

# **The Emerging Leader Track— A Social Services Model for Leadership Development**

**SEAN KILGER**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As retirements become more common, public agencies are quickly losing institutional knowledge and, with it, operational consistency and stability. At the same time, legislative and economic uncertainty is pressuring California social services agencies—many of which are still recovering from the Great Recession—to remain lean, leaving few resources for staff development. Furthermore, the realities of external socio-economic pressures are negatively impacting recruitment and retention efforts for many Bay Area public agencies.

Analysis of a Sonoma County model suggests that leadership development programs may lead to higher quality recruitments and improved employee retention. Additionally, such programs can provide a formal structure for institutional knowledge-transfer, thereby minimizing transition-induced operational disruptions and potentially improving operational efficiency and employee effectiveness. Based on these kinds of outcomes, this study proposes a leadership development program pilot for the San Mateo County Human Services Agency.

---

**Sean Kilger**, Management Analyst, Budget and Performance, Human Services Agency, San Mateo County



# The Emerging Leader Track— A Social Services Model for Leadership Development

SEAN KILGER

## Sonoma County: The Path to The Emerging Leader Track

### *Introduction: Moving the Needle on Employee Engagement*

In 2008, the results of an employee engagement survey revealed that job satisfaction at Sonoma County HSD was tempered by a perceived absence of opportunity to learn, grow, and develop professionally. In response, a team of managers was assembled to “move-the-needle” on employee engagement, improve agency morale, and retain quality people through meaningful development opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

This endeavor would later inspire a group of volunteers to join a specialized, multi-departmental taskforce, known as the Leadership Development Workgroup, or LDW. Guided by agency managers and HSD’s Staff Development unit, the taskforce tackled increasingly challenging issues: developing innovative and impactful programs and policies, building performance measures and evaluation methods, incorporating a continual improvement model, and building a foundation of trust and support with employees and leadership.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Mentor Project*

In 2013, as the issue of employee retirement continued to grow, LDW and Staff Development launched the Mentor Project, a 3-month professional development program based on a Group Mentoring model by Triple Creek Associates (now known as River<sup>3</sup>).

In the Sonoma County model, selected employees met in groups of two to four with their chosen mentors – usually a director or manager – for a few hours a month. Participants developed career plans, designed innovative projects, and learned how to see the agency from a leadership perspective.<sup>4</sup>

LDW helped to mitigate the administrative burden of the Mentor Project by handling communications, scheduling meetings, identifying and preparing potential mentors, and leading introductory panels where potential mentees engaged with potential mentors to meet and ask questions. This collaboration allowed HSD and Staff Development to focus its efforts on outcome measures and quality assurance data, which would later support the implementation of the Emerging Leader Track (ELT).<sup>5</sup>

### *Mentor Project – The Results*

By 2014, LDW and Staff Development had succeeded in creating a brand that was universally recognized as something good, both for the agency and its employees. Project participants gained invaluable knowledge from the mentorship experience, which they then applied in their current roles. At the same time, leaders and staff benefited from the improved skill-sets of departmental managers and supervisors, as well as the higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment exhibited by employees.

For example, the results of a before-and-after survey showed that, on average, Mentor Project participants reported a 15% to 20% increase in job

1. Conner, Francine and Kiergan Pegg (2018), In-Person Interview

2. Conner and Pegg (2018)

3. <https://www.riversoftware.com/company/about-us>

4. *Mentor Project Process Outline*, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development

5. Conner and Pegg (2018)

**FIGURE 1:**  
**The Five Levels of Sonoma County HSDs**  
**“Emerging Leader Track”**

- **Level 1, “Highly Capable Individual”:** Foundation for future skills development. Courses include: introductory supervision, self-management, emotional intelligence, and professional etiquette. Guided tours of the agency help employees understand their role in broader context. Employees participate in the Inspiration Lab (I-Lab), a project that improves strategic and critical thinking skills.
- **Level 2, “Contributing Team Leader”:** Team-oriented supervisory skills. Courses include: performance management, training, facilitation, documentation, change management, stress management, problem solving, and collaboration.
- **Level 3, “Competent Manager”:** Structuring people and resources to achieve desired outcomes. Courses include: operation & strategic planning; critical thinking; project management; finance, procurement and agenda items; and political acumen. Employees revisit change management and complete an advanced edition of the I-Lab.
- **Level 4, “Effective Leader”:** Divided into two sections, 4A and 4B. Courses include: coaching, teambuilding and development, communication, workforce empowerment, and effective presentations.
- **Level 5, “Level 5 Leader”:** Self-directed development and training.

