

# **Unit Based Teams in Santa Clara County Linking Core Values to Productivity and Partnership**

**GEOFFREY GAY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The process of continuous quality improvement (CQI) has long been used in the private sector to improve productivity and increase accountability in the workplace. The concept of decentralizing authority and placing it within in the hands of those who do the work has proven successful in many different workplace arenas. The County of Santa Clara has uniquely borrowed concepts from QCI and have developed Unit Based Teams (UBTs) in

both their Social Service and Health and Hospital departments. The results of the UBT process have improved communication, fostered accountability, developed trust and empowered the county's workforce to stay engaged with their work by remaining engaged as employees. UBTs have much to offer the public sector in "road mapping" the purpose of their work to agency values, vision, mission, and strategic plan.

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## Introduction

The concept of Continuous Quality Improvement has fed accountability and productivity into the private sector for well more than a half a century. Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is defined as the process of cultivating an environment that improves quality and performance. CQI promotes teamwork and the decentralization of operational procedures by suggesting that those who are doing the work may be better equipped at defining and creating operational procedures than those who actually lead the organization.

This case study presents an illustration of the evolvment and inception of performance improvement processes and their uniqueness in public sector social service programs in Santa Clara County. This case study evaluates how Unit Based Teams are utilized to create trust, accountability, productivity and self-driven leadership in typical county-administered social service programs. In addition, UBTs allow agencies to remain “road mapped” to their strategic plan, vision, mission, and core values, especially when implementing or considering revision of policies and procedures or fulfilling state programmatic mandates.

## Development of Unit Based Teams in Santa Clara County

The County of Santa Clara is made of up 1290 square miles. It is home to nearly 2 million people, with approximately 52% of residents speaking a primary language other than English. The median price of a home is \$1,163,000, and the median household income is just slightly over \$100,000. Currently

there are an estimated 9.3% of individuals living in poverty, and approximately 7,300 people who are homeless. 87% of the population has a high school diploma and 49% of the population has a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Santa Clara County first utilized a UBT model in their Health and Hospitals system in 2005 by adopting UBT models previously used in the Kaiser Permanente healthcare system. Amy Carta, Director of Special Projects and Public Relations in Santa Clara, reports that Unit Based Teams are all about promoting trust and employee engagement, while at the same time allowing employees to develop leadership skills and decentralize authority through buy-in.

The implementation and success of UBTs has led to further implementation in other county departments, with the most recent account being in Santa Clara County Social Service Agency (SSA). Unit Based Teams in Santa Clara County Social Service Agency are relatively new with their original inception taking place as little as 18 months ago. Santa Clara County Social Services is comprised of 2,911 staff and consists of four different divisions that include: Administration or Agency Office (AO), the Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS), the Department of Employment and Benefit Services (DEBS) and the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS). Approximately 50% of the SSA workforce is found in DEBS, with an additional 25% in DFCS and the remaining 25% almost equally divided between the AO and DAAS. The Budget for SSA in 2018 is \$722 million.

**FIGURE 1**  
**UBT Values Compass**



### The Process of Unit Based Teams

Unit Based Teams have been helpful in SSA, as they allow employees to identify issues that may stand in the way of productivity. UBTs in SSA are typically led jointly by a manager and front-line staff. The team works together to define the issue and develop ideas for improvement. Often, ideas are tested on a small scale before broader implementation. Typically, a UBT works closely together to share their ideas as a team, and a need for a UBT may focus on day-to-day operations, client services, quality, and efficiency. The UBT process mirrors SSA's agency vision that consists of customer focus, empower & engagement, and innovation. When asking any SSA employee about the UBT process one is first oriented to the UBT compass (see *Figure 1*).

