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## **A Senior Manager with a Knowledge Management Portfolio: The Santa Clara County Experience**

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*The agency director sought to create a systematically coordinated department that utilizes knowledge management strategies to promote evidence-informed practice. In his view, the organization was not providing needed information or organizational supports for practitioners to use knowledge effectively. To address this issue, he created a Director of Development and Operational Planning (DDOP) position with the responsibility to build structures and facilitate processes that support knowledge management. The DDOP oversees research and planning, government relations, legislative development and support, Board of Supervisors communications, staff development and training, community contracts, public information and in-house communication. The DDOP is reorganizing units under her supervision to create a knowledge management matrix that will implement new knowledge sharing strategies related to evaluation, contracts, legislation, organizational development, policy and planning, and staff development. The case study describes challenges and strategies related to: government regulations, size and complexity of the agency, staff resistance, and the developmental nature of the process.*

**KEYWORDS** *Knowledge management portfolio, knowledge management responsibilities, job description*

Knowledge management efforts look different in each county's social services department. How a county arrives at the decision to focus on knowledge management, the resources they have to put toward knowledge man-

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agement initiatives, and the goals they aim to achieve often determine the structure of knowledge management and how it will be supported. In Santa Clara County, the Social Services Agency director recognized the need to promote knowledge management among senior managers while at the same time minimizing the perception among all staff that they were receiving another top down directive. The agency director wanted to emphasize knowledge sharing as a means of organizing the knowledge that already existed in the agency so that it was easily accessible to others. The director also wanted to emphasize the collaboration and the identification of crosscutting organizational initiatives that would benefit from evidence-informed practice. One of the goals of Santa Clara County Social Services was to incorporate a data-based approach to service delivery combined with evidence-informed practice. In order to support these knowledge management goals, the agency director created a senior management position and called it the DDOP.

### CREATING A NEW SENIOR-LEVEL POSITION

Several events and organizational issues led Santa Clara County's Social Service Agency to create a senior position with the responsibility to build structures and facilitate processes and initiatives that support knowledge management. Three years ago at a Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) directors meeting, Eileen Gambrell, a UC Berkeley Social Welfare faculty member presented her research perspectives on evidenced-based social work practice, noting how much social work practitioners rely on intuition and past experiences when delivering client services. She also noted that social workers want better access to current research and organizational supports for knowledge sharing.

The agency director realized that the organization was not providing needed information or creating organizational supports for practitioners to use knowledge effectively in their jobs. There was no clear mechanism for distributing information, making it difficult for workers to learn from other divisions in the agency, let alone from the broader field of social welfare. Furthermore, the agency had not provided workers with the time or the flexibility necessary to access, analyze, and use information to inform their practice. The agency had expectations of their workers, but they were not providing the tools and supports needed to help workers improve in their practice. Although this was an important and necessary realization, the director knew that things would not change until a senior manager position was established to create knowledge sharing mechanisms and ways to support staff in using data to inform their practice.

The director was also motivated by his frustration with some practice issues in the Child Welfare area and hoped that the new DDOP position might help to address his concerns. His frustrations were rooted in the

following example: if someone randomly pulled 30 child welfare case files, nearly all 30 would have a case plan that started with “client needs to attend parenting classes.” This referral seems to dominate all case plans more as a result of habit than as a result of the known successes of parenting classes. The agency was devoting considerable funding to these classes without knowing: (a) which situations merited parenting classes, (b) which families were most likely to benefit from this type of intervention, or (c) which classes were effective. In the absence of this information, many workers appear to make the same recommendation when creating case plans. The director wanted to encourage workers to monitor the ways in which their work affects the community and to increase their investment in assessing service outcomes. He believed that if workers had better access to their own data, they would be more inclined to engage in the evaluation of their work and identify the changes that needed to be made.

The fiscal, political, and social context in a county social service agency often determines its opportunities and challenges. Santa Clara County has many resources that often allows for flexibility and creativity in developing innovative programs. Sometimes the abundance of resources can lead to the proliferation of new programs or projects that inadvertently contribute to a multitude of fragmented programs that lack coordination and/or any relationship to a strategic plan. As a result, the agency director sought to create a more intentional, systematically coordinated department that utilizes knowledge management strategies to promote evidence-informed practice by creating the senior DDOP position.