Source: *ELT Program Outline*, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development

satisfaction and agency commitment. In other words, not only did participants feel valued by the agency, they valued the agency itself.<sup>6</sup> Despite the success of the Mentor Project, leadership development also required formal training in areas such as labor relations, procurement and contracts, or strategic and operational planning. Soon thereafter, LDW and Staff Development proposed the ELT.

### *The Emerging Leader Track*

ELT began as a pilot program, designed to “provide younger staff with opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and experience it will take to sustain quality services.”<sup>7</sup> Using the initial feedback and data analysis from 15 participants, Staff Development refined the curriculum and, over several years, slowly expanded the program. As of 2017, ELT had grown to a maximum of five separate training levels,

providing a clear path for continual and formative leadership development (See *Figure 1*).<sup>8</sup>

To be selected for ELT, all interested and eligible employees must submit an Interest Form. An employee is considered eligible if they: (a) are no longer on probation, (b) intend to pursue a career in human services within the State of California, and (c) possess the interest and aptitude to assume a leadership position at any level. Directors review the Interest Forms and, with input from other leaders, each select up to five participants for each of the five levels (with a maximum of 25 participants per director). After selection, the nominations are cleared with supervisors and managers.<sup>9</sup> Employees are selected for each level based on their “readiness”; someone with the right mix of experience and character that suggests they will apply themselves to the training and practice what they learn. It should also be noted that no trainees are automatically advanced

6. *Mentor Project Participant Survey*, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development

7. *ELT Project Charter*, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development

8. *Conner and Pegg (2018)*

9. *ELT Process Outline*, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development



to the next level – everyone must re-apply each year to be considered for the program.<sup>10</sup>

### *ELT – the Outcomes*

As with the Mentor Project, ELT appears to improve employee job satisfaction and leadership readiness. In its second year of the program, 33% of existing ELT participants were promoted internally, compared to 24% of non-participants. In its third year, 45% of ELT participants were promoted, compared to 19% of non-participants.<sup>11</sup> Although it is not clear to what degree ELT is responsible for the disparity, anecdotal evidence suggests that program participants are coveted for their skills and aptitude. For example, ELT requires employees to develop improvement projects and present them to leadership; thus far, several projects have been adopted and a few are currently being implemented.<sup>12</sup>

HSD Staff Development is currently working to identify other suitable performance measures for the program, but the number of annual applications suggests that employees believe in the benefits. For example, some employees may apply for 2 to 3 years before finally being accepted into the program; some may not be accepted at all. Ultimately, it is about choosing employees that exhibit the right mix of qualities and demonstrate commitment to social services.<sup>13</sup>

### **Developing a Pilot Program for San Mateo County**

Today, San Mateo County invests heavily in professional development for its employees. However, within the agency itself, leaders recognize a growing need for a formal professional development program that speaks to the unique qualities of social services. Concerted efforts are currently underway to establish leadership development programs within HSA, but these programs are largely department-specific.

This means that there is an opportunity to establish a more universal, “one-size-fits-all” model that provides employees with a broader perspective and builds a foundation for greater cross-departmental collaboration.

However, there are a few hurdles to developing a one-size-fits-all program, due to the current structure of staff development activity in San Mateo County. First, HSA’s Staff Development team currently develops and offers program training for social services personnel, but leadership trainings are currently offered through County Human Resources or contracted training services. If San Mateo County’s model relies too heavily upon training contracts or county-wide trainers, it will be difficult to ensure that the material speaks to the structure, purpose, and challenges that are unique to the agency. Second, Sonoma County’s model provides opportunities for leaders to interact with the trainees, deepening the connection between the agency and each employee. If HSA were to solely utilize external trainers, the agency may not achieve the same impact on employee engagement. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Sonoma County model was developed by an engaged taskforce that helped to design and implement each project. HSA does not have a similar, centralized taskforce that can absorb the administrative burden.

### *The HSA Pilot*

In order for HSA to develop a one-size-fits-all model, it will need to achieve the same milestones as Sonoma County, but with a slightly different trajectory. Therefore, the best option for HSA is to test the waters with a pilot program, similar to ELT, but on a slightly smaller scale.

