

Remote Work and Effective Supervision During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections from Santa Clara County Eligibility Benefits

MARTHA MENDOZA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the County of Santa Clara enacted a shelter-in-place order, which led to the first-time implementation of telework for many employees. This process was a rapid transition that allowed for the Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS) to continue providing essential services to the communities most impacted by the crisis. With a majority of staff working remotely came the opportunity for

supervisors to explore effective supervision qualities that contribute towards creating positive teleworking habits while considering the ongoing demand for adaptation in the midst of such a life-altering pandemic. This reflection paper focuses on the importance of balancing accountability and flexibility in this new setting and how establishing trust, open communication, and connection contribute to overall telework success.

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Introduction

On March 16, 2020, Health Officer Dr. Sara H. Cody of the County of Santa Clara issued a shelter-in-place (SIP) order in an effort to slow the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), a global pandemic that has interrupted every aspect of normalcy throughout our communities. Among other specifics of this timely and impactful order, one directive ceased all non-essential business and government agency operations at physical locations, which included temporarily closing Social Services Agency lobbies across the County (Order of the Health Officer, 2019). In the best interest of health and safety for staff and clients, our executive directors in collaboration with leaders from Procurement, Finance, Information Technology, Staff Development, Central Services, and the District Office successfully orchestrated the distribution of equipment and the implementation of telework for most essential staff, many of whom were experiencing working remotely for the first time. From this change arose the opportunity for supervisors to explore new and improved methods to lead in this unprecedented setting. This report will explore qualities of effective supervision and will highlight how these characteristics contribute to creating constructive telework habits while considering the ongoing demand for adaptation in the midst of a life-altering pandemic.

Harmonizing Accountability: Job Formalization and Flexibility During a Pandemic

Teleworking success depends on supervisor and staff abilities to be flexible and to exercise self-discipline to ensure the completion of tasks and work responsibilities in a timely and professional manner. Researchers find that to effectively manage remote workers who cannot be physically observed as they might be in traditional office settings, supervisors should increase job formalization, provide more feedback, and resort to output-based evaluations of employees. Job formalization in this context calls for explicit recurring reviews of job responsibilities and regularly renewed agreements between each supervisor and staff member to reestablish mutual remote work expectations. These conversations should happen often and need to include honest feedback on performance as well as continued assessment to determine if telework is suitable for the employee. Detecting the need for training and addressing issues regarding quality of work early on is instrumental in preventing escalation to any type of progressive discipline. Being able to make this determination requires monitoring quality and timeliness of work. During a pandemic, this monitoring can be a challenging process, because some individuals may feel scrutinized if the job formalization dialogue solely focuses on output measures and is not considerate of personal well-being and the hardships the employee may be experiencing.

outside of work during SIP. An empathetic delivery of monitoring is important; it is imperative to be an excellent listener and ask questions before making assumptions. Tracking performance and sharing feedback must occur promptly so the worker is aware of where improvement is needed but also feels supported and driven to improve. Being tactful with this topic will yield the best results, emphasizing partnership and encouraging staff to continue to collaborate with their supervisor to meet their business goals. Consistency in this area sets both professional and personable tones which institute a standard of involvement and presence.

Balancing flexibility and accountability are critical. With the SIP order requiring school and childcare closures, individuals have found themselves balancing home and work responsibilities, dealing with high levels of anxiety and fear of the unknown. This reality inevitably has had an impact on some staff's availability to work regular business hours to process their workload. With every day bringing uncertainty, practicing leadership agility and being prepared to improvise at a moment's notice have become a crucial part of daily supervision. As a supervisor for public benefits services, distinguishing when and where to apply flexibility is key. For example, quality and timely delivery of public benefits to clients remains a priority for all eligibility staff, regardless of telework status. There are still strict deadlines that must be met to stay in compliance with program policies and regulations. However, flexibility can exist via a temporary prearrangement of alternate work hours to ensure staff can process their work and continue to serve their clients, while also taking care of other pressing personal priorities. Working with staff to identify "peak" hours of productivity, eliminate distractions, and set boundaries are successful tactics to practice flexibility while continuing to meet business needs. When accompanied by clear expectations and open communication, this type of accommodation can support and encourage the self-discipline needed to complete assigned tasks.

