

**SOLANO COUNTY’S INVESTMENT IN EXCELLENCE®:  
A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING STAFF AND SHIFTING CULTURE**

**Rebecca Needens**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*“All Meaningful and lasting change starts on the inside then works its way out into your world.”*

*–Lou Tice*

As with many other public service agencies in the State of California, the Solano County Department of Health and Social Services (SCHSS) is exploring methods to increase employee morale and create a more positive and constructive agency culture. In 2014, SCHSS implemented a training program, Investment in Excellence® (IIE). It is designed to provide employees with the skills and knowledge to help them recognize their full potential and learn how to apply this knowledge to break down the barriers to their success, both personally and professionally. The program seeks to empower staff to function in a more effective manner, in turn, positively impacting the culture of the organization. SCHSS’s has experienced some of these positive changes since implementing IIE. Although the concepts and the principles of IIE are very relevant, many of the examples and some of the language used in the training are dated and incongruent with the Core Values of the San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA). SFHSA should continue to explore other opportunities to complement the current efforts of the SFHSA Learning and Development Department and the Innovation Office to improve employee and client satisfaction and shift the culture of the agency in a more positive direction.

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**Introduction**

In the human services field, the workforce is considered to be the most valuable asset. In order to ensure the well-being and retention of current staff, as well as to be able to attract new talent to the organization, an agency must invest in its people. It needs to provide career development opportunities; provide the training, tools, and support needed for people to be successful in their positions; and, create a clear and fair process for promotions and succession planning. The public sector may not be able to compete with many of the fringe benefits offered in the private sector, but it can offer flexible schedules, education and training, a clear career path with promotional opportunities, and a culture where staff feels valued, appreciated, and recognized.

**Background**

The San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) conducted an all staff survey in the summer of 2015. The survey revealed the following issues/areas as opportunities for improvement: employee morale, perceptions of hiring and promotion processes as unfair, and poor communication between management and staff. SFHSA leadership is currently committed to exploring, identifying, and implementing changes to rectify these problems and to make the organization a place where staff members feel effective, valued, and rewarded, in turn promoting excellent customer service for clients.

Similarly, results of an Organizational Culture Survey, done for Solano County Department of Health and Social Services (SCHSS) by Human Synergistics® in 2014, revealed low morale and an overall punitive culture of negativity and defensiveness. SCHSS's Executive Director at the time, Ann Edwards, chose to contract with The Pacific Institute® after participating in what she describe as "a training [Investment in Excellence®] that changed my life." The Pacific Institute® (TPI) was founded by Diane and Lou Tice in 1971 and offers various motivational training programs that can be applied to many types of organizations. TPI's guiding principle is that individuals have a virtually unlimited capacity for growth, change and creativity, and can adapt readily to change. The institute believes that through its education, which includes goal-setting, self-evaluation, and self-reflection, people are able to develop their potential by changing their habits, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. This then allows individuals in an organizational setting to achieve higher levels of growth and productivity, as well as shift the collective behavior and culture.

TPI evaluated the results of the Human Synergistics report to identify problems with the culture. It then helped SCHSS' leadership visualize and build a constructive culture model that reflects the mission of the department. TPI recommended, and SCHSS chose, to implement the Investment in Excellence (IIE) program in 2014 in an effort to shift the culture in a positive direction.

### **INVESTMENT IN EXCELLENCE® (IIE)**

In order to fully understand IIE, I had the privilege of observing and participating in an entire four-day IIE training. The IIE program is based upon the premise that people are the cornerstone of organizational success, and IIE seeks to develop this most valuable asset. IIE is a powerful

development experience grounded in the principles of Cognitive Behavior Modification Psychology (identify your problems and set goals to correct them) and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (conditioning: our behavior is learned by observing and imitating the actions of others). IIE seeks to enable individuals and organizations to achieve much more of their potential by changing their perception of what is possible, and then providing the skills, knowledge, and application to cause a change in what they actually accomplish. People's potential is limited by their beliefs about what is possible. For example, an experienced, capable social worker believes that she could not become a supervisor in her organization because she believes that she does not have what it takes. Others see her potential, but unless she changes this belief she will likely never become a supervisor. Someone stuck in this type of thinking tends to stay stuck. IIE encourages this person not only to visualize herself in the supervisory role, but to further visualize herself successfully doing the job as well as what might lay beyond that. Participants learn to write positive affirmations for their goals and are encouraged to read them regularly.