The support for this position emerged out of two conversations between the agency director and his boss, the Santa Clara County executive, where the necessity of this position was clearly apparent to all. The idea for creating the position coincided with the departure of the agency’s chief deputy director, chief financial officer, and chief administrative officer. The agency director took this opportunity to restructure several senior management positions to better support knowledge management as he knew future goals would not be accomplished with a “business as usual approach.” First, the director did not want a deputy director position that could create distance between himself and the rest of the management staff and therefore decided not to hire another deputy director. The DDOP position was to take on many of the functions carried out by the former deputy director, but focused instead on moving the agency toward new knowledge sharing goals. Furthermore, instead of hiring a new chief financial officer and chief administrative officer, a new position was created that combined the functions of both. An additional position was created under the new chief of finance and administration to supervise many of the fiscal operations, allowing the chief to oversee a broader range of functions (e.g., information systems, finance, and working closely with the DDOP) in order to assist with the new knowledge management agenda.

The DDOP position was created as a senior level position so that knowledge management would be taken seriously in the agency. The position needed enough authority to get buy-in and create change. In addition, the agency director wanted this position to have ready and unlimited access to him so that the momentum and his original intention would not be lost among the many demands facing the agency director. The crisis of the moment continues to take center stage in social service agencies and knowledge management will disappear from the radar if the DDOP position is not taken seriously. The DDOP is responsible for planning and managing services in the areas of research and planning, government relations, legislative development and support, board of supervisor's communications, staff development and training, community contracts, public information, and in-house communication. Some of the tasks related to knowledge management include: (a) the development of systems to incorporate and disseminate external information regarding best practices across the agency; (b) the development of systems that measure service outcomes to inform agency practices; (c) to serve as a primary liaison to community agencies and task forces concerned with social services; and (d) to oversee the staff development and training department in the utilization of best practices and the promotion of agency culture change.

The DDOP was hired in 2006. She is a licensed clinical psychologist. In her last position at a non-profit social service agency she promoted organizational change, standardized program evaluations, assisted in strategic planning, developed a quality assurance program, created a think tank within the agency, and implemented a performance outcome approach using the Balance Score Card strategy. These skills and experiences were seen as important qualifications for the DDOP position in the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

## ORGANIZATIONAL RESTRUCTURING AND THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT MATRIX

As one person it is difficult to create a presence throughout a large agency and to implement knowledge management practices. Therefore in order to promote knowledge management, staff development, government relations and planning, staff members from Contracts and several staff members from Quality Assurance merged under the supervision of the DDOP. The Contracts Unit had previously been supervised under the finance director. This arrangement encouraged an emphasis on fiscal accountability and the director could always be sure invoices were submitted in a timely manner and that all funds were accounted for. However, under the finance director there was little conversation about the expected service outcomes to be addressed by the community-based agencies and a contract with the agency.

No measurements had been created to indicate whether or not an agency was successful, and no one was monitoring the overlap of services provided by various agencies. Outcomes were more easily tracked when buying services for a specific purpose—such as beds in a residential drug treatment facility. However, many contract agencies address multiple social problems with several related service goals, or emphasize prevention services that make outcomes difficult to measure. By placing contracts under the DDOP, there is a stronger emphasis on outcomes and in aligning future contracts with the needs of the department and the community for more rigorous evaluations of services.

In the staff development unit the content of the induction training had changed very little over the years. There was little focus on evaluating services or supporting knowledge sharing among staff. Training Unit staff had been transferred into the unit 10 years earlier from the supervisory ranks and had not been close to direct practice for some time. In essence, much of the training content was based on assumptions that were a decade out of date and reflected inadequate training of staff. The Government Relations and Planning Unit, which included Evaluation at the time, was incorporated into the domain of the DDOP in order to increase the use of data in the other units and to support future changes in relation to new policies at all levels of government. Since much of the knowledge management effort in Santa Clara County is practice based, the Staff Development Unit plays a key role in changing practice within the agency while the Contracts Unit plays a key role in changing practices outside the agency.

Most recently, Child Welfare Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) Quality Assurance (QA) was reorganized to be a component of DDOPs. By placing them under the supervision of the DDOP these staff members are able to prioritize focus on the quality of practice and department wide adherence to practice standards. Furthermore, because QA has a data-based approach, their work feeds directly into the work supervised by the DDOP. QA is often seen as the social service monitoring department representing the director's office and are often utilized to ensure that staff are doing their job correctly. By involving QA under the jurisdiction of the DDOP, it was hoped that this perception of QA would fade so that staff would see that it is not the purpose of QA to find faults, but rather to help inform practice and help the agency learn from mistakes and successes. In addition, the close coordination of QA activities with the evaluation activities that are also a component of DDOPs, broadens impact to practice improvement and innovation as well as assurance of fidelity to practice standards.

