

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**2025**

Elevating Employee Engagement Using Evidence-Based Strategies to Improve Organizational Performance: A Case Study of the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department's Organizational Development Framework

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Human services agencies rely heavily on the high-touch talents and performance of employees to fulfill their mission of supporting the economic stability and social well-being of vulnerable individuals and families. For this reason, strong employee engagement is paramount to a public services agency's operations, administration, and overall functioning capability. This is especially true in the Bay Area, where the reliance on public benefits is increasing (due to many factors such as high living costs, the housing crisis, etc.) as the number of unfilled positions continue to hit record levels, as reported by the UC Berkeley Labor Center's report *Civil Service Vacancies in California: 2022- 2023* (Hunter et al., 2023). Hence, for human services agencies to perform optimally in achieving their mission, effective employee engagement strategies must be implemented to ensure the delivery of mandated essential services.

Examining the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department's (HSD's) Organizational Development (OD) framework for employee engagement strategies reveals that themes related to onboarding, internal communication, professional development, and internal structures and workflow processes are pivotal to accomplishing their mission-driven work. Elements of HSD's approach were further explored as an opportunity for a neighboring county to consider applying, adopting, and/or adapting. The findings of this analysis suggest that improving organizational performance is a multifaceted, gradual process that requires incremental changes, specifically to the Alameda County Social Services Agency's (ACSSA's) existing employee engagement approach. The final recommendations of this paper include refining ACSSA's current organizational development model, creating a three-year implementation plan, and adopting elements of HSD's evidence-based strategies for employee engagement.

Introduction

According to a report published in December 2023 by the UC Berkeley Labor Center, staffing challenges, such as high vacancies, higher voluntary resignations, and employee burnout, have risen in California's local government sector since 2020 (UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2024). Further, anecdotal information gathered from the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Program during the Spring 2025 cohort corroborates the above statement. These accounts also acknowledge that elevating staff morale and focusing on employee retention are among the top strategic priorities for many Bay Area human services agencies. Conversations from the Spring 2025 BASSC cohort also suggest that critical opportunities to improve organizational performance are missed when agencies narrowly focus on remedying the workplace climate instead of addressing overall structural and systemic challenges.

For this paper, organizational performance is used synonymously with functioning capability, referring to the work that directly contributes to the mission, vision, and values of a human services organization, as well as its overall effectiveness. Workplace climate refers to the current feelings and shared perceptions that employees have about the organization; whereas, workplace culture describes the “core assumptions and values that guide the organization's operations” (Scott, 2024; Pradoto et al., 2022). Although workplace climate and culture are closely connected, they present differently within an organization. As author Scott (2024) explains, culture represents collective beliefs and expectations that influence how work gets completed within an agency, while climate underscores employees' sentiments about the agency's culture.

The pervasiveness of undesirable attitudes (e.g., poor morale, professional apathy, and continual pessimism) and counterproductive behaviors (e.g., frequent separations due to resignation, high absenteeism, etc.) is a key indicator of an organization's overall functioning capability and effectiveness. While most agency decision-makers (and other internal stakeholders) may agree that low morale, frequent absenteeism, and high turnover are markers of an organization's functionality, the disconnect arises when an agency's organizational management strategies placate employee temperament over addressing organizational engagement gaps. Examples of these gaps are evident in areas such as, but not limited to: communication, internal processes, professional development, and equitable access to information and resources. Therefore, to establish more sustainable internal conditions that promote and support high performance (in terms of achieving the mission), human services agencies must thoughtfully implement evidence-based strategies that prioritize and seek to improve the overall functionality of an agency.