**IIE Implementation:** SCHSS chose to implement IIE first with its executive team in early 2014, then with managers and supervisors toward the end of 2014. Currently, SCHSS is in the process of training all staff, with about 50% of staff trained to date. Initially, IIE was slated to be mandatory for all employees. In order to avoid any potential labor relations concerns, this changed to voluntary participation, but is strongly encouraged and supported. There are three keys to successfully implementing IIE: having leadership 100% fully engaged and committed to the program, identifying skilled facilitators, and not deviating from the curriculum.

The concepts of IIE appeal to staff by explaining that they will learn how to increase their self-efficacy - their ability to accomplish things in their lives both personally and professionally that they did not know were possible.

The program facilitators are SCHSS staff who are trained by TPI and vetted by the executive team. Each class is made up of 28 participants from across divisions within the department. Having participants from across divisions fosters professional networking and a greater understanding of other divisions and the larger organization.

**III Format:** The training is presented in four full-day sessions consisting of two phases of two consecutive days each, with 30 days between each phase. The purpose of dividing the program into two phases is to give the participants an opportunity to digest and apply some of the concepts they have learned in phase I before moving on to phase II.

Each participant receives a Participant Learning Package (PLP) which includes a workbook entitled *The Video Resource Manual*, a workbook entitled *The Audio Assimilation Guide/Journal*, and a CD which contains 40 audio affirmations delivered by Lou Tice. The training is presented by a team of two facilitators who, over the course of four days, introduce 34 units, each with a new concept and set of objectives. The class is structured as follows: a participant volunteers read the unit overview and objective; participants are then shown a short video lecture by Lou Tice who teaches the concept for the unit; the facilitators direct group activities and group discussions; and, lastly, time is allowed for personal reflection.

**III, Phase I:** In order to encourage sharing and build trust among the group members, at the beginning of the first class, the facilitators ask everyone in the room to agree that the personal information shared among the group is to stay within the group and not leave the room. One member of the executive team comes in at the beginning of the first session to address the class and to express his/her appreciation and support to the participants for being there.

Phase I focuses on personal and professional growth and transformation. For example, unit two of phase I is entitled *Belief is Key*. The primary concept in this unit is that human beings behave and act not in accordance with the truth, but rather in accordance with the truth as they perceive and believe it to be. Our beliefs affect how we work, how we live, how we treat ourselves, and how we treat others. If we know how to expand or alter the belief closer to the truth of our full potential, we can realize that potential. One example used to demonstrate this is how counterproductive IQ and aptitude tests can be. Once you learn how smart you are or are not, or what your aptitude would or would not allow you to do, this defines your potential. The program also challenges participants to reflect and understand where their limiting beliefs come from and how to change them.

**III, Phase II:** Continues in the same format, but now focuses on the organizational application and on building high performance teams. It connects personal transformation skills to the impact on the organization. People who operate with properly placed accountability, are self-actualizing, achievement-oriented, and encouraging of one another help create a constructive culture. This type of person can affect positive change in his/her environment just by virtue of who he/she is.

**After Phase II:** The Audio Sessions and Affirmation Guide/Journal are designed to keep the concepts alive for participants and help them affirm, visualize, and make the changes they would like to make in their personal and professional lives after graduating from the program.

At the end of the last day of class, each participant is asked to share something they found valuable about the program as they receive their certificate of completion. The graduation was powerful and quite moving. The group had done a lot of sharing of their personal history, and had shown a lot of vulnerability as the trust in the room grew. By the end of the fourth day, most of the group had bonded and expressed a strong desire to stay connected.