The DDOP is utilizing the reorganization of the units under her supervision to create a knowledge management matrix that will implement new knowledge sharing strategies designed to improve practices. Several positions in the new management matrix are new while others are a result of the restructuring. Many matrix staff have a long history in the agency

**TABLE 1** The Knowledge Management Matrix

	Policy and planning for DFCS and DAAS	Policy and planning for DEBS and AO
Staff development	DFCS and DAAS SD	DEBS and AO SD
Evaluation	Outcomes focused eval	Outcomes focused eval
Contracts	Program monitoring	Administrative and regulatory oversight
Organizational development (1 position)	←-----→	
Legislative (1 position)	←-----→	

with trusting relationships with staff throughout the agency, making them excellent knowledge management messengers. The matrix structure provides a framework to organize and disseminate knowledge and its flexibility allows it to extend its reach to support knowledge sharing within all program departments. The knowledge management matrix in Table 1 illustrates how this unit under the supervision of the DDOP integrates their efforts throughout four major departments in the agency: DFCS, Department of Adults and Aging Services (DAAS), Department of Employment Benefit Services (DEBS), and the Agency Office (AO), which includes Administration, Financial Management, Information Systems and the CalWIN Division.

The major functions of the knowledge management matrix are defined below and include; evaluation, contracts, legislation, organizational development, policy and planning, and staff development.

### Evaluation

Each program department has their own management information system unit that evaluates operations in terms of timeliness, caseload size, and other indicators of success. In contrast, the evaluation staff working in the knowledge management matrix of DDOP are more outcomes focused in order to address overarching issues beyond program level information. The evaluation unit uses data to identify the underlying causes of various performance issues that can inform staff development and contracts management. These staff are also involved in the identification and description of best and promising practices.

### Contracts

The Contracts Unit is being aligned with the outcome needs of the department. It uses evaluation results and policy information to design contracts that support the goals of the program departments. The agency wide function of contracts remains intact, which is to provide to overall standards for contracting within the Social Services Agency.

## Legislation

The legislative staff member keeps the divisions informed about regulations, policies, and procedures coming down from the federal or state level. The goal is to also gather input and data from the various program departments when drafting or making recommendations on proposed legislation.

## Organizational Development

The Organizational Development staff member provides management and supervisory level training across all divisions in such areas as conflict resolution, group and meeting facilitation, and leadership skills that are open to all staff members. This staff also coordinates the agency mentorship program. One of the multi-year objectives for this staff person is to design and roll out a two tiered management training series.

## Policy and Planning

This unit performs policy and planning functions for the agency's program departments (DFCS, DAAS, DEBS, and AO). This unit has detailed knowledge of each department as they address all departmental policy or business practice issues and facilitate problem-solving efforts. This position is designed to be a horizontally focused process manager.

## Staff Development

Staff Development supports knowledge management by staying informed about recent research, bringing in external information to inform practice, providing staff with the resources to successfully do their work, and facilitating agency culture change. Many of the other DDOP units help to identify areas where the agency can improve and these areas usually have training implications. For example, if the legislative position is working with DCFS on new regulations, staff development is often called upon to provide training sessions to equip staff to meet these new requirements.

While the DDOP had originally thought of creating a centralized knowledge management unit that would monitor all knowledge management activities throughout the agency, it became apparent that a more decentralized and flexible approach was needed in such a large and complex agency, where programs tend to operate in separate silos. The knowledge management matrix is successful in this agency because it involves the staff in each program department. The agency director has been promoting knowledge sharing and evidence-informed practice goals for many years and therefore staff have been oriented to this philosophy in order to make use of the structures and processes already in place. For this reason the knowledge



management matrix is not seen as the rigid backbone of the agency, but rather as the flexible and supportive muscles that bring additional strengths as it organizes multiple efforts and promotes a better understanding of the shared knowledge management goals the department as a whole is aiming to achieve.

Several units that perform knowledge sharing functions were not incorporated into the knowledge management matrix and were left decentralized. For example, the DEBS contracting unit remains in the DEBS division. Before making any structural changes, the DDOP will assess the readiness for reorganization, the challenges that will be faced during the transition, and the potential that such a change will lead to the desired outcomes. Similarly, the CalWIN data analysis remains in the Administrative Unit and not in the DDOP Evaluation Unit because it was concluded from an assessment that the agency would not achieve better outcomes for clients by making this change. Using flexibility and support to improve outcomes was more important than centralizing all related functions for ease of monitoring all knowledge sharing efforts.

