

Developing Emerging Leaders for Santa Clara County Social Services Agency: Sonoma County Emerging Leader Track 2.0 Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In our current post-COVID-19 pandemic and economic landscape, many government agencies struggle to fill positions and retain staff within the agency. The growing challenge has made it more difficult for agencies to identify, recruit, and retain leaders from the internal and external labor force. There is a need and urgency for agencies to build their leadership from within. The agencies must ensure that their employees' talents and skills are cultivated and that they have the tools and desire to remain in the agency. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) Emerging Leaders Track (ELT) program was created to reduce vacancies, increase retention, and promote staff within HSD. The implementation of this program has had positive results for Sonoma County in terms of employee morale and internal promotions. Santa Clara County Social Services Agency recognizes the importance of professional development and can build upon existing development programs (e.g. Leadership Development Program, Mentoring Program, and Supervisor Engagement and Development Series). Adopting a similar ELT program would also be an effective strategy to address staff morale, recruitment, vacancy, and retaining agency knowledge within Santa Clara County Social Services Agency.

Introduction

In an ever-changing social services world of decreased budgets, vacancies, and increased demand for employee retention, government agencies have a sense of urgency to harness internal leaders' knowledge. Additionally, there is a need for leaders to develop interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and awareness. There is a focus in local government agencies on building future leaders from within the workforce. The agencies must ensure that staff talents are cultivated, and have the resources, tools, and desire to remain within the agency. Studies have shown over decades that employee engagement and retention is directly influenced by the agency's commitment to staff opportunities for growth. According to Brodzik et al. (2022), if employees trust their employer's commitment to growth and leadership roles, employee engagement levels can increase by up to 20%, and the likelihood that employees will leave the organization decreases by 87%. The Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) Emerging Leaders Track (ELT) was created to prepare staff to take on leadership roles and positions. Developing a similar program at Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) will complement and build upon its current leadership development work, preparing staff for personal growth and their future career development across all levels.

Sonoma County's Approach to Leadership Development

"ELT is an opportunity for emerging leaders to take stock of what kind of leadership they want to embody, providing the skills and support to cultivate confident leadership within HSD."

-Ashley Taylor, ELT alumni

To address the need to sustain strong leadership, Sonoma County developed the ELT program in 2013. The program is designed to provide greater educational depth, skill development, and to prepare HSD leaders to take on positions with increasingly more responsibility. ELT began as a four-year program and later moved to a two-year program due to budget cuts. The ELT program includes three distinct components: training, mentoring, and a final project.

The ELT was developed with five program objectives that are still relevant today:

- Continuous improvement
- Employee commitment and engagement
- Improving current performance
- Building relationships
- Building leadership at all levels

In 2022, HSD launched an updated version of ELT called Emerging Leader Track 2.0 (ELT 2.0), a one-year program. It includes four additional program outcomes that speak to both leadership development and participant engagement:

- Identify and promote leadership skills and knowledge that will benefit ELT participants and HSD, now and in the future.
- Develop leaders who are forward-thinking, capable, and self-aware.
- Facilitate a shared vision and common language for leaders by promoting the practices,

behaviors, and values of a leader in HSD.

- Create an environment where participants become deeply engaged in working for HSD.

This new framework puts greater emphasis on providing opportunities for participants to create alignment with the HSD vision and mission. HSD hopes that ELT 2.0 participants will feel a sense of deep engagement with their jobs, their co-workers, and their employees, which will then lead to long-term employment with HSD. In the revamp, ELT 2.0 consists of two cohorts or track levels. Track 1 is comprised of core staff and is open to all staff in non-supervisory roles. Track 2 includes managers and supervisors or persons in a position holding higher responsibility. Track 1 consists of up to 25 participants and Track 2 consists of up to 15 participants. This updated ELT format offers HSD staff a chance to participate at the most appropriate level with others who are at similar job levels. The most recent program evaluation showed that 100% of the cohort enjoyed their experience while participating in ELT 2.0.