## **Feedback Loop**

The facilitators gather written feedback after each day of class. The facilitators meet with the executive team at the end of the program to share the feedback from the evaluations as well as the ideas generated by the participants through the group exercises, including ideas of how the agency can improve the culture and the organization. One group exercise involved listing and sharing with the class the qualities of a good leader. The general consensus was that a good leader displays honesty and integrity, cares about and values staff, understands the clients and the work, solicits input from staff, shows appreciation, makes sure staff have the tools needed to do their jobs, believes in 360 evaluations, and is transparent. This is a great way for leadership to get a sense of what issues are of concern to staff and what ideas they have for improvements. SCHSS Leadership considers this feedback loop to be an important part of the program.

## **Challenges**

**Time commitment:** Each participant is out of the office and away from their job for four full days. Although managers strongly encourage participation in IIE, some people feel that they are unable to make such a time commitment without compromising service delivery.

**How to keep IIE alive after graduation:** Despite not yet having a structured plan in place to reinforce the concepts and principles in a systematic way post-graduation, SCHSS has observed that IIE has managed to seep into the culture and there is a noticeably positive shift. SCHSS leadership and management truly believe in the efficacy of IIE and are exploring ideas to continue to reinforce it. Some of the ideas generated by participants include: a social media feed with principles and examples of IIE concepts; hanging affirmative IIE posters throughout the county; quarterly, management led IIE refresher courses; team building activities using the

concepts of IIE offered via webinar; and, making IIE part of the new employee orientation. SCHSS currently has storyboards posted in various buildings depicting a road to success and offering takeaway affirmations. The agency director, Jerry Huber, emails his quarterly newsletter to all staff, which includes an IIE concept or principle.

### **Efficacy**

**Quantitative:** TPI representatives were not able to provide quantitative data to support its claims that IIE has proven to be successful in helping millions of people in organizations all over the world. SCHSS is exploring methods to determine how to systematically measure and report on the impacts of IIE on the department's culture.

**Anecdotal:** Although changing the culture of an organization is a long-term proposition, SCHSS has noticed a positive shift in its culture since implementing IIE. In the fall of 2015, SCHSS staff went out on strike. SCHSS supervisors and managers report that the department recovered quickly after the strike due in part to IIE. In the past, it had taken a much longer period of time for the department to recover from a strike due to animosity and resentment between supervisors and staff, staff and management, and striking and non-striking staff. What was different upon staff re-entering the workplace after this strike was that staff were welcomed back to work by their supervisors and management, and staff who went on strike did not appear to harbor resentment toward those who chose not to strike. There was a feeling that people respected one another's decisions and trusted that they had their reasons for making the choices they did. There was a shared attitude by staff and management that everyone had to do what they had to do, without judgment or punitive consequences, and everyone went back to work together. The changes in individuals' attitudes, as well as changes in the culture, endorse respect and teamwork

and are attributed to IIE. One of the SCHSS Managers shared that since implementing IIE, the concepts and principles are becoming infused into the culture. One staff member reported that he hated IIE because it was way too “touchy feely” for him. However, his manager and coworkers have noticed a positive change in his attitude since graduating from IIE. He was known as someone who would find reasons why something could not be done, and he has now become someone who wants to figure out how to get things done.

SCHSS is confident that if the Organizational Culture Survey were to be conducted again today, it would show positive improvements in its culture as a result of implementing IIE.

## **Recommendations**

Observing the positive changes in thinking and the sense of empowerment demonstrated by participants as they progressed through the phases of IIE, it is clear that the principles and concepts of IIE are powerful and inspirational. However, some of the material and examples used are quite dated. The facilitators preface the first session by acknowledging that the videos are dated, and encourage participants to keep an open mind and focus on the bigger message of the program. The video lectures were recorded in the 1990s and some of the terminology and a handful of the examples used in the training to describe ethnicity, race, gender roles, and/or homeless individuals with substance use problems are likely to be perceived as culturally insensitive, or even offensive micro aggressions. These could undermine the credibility and efficacy of the program. Since these micro aggressions are incongruent with SFHSA’s core values, and TPI has no plan to update the training, it is recommended that SFHSA continue to explore other options. Ideally, these would include concepts and principles consistent with those of IIE and would complement the current efforts of the HSA Learning and Development

Program and the HSA Innovation Office. These efforts seek to provide professional development opportunities for staff and to help create and maintain a culture where employees find meaning and fulfillment at work as well as feel appreciated, valued, and recognized for their contributions.

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