

Addressing Employee Satisfaction Through Engagement: Insights from San Mateo County's Service Center and Recommendations for San Francisco County Programs

Eddie Estrada, MSW

Section Manager

San Francisco Human Services Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores a transformative approach to improving employee satisfaction and engagement, focusing on the successful strategies implemented by San Mateo County's Service Center. Drawing on a decade-long evolution from a challenging work environment to a top-ranked entity in employee engagement, this case study serves as a blueprint for San Francisco County programs aiming to enhance their own employee engagement strategies. Recommendations are made based on San Mateo's effective practices, emphasizing the significance of regular all-staff surveys, targeted action items, and a culture of recognition and support.

Introduction

“People could not wait for the transfer window to leave!” Just a short period ago, that was a common occurrence at San Mateo County’s Service Center just a few short years ago, referring to the opportunity for employees to request a job reassignment after passing probation. Since those days, the Service Center has implemented a series of action items aimed at improving employee satisfaction and engagement. Among all programs in San Mateo County, they rank in the top 3 of employee engagement and satisfaction. These initiatives provide valuable insights for San Francisco County programs, which are seeking to enhance its own employee satisfaction and engagement strategies. This paper explores the effectiveness of San Mateo County's Service Center action items and outlines a sequential plan for San Francisco County programs to implement similar strategies, emphasizing the need for conducting an all-staff survey as a key foundational step. It should be noted that San Francisco has not conducted an all-staff survey since 2019.

Case Study: An Employee’s Perspective

In this case study, we examine the transformative journey of a service center over a span of 10 years through the experiences of a long-standing employee. Initially, the service center grappled with the challenges of a burgeoning call center in California. Employees were thrust into a reactive environment, contending with a constant influx of calls without adequate preparation, due to the center being in its nascency and state regulations still in flux. This led to a work culture described by an employee as lacking in support and collaboration, encapsulated in the center's informal motto: "sink or swim." Training

was ad hoc, with new hires shadowing experienced staff rather than undergoing structured onboarding, contributing to a fragmented and stressful work atmosphere.

Over the years, significant changes in management and operational approaches catalyzed a shift towards a more cohesive and supportive work environment. The advent of a more inclusive leadership style led to a sense of unity and personal investment among the staff. Managers and supervisors transitioned from authoritarian figures to accessible team members, fostering an atmosphere where employees felt valued and recognized for their efforts. According to the employee, this evolution resulted in a culture where the threat of attrition decreased, as employees felt less inclined to leave due to increased job satisfaction. This sentiment was bolstered by a newfound recognition of the importance of mental well-being and a supportive team dynamic, which provided stability and encouraged a positive, patient, and open-minded approach to work. The center's journey reflects a larger narrative of organizational growth and the critical role of human-centric leadership in fostering a productive and satisfying workplace.

San Mateo County Employee Survey Results

The survey data (See Appendix Figure A) from the Service Center reveals a nuanced picture of employee engagement from November 2022 to February 2024. While there is a consistent sense of long-term commitment among employees, with a steady majority indicating that they see themselves working there in the years ahead, there are fluctuations in their views on the work environment and motivation. In the short term, employees' perceptions of the work environment and their motivation levels show some volatility, with a

concerning dip in positive sentiment by February 2024. Despite this, employees consistently enjoy working with their team, which remains a strong point through all the surveyed months. However, there is an increase in employees' willingness to recommend the Service Center as a good place to work by February 2024 compared to July 2023, suggesting some recovery or improvement in employee advocacy. These trends suggest areas where management could focus to bolster satisfaction and motivation, which could in turn enhance the already strong loyalty and long-term outlook observed among the employees.

San Mateo County's Approach to Increasing Employee Satisfaction

The Service Center's strategy to address employee satisfaction encompasses a range of action items, including significant remote work, semi-yearly surveys, recognition programs, unit meetings, offsite events, a resource center, and a stop-n-go service center leadership event. Not only are they getting feedback from the staff regarding these action items, but "they [staff] are showing up!" What makes this even more impressive, is that their staff can work remotely 80 percent of the work week. By allowing these employees to work remotely, they have significantly reduced costs, given them back time that commuting takes, and the ability to take care of personal errands on a work day instead of a weekend, leading to increased job satisfaction and productivity.