Participants build their capacity to be confident, effective leaders by participating in trainings, projects, and career development. Activities and trainings were developed and facilitated utilizing Knowles' Five Assumptions of Adult Learners, and the Principles of Andragogy. Different from ELT, the ELT 2.0 utilizes the Office of Personnel Management (OPM-2015) framework that serves as an important 'north star,' guiding participants in their professional and personal growth. The OPM competencies give a baseline from which an ELT participant can assess their strengths, understand skill gaps, and form a plan for growth. For six months, program

participants are deeply engaged in a team project that involves extensive collaboration and development. This period is dedicated to crafting detailed presentations, which culminate in a formal project presentation to the Executive Team as well as other HSD managers. These presentations are a significant component of the program, showcasing the practical application of innovative ideas. Historically, recommendations from these projects often become adopted as HSD practice.

"I encourage HSD employees to take the leap and enroll in an ELT program even if they don't plan to promote. What I learned in ELT can also be applied to everyday life; our management team 100% supports staff to enroll in ELT and will give you the necessary space/time to do the work necessary."

-Victoria Gonzalez Allen ELT Alumni

Program Evaluation

Sonoma County evaluates the success of the ELT Program using pre, mid, and post-surveys. The surveys are used to provide feedback from participants and to make program improvements. Overall, the ELT survey results consistently show increased staff satisfaction and a feeling of readiness to work in a leadership role for Sonoma County HSD. In 2021, HSD's Planning Research Evaluation and Engagement (PREE) team compiled a dataset in collaboration with Human Resources and Staff Development for HSD staff employed at that point in time. The dataset included a variety of standard demographics, job qualifications, and workforce equity measures including whether an individual was an ELT participant and whether they were promoted into a leadership position as of 2021. The program evaluation identified both benefits and areas for improvement. Most recent evaluations showed continuous

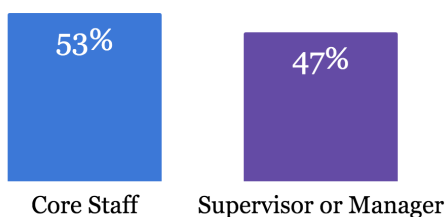
improvement in respondents' work satisfaction and confidence to move into higher leadership positions.

Positive Outcomes

Position Level

An estimated 83% of people who applied for the ELT program were core staff and 17% were in leadership positions. As of 2021, nearly half of ELT participants from 2013-2020 were in leadership roles at HSD.

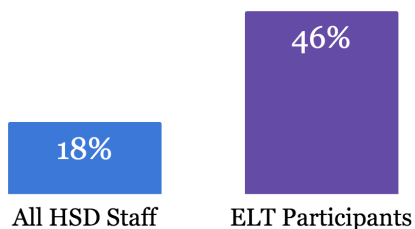
ELT Participants - Position Level



Promotions

Many of the past participants have been promoted within the County and became talented, capable leaders. As of 2021, analysis shows that nearly half of ELT participants had been promoted into a leadership position within HSD, compared with less than 20% of all HSD staff who did not participate in ELT during that time frame.

Promotion to a Leadership Position

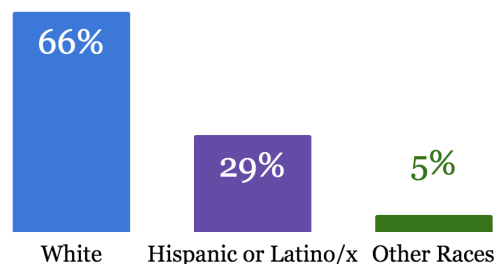


In the most recent ELT 2.0 from 2022-2023, 60% out of the 35 participants had been promoted into a leadership position within HSD.

Demographics – Race & Ethnicity

Among ELT participants in 2013-2020, two-thirds were white and almost one-third were Hispanic or Latino/Latinx. Underrepresented at that time in ELT were people identifying as Asian American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. These demographics made up the remaining (5%) of ELT participants marked as 'Other Races' in the figure below. Comparison data from 2021 suggest that Hispanic or Latino/Latinx, Asian, Black or African American, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander individuals were underrepresented among ELT participants from 2013 to 2020. Meanwhile, white individuals – who make up about 52% of all staff at HSD – were overrepresented among ELT participants.