Implementing and iteratively enhancing employee engagement strategies is a validated approach to improving organizational structures and systems, which sit at the nexus of workplace climate and culture. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to shifting structures, a universal facet is that before any progressive steps can be taken towards improvement, a deliberate exploration of the organization's current performance, its proclivity for growth, and its readiness to act alongside stakeholders must be undertaken. By meaningfully engaging and remaining curious during this discovery stage, agencies activate catalytic steps of organizational development, which is a systematic approach of “planned change that involves an entire organization”, with the overarching objective of “increas[ing] the long-term health and performance of the organization, while enriching the lives of its members” (Burke, 2022; County of Santa Cruz Human Services

Department [HSD], 2025). This approach enables organizations to move beyond merely mitigating employees' feelings and perceptions as engagement strategies and instead focus on providing substantive change that helps fulfill the mission.

This paper examines the County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department's (HSD) Organizational Development framework, with a focus on employee engagement strategies that enhance the Department's overall effectiveness. Information for this project was gathered through semi-structured interviews, review of existing and drafted procedural materials, and observations (see Appendix A). The recommendations outlined in this paper provide practical solutions for gradual implementation within the Alameda County Social Services Agency. Furthermore, this project contributes to the growing evidence that HSD's Organizational Development framework serves as the exemplar for public services agencies in the Bay Area seeking to improve organizational performance.

The County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department (HSD) Background and Overview

Santa Cruz County is situated on California's central coast, where it was established in 1850 as one of the first counties in the state (Visit Santa Cruz, 2025). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), Santa Cruz County is the second smallest county in California by total area, with a population size of 262,406 as of July 1, 2024 (United States Census Bureau Quick Facts, n.d.). This County comprises a majority of unincorporated areas and four incorporated cities, all of which are served by the concerted efforts of 575 County of Santa Cruz Human Services Department (HSD) employees (J. Kaley, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

As publicized on the HSD public website, the Department's mission is "to strengthen [their] diverse community by protecting the vulnerable, promoting self-sufficiency, alleviating poverty, and improving the quality of life for all [Santa Cruz] county residents" (Human Services Department Homepage, n.d.). HSD aspires for "every child, adult, and family in Santa Cruz County [to be] safe, healthy, and financially secure" and centers excellence in service, compassion, integrity, partnerships, and effective practice at the core of the organization (Human Services Department Homepage, n.d.). The Department has four operating and two administrative divisions overseen by the Human Services Director, with the support of a Deputy Director and six other executive leadership team members.

In addition to HSD's work in providing essential safety net services to Santa Cruz County residents, the Department explicitly aims to foster a healthy working environment by committing to an Organizational Development design that centers on evidence-based employee engagement and continuous internal quality improvement strategies. According to the HSD FY 2022-23 annual report, the Department successfully "increase[d] employee satisfaction by 25% with professional development opportunities, including applying their talents and skills through mentorship, coaching, and targeted skill building" with "90% of employees who completed the department mentorship program as a mentee, hav[ing] increased job satisfaction and development of leadership skills" (Santa Cruz County, n.d.).

Furthermore, annual reports dating back to FY 2017-2018 confirm that HSD has continuously invested and engaged in designing, evaluating, and scaling its Organizational Development framework for at least 8 years (Santa Cruz County, n.d.).

HSD’s Organizational Development Framework At-a-Glance

In 2016, the HSD hired an Organizational Development Manager. Initially, this position also served as the Department’s Public Information Officer (PIO). Understanding the value and need for a concentrated focus on employee engagement strategies that work to improve the performance and effectiveness of the department, the PIO role was separated from the Organizational Development Manager position, allowing more dedicated time to innovate, test, and evaluate HSD’s Organizational Development framework.

Additionally, as the HSD Organizational Development Manager role evolved, becoming more clearly defined as employee-focused, Organizational Development was set apart as an independent unit (although interdepartmental collaboration continued). With a designated full-time equivalent (FTE) position directly responsible for continuously assessing the Department’s progress towards its mission, HSD has been able to implement an innovative and structured Organizational Development model that designs and tests interventions to improve performance.

