

Security in the Round

By Mark H. Saunders

It is said that many things in the business of corrections are cyclical — that is, everything has been tried before and is periodically resurrected and tried again, usually with a different name and often with an original twist. Arguments for and against a concept, program or idea can be made based on the previous experience. Sometimes corrections professionals take the position that “It didn’t work then, so why should it work now?” or “We tried that in 1971 and again in 1993 and got the same results.” These types of rationales are especially prevalent if the espousing party is not an advocate of a particular idea. If a person does want to initiate a recycled concept, he or she might say, “When this was tried before they didn’t have video cameras” or “The staff that were involved before never bought into it; we have a vested interest and want it to succeed.” Security has likely been the topic of many of these discussions and debates over the course of time. In fairness, everything that worked before does not always work now, and anything that did not work before does not always fail now. Balance can be achieved, however, by applying cautious optimism with an open mind. For example, new technology requires additional training, but correct usage can provide significant security advantages. And while training is one of the most important aspects of human resource management, training should stop short of “my way or the highway” messages. The discriminating correctional practitioner is challenged regularly to discern the difference.

Technological Progress

Technological advances have changed the way corrections does business. Tracking bracelets, ID barcode scanning, video cameras, retina scanning and other devices that have become part of the infrastructure of corrections during the past several years have improved security and accountability. The American Correctional Association’s Online Corrections Academy and other training aids, fitness requirements, collective bargaining and lawsuits have professionalized the work force, although these efforts are sometimes met with resistance. Accreditation, countless publications on best practices, research on evidence-based programs and broader public interest pushed the field into the next century, but nothing changed overnight in correctional agencies. Most agree that the changes overall have brought more accountability and, therefore, improved operations and results.

Although the advantages of progress are obvious, sometimes there is a need to protect against potential negative consequences. Security tools, for example, can result in a lack of personal staff effort — cameras are great to have,

but they do not replace the direct observation of offenders. Recent experience shows that some inmates will break rules even knowing that they are on camera but will not engage in the same behavior when a correctional officer is standing right next to them. Staff may find it easier to sit at a desk and monitor video screens instead of making rounds and mingling among the offenders — new terms have even been coined, such as “camera rounds.” However, the practice of being among the inmates is a better way of deterring negative behavior and can provide valuable information. Important questions can be answered, such as “Who do the inmates really listen to?” “Who are they afraid of?” and “Who represents their interests and who does not?” These things are hard to pick up from a video screen. This is just one illustration of how technology and tradition can create dilemmas in the field. Administrators may find themselves choosing between the two or blending them together to achieve maximum effectiveness in their respective settings. Careful compromise could pay dividends in both employee participation and security, certainly a win-win outcome.



Photos by Rick Chuvales

The best security is still the direct observation of offenders. No technology can replace direct contact with residents. Officer Shawn Ward, 2008 Corrections Officer of the Year for the Southeastern Correctional Institution, understands that his direct involvement with offenders prevents incidents.



Regular interactions with team members increase their opportunity to offer insight and opinions and decrease the likelihood that they will act outside of expectations.

Work Force Influences

The work force has changed — and stands to change even more in the coming years. The ACA work force initiatives have demonstrated that today's correctional employees are much different than those of the past. In fact, generation after generation has produced innovative professionals, breaking the mold because of individual influences. One of the lessons taken away from the data collected and developed by the ACA workgroups is that there may no longer be an expectation that employees use the same security methods of the past, especially if they believe there is a better way to do things. Although some may find this threatening, the phenomenon can be advantageous to the mission if channeled correctly. Some people have the ability to see things as they can be, instead of only as they are. Leaders in the profession must recognize good ideas and apply them accordingly.

The methods of identifying and selecting candidates for correctional positions are well beyond the “good old boy” system of the past. Candidates are recruited from college campuses and inner-city employment offices as much as from anywhere else. Pre-employment testing is advanced, and as a result, the employees entering the field are ostensibly better suited for the business.

To reject the younger generation from the work force or discount its input could deter improvements in security and other areas. This is not drastically unlike the past when courts (in McDowell, Ohio, for example) had to force some jurisdictions to hire women and minorities. Although it took the industry quite some time to truly recognize the value of diversity, it finally sank in. During the past several years, security has been improved because offenders have a wider variety of staff to identify with, and even at times trust, thereby increasing the flow of information and the general ability to communicate instead of incapacitate. Corrections is now at a time when it must accept the generational differences of the work force. Unlike the past, external

forces are not forcing this on the industry. People must be hired to sustain correctional agencies, and the people in the employable work force are those who may have generational traits not necessarily seen by some as positive for the profession. Some may want immediate recognition for their work, and others might believe they should be promoted ahead of everyone else. The work force is different than ever before, but that situation is not new — the industry has grown and improved because of changing work forces in the past. How much it can improve is limited only to how open correctional leaders are to new perspectives coming from those entering the field.