The commitment from the Service Center's leadership to regular employee engagement surveys is a critical component of their strategy, providing a confidential and anonymous way for employees to express their satisfaction and concerns. This report

will take a deep dive into each of the aforementioned action items.

Key Action Items and Their Impact

Semi-Yearly Surveys: These are essential for gauging employee sentiment and identifying areas for improvement. They serve as a direct line of communication between staff and management, facilitating a culture of transparency and continuous improvement. These surveys utilize both quantitative and qualitative fields, which provide stronger insights such as the "why" and the "how," and they may uncover underlying issues beyond the reported satisfaction percentage data.

a. Other Surveys

- i. Exit Surveys
- ii. Post Training
- iii. Post Onboarding
- iv. Post All-Staff Meeting
- v. County-wide Surveys

Recognition Programs: Recognizing employees for their contributions can significantly boost morale and productivity. It fosters an environment where employees feel valued and appreciated. The Service Center recognizes their staff for not only productivity but also their perfect attendance. Workers who have shown improvement in their data entry or customer service calls are also recognized. Staff are recognized through email, newsletters, 1:1 meetings, unit meetings, and all-staff meetings. The leadership team has found that public recognition motivates other staff to strive to be recognized for their hard work as well.

One on One and Unit Meetings and Offsite Events: Regular meetings like individual and group supervision, and offsite events can enhance team cohesion and communication. These gatherings offer opportunities for strategic planning and team

bonding, crucial for effective collaboration and workplace satisfaction. The Service Center utilizes both virtual and in-person meetings. Even without proper technology, like a room set up with cameras and audio, they find a way to make it work and invite staff to join in-person. The off-site events have been longer, usually involving bowling, walking, painting, hiking, etc. They noted that food was crucial in making these events successful.

Resource Center: Providing resources for self-improvement and stress relief can contribute to a healthier, more balanced work environment. This initiative supports employee well-being, an essential aspect of job satisfaction. The Service Center has provided a space that contains books on self-help, cooking, customer service, painting and coloring books, stress balls, fidget sticks, and motivational quotes on the walls of the resource center. They encourage their staff to pop into the resource center after tough calls with the public.

Stop-n-Go: The leadership team created a space in which staff could purchase food and drinks. The initial funding was provided by the leadership team, but future sales go back into replenishing supplies and towards a special December outing for an all-staff celebration. Furthermore, the leadership team provides Service Center Bucks (credit), towards purchases through their recognition program above. They found that engaging their employees in fundraising activities can create a sense of community and purpose, further enhancing their connection to the organization.

Other Ideas for Team Building: In addition to the previous strategies discussed for enhancing employee satisfaction, integrating specific team-building activities can significantly boost morale and cohesion. Not

an exhaustive list, but the Service Center offers the following activities for team building: Toys for Tots Toy Drive, potlucks, special events, Show your Spirit Days (favorite baseball team, show, etc.), holiday events (all), and Racial Equity Inclusion activities and awareness emails.

Onboarding: According to the Service Center leadership, their onboarding is not only an initial 2-week process, but it is a continuous comprehensive, welcoming, and adaptable development program for their new hires. By investing in a thorough onboarding process, they ensure that new employees are well-equipped, motivated, and integrated into the Service Center, which can lead to higher job satisfaction and retention rates. It should be noted that they utilize a buddy (mentor) system for training, reverse shadowing, customer service role playing, as well as industry specific training. They have constant communication with the new hire to ensure they are grasping the training and applying what they are learning from shadowing and in their coursework.

As depicted in the Theory of Change Logic Model (see Appendix Figure B), the sequential relationship between the campaign's strategic inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes illustrates the foundational framework necessary for achieving long-term staff engagement and service improvement (Estrada, 2024).

