

Taking Leadership Development to the Next Level

FLORANTE LAPITAN

The City and County of San Francisco

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many organizations often find it difficult to fill leadership positions with the right person. With approximately 2,500 employees and only 1% in leadership positions within the City and County of San Francisco's Human Services Agency (SFHSA), there is an urgency to have qualified candidates readily available to fill leadership roles that are vacated by retirements and turnovers. SFHSA has a mentorship program that works toward helping employees develop leadership skills. In Sonoma County's Human Services Department, leadership development programs that include the Mentor Project and the Emerging Leader Track (ELT) were created to support existing employees in their journey to become leaders. The ELT, in particular, has helped take their employees to the next level of leadership development.

Implementing an ELT at SFHSA to complement the existing mentorship program will help the agency's employees to become better-prepared leaders. ELT was developed with five program objectives: (1) continuous improvement, (2) employee commitment and engagement, (3) improve current performance, (4) build relationships, and (5) build leadership at all levels. The trainings are relevant, engaging, and rigorous – illustrating real-world scenarios and current trends in social services and leadership. With the use of a program like ELT, the Mentorship Program at SFHSA can be complemented with trainings and activities that will help to drive leadership development. In doing so, SFHSA can build more diverse leaders, promote equity within the agency, boost morale among the employees and retain great workers.

Florante Lapitan, Section Manager,
San Francisco Human Services Agency

Introduction

Is it better to develop leaders from within an organization or hire from the outside? Many organizations often find it difficult to fill leadership positions with the right person who will have the experience, skills, and knowledge required to successfully manage and lead departments, programs, or teams of employees. While many existing employees within an organization are skilled in their current positions, many are not ready or may not have the ability to lead. On the other hand, hiring from outside the organization may produce a larger pool of experienced candidates with proven leadership but candidates may lack the know-how of the organization's daily operations, culture, and built-in relationships that is needed to succeed. Within the City and County of San Francisco's Human Services Agency (SFHSA), a mentorship program through the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging was developed to "support and invest in staff's long-term career plans by cultivating meaningful development experiences for future leaders of SFHSA," (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2022). This beneficial program is a great step toward helping employees develop leadership skills by working directly with a mentor who provides coaching, career advice, and practical learning opportunities. In Sonoma County's Human Services Department, leadership development programs that include the Mentor Project and the Emerging Leader Track (ELT) were created to support existing employees in their journey to become leaders. The ELT, in particular, has helped take their employees to the next level of leadership development.

Background

Mentorship programs provide professional development opportunities as well as avenues for individuals to learn more about

what it takes to be successful in different positions within an organization. The goal of which is to increase individual job satisfaction and commitment to the organization while better preparing individuals for future opportunities. The SFHSA has implemented a mentoring program to address the need for leadership development with the goal of increasing equity in the hiring process and improving workplace culture. With approximately 2,500 positions within SFHSA, about 63% make up non-management positions, 20% are supervisory staff, 3% are program managers, and 1% are in leadership and program director positions. This small percentage of leadership and program directors creates an urgency for the agency to have qualified candidates readily available to fill leadership positions that are vacated by retirements and turnovers. To create the pool of candidates that qualify for these leadership positions, a program like Sonoma County's ELT could prove to be beneficial as a complement to SFHSA's Mentorship Program.

In 2012, the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) successfully developed and implemented the Mentor Project to "foster developmental knowledge transfer and skill development as increasing numbers of HSD staff become eligible to retire" (Sonoma County Human Services Department). The program uses a group mentoring model that matches mentors with mentees based on their positions, skill sets, and shared perspectives. The program's goals are to increase employee job satisfaction, increase employee commitment to the department, prepare employees to fill vacancies in leadership positions created due to retirements, and improve job performance in current positions. The program was found to be successful based on measurements that were developed in two main areas: (1)

increased job satisfaction and (2) commitment to the department. With the success of the Mentor Project, HSD created the ELT in 2013 to “prepare emerging leaders to take on positions with increasingly more responsibilities” (Sonoma County Human Services Department, 2021).

Emerging Leader Track

The Emerging Leader Track (ELT) was developed with five program objectives: (1) continuous improvement, (2) employee commitment and engagement, (3) improve current performance, (4) build relationships, and (5) build leadership at all levels. The framework includes cohorts consisting of all work levels of HSD employees. The cohorts are Level 1 – Individual Contributor Role, Level 2 – Supervisory and Management Role, and Level 3 – Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Program (EDP). Level 1 is open to non-supervisory employees, Level 2 is for those in a supervisory or management role (or those holding a position of higher responsibility than an individual contributor), and Level 3 is primarily for those in a management role who aspire to lead at the senior management or the executive level. The number of participant slots are representative of the percentage of all employees in each division to allow for a diverse group of individuals with a fair opportunity to participate.

The application and selection process involves full-time employees completing an interest form in either the Individual Contributor or Supervisor/Manager level. On the interest form, applicants can select their level based on their position within the department, which is then reviewed by the Division Director, Manager, and/or Supervisor. Each division’s leadership makes the final decision on ELT participant selection, taking into account characteristics

that positively represent HSD, such as being an engaged learner with motivation to develop leadership skills that will benefit the department, aiming for personal growth, motivated to share ideas, and having the dedication to moving the department’s mission, current initiatives, and Racial Equity efforts forward.