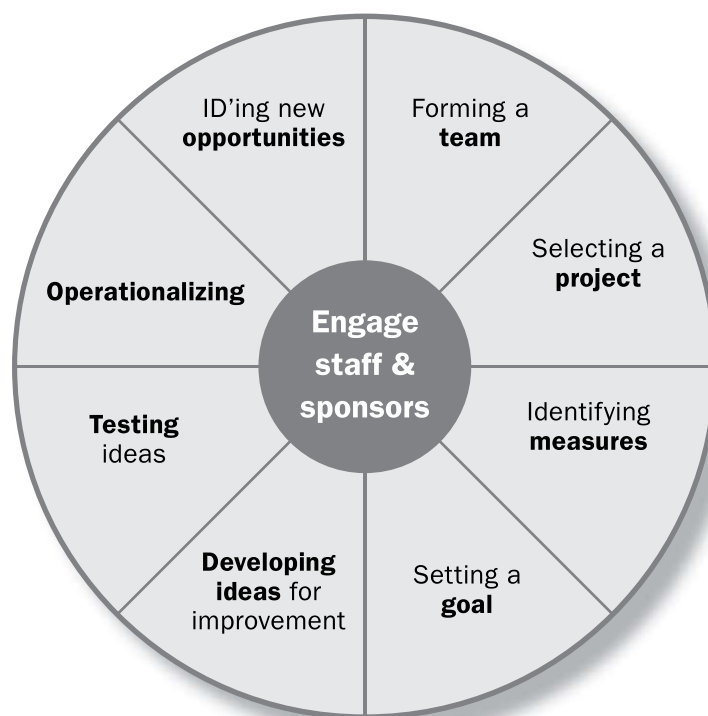
The UBT compass is noted as a visual reminder to staff of SSA's mission and the agency's strategic plan, and is further defined as the Strategic Road Map. The creation of a UBT is an example of CQI in action and promotes a model more closely aligned with horizontal-management, as opposed to more traditional or classical forms of top-down management.

When employees decide to develop a UBT, there are specific roles consisting of team members, co-leads, and sponsors, with each group having their specific role and their role together within the team. The role of team members includes completing a UBT training, attending UBT meetings, support working agreements, and working collaboratively with other team members. Co-leads advocate for labor and management collaboration, troubleshoot when appropriate, make off-line decisions when needed, keep records and prepare for meetings and discussion as needed.

Often, co-leads consist of both a union shop steward, a lead staff member, and a supervisor or manager. The UBT is then sponsored by executive team members who further support labor and management collaboration and authorize and legitimize the team's commitment for change. Sponsors may also allocate resources needed to promote the UBT's success. There are seven steps required to form a UBT: 1) Form a team; 2) Select a project; 3) Identify measures; 4) Set a goal; 5) Develop ideas for improvement; 6) Test ideas; and 7) Operationalize. Potential UBTs and sponsors can visualize this process



**FIGURE 2**  
**Process Determination Wheel**



using the Process Determination Wheel as seen in *Figure 2*.

Teams that have decided to form a UBT will bring their ideas to a cohort meeting and, with the assistance of facilitators and consultants, will develop a specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) goal. The process of developing a SMART goal starts with addressing an actional item that the team wants to change. For example, to consolidate Cal-Fresh application forms from several forms to one consolidated form. The team then decides how they will measure this goal and if the goal is achievable, realistic and can be time-bound (i.e. solved in 90 days or less). Cohort Meetings foster an environment of employee engagement with the development and sharing of SMART goals. Facilitators and consultants alike offer feedback and assistance with developing meaningful goals. All levels of the organization are encouraged to participate in these meetings, hence further fostering employee

engagement, in an attempt to identify barriers and problems, such as the time needed to resolve an issue, develop a process, or identify any barriers that may relate to labor contract issues. When an idea for a UBT team is formulated, the team will bring their UBT idea to a Steering Committee for formal approval. The Steering Committee may be comprised of line staff, executive team members, managers and representatives from labor who remain neutral but have the authority for authorization.

The steering committee assists in facilitating the identification of the purpose, guiding principles, and responsibilities, as well as cultivating membership from various roles of the organization. Once a UBT is established, teams, leads, and sponsors meet for what is known as a 'report out'. A 'report out' includes team members involved and vested in the UBT process. UBTs prepare and organize three-minute presentations on their UBT process. The 'report out' process allows all UBTs to collaborate on

problem-solving and assist in developing SMART goals, tracking data, and engaging others in their department. In the County of Santa Clara, there are an estimated 200 employees participating in the UBT process.

During a ‘report out’ session, it is easy to see how each UBT has developed their focus and that no two teams are alike or run parallel in their formation; however, it is worth noting that each team is equipped with the same framework and will utilize the Performance Improvement Wheel by beginning anywhere on the diagram as they move forward in this process. For example, during a report-out session on March 28, 2018, a Cal-Fresh Unit in DEBS created a UBT to develop ideas for process improvement as to reduce the number of errors on Cal Fresh applications. The team developed a SMART goal to increase their accuracy rate. In an attempt to track data and begin to measure their level of accuracy, the UBT plans to develop a Survey Monkey to begin a process of engagement with other staff members and further identify issues that impede accuracy with CalFresh applications.

A UBT from DFCS offered another example of improving customer service. The UBT’s project focus was to create a successful event for the public to explain the programs within DFCS. The team was focused on setting a goal, compiling data with statistics, and deciding on which data are most relevant. The group pointed out that they were starting their UBT by identifying problems and not solutions. The group also illustrated their engagement activities as targeting further UBT recruitment in various classifications in their department, marketing UBTs on common bulletin boards, meeting with their sponsors, and having regular check-ins with other team members.

