

# **Promoting Employee Engagement in Alameda County Social Services Agency**

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**ALAMEDA COUNTY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Organizations, including Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA), are facing a high rate of employee turnover. Per Alameda County SSA Human Resources Department, 493 employees parted ways with Alameda County SSA from 2020 – 2022. The primary, though not exclusive, reason for these separations relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-era trend of elevated voluntary departures came to be known as the Great Resignation. About 50.5 million people quit their jobs in 2022, according to the federal JOLTS report. Organizations have had to brainstorm alternative work guidelines such as

teleworking, telecommuting, and a hybrid combination of other alternative work methods. Additionally, these organizations are still seeking strategies to keep their workforce motivated and engaged to prevent unnecessary resignations. The past several years have brought challenges to organizations that have resulted in re-prioritizing engagement strategies to address employee needs. The objective of this study is to find ways to improve employee engagement with specific recommendations for Alameda County SSA, through an exploration of strategies used by Santa Clara County SSA.

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## Introduction

A question that organizations grapple with is, “What is employee engagement?” According to Kruse, “Employee engagement is the emotional commitment an employee has to an organization and its goals”.<sup>1</sup> The emotional commitment means engaged employees actually care about the work they do and their organizations. To these engaged employees, the employer represents more than a paycheck – it is the eagerness toward their task that makes them passionate in their work, and this passion is often reflected in their individual outcomes. It is also the level of enthusiasm and dedication an employee feels toward his or her job.<sup>2</sup> These employees genuinely care for the organizations they work for and are emotionally invested in helping the organization achieve its goals and objectives, resulting in better business outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This study delves into how Alameda County’s Workforce and Benefits Administration (WBA) in its strategic planning, focuses on improving employee engagement to promote organizational excellence. The study made recommendations on how WBA can improve employee engagement.

In 2017, Alameda County Social Services Agency WBA undertook a Balanced Scorecard (BSC) Performance Management Planning Process. One of the strategic

objectives of the BSC was to improve employee engagement to promote organizational excellence. The BSC aimed to create a forum to engage more line staff in the identification of strategies to streamline departmental operations and maximize resources to offset the burden of unfunded mandates. WBA’s BSC Performance Management Plan identifies employee engagement as a priority strategy for ensuring that the department maintains a workforce positioned to meet the demands of delivering quality public services in the 21st Century.<sup>4</sup>

The BSC links employee engagement to performance. Under the objective of the BSC that discusses improving employee engagement, it states, “An engaged employee cares about their work and the performance of the organization.”<sup>5</sup> WBA’s BSC listed activities to help achieve its employee engagement goals. These activities include:

- Institute Employee Engagement Model consisting of the elements of planning, analyzing, taking action, evaluating action, and sustaining.
- Hold employee focus groups led by departmental leadership, structured to motivate them through presentations, feedback, and question-and-answer segments.
- Promote peer-to-peer and peer-to-management communications (e.g., Forums where employees and management meet to set goals, weekly presentations on a myriad of topics).

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<sup>1</sup> Kruse, K. (2012, Jun 22). What Is Employee Engagement? Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2012/06/22/employee-engagement-what-and-why/?sh=4a0e28d67f37>

<sup>2</sup> Alameda County Social Services Agency Workforce and Benefits Administration (WBA) Balance Scorecard (BSC) Performance Management Plan FY 2021 - 2025

<sup>3</sup> Kruse, K. (2012, Jun 22). What Is Employee Engagement? Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2012/06/22/employee-engagement-what-and-why/?sh=4a0e28d67f37>

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<sup>4</sup> WBA BSC Performance Management Plan FY 2021 - 2025

