

Correctional Women's Issues: Items to Remember for the Future

By Gwendolyn C. Chunn

There is a Southern adage that is called “preaching to the choir.” It means that information provided by a speaker is already known by those who hear it. That is this writer’s predicament. Correctional leaders and managers who already recognize that women of all colors, shapes and sizes will play an increasingly visible role in the near future in administering and managing correctional programs, are already “singing in the choir.”

For those who watched the “first women managers” in correctional systems in the early 1970s, you may recall that they blazed a difficult trail. They were accused of being one or more of the following: too compliant, too rigid, tried too much to be one of the guys, too fragile, too emotional — the list goes on and on. On the other hand, sometimes these first women were lacking — in political sophistication, in an air of authority, in humor, in access to power and information — this list, as well, goes on and on. But with all of their faults and shortcomings, one fact does remain: they did blaze the trail for every other woman who followed. And being a trail-blazer is by no means easy. What legacy did they leave?

First women managers gave us “first women executives.” Effective correctional leadership is a business that demands total involvement. The same is true for women. Certain managerial lessons can be learned only through experience. By the time a seasoned manager has survived various lessons, including changes at the top in priorities and personnel, cut-backs, media, staff shortages, legal battles and disputes, acts of nature, and a myriad of offender issues, moving to the executive level is not an impossible leap of faith. There is one catch, Cinderella. You have to wait until Gov. Prince Charming comes to see if the glass slipper fits your foot. Fewer and fewer atavistic mindsets are apparent in gubernatorial candidates because archaic notions in today’s world do not suggest success with the electorate. Therefore, whether governors “feel it” or not, they are likely to seek several Cinderellas with several glass slippers. What can you do now to help you prepare for the future?

Advice for the Future

Take a look at the data and what is going on around you. Members of the American Correctional Association will always be grateful to Immediate Past President Charles J. Kehoe for beginning work with helping us to examine future correctional work force issues. Take a second look at the correctional work force data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics:

The increases in the percentages of females compared with male workers are clear. Notwithstanding, one can see

Table 1. Correctional Work Force

	1995, actual	2000, actual
All Staff	347,320	430,033
Custody/Security	220,892	270,317
RACE		
White	232,382 (71.4%)	272,436 (68.8%)
Hispanic	20,702 (6.4%)	31,697 (8%)
Black	65,513 (20.2%)	83,697 (21.1%)
Asian	6,579 (2%)	7,890 (2%)
Gender		
Men	246,581 (71%)	288,306 (67%)
Women	100,659 (29%)	141,747 (32.9%)
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics		

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more evidence in the workplace itself. Walk into any jail or secure correctional facility. There are more women at supervisory, management and executive levels. Walk into any college or university that offers a criminal justice degree and one sees a significant percentage of female students. Table 1 points out that the data from the year 2000 shows only 31.1 percent of males and females who are Hispanic, black or Asian in the correctional work force. In the future, it will be important for us to disaggregate the data to track separate trends for men and women within diverse groups. Those numbers are destined to increase.

Be prepared. That is the scout's motto, but it is more important now as you prepare to be ready for a promotion. Take advantage of every opportunity to learn something new. Learn as many details as you can about every department or agency that may be connected to your agency's work. Be careful not to make the mistake of stepping over something that is not of interest to you. For example, the quality assurance protocol may not be exciting, but knowing it may help you to gain access to other parts of the organization. Take advantage of every training opportunity that may come your way. Find out what is available online and in your own area. Find ways to help your supervisor support your participation in training opportunities. Often, if you are willing to teach what you have learned or if you are willing to work your regular assignment in addition to attending training, the most recalcitrant supervisor will often support you.

Get a credential or two that shows that you bring "added value" to the job. For those who do not have a college degree, try the ACA Online Corrections Academy for starters. It offers the student a flexible pace and schedule as she or he learns more about correctional operations. For those who have decided to make a stronger commitment to their professional development, there is the ACA certified correctional officer, certified supervisor, certified manager and certified executive designations that may be earned. Each category attests to your professionalism, to what you know about the corrections field, and helps hiring agencies assess your preparedness for the job. Just as important, it becomes a part of your resume.

Assist your co-workers when it is appropriate. There is a "culture" in every work setting; it is the way things are done and the way employees treat one another where you work. If it is a positive environment, there is already an expectation that employees will recognize that they are team members. They will expect to help one another and to work together. When one works in a negative environment, the best way to begin to improve it is to choose to be positive. It is important to explain to others the benefits of a positive attitude and to maintain your commitment to a positive attitude even when ridiculed. Negative people cannot inspire a vision of optimism. Moreover, they contribute to poor morale and sap the creative energy of an organization.

Volunteer to serve on problem-solving committees. Be willing to go the extra mile to get additional information or resources. When an employee is willing to do the extras,

managers believe that those employees are more invested in the goals and outcomes of the organization. Volunteer to give the report from the committee or write up the findings in order for others to see that you are comfortable in both a follower role and a leader role. Recognizing the contributions of others helps them to have more investment in the work.

Give up the notion that one needs to be perfect in order to be an effective leader or manager. Rather, strive to be precise and methodical to engender respect for your work and for your contributions. Organize your work in a manner that defends your work plan strategy and facilitates the involvement of others. Choose competent individuals who can be loyal and who bring talents that are different from your own. Provide routine formal and informal progress reports to appropriate managers to allay any concerns about your work.

Learn to pay a compliment; learn to take a compliment. Women working in corrections, and everywhere else in the United States, are often accused of being petty, especially with their female peers. Work to dispel that myth. Share words of appreciation with co-workers who do a good job. Be sure to identify the specific behavior that you wish to acknowledge. While any appreciation will always be well received, it is best received when it is done in a face-to-face setting. A corollary of this skill is to learn to take compliments. It is unnecessary to discount the compliment or to weaken it by suggesting how undeserved it is. Learn to say, "Thank you very much. I appreciate your attention."

Finally, toot your own horn. As an employee works diligently and goes beyond the call of duty, volunteers, is credentialed, and has demonstrated loyalty and commitment to the organization, it is permissible to reveal your interest in promotions to supervisors and managers. Frankly, without some clear indication from you, your chances of being tapped may be reduced. Remember, there are others who are also positioning themselves for a career move. When a female employee is silent or worse, seething because she thought the hiring manager should know her interests, she has contributed to the problem by not sending a clear message. Of course, one of the most appropriate times to air career intentions is during work review sessions.

While the information in this article is not new or particularly different, it does represent a compilation of issues that get in the way of women who want a bright career in corrections. At the same time, one could successfully argue that the aforementioned issues are just as applicable to male workers. Perhaps in truth, we are beginning to move more swiftly to a point where one's race and gender are incidental to getting the job done. If that is where we are going, let us get on down the road.

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