### **What Unit Based Teams Have to Offer**

The process of developing and implementing Unit Based Teams can be offered as a tool to further develop an organization’s efficacy to improve production, efficiency and accountability. However, the most important aspect of UBTs is what they create

for an organization. In interviewing members from executive team, UBT processes are often associated with the words, “trust,” “buy-in,” and “communication.” More importantly, the UBT process fosters engagement at all levels of the organization.

Leslie Crowell, Deputy County Executive of Santa Clara County, offered some insight and perspective to the Unit Based Team’s process after a ‘report-out’ session on March 28th, 2018. Crowell explained that the concept of UBTs came to Santa Clara County via the labor movement, and was met with some level of resistance given the fear of the unknown. Crowell further explained that union representatives would offer supportive “roadshows” to various departments and staff as a mechanism of marketing the UBT process to fellow union members, which increased popularity and essentially became a process that was driven largely in part by labor and union staff. Crowell feels that the UBT process allows teams to get information in creative ways, and at times have created videos or vignettes that illustrate the needs of a department or the needs of a client. Per Crowell, the County of Santa Clara pays approximately \$200,000 a year to contract with Ann Nicholson and Associates to support the UTB process.

The cost of this contract is split between Santa Clara County SSA and Health and Hospitals. Although the County of Santa Clara has not tracked the impact of UBTs on a large scale, they are currently measuring success by collecting data, administering surveys, encouraging employee engagement, and reviewing the process in after-action reviews to further determine if the process is effective. Crowell values the UBT process as it is putting meaning into the work that is being done, decentralizing managerial control, creating employee “cachet” and serving as an antidote to “learned helplessness” in the workplace.

### **The UBT Process in Marin County**

Leadership in the County of Marin prides itself with a strong set of values and diversity in the workplace. Departments offer multigenerational diversity and

various skill levels from different educational backgrounds and life experiences. The County of Marin relies on the core values of respect, trust, integrity, diversity, equality, accountability, innovation, collaboration, and excellence.

The county's Vision is "working together to become a more responsive government," while the county's mission is "to become more adaptive organization where we encourage engagement, learning and leadership at all levels." In addition, the county has defined their areas of focus as diversity, inclusion, innovation, change, growth, development, and communication. The purpose of this case study was to illustrate the UBT process to a county that is looking to establish leadership at all levels, as readily defined in Kimsey-House's book *Co-Active Leadership*. This case study has illustrated an adaptable model to increase productivity, accountability, transparency, and employee engagement in their work. In many ways, the UBT process promotes a tangible and workable model that is directly congruent to County of Marin's vision, mission, core-values, and the strategic plan.

In Santa Clara County, the UBT process has created a continuum of transparency and communication from executive leadership to line staff in regard to decentralizing control of work processes and sponsoring line-staff and managers alike to proactively engage in problem definition and create equitable solutions aimed at improved efficiency, productivity, development, inclusion, and innovation. In Santa Clara County, with buy-in, the UBT process has led not only to process improvement but has increased morale within the context of personal empowerment. In addition, the UBT process has offered a set of solutions to county management and labor, as both entities work together to develop solutions and improve processes in their workforce.

The UBT process is relatively simple to embrace, and observance and understanding of this model is essential to its success and implementation in an organization. The case study recommends that various stakeholders (i.e. executive team, managers,

supervisors and line staff) in Marin County Health and Human Services travel to Santa Clara County to observe the UBT process by attending steering committee, cohort and report-out meetings to see the overall efficacy this model produces at all levels, and divisions participating in this performance improvement process. The County of Santa Clara has been gracious in offering information on their implementation process and would likely continue to share and collaborate with Marin Health and Human Services. This case study proposes a six-month to one-year pilot program specifically within the Employment Services/CalWORKS division or any other division or unit interested in participating.

This pilot program would initially come at little to no cost to the County of Marin, providing that Santa Clara County would allow HHS stakeholders the opportunity to attend UBT facilitator training sessions along with Santa Clara County personnel. Stakeholders could then identify how to implement a UBT process in specifically defined units interested in participating in this process. Stakeholders would then provide a potential evaluation to the executive team on the planning and implementation, and review its impact on productivity, efficiency, and morale and how they correlate to Marin County's strategic plan, values, and commitment to become a more responsive local government. If successful, wider implementation could be considered along with a cost-benefit analysis on a projected cost to hire consultants and adopt UBT processes into our County government system.

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