HSD’s Organizational Development framework draws from Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s widely accepted 1937 philosophy of systems thinking, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and constant state of change between individuals and organizations (HSD, 2025). Specifically, HSD employs a “people-first” model that acknowledges that while the Department shapes team members, they are also seen as “influencers of the organization, who are important and not mere human resources” (HSD, 2025). As reported by the Organizational Development Manager, HSD’s executive leadership also recognizes the bi-directional influence of employees on the organizational culture. Because of this, they intentionally include staff in strategic planning initiatives as “efficacy is higher with partnership versus a push” (J. Kaley, personal communication, March 5, 2025). Additionally, the HSD Organizational Development framework considers that change within an organization is a gradual, cyclical process that involves increasing awareness, counter-conditioning, and contingency planning for regression, which aligns with James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente’s 1983 Transtheoretical Model (TTM) of change.

Employee Engagement Strategies as a Vehicle for Organizational Development

As outlined by the HSD Organizational Development Overview reference material provided electronically on April 14, 2025, the core employee engagement components of HSD’s Organizational Development framework include onboarding, communication, professional and leadership development, and internal structures and workflow processes.

Onboarding in HSD refers to “the process of acclimating and welcoming new employees into [their] organization and providing them with the tools, resources, and knowledge to become successful and productive” (HSD, 2025). The key features include:

- Ensuring all new employees (regardless of their hiring classification) receive HSD’s Employee Engagement Suite, which includes elements such as an employee training plan, a professional development planner, an engagement suite desk guide, and a self-care handbook.

The objective of HSD's onboarding process is to provide all new staff with the necessary information and an understanding of the established organizational norms, thereby minimizing the time it takes for new employees to become productive members of their workgroup.

The overarching goal of HSD's employee engagement *Communication* strategy is to “engage, inform, and support team members so that trust is built and multi-channel communication remains open and responsive” (HSD, 2025). As posited by the Organizational Development Manager, communication must be the thread for messaging (and restating) the Department leadership's “unified why” as a path forward (J. Kaley, personal communication, April 14, 2025). Some of the elements of HSD's communication strategy include:

- Onboarding, supervision, meetings, presentations, informal communication, exit communication, intranet, email, social media, app technology, newspaper/press release, and internet strategies.

Professional and Leadership Development in HSD is described as “an opportunity to develop [their] own people and show [they] care about [employee] growth” (HSD, 2025). This strategy focuses on developing leaders who can positively impact the organizational culture and productivity. The key elements include:

- Internal mentoring, coaching, and skill exchange opportunities with the primary objective of promoting creativity, breakthrough performance, and resilience through coaching.

Employee engagement in terms of *Internal Structures and Workflow Processes* entails “long-term study and examination of infrastructures and work processes and working with staff to ensure alignment of structure and workflow for maximum productivity and job satisfaction” (HSD, 2025). Features include:

- Implementing a design team where leadership and representatives from each program make department decisions on projects and initiatives, and implement them with feedback from division staff.
- Conducting regular employee engagement surveys and facilitating focus groups.
- Annual strategic planning for the department and programs.

All employee engagement strategies within the HSD Organizational Development framework have corresponding objectives and key performance indicators to measure efficacy and effectiveness. As the Organizational Development Manager stated, it is important to design strategies with clear purposes and metrics at the onset. Furthermore, at first glance, it seemed that employee engagement began with onboarding; however, as explained by the Manager, engagement starts before an employee's hire date (J. Kaley, personal communication, April 14, 2025). The process begins by enlisting appropriate organizational structures and systems that support the Department's overall performance and effectiveness. This, in turn, impacts the pool of talent, hiring process, training, and staff retention (J. Kaley, personal communication, April 14, 2025).

Organizational Development in Alameda County Social Services Agency

Having examined Santa Cruz County HSD's Organizational Development framework, this paper will now look into Alameda County and the Social Services Agency. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by population size of more than 1.6 million residents as of July 1, 2023, Alameda County is ranked as the 7th most populous county in California and is located in the eastern region of the Bay Area (United States Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d.). Alameda County comprises a diverse mix of metropolitan cities, rural towns, and unincorporated areas. One of the essential public services agencies within the county is the Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA), which the Agency Director leads with the support of four additional members of the Agency's Executive Team. ACSSA has four departments, including three operating departments and one administrative department. Through the coordinated efforts of more than 2,200 team members and 150 community partnerships, ACSSA serves over 523,000 individuals, accounting for approximately one in three Alameda County residents (Alameda Social Services, n.d.). There are nine offices strategically stationed throughout the county.