According to the Service Center leadership, the core elements necessary for effective employee engagement revolve around a genuine commitment from all levels of management to understand and address the factors that motivate staff. This involves dedicating sufficient time and thought to the engagement process, being open to honest feedback, setting realistic expectations, and recognizing that this is an ongoing effort rather than a one-time initiative. Leadership

unity and the willingness to engage in difficult conversations is critical to changing the organizational culture and creating a positive working environment. True success in enhancing employee morale and engagement hinges on these factors being embraced and acted upon collectively by the entire team. They stated that nothing happened overnight and that this has been many years in the making.

Recommendations for San Francisco County Programs

Given the initiatives implemented by San Mateo County at their Service Center, San Francisco County Programs can adopt a similar approach to improve employee satisfaction and engagement. The following sequential plan outlines steps San Francisco County can take:

Conduct an All-Staff Survey: San Francisco County should prioritize conducting an all-staff survey, given that the last one was conducted in 2019. This survey would serve as a baseline to understand current employee satisfaction levels and identify specific areas for improvement. Then continue to survey all staff on an annual basis to establish benchmarks and other valuable measurables.

- a. Targeted Surveys: Develop specialized surveys focusing on specific aspects of work life, such as remote work, diversity and inclusion, safety, and mental health. This precision will allow for more focused improvements.

Establish a Recognition Program: Based on survey findings, develop a recognition program that addresses the unique needs and achievements of San Francisco County employees. Presently there is an employee of the month, but chances of being selected

are slim to none, even though San Francisco County has many stellar employees.

- a. Personalized Recognition: Utilize data analytics to personalize recognition efforts, ensuring that the achievements celebrated are meaningful to each employee. Incorporating peer-to-peer recognition platforms can democratize the recognition process. Consider using a specific virtual background for an employee who is outstanding during virtual meetings.

- b. Integration with Career Development: Link recognition programs with professional development opportunities. For instance, award winners could receive mentorship sessions with senior leadership or scholarships for professional courses.

Organize Unit Meetings and Offsite Events: Implement regular unit meetings and plan offsite events to foster team building and open communication channels within and between departments. Mandate regular in-person meetings to create consistency, and also to help newer staff begin to build rapport and establish relationships with seasoned staff.

- a. Move beyond San Francisco: Much of the workforce commutes to work. Consider hosting staff meetings and staff events in locations in which most employees live so that they are more likely to participate, and rotate locations regularly. If public transportation is not available, then places with plenty of free parking should be considered.

- b. Cross-Departmental Innovation Sessions: For those smaller

departments, consider regularly scheduled sessions that bring together employees from different departments to brainstorm solutions for county-wide challenges, fostering a culture of collaboration and innovation.

Create a Resource Center: Develop a resource center focused on employee well-being, offering materials and activities that support personal and professional growth. Also include a physical space where employees can go to rest and relax, or review resources that best fit their needs. A possible location could be a cubicle near a quiet section of the office.

a. Mental Health and Wellness Apps: Curate, and pay for a small selection of recommended apps that support mental health, stress management, and physical wellness, possibly offering subscriptions on a quarterly basis to employees. Some examples include Counselr, Calm, Stava, and Headspace.

b. Innovation Lab: Establish an innovation lab within the resource center, equipped with tools and resources for employees to work on personal or professional projects that could also benefit the county. Moreover, a computer with higher processing power that can assist employees in developing other professional skills like graphic design, virtual simulation, or other programs that need more than what the typical work laptop can handle.

Host Staff-led Events: Through the surveys, staff can provide their ideas on the next event. These can happen as smaller units, or with the greater team. As the planning team, organize events that encourage team

collaboration and contribute to the community, promoting a sense of purpose and belonging among employees. Raise funds as staff, bringing together everyone's unique talents and abilities to foster engagement, but also to raise funds for more team building activities. San Francisco currently serves many homeless individuals that may benefit from a winter coat, partnering with another community based agency and starting a winter coat drive that is employee led could be just one of the possible team building activities.