HSA’s pilot should, over a period of three to four months, offer eight to ten full-day sessions to a multi-departmental group of 12 to 15 participants. Participants should be limited to employees in good standing that demonstrate a desire to lead and a commitment to social services. To properly assess the program, participants must be given the time and

10. Conner and Pegg (2018)

11. LDW Presentation, courtesy of Sonoma County HSD Staff Development

12. Conner and Pegg (2018)

13. Conner and Pegg (2018)

**FIGURE 2:  
Resources for SMC-HSA Pilot**

- **Trainers and Facilitators:** Determined by the curriculum. Options include County Human Resources, contracted services, and HSA leaders/trainers/subject matter experts. (Staff Development)
- **Facilities:** Identify a centralized area with projector/TV screens and full-day availability. (Staff Development & Facilities Admin.)
- **Training Supplies:** Will vary depending on training subject, frequency, and materials provided. This will largely be determined by the curriculum. (Staff Development and selected trainers)
- **Lunch:** Providing food ensures that staff can spend their time networking, rather than driving. In-house VRS Catering services can be used, providing revenue for client employment and training programs. (Admin. & Clerical support)
- **Technical Support:** Staff Dev/BSG (data/resources), Fiscal (funding)
- **Admin & Clerical Support:** Could be delegated to Staff Development, a volunteer taskforce, a clerical pool, or departmental staff

freedom to participate fully, without fear of added stress or overwork. Failing to do so could negatively impact participant feedback, or worse, other agency staff may see leadership development as a source of pain and discomfort, rather than an opportunity to grow and promote. Therefore, rather than make the pilot mandatory, directors are encouraged to opt-in at their discretion.

Below are several key steps to developing and implementing the pilot. Although they are numbered, these items could potentially be developed simultaneously:

#### **STEP 1: IDENTIFY AVAILABLE RESOURCES**

*Figure 2* includes a list of resources that must be identified and the team(s) suited for the task.

#### **STEP 2: DEVELOP THE CURRICULUM**

Over 2 to 3 months, Staff Development will utilize existing training resources and examples to develop courses that build a foundation on which future, more advanced training can be built. Courses should focus on technical training, institutional knowledge, supervisory skills. Participants should be encouraged to think critically, beyond their individual roles, and

consider how departments, programs, and services interact and impact one another.

#### **STEP 3: ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL ACTIVITIES**

Designated administrative and clerical support staff will order and prepare training materials. Using examples from the Sonoma County program, support staff will develop and distribute interest forms to identify eligible participants for the pilot. The window for application should last two to four weeks. After collecting interest forms, directors will then have the opportunity to select the participants. Ideally, directors will notify a potential employee's supervisor and manager before finalizing the decision. Once participants are selected, support will schedule trainings, reserve facilities and secure Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) catering for on-site lunches.

#### **STEP 4: IDENTIFY PERFORMANCE MEASURES AND DEVELOP EVALUATION TOOLS**

Borrowing from other-county examples, the Staff Development department will work with HSA leaders and analysts to develop performance measures

and evaluation tools, such as participant pre- and post-surveys, employee data, course evaluations, and other metrics. Ideally, individual participant data should be tracked and compared to non-participants. Human Resources and IT can provide support for employee data tracking and data management systems, respectively.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to conduct a post-pilot survey with managers and supervisors to determine if (a) there was an observable difference in the performance of the participant(s); and (b) if the participants' absences to attend the trainings resulted in any significant disruptions to program operations or service delivery. In future years, managers and supervisors should examine employee engagement survey data to determine if divisions or departments see improvements that could be attributed to the program.

#### **STEP 5: COMMUNICATE THE RESULTS AND INCORPORATE FEEDBACK**

An official report-out is a crucial and necessary step in ensuring the long-term success of any program. Once the pilot is completed, performance measures and evaluation tools will be summarized in a presentation to agency directors and managers, providing an opportunity for feedback on the program. A determination can then be made to continue the program and what adjustments, if any, should be made.

#### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to extend my gratitude to Sonoma County staff for their hospitality; Francine Conner and Kiergan Pegg, for their time, effort, and commitment to this program; Nicole Pollack and Clarisa Simon, for their invaluable knowledge, guidance, and support; Jacinta Arteaga and Marnita Garcia-Fulle, for encouraging me to enter this program and for providing much needed professional and emotional support; my fiancée, family, and friends, for their unfailing love, patience, and understanding; and lastly, the esteemed educators and administrators who make BASSC possible. It has been a pleasure and an honor to be part of this program.