Like HSD, the mission of ACSSA is to improve the economic and social welfare of all individuals, households, and communities within the county (ACSSA, 2025). The agency aspires to adequately prepare all customers for successfully navigating barriers to economic and social independence, promote healthy and secure family units, and help neighborhoods flourish through collaborative alliances with private organizations, community advocates, and other public entities (ACSSA, 2025). A few of the Agency's central values are to model and treat internal and external customers with dignity and respect and to exercise integrity. Emerging from recent strategic planning sessions, ACSSA also aspires to align commitments and actions, to be a reflective learning organization that listens to all voices, to be flexible and collaborative, and to utilize data-driven methods to address identified service delivery gaps and enhance customer service outcomes (ACSSA, 2025).

Discussion and Recommendations

ACSSA and Santa Cruz County HSD provide essential services, critical support, and public assistance benefits to vulnerable individuals and households, as well as to veterans, older adults, and children. Both entities are governed by their respective five-member boards of elected officials, and both have civil service commissions that regulate employment standards and working conditions. Both organizations also have classifications represented by Local 1000 of the Service Employees International Union, a significant union in California. The most glaring distinctions between the two organizations are the size, demographics, and annual budgets. Specifically, HSD's annual budget (total expenses) for FY 2024-2025 is \$204,396,816, whereas ACSSA's total expenses for the same fiscal year exceed \$1 billion (Santa Cruz County, n.d.; Alameda County, n.d.). Additionally, ACSSA has four times more funded FTEs than HSD (2,380 compared to 583 funded full-time staffing positions). Moreover, in terms of organizational development, HSD has identified a position responsible for managing employee engagement and organizational performance. In contrast, ACSSA's employee engagement responsibilities are currently shared among the Agency Executive Team, the Training and Consulting Team (TACT), the Human Resources Department, and the Office of Public Affairs.

Given the differences between HSD and ACSSA's organizational structures, employee engagement strategies must be designed to meet the appropriate needs of each entity. Moreover,

as HSD's Organizational Development Manager affirmed, regardless of the organizational framework, it is critically important to gain the trust and buy-in of staff for engagement strategies to be successful (J. Kaley, personal communication, March 5, 2025). Hence, an organizational learning and development environment conducive to confidential, two-way, continuous dialogue must be established without fear of penalties for disclosing information. This paper proposes three prudent recommendations for employee engagement strategies based on HSD's successful implementation of an Organizational Development framework.

Recommendation #1: Assign the responsibility of developing an evidence-based Organizational Development framework to ACSSA's Office of Public Affairs (in collaboration with other departments and programs). This will establish and provide a clear, centralized, and neutral unit dedicated to Organizational Development. This course of action enhances accountability for organizational development efforts by assigning clearly defined roles and minimizing duplicative work.

Recommendation #2: Establish a design team to create a strategic three-year Organizational Development implementation plan. This will allow dedicated time to research, develop, test, and evaluate a proposed framework. At the onset of the ideation phase, clear objectives and metrics must be discussed through a participatory design approach that includes a broad representation of internal stakeholders. This recommendation is an adaptation of HSD's model, given that it may not be practical to create and dedicate a full-time FTE to an Organizational Development management-designated position in ACSSA at this time.