The Elements of Basic Security

Time has shown that approaches to security, both inside prisons and via legislation, have been cyclical. From a political perspective, history documents that this country has gone back and forth between prison reform and punishment. From a practitioner perspective, society has demanded safety and expected rehabilitation — but by and large has refused to fund both.

No matter how progressive the field becomes, a big part of the prison mission is, and always will be, security. It is well understood that the public and elected leaders have less interest in what prisons are doing as long as everyone associated with the operation is safe and nobody escapes. Less crime and, commensurately, less tax money spent on prisons are desirable, but this needs to be done by means other than just cutting funding.

The U.S. has only scratched the surface of alternative sanctions for nonviolent offenders, and despite studies and the personal experiences of practitioners that indicate that incarceration increases the likelihood that certain types of offenders will re-offend, they continue to be placed in



At the Southeastern Correctional Institution in Lancaster, Ohio, roll call briefings incorporate more detail than before, even though it sometimes means covering fewer topics on any given day. Although this is not the first time corrections has been challenged with assimilating a new type of employee, it may be the most difficult transition for some.

prison. Correctional employees do not decide who gets sent to prison, but often those who do will not fund prisons proportionately to manage the inmate population. Unfortunately, most of those who insist that the answer to public safety issues is putting more people in prison do not want to pay for that in actual dollars.

Thus, corrections is generally underfunded to do everything that would be best for the safety of the public, the security of prisons and the future of the offender. This does not change the way the majority of society views crime and punishment, so correctional agencies prioritize resources toward keeping the current inmate populations from hurting the public, themselves or staff. The next priority is providing life-sustaining services such as food and medical care. What is left over is used to fund programs and services that go directly to the objective of changing lives. Since this part of the mission falls so far down the funding food chain, it impacts fewer people with less effectiveness. The end product is that most offenders are released from prison with some reentry and rehabilitation programs under their belts, but by and large, the majority of them do not get intensive, life-altering attention. Predictably, they then re-offend at high rates and prisons take the criticism that what they do with offenders does not work.

So what can be done? Corrections professionals know that more and better treatment, education, faith-based programs and other rehabilitative tools can reduce recidivism. In fact, with funding to hire and purchase the proven rehabilitative tools out there, and resources to house people in an environment that is conducive to personal safety and self-improvement, correctional experts could make some bold projections as to where the recidivism rate could realistically be. There are programs that have had remarkable success in many correctional agencies, but they often only serve small segments of the population, making them very expensive and leaving many inmates without access. Therefore, many of the inmates who did not have access to the most intensive programs re-offend, turning the public sentiment away from programming and toward "lock them up and throw away the key."

If the number of offenders who return to prison is lower, the prison population decreases and security threats are reduced. As the number of inmates decreases, there is less strain on prison physical plants, fewer incidents related to crowded prisons, a more stable work force and fewer lawsuits resulting in costly litigation. For the public, when the recidivism rate goes down, it means there is less victimization by released inmates and a growth in public confidence that correctional agencies are really protecting society.

Correctional agencies can make it their mission to provide enough intensive proven treatment to offenders to greatly increase their chances for success upon reentry. When funding or the political environment prohibits such an intensive approach, programming should be implemented to at least occupy the minds and time of offenders and give those offenders who do attend the chance to become law-abiding citizens.



Here, the author studies real-time camera images from all over the facility with Ohio DRC Director Terry Collins and Assistant Director Mike Randle.

Conclusion

Security is taught and preached at every level in correctional agencies, companies and facilities and has been since the beginning of corrections. There are both direct and indirect means of providing security. Good security ensures public, staff and inmate safety, but everyone seldom agrees with every method and application to achieve a secure environment, even within the same prison.

Technology is most effective when complemented with sound correctional practices and concerted staff effort to ensure that offenders never believe that technology is the sole deterrent to their negative behavior. In essence, the direct observation of inmates is still the best security. Post-incident reviews completed after a major prison incident typically conclude that security procedures were violated, employees were not well-trained in security measures, and that inmates knew too much about the security (technology) of the prison. In conclusion, technological progress should be welcomed as a complement to strong corrections professionals doing what they have traditionally done best. Work force changes should be met with the best training available, combined with an open invitation for creative thinking. And basic security should forever be accepted as a combination of competent staff using leading-edge technology and the provision of evidence-based reentry programming.

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