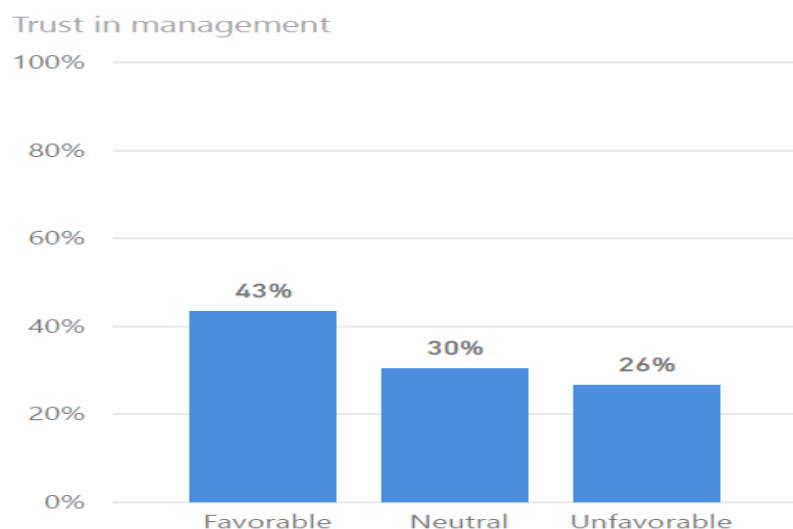
<sup>5</sup> WBA BSC Performance Management Plan FY 2021 - 2025

- Develop WBA brand ambassadors who help to motivate colleagues by relaying the department’s mission, values and messages to help employees connect their job to the big picture.
- Institute employee appreciation/ rewards/ recognition program to acknowledge employees for their hard work.
- Provide mini-clinics and in-house training by Supervisors.
- Educate workers on the “perks” associated with longevity of seniority. Advise on the impact of leave without pay on their county seniority, co-workers, and clients.

- Engage staff in and develop “support workgroups.”
- Create quiet room availability, onsite exercise classes, and massage therapists.

In 2019, WBA conducted an employee survey to measure staff engagement. Five hundred and fifty-two employee responses were received out of the 1038 filled positions at the time (approximately 50% response rate). Sixty-eight percent of the respondents reported being engaged. The survey also explored the level of employee trust in management, with only 43% of the employees who responded expressing trust in management.

**Figure 1: 2019 WBA Employee level of trust in Management Survey Results.**



In 2023, employees who were informally asked about how they feel, responded they feel more disengaged. Most office engagement activities such as bowling games, picnics, potlucks, and in-person meetings, came to a stop during the

pandemic. This has created more employee distrust toward management. Employee workloads have increased due to the high employee turnover. According to Careers in Government, trust in managers is lost when employees feel left in the dark, neglected

and not listened to.<sup>6</sup> Employee engagement leads to employees feeling vested in the organization, included, and recognized. These challenges are not unique to Alameda County SSA. Lessons from other successful public sector engagement strategies may be useful and applicable, such as the efforts of Santa Clara County.

### **Santa Clara County SSA Employee Engagement: Voice Videocast**

Santa Clara County decided to research and find effective employee engagement strategies that work for their county employees. They came up with an employee engagement tool named the SSA Voice Videocast. This engagement strategy has been successful.

The Santa Clara County SSA Voice Videocast was created after researching ways to improve employee engagement. Leadership embarked on roadshows (office visits) to share their initiatives and communicate with employees. The pandemic forced a change in the method of engaging employees through these previously in-person meetings. A Program Manager was tasked with developing strategies to improve employee engagement during the pandemic. An engagement framework was developed based on:

- Health and Wellness
- Recognition of Staff
- Professional Growth and Development
- Healthy Relationships
- Overall Communication

A specialized team of staff representing various levels, including the agency's executive team and staff development, was assembled to develop a method to share information with staff, improve morale, and build a sense of camaraderie. During the

pandemic, this was achieved through Zoom meetings that utilized voice casting, pre-recorded segments, and live on-air facilitation. Over time, a variety of tools were utilized to brand "SSA Voice" and to create video broadcasts that included both live sessions and pre-recorded information.

