

Unit Based Teams Increasing Employee Engagement

ANNIE BARRETT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social service departments are under constant pressure to maintain accuracy of regulations and initiatives for a growing population and improve the client experience while staying within the constraints of the allocated budget. When the demand is higher than the supply and adding additional resources is not a viable solution, Unit Based Teams (UBT) allows opportunity to identify and improve on those performance gaps. Quick fixes in day-to-day work established by the UBTs allow more time and resources to be dedicated to 'bigger picture' issues. UBTs will not resolve all demands but is a process that has been proven to increase

productivity and employee engagement. UBTs allow line staff and managers to explore and collaborate on improving efficiency, quality and customer service through operational change. These changes provide an opportunity for better practices, better customer experience, and more engaged staff, thereby increasing job satisfaction and creating higher performers. This process is valuable in an environment that conveys expectations to do more with less.

"Great things in business are never done by one person; they're done by a team of people."

—Steve Jobs

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Introduction

Federal budgetary cuts to social services programs impact county offices' ability to provide top-quality customer service within the constraints of the budget. Contra Costa County, amongst other counties, has been forced to think outside the box to meet the state and federal standards without additional resources. Although it is a last resort, one of the resolutions to meeting these budgetary confinements is layoffs. According to a survey completed by Cornerstone OnDemand in 2014, when staff feel that they do not have enough hours in the day, productivity decreases by 68% (G. I. Sanders, *Employee Productivity Statistics: Every Stat You Need to Know*, April 21, 2017). Unit Based Teams allow an opportunity for counties to save money by improving inefficiencies with day-to-day tasks. With minimal cost to implement UBTs, the results exceed those costs. Employees are also more engaged with their jobs. Through empowerment and innovation, productivity and efficiencies are increased. McKinsey & Company found productivity improves by 20-25% in organizations with connected employees (ibid., G.I. Sanders). Accuracy to programs increases, allowing more money to be allocated to improvements, and less applied to fiscal sanctions. Statistics by Queens School of Business and Gallup show that employees that are not engaged have a 37% higher absenteeism rate, 49% more accidents, and 60% more errors and defects (ibid., G.I. Sanders). The cost savings by implementing UBTs can result in saving jobs during a period when the allocations are minimal.

According to the U.S Census, Contra Costa County has an estimated population of 1,147,439 with a median annual household income of \$82,881, with 8.5% of the population in poverty.

Santa Clara County is a larger county with an estimated population of 1,938,153, the annual median household income of \$101,173, and 9.3% of persons living in poverty. Although Santa Clara County is a larger county, their implementation of UBTs has shown that UBTs can be scaled to meet the needs of the audience.

Definition

Unit Based Teams are defined as natural work groups of physicians, managers, and front-line staff who work collaboratively to solve problems, improve performance, and enhance quality. UBTs were established by the 2005 national agreement between Kaiser Permanente (KP) and the Coalition of KP Unions. They use established performance-improvement techniques and employee-engagement principles (including the social movement theory) to achieve clinical and operational goals.

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency adapted this definition to be relevant to the department: Unit Based Teams are groups of frontline employees, supervisors, and managers whose work brings them together naturally, who work collaboratively, solve problems, improve performance and enhance quality of measurable results.

Background

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) introduced Unit Based Teams to Santa Clara County in 2012, looking for ways to adapt to the onset of the Affordable Care Act. Faced with the magnitude of opportunities and challenges that Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System would have pending the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), SEIU created a problem statement and approached

the County Employment Management Association (CEMA) with UBTs as a solution.

Unit Based Teams were an ideal solution; it has been a successful results-based business model for Kaiser since 2005. The model has proven to be cost-saving and has increased employee engagement. Studies by human resources consultants, Watson Wyatt, have shown that highly engaged employees are twice as likely to be top performers, exceed performance expectations in 75% of cases, and more readily identify with the organization and its customers. In 2015, Kaiser reported a UBT in Customer & Member Services saved \$630,000 in staff time and resolved over 20,000-member issues. The Central Refill Pharmacy UBT was able to decrease overtime by 75%, saving the company \$180,000 in a six-month period by assessing workflow and identifying bottlenecks. In seven months, a UBT ensured a quieter hospital stay and better patient experience while increasing customer satisfaction an additional 20% by dimming the room lights starting at 7:00 P.M. and having nurses wearing easily identifiable badges that say "Quiet".

