

# **SSA Voice Videocast: County of Santa Clara's Employee Engagement Strategies for a Better Workplace**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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In today's fast-paced and ever-changing world, effective communication is more important than ever. Employee engagement is a critical aspect of organizational success. With the right approach, public sector organizations can create a work environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and committed to achieving organizational goals. The County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA) approached this challenge by implementing an innovative and unique strategy to improve employee engagement with the SSA Voice Videocast. As a result of their efforts, SSA saw

increased employee satisfaction and connectedness with the organization and agency leadership. Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) can elevate its program infrastructure by embracing virtual applications and technology to engage with staff. By doing so, they could unlock the potential to offer a program similar to the highly successful SSA Voice Videocast. Imagine the possibilities of this groundbreaking program and how it could revolutionize the SCHSD experience. It is time to step into the future and seize this opportunity.

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## Background

In 2014, the Sonoma County Human Services Department (SCHSD) began undertaking an agency-wide strategic planning process. In collaboration with Applied Survey Research, SCHSD created an Employee Readiness Survey, hosted focus groups with each division's executive, managerial, supervisory, and line staff, and interviewed external stakeholders to gauge the agency's readiness for such planning. Findings included that staff members desired more collaboration between divisions and external partners and that communication was lacking between divisions. Some groups described the department as "silos."

In response, SCHSD identified seven priorities that became the Strategic Roadmap. One of the seven priorities was focused on improving internal communication. A workgroup was formed to analyze communication gaps between peers, supervisors, and management staff. Using a Design Thinking approach (Silver & Bamford, n.d.), the workgroup identified three solutions to address inter-departmental communication shortfalls:

- "One HSD Day" was a dedicated day for all SCHSD staff to be recognized and share information about each division's services and accomplishments.
- "Division Ambassadors and Program Liaisons" was a program where selected subject matter experts would be the primary go-to for cross-divisional inquiries and present at all staff meetings on program and division-related matters.
- "MyHSDPortal" was a space each employee could develop on the SCHSD intranet that could be

personalized, where employees could self-declare their skills, abilities, and knowledge to be used beyond their current job classification.

Unfortunately, although some of these systems were received well by staff and improved communication style, they fell short as they were unidirectional and did not provide two-way communication.

This was evident in a 2023 survey completed by an SCHSD leadership program workgroup. At the request of the Director, the workgroup set out to research strategies to improve communication between staff and leadership. Survey results included 228 responses representing staff from all levels, tenure, and work assignments. The survey identified that 73% of staff do not feel well informed about what is happening with managers and leaders, and 74% do not feel communication is clear between leadership and staff.

Similarly, in late 2019, the County of Santa Clara Social Services Agency (SSA) developed data-driven strategies to improve employee engagement. SSA collected and utilized data via its Annual Employee Engagement & Well-being Survey to obtain feedback and explore the unique challenges that impact their staff's overall engagement and well-being. Areas consistently identified in the survey as needing growth and improvement were communication from leadership and staff recognition. SSA made it a priority to address this. SSA recognized that the efforts to bridge communication gaps needed to be planned and structured; these efforts would need to be supported by allocating staff and resources to build a framework on how the department would approach employee engagement.

When the COVID pandemic struck, it immediately halted the work. SSA organized a workgroup of staff from across their

agency to come together and create strategies to attend to the wellness of SSA staff during times of uncertainty. During the pandemic lockdown, many people were grappling with feelings of loneliness and detachment from the world around them. A group of SSA employees came together to brainstorm ways to stay connected despite the challenging circumstances.

At the onset, the group wondered about what they would talk about. How should they define engagement? What would they need? Who do they know that could help? How would they achieve engagement? A system was needed where the players understood their individual roles and understood the need to engage staff at all levels.

## **Santa Clara County's Approach to Employee Engagement**

SSA conducted research to help identify ways to engage employees, embodying the "Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions" by Barbara Fredrickson. Fredrickson argues that negative emotions have a way of limiting our thoughts and actions. On the other hand, when we are feeling happy or optimistic, our minds open up to a broader range of possibilities. Positive emotions allow us to tap into different ways of thinking and behaving when faced with emotional triggers. Positivity broadens our mental horizons and helps us approach life with a more flexible and adaptable mindset (Fredrickson, 2004).

According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory, positive emotions broaden thoughts and actions, allowing individuals to see new possibilities and build new skills. These positive emotions also help individuals tap into personal resources such as resilience, creativity, and social support. The more staff members experience positive emotions, the more they can build these resources, which

can help staff thrive in all areas of their lives (Fredrickson, 2004).

The Broaden-and-Build Theory was instrumental in considering how SSA could engage its staff. As a principle, leadership wanted to ensure that the result was positive in whatever way they interacted with staff. The SSA director assigned a Program Manager to lead the development of the framework. The development phase involved broad consultation with the executive team and staff in defining engagement, establishing goals, and designing strategic pillars. Leadership used aspects of implementation science; exploration and research; repurposing staff and resources; creating teams; and building relationships with communication feedback loops.

SSA identified the overarching five key pillars of the Employee Engagement and Wellness framework, which focus on the following:

- Communication
- Wellness
- Healthy relationships
- Recognition
- Professional growth and development

In support of those key pillars, SSA focused on strategies to help achieve objectives. These included SSA Voice Videocast, SSA Mentoring program, Leadership Development Program, People Powered Projects, and Speaker Series.

The SSA executive team had already started a grassroots effort to connect with staff through "roadshows." They visited departments in person to share updates and field questions. As a result, the idea emerged to create a virtual communication platform that would allow staff members to connect with the Executive Leadership Team and share thoughts, concerns, and questions

about the pandemic. The SSA workgroup saw this as an opportunity to build on.