Recommendation #3: Adopt the following practical components of HSD's Organizational Development framework:

- **Onboarding:** All newly hired ACSSA employees should receive an employee engagement guide. This material differs from what TACT currently provides during the New Employee Orientation in that it intentionally focuses on the Agency's strategic priorities, change management strategies, the Agency's communications plan (currently being revised), and career development strategies. This will allow all new staff to receive consistent and equitable access to resources and information.
- **Communications:** In collaboration with the Human Resources Department and the Data and Evaluation Team, an Agency exit interview survey should be created that extracts reliable and relevant information about vacated positions. The Human Resources Department should be responsible for disseminating an automated exit interview when there is notification that an employee is vacating a position. Exit interviews should be provided any time a position is vacated (including promotions, temporary out-of-class assignments, resignations, etc.). The monthly report generated by the Data and Evaluation team should include quantitative and qualitative information drawn from the exit interview surveys and should be used to inform systemic changes.
- **Professional and Leadership Development:** Institute monthly group support sessions for mentors participating in ACSSA's existing mentorship program. There should be a consistent facilitator and opportunities for peer support. Mentor attendance should be an expectation built into the program.

- Internal Structures and Workflow Processes: Employee engagement surveys should be administered biannually, with the results published and made available to all staff. A learning insight provided by their Organizational Development Manager was that HSD's staff reported survey fatigue caused by the length of the climate surveys and the annual frequency (J. Kaley, personal communication, March 5, 2025). Drawing on this information, ACSSA should administer employee pulse surveys biannually, with the results informing the agency's response to identified organizational gaps and opportunities for growth. Another key insight provided was that when delivering the inevitable critical feedback of the climate survey to executive leaders, it was recommended to "[look] at the need under the complaint" (J. Kaley, personal communication, March 5, 2025).

Conclusion

The findings of this case study suggest that employee engagement strategies require more than pizza parties, anonymous suggestion boxes, and annual team-building exercises. Rather, Organizational development must be approached as a continuum of engagement schemes that begin with asking the questions: 1) *How is the organization currently performing?* 2) *What will the impact be if there is no structural change?* and 3) *How might we reimagine engaging with talent at every level?* (J. Kaley, personal communication, April 14, 2025). While there are limitations to this case study (for example, limited observations due to time constraints), what is promising is that the Alameda County Social Services Agency can incorporate incremental, gradual changes outlined in the recommendations above to improve organizational performance. Furthermore, ACSSA is already implementing aspects of the recommended Organization Development practices, including the automated Agency Director welcome message to all new staff, the digitalization of exit interviews (as modeled in the Department of Adult and Aging Services), and interdisciplinary focus groups discussing the workplace climate.

Specifically, in March 2025, ACSSA's Office of Public Affairs teamed with contracted partners to facilitate focus groups discussing the climate and culture of the agency. Although the sample size was small (51 focus group participants in total, 29 of whom responded to the feedback survey), preliminary results show that staff:

- Would like more bi-directional communication opportunities,
- Are interested in more cross-departmental collaboration, and
- Felt comfortable openly discussing their thoughts and experiences in the focus group environment.

In all, the findings of this paper suggest that HSD's Organizational Development framework centers evidence-based employee engagement strategies that work to achieve the Department's mission through human talent. Furthermore, with targeted modifications that cater to the unique needs of ACSSA, adapted and existing employee engagement strategies can further enhance the Agency's overall performance and effectiveness.

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Appendix A

Methodology

This case study aimed to better understand employee engagement strategies from an Organizational Development lens, focusing on sustainable organizational performance and effectiveness for human services agencies. The design of this study involved semi-structured in-person interviews, documentation review and analysis, and direct observations (with informed consent). On February 21, 2025, initial contact was made to the BASSC Liaison, Andrew Stewart as the hosting County, with a request to visit HSD. On March 5, 2025, the first in-person visit took place, during which Jen Kaley provided empirical and anecdotal information during a semi-structured interview. On April 14, 2025, Jen Kaley provided access to HSD's computer lab and assisted with navigating the internal intranet. On May 8, 2025, Jen Kaley facilitated the HSD Mentor Support Group via Microsoft Teams, which was observed for the 60 minute meeting duration, with the informed consent of the participants. Source data was collected directly from HSD Organizational Development reference materials and peer-reviewed scholarly articles found primarily using Google Scholar.