

STAFF TRAINING

And the Impact On Institutional Culture



Staff training can have a big impact on changing institutional or workplace culture. However, when questioned about the type of training that is needed, a consistent answer is rarely found. The general nature of a correctional job tends to mandate answers that lean toward additional training on security, containment of incidents and controlling violent offenders. Although these training areas are critical, they do not, for the most part, target a change in institutional culture.

When developing training modules, emphasis should be on developing staff's skill sets, particularly in crisis intervention, behavior management and handling offenders with serious mental disorders. The training modules must take into account current cultural barriers that impede staff's ability to use what they have learned in the training sessions. However, the reality is that the training is often forgotten as soon as the session is over because there is little expectation that staff will either use or remember the skill sets taught.

The most effective manner in which management can ensure that the training serves the intended purpose is by addressing specific issues: staff expectations, performance roadblocks, teamwork, effective communication, departmental communication, designated trainers and peer mentoring.

Staff Expectations

In most correctional settings, concern about staff safety is a dominant theme among all the different classification or job categories. It can manifest itself in different ways such as staff absenteeism, increase in work-related injuries or claims, and voiced frustration about their inability to perform their jobs. In order for the training programs to prove effective, they must show a direct correlation to the skill set(s) learned and how they will facilitate staff's ability to perform their jobs.

Perhaps the most critical skill set is the ability to communicate with those individuals under an individual's charge. Correctional leaders must be able to assess staff's communication skills at different levels in their career. In doing so, training and intervention techniques can be identified, which will keep us at a professional level. Jailhouse lingo, sex-playing (inappropriate conduct between staff and inmates) and similar behavior demonstrated by some staff can be indicators that a manager's professional influence has been diminished.

Performance Roadblocks

An important component of developing effective staff training is understanding staff's perception of performance roadblocks. Performance roadblocks can be any issue that staff perceive as obstacles in

the performance of their assigned duties such as conducting security checks. The obstacles, whether perceived or real, must be addressed in order for staff to accept the fact that the training will be useful in accomplishing their duties. It may also mean reviewing statewide policies and or procedures that have become ineffective or no longer meet the needs of the institution.

The best way to determine whether the training presented is still current is to include a section in the evaluation form that addresses performance roadblocks triggered by the training topic. This is important when the training is a result of a court mandate or change in departmental policy. As plans are drafted to address the deficiencies (court related) or change in departmental mandates, the training plan often fails to acknowledge any resulting performance roadblocks perceived by staff. Performance roadblocks can impact staff's receptiveness to any new training and, unless these roadblocks are identified, the training will not result in any significant change, as required.

Teamwork

Staff understand that performance effectiveness cannot occur in a vacuum, yet many of the training modules are not presented in a format that encourages teamwork. The training programs must include and acknowledge the value



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of teamwork in the performance of staff duties. Rather than designating specific subject matters, a team must be developed that will deliver the material in a way that not only encourages teamwork, but reflects it as well. An effective teamwork approach can be a tool used to break down barriers that encourage a negative institutional culture. This is particularly important in institutions or units that have multiple missions. Even though individual action may save the day, in crisis situations, it is teamwork that truly sets the level of performance.

Effective Communication

For the most part, the majority of staff understand their role and responsibility in meeting their job performance requirements. Staff also understand the value of safety practices, security mandates and ensuring that daily operations and functions are completed (serving meals, movement, school, etc). However, the way these functions are completed can sometimes be impacted by the employee's philosophy about working with the offender under his or her charge. This can specifically be seen in some veteran staff members, who through time, have often lost the zest for their jobs and have begun to interact more like offenders rather than professional correctional employees. In order to capture the behavioral changes, employees

are asked to send a questionnaire to a family member after six months of being on the job. The behavioral changes noted include an increased use of profanity, a tendency to be less patient with their spouses and children, and a pattern of isolating themselves (not talking about the job). Although these changes may not be attributed solely to their employment, the consistency in the answers leads one to believe that their communication with family members has been impacted by their correctional experience.

The value of maintaining good communication skills on and off the job must be included in every training program developed for correctional staff. There must be an expectation that all employees are to act professionally, courteously and responsibly at all times. This is easier said than done, especially when staff may not see the value of effective communication or are unaware that their skills have changed. Once staff have identified a problem with their communication skills, an avenue by which their skills can be restored must be provided. Personal development sessions should be part of the facility's training arsenal to assist staff in maintaining their professional demeanor.