Efforts were made to:

- Engage the live-streamed audience with interactive tools such as Mentimeter.
- Amplify a variety of different SSA staff members' voices by delivering pre-recorded sessions and announcements, thus creating a sense of shared ownership and increasing connection.
- Ensure that executives did not feel "on the spot" to answer live questions from the audience.
- Provide opportunities for staff to recognize and appreciate colleagues, along with creative ways to highlight them in a pre-recorded segment or through virtual "high fives."
- Profile leaders in the organization, including personal information such as hobbies, interests, and stories about their career journey, in an effort to build trust and relatability.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the frequency of the SSA Voice was bi-weekly due to the need to provide a large amount of information, reassure staff, and help build cohesion in an all-remote environment. Today, SSA Voice is delivered once per month. Surveys show that 90% of the Santa Clara County SSA staff have participated in SSA Voice in some way. However, approximately 15% of staff are able to watch the SSA Voice Videocast live. More staff say they watch a recorded version of

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <https://careersingovernment.com>

the SSA Voice later when they have time. Employee responses have shown the SSA Voice is an effective employee engagement tool. SSA Voice is still evolving to meet the current needs for employee engagement, and it is an effective strategy that Alameda County can learn from.

## **Recommendations For Implementing SSA Voice In Alameda County**

Alameda County SSA should consider adopting the engagement strategies of the WBA BSC and build upon the current employee engagement strategies by adopting a program similar to SSA Voice. The activities listed above in the BSC can be enhanced with the implementation of a version of SSA Voice in Alameda County, along with considering the following recommendations:

- **Create Buy-In:** The Alameda County Social Services Agency Executive Team (AET) will be one of the most important stakeholders in adopting and rolling out an Alameda County SSA Voice Videocast. The buy-in of AET is needed because the Santa Clara SSA Voice has shown the importance of AET playing a vital role in the SSA Voice. For the SSA Voice to be successful in Alameda County, AET will need to make employee engagement one of its top goals with the time and resources of the various departments allocated to it.
- **Commit to Adequate Resources:** Creating a robust internal employee engagement program requires staff time. Two creative and dedicated employees should be allocated to the project. One person should be a senior manager who can attend AET meetings, and the second can be a project manager. Both hires should be internal since the county culture needs to be understood and some trust already established. Alameda County already has an Agency Communications Team (ACT) who can assist with this endeavor. Additional employees from the different departments can be added to the SSA Voice team. Positions may need to be backfilled as a result of these two positions, which would require additional funding for 2 full-time employees (one 2nd level manager and one 1st level manager).
- **Commit to Ongoing Use of Data to Enhance Staff Engagement:** The results of the past employee surveys since the inception of the BSC will need to be reviewed. A new survey would then be developed as a follow-up to find out what employees are interested in. This would tailor the SSA Voice to the needs of Alameda County SSA employees.
- **Engage Departments Meaningfully:** Excitement needs to be created among the departments about the upcoming implementation of the Alameda County SSA Voice. Employees should be made aware that the SSA Voice is their voice. Employee recognition and participation should be highlighted with a sense of ownership and engagement among various levels of staff.
- **Cover Varied and Timely Topics:** The county resources and various vendors should be engaged to promote the resources of Alameda County (e.g., Claremont Employee

Assistance Program, Kaiser) to enhance the lives of Alameda County employees.

- **Determine Broadcast Structure and Frequency:** The SSA Voice team will need to come up with a structured segment and timeframe for broadcasts. The program structure can be amended and changed based on the needs of Alameda County employees. A recommendation for monthly airings, in the beginning, is reasonable.

In conclusion, implementing the Alameda County SSA Voice could be a strong boost to Alameda County's employee engagement, which is one of the main goals of the BSC Performance Management Planning Process. With the post-pandemic employee shortages in Alameda County SSA, engaging our current employees is vital and will also be an effective tool in the retention of current employees and recruiting new employees. Word of mouth about how employees feel gets out to potential new employees who may be inspired to work at Alameda County SSA. Effective employee engagement can help retain current employees who will be emotionally vested in the Agency and recruit new employees who want to join organizations who show they care about their employees through engagement.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Alameda County Social Services leadership, Gana Eason, and the Eden senior management team, Jeannette Perez and Stephanie Gioc, for providing me with the data. My appreciation and admiration for the Santa Clara SSA Voice team, Mark Lapiz, Wendy Merklingshaus, and Diane delos Santos, and the BASSC team.