Supervisor Relationship: Trust, Check-Ins, and Connection

"I learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

—Maya Angelou

Employees look to their supervisors for guidance, encouragement, and development to augment their job skills and professional growth. Studies show that a strong sense of trust between supervisors and staff contributes to efficiency and an optimistic attitude towards change and engagement, therefore playing a critical role in the successful implementation of telework. Work relationships cannot flourish without a solid foundation of trust, which is built upon integrity, consistency, and transparency. In this new telework setting, it was not uncommon at first for some supervisors to struggle with the idea that teleworkers may not be completing their tasks when left to their own devices. These preconceived notions pose a challenge in establishing a framework of trust. A suggested remedy to address this issue involves continually emphasizing accountability and sustaining engaging communication with staff. Steering clear from micromanaging and focusing on managing expectations rather than specific tasks is a proven way to demonstrate trust to employees. At the same time, teleworkers should be able to trust their supervisors to be readily accessible, resourceful, inclusive, and compassionate as competing health, family and work priorities take place simultaneously during the SIP order. They should not expect to only hear from their supervisors when work improvement is needed or something goes wrong. Prioritizing casual and intentional telemeetings with staff to offer support and provide reinforcement of their strengths is a way to express genuine kindness that sets the groundwork for trust to cultivate.

With many experiencing personal isolation during SIP, preventing professional isolation is vital.

Check-ins are crucial in both individual and unit meeting settings to ensure clear, consistent communication, transparency, and a sense of connection. Creating a space within meetings for staff to address non-work-related pressures that may be impacting their performance is equally important to facilitate informed decisions that allow for well-rounded evaluations. Listening to staffs' concerns helps supervisors gain perspective on personal priorities they may be balancing such as childcare, assisting children with remote classes, worrying about a family member being ill, or maintaining their own mental health. There is great prospect in this area to connect through compassion and nourish a trusting supervisor-teleworker relationship. Initiating contact with a unit member to check in on them if they seem low during a meeting or sending a constructive email to highlight a recent accomplishment serve as other great examples of possible actions to take. Utilization of virtual meeting applications, including Zoom, Skype for Business, and Microsoft Teams allows for a deeper sense of community and connection.

Leading the Way: Management Support

The Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS) leadership team has led by example in demonstrating commitment to transparency and keeping communication a priority. All department supervisors have been encouraged to utilize supportive services in the realm of well-being, mental health, leadership, and employee engagement, all of which touch on the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic crisis. Most notably and in relation to effective supervision, a supervisory team web-based interactive Zoom session with DEBS Director Angela Shing and facilitator Ann Nicholson created a space that allowed for meaningful connections and peer-to-peer support. The framework for the meeting revolved around the seven characteristics of great leaders, which include being self-aware, humble, courageous, fair, curious, collaborative, and adaptable. Understanding and working on enhancing

these traits can be a promising method to improve effective telework leadership.

At the Continuing Benefit Services (CBS) office, managers have provided incredible support and have been able to deliver guidance through challenging situations. Something specific that worked remarkably well to create principles around trust and accountability within the office was to have explicit written telework expectations for all supervisors and staff. While expectations already existed before telework implementation, each unit modernized their previously existing expectations among the team to include and account for the flexibilities and self-discipline that successful telework demands. Managers also took the time to attend unit meetings to greet and show support to staff by acknowledging the difficulty and unpredictability of the crisis, listening to staff concerns, and sharing words of encouragement. This gesture exemplifies and models being present and connected despite physical distance. In this way, staff hears directly from their managers the reassurance that their concerns are valid, and communicating this message helps build trust.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the impacts of this pandemic will have lasting ripple effects that will influence how society interacts moving forward and how DEBS delivers services in this new "normal." There are many unknowns that we have yet to learn from, but in the interim, there is enormous value in acknowledging the silver linings of this crisis with staff and praising those who have shown collaborative leadership during the most difficult of times while continuing to provide essential services to the community. Personally, I am inspired every day by the individuals I am so blessed to work with. I have witnessed eligibility staff and managers stand up with courage in challenging times, unparalleled by anything seen before, and gracefully adapt to changes that impact their lives outside of work. This year, while challenging on so many levels, has also been

a true revelation of passion and leadership. The staff that make up DEBS have demonstrated profound alignment with the guiding principles of the department: responsiveness, compassion, and innovation.

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