Organizational leaders must recognize that communication is essential in maintaining a safe, healthy and secure workplace. A communication system that encourages a continuous flow of healthy (i.e., fact, not rumors) and secure

information between management and employees without fear of reprisal or ridicule will assist in controlling workplace violence. Every aspect of the training presented to employees must reiterate the value of communication and the sharing of information.

Workplace violence, which is at epidemic levels and growing nationally, is sometimes the end result of the high level of stress under which correctional staff work. It is understood that stress affects staff at all levels and that the ability to resolve conflicts varies as well. To help offset acts that could lead to workplace violence, effective communication training must include a section that teaches employees and managers conflict resolution. For the most part, correctional employees and managers know how to resolve conflicts between offenders, but fail to address employee conflict. Workplace violence can be combated through education and training on effective conflict resolution.

Departmental Communication

Departmental communication is just as critical as employee communication, and communication from the top to the bottom of the organization must be ensured. The organization's vision and mission statement must be shared with employees, managers and supervisors and must be incorporated into its training plans and hiring process.

A continuum of training must be designed that addresses needs of an organization's mission and employees; it must start at the academy and continue with every subsequent in-service training program.

Frequent and consistent departmental communication will assist in removing performance roadblock and role confusion, and contribute to developing a professional operation. The frequent communication will serve as a check and balance system to ensure that the mission is not distorted through time or misrepresentation. For a vision to be effective, it must be well understood in the organization, but particularly by the staff members who are direct service providers to the offender population. If the vision is not well communicated, then it becomes more of a rumor mill, since staff tend to select only those aspects of the vision that either they understand or believe in. The vision clearly outlines the direction and focus of organization. Training is one of the avenues the organization can use in communicating the direction and the values critical to the mission.

Designated Trainers

Perhaps the central component of institutional training in the correctional system that is in need of improvement is the way training topics are delivered. The "training for trainers" system designates certain staff as subject-matter experts and they assist in the development of the training curriculum. Once the curriculum is finalized, staff are selected and trained to deliver the curriculum.

In most institutions, the training assignment is a secondary function to their assigned workload. As a result, the effectiveness of the material is predicated on the trainer's skill and interest level and not necessarily based on their comfort level with the material being presented. Training cannot be effec-

tive or have a long-term impact if resources are not allocated to provide the trainers with professional development and the time to deliver the subject matter. Professional development includes the implementation of a "training foundation skills" program, developing core curriculum and ensuring an evaluation process that captures the effectiveness of the training module. As long as training is a secondary function, employees will not see the value or the importance of the training topics discussed. Using curriculum from other correctional agencies also must be explored, whenever possible.

Peer Mentoring

Even when the training modules are professionally written, some staff are able to internalize the skill set if they are able to learn from watching others perform the tasks. Peer mentoring in the form of job shadowing a lead person is an excellent tool for newly hired employees. This is especially important when working with seasoned and institutional offenders.

Assigning a new employee to a lead person would allow the employee to receive immediate feedback on the performance of his or her duties. The workload of many first-line supervisors precludes them from being able to provide immediate feedback and address any areas of concern before they become problematic. Relationships also influence the ways in which employees relate to one another. Peer mentoring could assist in establishing effective working relationships.

Changing Directions

The challenge of setting the organization's direction can best be met by ensuring that staff are trained and that their skill sets are consistent with what is required of them. It may mean revisiting the way correctional training is devel-

oped, funded and delivered. Although there are many courses that are required either by statute or personnel mandates, greater attention must be focused on providing training on interpersonal, value-based and communication skills. These are the skills that distinguish an outstanding employee from a regular staff member. The individuals who have made a difference in people's lives are often described in terms of their personal skill set.

The training also must be credible and staff must understand how it impacts them in the choices they make in the performance of their duties. Corrections professionals must start thinking about the future, identifying the training needs of future leaders and listing the changes that could make a difference in the organization. Training has always been reactive and leaders in the field need to become familiar with forecasts of professional futurists so that they can start developing training programs that will prepare them to deal more effectively with the challenges of an ever-changing incarcerated population. This may require conducting an analysis of the opportunities and threats associated with these challenges. The threat and the challenges are unique and a facility's training programs must reflect the best approach to confront them.

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