

An Interview with Jean C. Sebring, the Executive Director of Human Resources Customer Service Support & Classified Staffing for the San Francisco Unified School District.

The San Francisco Unified School District (“SFUSD”) was established in 1851, and is the eighth largest school district in California educating over 56,000 of San Francisco’s pre-school(37 schools), elementary(71 schools), middle(15 schools) and high(18) schools. SFUSD has 3,187 certificated staff, 88 resource teachers, 126 counselors, 42 librarians, 1,157 paraprofessionals, and 1,107 classified staff. SFUSD, a single-district county, administers both the School District and the San Francisco County Office of Education. The mission of SFUSD is to provide each student with an equal opportunity to succeed by promoting intellectual growth, creativity, self-discipline, cultural and linguistic sensitivity, democratic responsibility, economic competence, and good physical and mental health so that each student can achieve his or her maximum potential.

Ms. Sebring has been the Executive Director of Classified Staffing and Customer Service Support for the past 3 years after she worked for about 30 years as a director of human resources in the private sector. She is responsible for civil service recruitment and hiring, benefits for the entire district employees, the integrated disability services, salary setting, union negotiations, employee discipline and customer service.

Ms. Sebring, a professional in human resources, has a thorough knowledge of human resources and through her various experiences knows well what motivates employees to do their best to achieve the goals of their organization. At times, Ms. Sebring finds herself in ethical dilemmas, needing to choose among competing values. I was curious about Ms. Sebring’s opinions about ethical issues she faces as a female administrator and human resources manager.

For these reasons I interviewed her on the subjects of Managing Human Resource, Organizational Behavior and Ethics.

Managing Human Resources

The public sector personnel administration and management, as stated in LeMay (in chapter 9), differs somewhat from that of the private sector. Jean Sebring agreed to an extent, with this notion. She noted that even though the eventual purpose of personnel administration and management in both a public sector and a private sector is to effectively and efficiently achieve the agency's mission, personnel administration and management in a public sector focuses on observing laws and rules and adjusting and reflecting needs of an agency's various groups rather than focusing on profits. She states that because employees in public sectors must conform to regulations much more than employees in private sectors, sometimes, efficiency, productivity or flexibility can be neglected. In this aspect, she believes that public administrators also need the proper capacity to be in harmony with actual situations like those in private sectors. SFUSD has several unions representing teachers, administrators, staff support personnel, technical personnel and the craft trades. Each separate agreement can conflict with others and it is the responsibility of public administrators to legally coordinate the different views. Ms. Sebring stresses that public administrators should not negotiate with a variety of groups if it negatively impacts the agency's mission or regulations.

Wise (in Stillman) says that public managers should make a conscious effort to develop a culture of public service through the workplace. And, if managers do nothing to promote and reward people who display public service motives, they should not expect those motives to be important in the organizations they lead. Ms. Sebring completely believes that if public managers do not evaluate personnel and concentrate on developing their strengths, they get employees who do the minimum possible and eventually conform to the typical bureaucrat stereotype for public employees. She adds that most employees want to be properly rewarded for their efforts and if

they are not treated equitably, they will not continue to work hard. Therefore, Ms. Sebring asserts that human resource managers should always understand what motivates employees to do their best to achieve the agency's goal and they should always strive to treat every employee fairly.

According to Klingner and Nalbandian (2003), "Workforce diversification starts from a recognition that human resources are increasingly vital to organizational survival and effectiveness; and diversification programs are the best way to effectively use human resources" (p. 172). Ms. Sebring strongly agreed with this notion, noting that human resources play an important role in achieving our agency's mission effectively. She believes it's also true that diversity in the workplace increases productivity. The customers of SFUSD are mainly students and parents. Most schools of SFUSD have diverse students and parents in race, ethnicity, language, and so on. To satisfy such various customers, Ms. Sebring says that SFUSD also has a variety of employees who are different in race, gender, ethnicity, language, and disabilities as well as in experiences and knowledge. She believes that diversification programs are necessary within SFUSD because programs tailored to the particular features or situations of diverse groups help them adapt to their job and to agency's culture. In the end, this diversity leads to the agency's productivity. Ms. Sebring asserts that diversification in the workplace contributes to the break down of perceptions, barriers, and prejudice among various groups as they learn to work together and share the accomplishments toward their common goals. She enjoys potlucks where employees bring their country's traditional food and have opportunities to understand and share others' different cultures.

Organizational Behavior

According to Mayo (in Stillman), if only the informal nature of human organization is recognized and properly dealt with (rather than the scientific, technological, and economic processes), then it is indeed possible to build a better world (p. 156). That is, human needs, values, and concerns of the basic informal group play a primary role in successful management practices.

Jean Sebring strongly agreed with this notion, stating that from her experiences, informal relations between employers and employees in the workplace can better contribute to the agency's productivity and efficiency by making situations comfortable rather than authoritarian in a hierarchic structure. SFUSD consists of various employee groups such as teachers, administrators, and technical personnel and has a special objective 'to foster students' academic success.' In these terms, she suggests that the organizational structure should be more open for employees to communicate freely between other groups. Ms. Sebring is also proud that she has tried to treat her employees like family members by listening to their concerns, sharing their difficulties and making an effort to resolve issues. She believes that by understanding employees' motivations, supervisors can better understand them as a fellow human being and help them not to feel isolated, but rather to feel accepted and to cooperate with others within their group. Ms. Sebring suggests that managers and administrators need to create many opportunities for informal contact between employees, and that this communication inevitably leads to a more cohesive work environment.

Ethics

The strength and quality of an administrator, as stated in LeMay, lies in his or her capacity to deal effectively with the moral complexities of organizations without being broken by the imposed problems of choice (p 157). Director Sebring agreed partly with this notion, saying that public administrators inevitably face the confusing situations where they should choose one among competing values. We have also seen that many administrators have been regarded as competent because they achieved their goals under such complicated situations, without negatively impacting their agency or their superiors. However, Ms. Sebring adds that even now, she is confused with the school district's results because where ethics or morals are concerned, the standards are sometimes ambiguous in how they apply to actual situations. This ambiguity exists even though organizations try to clarify such dilemmas in decision making by articulating

codes of ethics to guide employee behavior. She also confesses that some competent female administrators who focus on observing laws and rules and are more inflexible are often excluded from promotion because of improper dealing of ethnic issues even if they are excellent candidates.

Conclusion

In the climate of an office, SFUSD was different from Busan Metropolitan city Office of Education in Korea. It seemed to be friendly and less bureaucratic. Jean Sebring, the Executive Director of Human Resources, has tried to create a friendly and familiar office environment because she knows that informal relations between employees in the workplace can improve the agency's productivity. SFUSD which has various employee groups makes an effort to provide employees many opportunities to understand other countries' culture and to share each other's concerns through informal meetings like potlucks. Ms. Sebring believes that the public sector personnel administration and management is different from that of the private sector because it focuses on observing laws and rules and on coordinating the different views from various groups within the agency. According to Ms. Sebring, for public administrators, especially female administrators, it is somewhat difficult to balance between law and practice.

Through interview with Ms. Sebring, I came to realize how importantly a professional with various experiences in one field can contribute to the agency's development. I'm convinced that precious lessons from her will play a crucial role in my work in a public sector. Also I hope that I can be the director like Jean Sebring in the future.

References

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