are often coveted. They tend to be either leadership positions or positions with more set hours, and are perceived as less stressful because there are no cases to manage. Ultimately, as of Spring 2014, the management team failed to create a policy that would systematically switch out those social workers every three years.

The second change involved the creation of a countywide assignment system for Immediate Emergency Response (IER) referrals, which is now known as the IER rotation. IER referrals require a 2-hour response time in most cases. Historically, these referrals have been distributed between three geographically based offices: Seaside, Salinas, and King City.

However, there has also historically been considerable concern by social workers that referrals were not being distributed equally. Furthermore, there has been conflict between these three offices in which staff feel some units are “protected” from receiving an overload of referrals while other units—namely the largest unit, located in Salinas—are “dumped on.” Even when data have shown otherwise, there continues to be a perception of inequality. Because the units are separated and there is not a lot of interaction between social workers in the Emergency Response (ER) units other than at joint ER meetings, they are largely unaware of the stress levels and amount of work in the other offices. When several workers began discussing the idea of countywide assignment during a Joint ER meeting, the other workers took hold of the idea and ultimately everyone voted to try out this new system. Since June 2013, when it was first implemented, it has gone through several iterations and is still being assessed for its utility in building a strong ER team and creating an equitable distribution of referrals.

## Contra Costa County Transitions

Neither of these transitions was anywhere near as challenging as those facing Contra Costa County’s Community Services Bureau (CSB), which includes the county’s Head Start and Early Head Start programs. After a series of budget cuts starting in 2010 and totaling \$5.8 million, CSB had already cut their office supply budget by 75%, eliminated 20 vacant manager and staff positions, and closed two child care centers, all without having to lay off any staff. In January 2013, CSB faced yet another cut, this time of \$3 million—more than it had faced in each of the previous years, and which represented 15% of its annual funding. Having already cut deeply into staff

and services, CSB was forced to close down three child care centers and lay off 31 employees.

After learning in early 2013 about this budget shortfall, the solution to manage this change came clearly from the leadership of CSB Director Camilla Rand. Rand holds a master's degree in organizational development, and studied transition management and possesses many books detailing organizational leadership. One book caught her eye again: William Bridges' *Managing Transitions, 3rd ed.* (2009). Bridges discusses the three phases of transition, including Ending/Losing/Letting Go, the Neutral Zone and the New Beginning. In the Ending stage, people are working on grief and loss issues. Individuals are perhaps initially in shock or anger because they find out they are possibly going to lose their jobs. In the case of CSB, not only were the staff who knew they were getting laid off impacted, but a whole "bumping" procedure was instituted whereby those with greater seniority could choose to bump others out of positions if their site was being closed but they themselves were not being laid off. Therefore, most centers were impacted by some sort of staffing change. Furthermore, the community was impacted because families had to be moved to other Head Start centers with unfamiliar teachers and staff. Because the closures and layoffs were set to occur during the summer, some children automatically went on to kindergarten and therefore were not affected by the change. Luckily, those children continuing on in Head Start whose home centers were being closed were shifted to other nearby centers. However, this meant that many of the children on the wait list for enrollment in Head Start centers would not be able to enter the programs at all.

The Neutral Zone is the second, and most critical, stage in the transition process. For CSB, this was the limbo time when staff knew who was being laid off or moving to different centers, but the layoffs had not yet happened. This is also when the Transition Management Team (TMT) began. Bridges detailed the development of the TMT in his book, and CSB followed his suggestions in many ways. The role of

the TMT is to facilitate clear communication up and down the organization about what exactly is happening with the change. It is made up of a broad spectrum of staff, though is not too large as to become unwieldy. For CSB, the TMT consisted of a teacher, site director, manager, personnel staff, a union representative, mental health staff, and the director, and was a mix of various levels of management and line staff. The role of the TMT was not only to communicate about the change but to also figure out how to support staff through the change process.

Christina Reich, a division manager at CSB, became the lead for the TMT and shared the material that the TMT developed for staff with Monterey County. In March 2013, Rand directed Reich to create the TMT and in April, the TMT began meeting on a weekly basis. After each meeting, an email that had been developed by the team was sent out to all staff and posted in the centers. These emails offered support to all staff, and also served to dispel rumors about what was going to happen during the transition. They typically ended with phrases such as, "Take care of one another and yourself! Your Transition Management Team."

One site supervisor interviewed for this study indicated she was grateful for the firsthand knowledge she got as part of the TMT so that she could talk to staff directly about the changes. She was also able to relay the particulars of staff anxiety back to the TMT so that the team could figure out how to address that anxiety. She also indicated that her staff found the emails to be inspirational. However, another staff person who was laid off and then ultimately rehired, indicated that there was a time lag before she actually had a chance to review the emails, and she did not find them particularly helpful.