#### CHALLENGES TO PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The challenges facing the DDOP can be attributed to the nature of public social service agencies. First, the agency operates under many county, state, and federal regulations. This often makes it difficult for county agencies to operate in a flexible manner, which is an important aspect of knowledge sharing and changing organizational cultures. Second, the size of an organization affects its capacity to promote change. Santa Clara County's Social Service Agency is large and complex. Knowledge sharing is usually supported through a centralized structure, but in an agency as large as Santa Clara County's Social Services, many of the processes that need to be woven together are decentralized. It is difficult to create a centralized structure that has the reach to influence all parts of the agency. Third, the agency is made up of three very separate service-provider departments; DEBS, DAAS, and DFCS. Each department has its own goals and objectives and it is difficult, but necessary, to find the "common ground" where they all connect and share goals. The knowledge sharing function of the DDOP is critical to finding common ground.

The agency also faces challenges when adapting to their new knowledge management roles and functions. Staff Development is now revising all training content to be more responsive to the changing needs of staff in a time of financial resource constraints. The unit is also working to use technology to enhance outcomes by creating an electronic learning management system that tracks all training activities and stores training information as well as

promoting more online e-learning opportunities. For the Contracts Unit, it is difficult to balance the old financial orientation with a quality assurance orientation.

For staff in general, the increased use of evidence-informed practice can be met with resistance if it does not adequately incorporate the tacit knowledge and intuition that have guided practice for a long time. It still remains to be seen how data-based decision making represents an improvement over the old intuitive approaches. In order to reduce resistance, the DDOP spent a considerable amount of time learning how the agency operates and the related responsibilities of staff by talking with staff at all levels within each department. Through these conversations staff concerns were noted and focus groups created around common issues. These focus groups increased the DDOP's understanding of the working environment and helped staff understand the new role of the DDOP. For example, the DDOP recently assisted the agency director with his presentations to all DFCS staff members on the topic of the disproportionately high number of children of color entering into the system. Staff had been hearing about this issue, but did not understand the extent of the issue until they saw their department's own numbers that created a sense of urgency to find solutions. If knowledge sharing is presented in a way that directly relates to the every day work of staff and is not presented in an abstract way, there can be less resistance. The DDOP and the agency director would eventually like to see all staff reflect regularly on their own data, analyze it, and use it to improve practice and outcomes.

In addition to illustrating the relevance of knowledge sharing in every day work activities, knowledge management systems need to be directly connected with overall agency goals and the goals of the various programs. The DDOP divided the concept of knowledge management into 5 principles:

1. Social Purpose: Building a dynamic response to the changing landscape of our social purpose.
2. Practice Excellence: Building organization-wide practice excellence through program evaluation, research, and linking with external resources.
3. Continual Improvement: Building a culture of continual quality improvement through process evaluation and design.
4. Talent Management: Building a dynamic and ready workforce.
5. Integrated Information Systems: Design and build Information systems that provide system-wide performance information and easy access to internal and external knowledge.

Early in the development of the DDOP, a document was created to highlight the initiatives already in place that support the five DDOP principles. In essence, staff is more likely to contribute to future knowledge sharing

efforts if they can see how knowledge management goals can help the agency or program department achieve their goals and objectives and by acknowledging what staff have already accomplished.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

Creating knowledge sharing systems and structures is an ongoing developmental process. As the DDOP reflects on its first two years, the agency is still working in stage one. The developmental process of knowledge management in the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency can be illustrated in the following four stages:

### Stage 1

- Develop a clear understanding of the agency director's vision.
- Understand the agency and its culture to ensure that knowledge management goals match the needs and strengths of the agency and are framed and implemented in a way conducive to agency culture.
- Develop a structure that will support knowledge management.

### Stage 2

- Create plans to support each division in incorporating knowledge sharing practices to help reach their goals.
- Creating durable organizational forums that can promote and sustain knowledge sharing and the infusion of best practice and continual learning approaches.

### Stage 3

- Create systems and ways to document progress in order to make knowledge management something tangible.
- Create incentives and rewards to continue promotion of knowledge sharing.

### Stage 4

- Knowledge management practices are built into the structure of the agency through formal systems.
- Knowledge sharing becomes standardized and part of the agency culture.

## LESSONS LEARNED

It is important to keep in mind that all knowledge management efforts are focused on the ultimate goal of improving services for the clients and to demonstrate to staff the connection between knowledge sharing and improved practice. In public social service agencies there will always be an obstacle (e.g., financial, political, etc.) that make it difficult to dedicate time and energy to promoting knowledge sharing, however knowledge management needs to continue to be a high priority if momentum is to be maintained. Creating a senior management level knowledge management position helps to ensure that these efforts do not get lost when the agency faces new challenges and changes. Finally, it is clear that the knowledge management goals and the size and culture of the agency will directly influence the structure and processes of knowledge sharing.

## APPENDIX A: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### Interviews

Will Lightbourne, Director, Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County, CA  
Gina Sessions, Staff, Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County, CA  
Dana McQuary, Staff, Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County, CA  
Barbara Sasaki, Staff, Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County, CA