Santa Clara County Labor and Management collaborated for the next year and a half, visiting the Kaiser Garfield Innovation Center, developing a vision for the implementation of UBTs, and creating a Value Compass to help increase employee engagement and service levels. (The Value Compass is a visual statement to reflect and remind of the vision and help guide the department to the destination of finding new ways to work providing the highest levels of service). The two teams collaborated with additional stakeholders and in 2014 presented a joint statement signed by SEIU Local 521, CEMA, Valley Physicians Group, Registered Nurses Professional Association, and the Deputy County Executive and Director, Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System.

The Joint Statement invited employees and county leaders to get involved with the UBT practice. The statement explained UBT and how this concept is different from previous initiatives that

were top-down or driven by outside consultants. UBT is fostering a new culture and collaborative way of thinking, involving frontline employees, managers, doctors and other providers to share ideas and initiate changes. The joint statement was impactful showing the unity between labor and management with a goal to better service the community. All employees, regardless of rank, were necessary for the success of the collaboration.

Santa Clara County hired the consultant group Ann Nicholson & Associates. The cost was \$200,000 annually, split equally between general funds and the Health and Hospitals funds. This firm had experience with the Kaiser UBT model, and consultants were able to be subject matter experts. Their services included training the facilitators for the individual UBTs as well as facilitating the larger UBT cohort meetings that UBTs would attend and report out progress. The firm also assisted guiding the UBTs through the process to help keep the teams on track to their goal. In addition, this consultant group was available as coaches to the facilitators.

Santa Clara's Health and Hospitals Director of Government, Public Relations and Special Projects, Amy Carta, reports that 85 of the 90 UBTs launched in Health and Hospitals completed their project. She believes the growth in the number of teams and areas shows success. The teams that were unable to complete their project showed improvement in their engagement. Riding on the success of Health and Hospitals, SEIU incorporated UBTs in their last expansion contract and Social Services Agency (SSA) Management Leaders decided to implement the UBT process throughout the agency. SSA hired a Continuous Quality Improvement Manager whose core job function is to assist with gathering and tracking data initiatives through the UBT process. UBTs have only been active with SSA since 2017; the department is still in the process of gathering data to report success, but much like Health and Hospitals, the increase in ideas per wage and employee engagement has been infectious in the department.

FIGURE 1
UBT Values Compass



The Development for Social Services Agency

The Steering Committee developed included members from the Social Services Agency Executive Team, Union Leadership, and staff representing all bargaining members of the Social Services Agency. All Stakeholders should be represented as part of the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee worked together to develop the Values Compass specific for the Social Services Agency (see *Figure 1*). The Values Compass is a key element in the power of partnership and is a visual reminder of the SSA mission statement and the goal of UBT. The Steering Committee is responsible for approving or denying suggested UBTs based on its relevance to the Values Compass.

In 2016, the Social Service Agency began the launch of the UBT. Flyers covered the entire department encouraging staff to reach out to their union representation and the executive sponsor. This spoke to the collaboration, and that all parties were invested in the success. Instructions on how to submit a UBT proposal were provided.

Facilitators are required to ensure the teams stay focused on the goal. Facilitators are deployed to

a UBT where they have minimal to no knowledge in the subject matter. With the Health and Hospitals System already involved in the UBT process, this allowed a larger pool of facilitators. The application to become a facilitator is a commitment of understanding signed by the potential facilitator as well as their supervisor. This contract is a way to show that all parties are invested in the success of the collaboration and the UBT process. They are committed to a minimum of eight hours a month for an eight-month period. Facilitators are given a two-day “just-in-time” training to prepare them on how to facilitate meetings and keep the UBT participants on track.

The Unit Based Team

In 2017, the Social Services Agency of Santa Clara County successfully deployed the first wave of Unit Based Teams. All Unit Based teams from SSA come together for a monthly cohort meeting. This allows teams to check in ensuring they are on the right path, provide each other with support and network contacts. The exact same tools are provided to each team for their report outs and progress.