ELT Participants by Race & Ethnicity



*Data masked to protect the confidentiality of participating individuals

To address the inequities in ELT 2.0 participation, HSD is intentionally working to create a culture of belonging. HSD is working to create this culture at the department level, while also asking supervisors and managers to create mini cultures in their units and sections. The HSD Executive Team along with the HSD Racial Equity Team and the Sonoma County Office of Equity Steering Committee members have made this a priority in the new Strategic Roadmap 2024-2027 plan draft.

HSD has offered multiple Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) trainings to managers and supervisors, because HSD leaders believe that a change in culture starts at the top. The Executive Team has been working with a consultant to learn and plan for the change in culture as well. HSD is at the beginning of this major shift and will continue to learn how to plan for inclusion using targeted universalism, the Anti-Racist Results Based Accountability (RBA) (data) system, and looking at ‘root cause analysis’ while designing for the margins. These DEI tools will hopefully lead to an increase in Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) employee participation in ELT 2.0.

Santa Clara County SSA Leadership Opportunities

The mission of SSA is to provide resources and opportunities in a culturally responsive manner to enhance the quality of life in the community by protecting, educating, and empowering individuals and families. The vision is to serve, empower, and transform (SSA, 2024). County leadership wants Santa Clara County to be a “Learning Organization.” SSA is ahead of the task as it already participates in the Bay Area Social Services Consortium, BASSC Executive Development Program, and the BASSC Supervisor Learning Collaborative. As many Social Services Agencies attempt to recover from the impact of COVID on the workforce, SSA recognized the need to develop a leadership program that would offer personal leadership awareness and growth, messaging, and communication development, with the intent to improve internal promotion opportunities. SSA created a multi-layered Leadership Development Program (LDP) that looked for leadership at every level. The LDP Team’s mission is to create an organizational culture that promotes teamwork, innovation, and trust by supporting leadership at all

levels from a strength-based position that embraces coaching, relationship building, and self-awareness (SSA, 2024). This agency-wide program is open to all staff, no matter their job classification.

Recommendations

The foundation of transformational and efficient leadership is relational, and one cannot successfully lead staff without having relationships built on trust, organizational alignment, communication, collaboration, and cooperation. Transformation must come from the executive-level leaders to create organizational change, and it is integral to the success of all SSA programs.

SSA could replicate the HSD ELT 2.0 program to further invest in its staff and their professional development. The ELT program would enhance and provide another opportunity to support the existing leadership programs and could sit within Staff Development & Training which oversees the Leadership Development Program, Mentoring, and Supervisor Engagement and Development Series program. A commitment from executive leadership to supporting this program will be key.

There are challenges that would need to be addressed to implement an ELT program at SSA, such as ensuring participants have enough time to participate and providing coverage and support for staff while participating in the program. Additionally, the program will need dedicated staff to oversee and facilitate the program. Implementing a program like ELT in SSA will enhance its leadership training opportunities for all staff. It will support participants in their personal and professional development and build their leadership competencies. The program will help staff explore their skills and abilities,

gain confidence, build relationships, and grow within the agency. It will show continued investment in staff growth from within the agency. Although there is a cost of time and money for the ELT program, there are savings as well. Investing in the development of employees reduces vacancies, improves recruitment, and increases retention, which can offset the costs and time of onboarding new employees.

Longer-Term Recommendations

Develop a fuller, more robust leadership development culture which could include:

- Conducting a root cause analysis to examine the reasons past and future staff leave. A root cause analysis will help identify not only the reasons but also aid leadership in implementing recommendations.
- Identifying and prioritizing funding programs and resources that may have a significant cost and being mindful of how such programs can cultivate and reinforce a learning organization.
- Supporting existing managers and leaders by making it a priority to build rapport and establish trust across all levels of staff. This would require a growth mindset to improve relationships across the agency. It would require time and commitment to the effort.

Acknowledgments

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