## **SSA Voice**

The SSA Voice Videocast was created as a Virtual Webinar where SSA Executives provide updates to all staff and answer pre-submitted questions from staff. This program facilitates two-way communication and recognition and creates positive interactions to increase morale, productivity, and connection. The SSA Voice is broken into different segments or features:

- Interactive software, in particular, a tool called "Mentimeter," and interactive polling, questions, and surveys allow the meeting host to connect with the audience live and include them in the presentation.
- Announcements are used to discuss different events or activities throughout the department. SSA engages its staff with announcements by reaching out to any staff member to participate in reading the announcements; this can be pre-recorded or done live.
- Acknowledgments, through the High-5 segment, are used to appreciate and recognize staff. Acknowledgments can be done by managers, supervisors, and even colleagues.
- Special guests and programs include panel discussions with county leaders in various departments and programs.
- Dialogue with SSA Executive Leadership includes a regular interview segment with the SSA Director.

SSA leadership hoped to understand better how local practices and policies impacted employees while providing valuable insights to leadership. Leadership wanted to break down silos, create a two-way communication culture, and ensure leadership and all-staff interactions were positive. SSA leadership realized that staff needed to heal from the trauma and stress first if staff were to have the ability to help the community heal too.

The real power of SSA's engagement efforts lies in the investment in building a sustainable infrastructure that supports engagement. This involves collecting data and incorporating it into designing effective responses to findings. SSA is committed to supporting its workforce by investing in a framework and infrastructure that supports employee engagement and can foster employee development, improve client experience, and achieve long-term outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

Overall, SSA's engagement efforts are a model for any organization looking to create a culture of inclusivity and connection. SSA's approach to employee engagement is robust, diverse, and effective. The data support this conclusion. SSA analytics show that 96% of their staff are aware of the SSA Voice, 69% have participated, 93% agree that the SSA Voice is effective for communication, and 92% would recommend it to others. Additionally, a 2022 Employee Engagement and Well-Being survey showed that 79% of staff are enthusiastic about their job, and 82% intend to stay working for SSA.

As championed by the director, SSA leadership's commitment to engagement set the stage for broad buy-in and cultivated a foundation for positive interactions, feedback, and learning. SSA is seeing the fruits of this labor, with increased staff morale and improved retention. SSA is

creating an environment where staff are happy to go to work, feel valued, and are eager to serve their community.

## **Application to Sonoma County**

With the right approach, SCHSD can create a work environment where employees feel valued, motivated, and committed to achieving organizational goals. Successful employee engagement strategies include training and development opportunities, recognition and rewards for good performance, two-way communication, fair treatment, pay conditions, and health (Jha & Kumar, 2016, Fig 2.)

SCHSD has many elements already in place, similar to SSA's employee engagement strategies, including robust mentoring and coaching programs that help promote learning and development. SCHSD's Staff Development section ensures employees have training available to cultivate the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties effectively.

However, SCHSD has no formal system that promotes two-way communication where employees can share their thoughts and ideas and which can help identify and address issues proactively, as evidenced by the recent survey results that identified 73% of staff do not feel well informed about what is happening with managers and leaders, and 74% do not feel communication is clear between leadership and staff.

SCHSD does not have a position like SSA's Program Manager solely focused on Employee Engagement and Well-being. Many SCHSD staff involved in employee engagement are often pulled away due to other position responsibilities.

Although SCHSD is much smaller than SSA, it may want to consider adding a new position or reallocating an existing position

to create a resource similar to the SSA Program Manager. This position must be part of the executive leadership team to be "in the know" about what is happening throughout the department, perhaps reporting to the Assistant Director or even the Director. In this role, the Program Manager would be able to lead a workgroup and create a system or platform to establish a two-way communication program. The Program Manager would need the right capabilities to manage employee interactions. These qualities include respect, responsibility, being proactive, participative, sociable, understanding, and empathy (Jha & Kumar, 2016).

One positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that society has moved the needle in adopting applications such as Zoom or MS Teams as tools for organizational communication. These would be options to replicate a scaled-down version of the SSA Voice in SCHSD. The program could start with an interactive poll to set the tone of the meeting by engaging staff and being inclusive. However, the focus should be a "Dialogue with the Director," as this is the leading segment where staff can connect with their leaders, where two-way communication can happen to discuss and work through complicated and sensitive subjects impacting staff.

## **Conclusion**

SSA's Employee Engagement efforts have succeeded, as evidenced by the impressive survey response results. Many critical components led to their success; however, it all started with Executive leadership buy-in. The SSA Director recognized that their efforts to create a positive work environment would not be consistent if they did not prioritize an employee engagement program and provide sufficient staffing and resources to support the work needed to research and



implement the necessary changes to improve the work culture.

SSA hired a Program Manager to oversee the work—someone who could focus on creating a comprehensive employee engagement program framework. This manager could plan and coordinate the event; form a workgroup; dive into the survey data; talk to staff about their experiences; take the time to envision future messaging topics and speakers; and ultimately write the script for the SSA Voice. A dedicated resource and systematic approach ensure the messaging is consistent, reliable, and vetted.

In conclusion, SCHSD can increase employee engagement and inclusivity by promoting a positive workplace culture through a two-way communication system like the SSA Voice. However, to be successful, this needs to have the support of executive leadership. The proper staffing and resources must be allocated to build and sustain a program like the SSA Voice, a system that can bring all engagement elements together. Otherwise, the department may continue to struggle with employee engagement.

SCHSD leadership is in the ideal time to move employee engagement up the priority ladder as it builds a new strategic vision for the organization. A program like this can contribute to the new mission, vision, and values as it has proven to help break down barriers and biases and promote a sense of community among employees. It can help HSD create a more positive work environment where employees want to come to work, are engaged, and feel included, which can lead to tremendous success in the long run.

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