Because there were representatives from personnel and mental health on the TMT, the team was also able to create a binder for laid off staff that included a variety of information regarding retirement, mental health, job searches, medical insurance, public assistance, and other related issues. In addition to the binder, workshops were regularly held leading

up to the layoff date of June 30, 2013, discussing all of the above information. The 1½-hour long workshops were often held right after work and in various locations throughout Contra Costa County. These were not particularly well-attended, typically only attracting a handful of people, but were certainly an important gesture to laid off employees. The role of the TMT was also to talk to potential employers in the community to help find jobs for those employees being laid off. Notably, as of April 2014, 92% of those laid off now have jobs with Contra Costa County, many of whom are now back in CSB. At least one person laid off chose to retire, and another returned to school.

Each of the TMT members, excluding the director, was teamed up with 1-3 employees who were to be laid off. Their task was to meet 1:1 with each of these employees to offer support and guidance through this transition. Although only a few of the employees chose to meet 1:1 with TMT members, those who did reportedly found it valuable. They received resume preparation assistance and moral support throughout the layoff process.

The TMT continued to meet into July 2013 and then disbanded. At that point, the agency was in the third and final stage of transition, the New Beginning. In October 2013, a CSB summit was held, which was the first time all CSB staff were able to meet together. It was a time to reflect, bond, and plan the goals for the agency moving forward. The senior management team then took on leadership around each of these goals, forming committees comprised of a mix of staff that continued to meet regularly and work on those goals.

Several staff offered their reflections on the whole transition process. Some became tearful, almost a year later, about how difficult it was to see staff be laid off and feel powerless over that. Those interviewed indicated that they felt the duration of the TMT was appropriate. Although the TMT didn't particularly address the needs of those staff left behind, they did provide information that provoked dialogue during staff meetings, in which there were opportunities to

both grieve and celebrate. For those staff who were laid off, one TMT member attributed their ability to regain employment to the support provided by the TMT. Another staff person who was laid off and then rehired, indicated that even though she didn't take advantage of the workshops offered because she was too distraught by her predicament, she felt CSB handled the transition as well as possible. She appreciated the TMT and the 1:1 help she received. Another staff person indicated that she thought the TMT showed advance planning on the part of the agency, and that the TMT used a short amount of time to mobilize and thoroughly address the issues arising from the transition. She felt that the October summit provided closure and a time to celebrate.

### **Recommendations for Monterey County**

Notably, although Contra Costa County as a whole has instituted layoffs in the past, only CSB used the TMT model to navigate such a transition. Monterey County's Department of Social Services has been lucky to never suffer layoffs, and budget cuts have certainly never been anything as severe as those experienced by CSB. Should Monterey County ever experience the need to lay off staff or make large staffing changes such as those experienced by Contra Costa County, the TMT model is definitely recommended. Other than staff time, there is no cost to developing a TMT, particularly one that would meet once a week for 1-2 hours at a time and only during the critical months of transition. It certainly made an impression of goodwill during a time of intense emotional turmoil for many staff. The informational binder and workshops, as well as the offer of 1:1 assistance, were also very tangible examples of the agency assisting its employees to navigate this difficult transition, even if not everyone took advantage of them.

The TMT is not the solution to every change, but it does point to how transitions should be managed in large, bureaucratic organizations like Monterey County. One of the main premises of the TMT is that there is involvement of staff from top to bottom, representing all aspects of the organization. In the

case of the proposed non-case management policy discussed earlier, one reason it likely failed is because it was developed initially at the manager/supervisor level and not discussed with social workers in a comprehensive way. It ultimately became an “us versus them” policy that did not work for the agency and was met with considerable resistance from line staff. The remarkable thing about the CSB layoffs is that everyone, including the union representative, understood that the layoffs were necessary and that everything that could be cut had already been cut. The communication around that was very clear from management, and all CSB staff had already experienced several years of dwindling funds. For the proposed non-case management policy to have succeeded, it needed to be much clearer why it was necessary. And, in the end, it proved not to be.

As for the IER rotation, also discussed earlier, staff at all levels (social workers, supervisors and manager) have been involved in development and implementation, so it has not been something anyone considers to have been “imposed” upon them. However, it has not addressed the issues of teamwork or equitable referral distribution, and that is why it is still a work in progress. The TMT is not necessary for this level of transition, but certainly good communication from top to bottom has been key, as has inclusion of staff from all levels.

## Conclusion

The Community Services Bureau of Contra Costa County offers an excellent model of how to handle a major organizational transition in the laying off of 15% of its Head Start/Early Start workforce. The Transition Management Team, created from a broad array of staff, was able to disseminate information in order to dispel rumors and support staff throughout the layoff process. The team was able to provide tangible supports to staff and promote morale during a time of emotional upheaval. They also addressed the stages of transition, acknowledging and addressing the grief and loss issues that staff were experiencing in a humanizing way. Should layoffs ever be in Monterey County’s future, this is how they should be addressed.

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## Reference

Bridges, William. (2009). *Managing Transitions*, 3rd edition. Philadelphia: Perseus Books Group.