Conclusion

San Mateo County's approach to improving employee satisfaction through a comprehensive set of action items offers valuable lessons for San Francisco County programs. By adopting a similar strategy, starting with an all-staff survey, San Francisco County can build a solid foundation for enhancing employee satisfaction and engagement. This sequential plan not only addresses immediate areas for improvement but also fosters a long-term culture of recognition, collaboration, and well-being.

The effectiveness of the action items for enhancing employee engagement in San Francisco County hinges on a deep commitment to the engagement process and a genuine understanding of what motivates staff. Successful implementation of these initiatives requires more than mere participation; it demands a sustained and sincere effort from all levels of management. Time and thoughtful consideration are essential to truly engage employees and achieve a positive impact on morale. Leadership must be prepared to accept both positive and negative feedback openly and set realistic expectations about what can be achieved. This ongoing process is not a quick fix but a continuous effort to

foster a supportive and motivated workplace.

Acknowledgments

The writer expresses deep gratitude to the Service Center and the leadership of San Mateo County for their invaluable support and for sharing their vision and goals. Special thanks are extended to Nancy Rodriguez and David Sordia for their gracious hospitality during the writer's visit to San Mateo, and for their insightful explanations of their employee engagement model and the various tools employed.

Appreciation is also directed towards the Executive Team of the San Francisco Human Services Agency for providing a stimulating and enjoyable experience as part of the BASSC Executive Development program. Additionally, the author is profoundly thankful to Andrea DuBrow for her support, flexibility, sense of humor, and, most importantly, her encouragement. This program not only afforded the writer the liberty to engage authentically and inquire freely but also facilitated the formation of enduring friendships, for which the author is exceedingly grateful.

References

San Mateo County Human Services Agency.
(August, 2023). *Service Center
Program* [Newsletter].

San Mateo County Human Services Agency.
(February, 2024). *Service Center
Program* [Employee Engagement
PPT].

San Mateo County Human Services Agency.
(February, 2024). *Service Center
Program* [Engagement Survey
Trends].

Estrada, E. City and County of San
Francisco. (April, 2024). *Logic
model for the Employee Engagement
Project* [Logic model].

Appendix

Figure A.

Service Center Employee Engagement Survey Trends

How would you rate the work environment at the Service Center on a scale from 1-5? (5 Being the highest and 1 Being the lowest)											
	1		2		3		4		5		Total
Nov-22	0.00%	0	3.57%	1	25.00%	7	42.86%	12	28.57%	8	28
Jul-23	0.00%	0	5.30%	2	10.50%	4	28.90%	11	55.30%	21	38
Feb-24	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	11.40%	4	34.30%	12	54.30%	19	35
How motivated do you feel coming to the Service Center on scale from 1 - 5? (5 Being the highest and 1 being the lowest)											
	1		2		3		4		5		Total
Nov-22	3.57%	1	0.00%	0	25.00%	7	28.57%	8	42.86%	12	28
Jul-23	2.60%	1	5.30%	2	18.40%	7	23.70%	9	50%	19	38
Feb-24	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	11.4%	4	34.30%	12	54.30%	19	35
Would you recommend the Service Center to your friends as an Employer?											
	Yes		No		Total						
Nov-22	96.43%	27	3.57	1	28						
Jul-23	89.50%	34	10.50%	4	38						
Feb-24	94.30%	33	5.70%	2	35						
Do you enjoy working with your team?											
	Definitely No		Undecided		Occasionally		Definitely Yes		Total		
Nov-22	0.00%	0	3.57%	1	10.71%	3	84.71%	24	28		
Jul-23	0.00%	0	7.90%	3	2.60%	1	89.50%	34	38		
Apr-24	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	100%	35	35		
Do you see yourself working here in the next few years?											
	Yes		No		Total						
Nov-22	96.43%	27	3.57%	1	28						
Jul-23	86.80%	33	13.20%	5	38						
Feb-24	94.30%	33	5.70%	2	35						

Figure B.