The UBT process is broken out into eight sections:

Action	Purpose
Identifying New Opportunities	Identify areas that can be improved
Forming a Team	Determine the co-leads—one from management, one representative from line staff, and the executive sponsor, and establish the roles of team members
Selecting a Project	Identify a problem that needs to be solved
Identifying Measures	Determine the baseline and what the goal is to improve. Establish how this can be measured
Setting a Goal	Develop goals that should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time limited (SMART). UBTs are set for 90 days
Developing Ideas for Improvement	Brainstorm known processes that can be adopted or adapted to the goal
Testing Ideas	Test, collect data, and review
Operationalizing	Decide who needs to be informed

Each month the team reports to the Steering Committee where they are in the UBT process, by putting a dot on the wheel (See *Figure 2*). The wheel is versatile and encourages the concept that sometimes to move forward one must move backwards first. Once completed there is an opportunity to start another.

With every stepping-stone, an accomplishment needs to be addressed and appreciated. Different people have different interpretations of success. Success may not equate to implementation of an idea. The measure of success may be an idea that was vetted out and determined unable to accomplish. Trying change is the success. Employee engagement, employee retention, and employee use of time are success markers. The UBT process develops relationships between those who organize systems with those who work in the systems. The collaboration and increase of employee engagement will show

success as employees begin to perform at a higher level. Engaged employees increases job satisfaction, performance and retention.

Recommendation

Santa Clara's County Administration Office has been supportive of the Unit Based Teams. Deputy County Executive, Leslie Crowell, has seen the cultural change and a shift in leadership prompted by this implementation. Labor has included UBT as part of the bargaining effort and the county is continually onboarding new departments. Santa Clara County has found the value of this inclusive approach to tackling day-to-day issues that face line staff.

Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services has implemented Unit Based Teams informally in many ways. Divisions, buildings, offices, and units have all implemented quick operational changes to meet the demands of the customer. Implementation of UBTs provides a formality to implementation changes. Providing the infrastructure of UBT allows staff to provide suggestions of ways to improve day-to-day business processes and fosters engagement throughout the department. A visit to Kaiser's Garfield Center is free and educational. This will provide the executive team with the knowledge to adopt and adapt UBT to Contra Costa County. The Employment and Human Service Department Executive should consider developing a joint statement with the labor unions. With bargaining coming up, and the 2019 budget not looking promising, collaboration and communication will be a strong reminder that EHSD is here to serve the community.

- An investment in the type of services provided by the Ann Nicholson and Associates consulting group is worth the return with the improved efficiencies that result in cost savings as the Kaiser data has shown, and the investment that Santa Clara County has made. The knowledge that this type of consultant group brings from implementing UBTs with Kaiser and the three

FIGURE 2
Process Determination Wheel



departments (SSA, HHA and Library) of Santa Clara County will assist with building a strong foundation. A consultant will help with maintaining time, scheduling, and assisting the Steering Committee. They have materials developed that will expedite the implementation of UBT in the department. An investment in a consulting group providing these services has the ability to show a return on investment within the first wave of UBTs.

- The Strategic Initiative teams that Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) already established set a perfect forum to develop the Steering Committee for UBTs. Expanding a Strategic Initiative group to represent all labor unions would build the Steering Committee. This group would help launch UBTs in EHSD by building a strong, powerful UBT Compass catered to the mission and values of EHSD.

Unit Based Teams should be implemented in the entire Employment and Human Service Department. This will allow the staff to decide what areas need improvement in efficiencies, such as: customer service times in Workforce Services or Aging and Adult, child contact initiatives in a disaster for Children and Family Services, or back-up processes when the IT Help Desk is not available in the Administration Bureau and there is an urgent technical matter. The ideas are endless, and as several bureaus share the same offices and clientele, inviting all staff to participate will open an opportunity to mitigate duplication of processes or adopt processes from each other. Simply, implementation of UBTs benefits staff, clients, the department and county, by improving operational processes, the customer experience, staff performance, and overall work life. Companies with engaged employees outperform those without by 202%. UBTs are a step towards increasing staff engagement, which in turn increases

productivity. This is a key element to doing more with less.

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