The ELT offers trainings that are relevant, engaging, and rigorous – illustrating real-world scenarios and current trends in social services and leadership. Both Level 1 and Level 2 are 11-month programs that include six to seven trainings. Over the period of 11 months, the Individual Contributor and Supervisory and Management cohorts are provided the opportunity to experience trainings together to encourage relationship building and support among the cohort members. ELT requires participants to also complete a project or conduct presentations. Project teams consist of four to five individuals focusing on team deliverables that can include things like creating an Action Plan, developing a Project Charter, or presenting to an audience of managers, directors, and colleagues. The teams are supported by a Subject Matter Expert and a Project Sponsor.

Additionally, the ELT has a Program Information Exchange component where participants are able to explore another HSD program that would be of interest. Two participants from different programs or divisions are partnered up to interview each other or a program representative. Participants learn and gain insight into the different aspects of the program, including benefits, challenges, outcomes, and future plans. A one-to-two page paper is developed after the visit that outlines what was learned, and participants present their findings in class with their cohort.

In addition to trainings and program information exchanges, the ELT also offers career development activities through periodic guest speakers from Human Resources, representatives from different job classes requested by cohort members, informational interviews, and one-on-one shadowing. Such activities encourage participants to be active in planning their growth and career development within HSD.

Finally, a key component of the ELT is the use of leadership competencies to guide participants in their professional and personal growth. HSD is utilizing the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Leadership Competencies to “serve as a north star” and to be used as a baseline for participants to assess their strengths and skill gaps thereby helping to form their action plan for growth. Each competency is defined, includes learning objectives, and is assigned to each training and activity.

ELT’s success is evaluated through feedback and suggestions from participants who have completed the program. The trainings use pre-, mid-, and post-surveys to measure the impact of the program on staff and to collect information on how to improve the program in the future. Previous surveys from ELT participants have shown that the program helped to increase staff satisfaction and “feelings of being ready to work in a leadership role” for HSD.

With the use of a program like Sonoma County Human Services Department’s ELT, the Mentorship Program at SFHSA can be complemented with trainings and activities that will help to take leadership development to the next level. In doing so, SFHSA can build more diverse leaders while promoting equity within the agency and boosting morale among the employees to retain great workers. ELT can help build relationships and foster teamwork through the projects

and activities that participants complete. The exchange of information between programs can be beneficial to SFHSA’s effort to integrate and improve a “no wrong door” policy as program participants become aware of the different programs and divisions within SFHSA. Finally, the use of leadership competencies in guiding participants to create their own personal career development plan would provide a more structured and clear path for employees to follow as they aspire to become leaders within the agency.

Recommendations and Considerations

Sonoma County HSD’s ELT can be replicated or adapted by SFHSA. The structure of the program and its components can easily be developed and implemented as part of the agency’s leadership development program offerings. The program can sit under SFHSA’s Learning and Organizational Development (L&OD) because of the existing staff, resources, and infrastructure for training already in place. The program will require a minimal budget for staff and operations as the program can leverage existing resources within L&OD. Prior to the implementation of this program, appropriate messaging and awareness would be crucial to gaining buy-in from employees. Introducing the importance and value of leadership development to program leaders, including managers and supervisors, is key to a successful program implementation that will allow employees the time and support needed to participate while they are away from their daily work activities.

The program should incorporate racial equity in its components by centering topics for projects and activities on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, and including members of SFHSA’s Racial

Equity Work Group (REWG) in the panel of career development speakers. The trainings can be conducted in a hybrid model utilizing in-person and virtual or online modes of instruction to allow for flexibility in participation. The selection process for this program can be the same as Sonoma County's ELT, which uses an interest form for every cohort level and allots a set number of slots for each cohort based on the number of employees in each program. While completing the mentorship program is not mandatory to be eligible for this track, individuals who have completed the mentorship program can continue to build on the experience and knowledge gained from that program.

Finally, the program can follow an 11-month track, allowing cohorts to meet three times together to build relationships and encourage support among each other. The use of an Individual Career Development Plan with competencies focused on relevant key performance indicators will provide participants with a clear and necessary roadmap to follow after completion of the track. To evaluate the impact and success on leadership development within SFHSA, the program should continue to follow alumni to track career growth in addition to using pre-, mid-, and post-surveys to measure outcomes.

Conclusion

The use of a leadership development program like Sonoma County HSD's ELT as a complement to SFHSA's Mentorship Program can help build leaders within an organization to fill vacancies due to turnovers and retirements while retaining great employees. The ELT program uses training and activities that expose individuals to real-world scenarios and trends within leadership in social services to help employees build the skills and

knowledge they need to be successful leaders. ELT is replicable and requires minimal funding to implement as existing resources within L&OD can be leveraged. With the use of surveys and follow-up on program alumni, impacts on leadership development, employee satisfaction, and career growth can be measured and used for continuous improvement.

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