

Envisioning the Future: Proactive Leadership Through Data-Driven Decision-Making

By Jeanne B. Stinchcomb

By definition, leadership means being ahead of the rest. As such, it is a visionary, forward-thinking process targeted toward proactive strategies. While others are engaged in reacting to existing events and maintaining the status quo, leaders are envisioning the future and forging a path toward it.¹

Just as those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it,² those who do not anticipate the future are condemned to be controlled by it. Thus, in an ongoing effort to control organizational destiny, proactive leaders are continually looking ahead to anticipate and accommodate upcoming changes on the distant horizon.³ As long-term planners and innovators, they use insights into tomorrow's challenges to shape today's decisions. By employing relevant information to their strategic advantage, they attempt to prevent the onset of chaos before it is too late.⁴ In fact, when leaders are caught off guard by the future, it is generally a result of the fact that they were not paying enough attention to it.⁵ That is when the inevitable crisis occurs, demanding immediate response. And crisis management is the opposite of clear-sighted leadership.

There are undoubtedly some future events that are destined to occur regardless of our most enlightened attempts to intervene. The manner in which they will affect corrections, however, is not predestined and can, in fact, be modified — but only with the benefit of proactive foresight. In essence, while the future may not be subject to change, its influence is. When leadership is based on data-driven decision-making, “destiny is not a result of chance, but a reflection of choice.”⁶

Shaping the future, therefore, requires a sound basis for making informed decisions today in order to

circumvent otherwise unanticipated consequences tomorrow. This is where true leaders establish strategies that are based on current facts and accurate figures, rather than past precedents or emotional reactions. It is also where the desire to make informed decisions confronts the reality of data analysis. However, correctional leaders do not need to be mathematical prodigies to analyze descriptive statistics and use the resulting knowledge as a foundation for strategic planning. In that regard, it may be helpful to distinguish between descriptive and inferential statistics.

As the term implies, inferential statistics make conclusions about relationships. In an “if this, then that” chain of events, they develop causal linkages — leading in a logical progression from theories to practices, and ultimately, to outcomes.⁷ These causal connections enable one to make generalizations about a large group on the basis of data taken from a smaller sample of it.⁸ As such, inferential statistics help to determine the extent to which an organization's efforts produced expected results. For example, did staff training on interpersonal communications promote improved relationships with offenders? Did inmate vocational programs result in greater employability and lower recidivism? Did an anger management intervention produce fewer disciplinary action reports and less institutional tension?

These are not simple questions. In order to answer them with any degree of empirical certainty, the procedures used to evaluate such initiatives must meet certain methodological standards. Additionally, the findings must be subject to tests determining whether they are statistically significant, or whether they could have occurred simply by chance. The strength and integrity of the results —

what we have come to know as “evidence-based” inferences — therefore depend on how rigorously the evaluation was conducted.⁹

Just as a correctional facility can only be accredited if it meets specific standards, inferential data have credibility only to the extent that they meet the demands of relevant statistical tests. Descriptions of a study's methodology and outcome can therefore become somewhat complex, leading to diverse conclusions. For example, the renowned “Martinson report”¹⁰ is one of the most rigorous and influential analyses of inferential evaluation studies in corrections. Yet its findings have been subject to considerable discussion, debate and even reinterpretation.¹¹ When the methodology is defensible, the statistics are valid and the outcomes are relatively straightforward, inferential statistics can provide powerful decision-making tools. But, as even Martinson's landmark research indicates, that level of perfection is not a frequent occurrence.

For such reasons, descriptive statistics are much more prevalent than inferential outcomes as decision-making tools — especially in corrections, where the vast majority of research is, in fact, descriptive in nature.¹² While descriptive statistics do not attempt to make cause-and-effect inferences, they do portray the existing nature of a situation. Thus, they offer valuable insights into patterns or trends that can guide informed decision-making. In that regard, visionary leaders who have been proactively scanning the statistical horizon are already well-aware of upcoming demographic projections that have serious implications for the future correctional work force. For example:

- The average state government employee is now over 44 years old.¹³
- Nationwide, turnover rates have soared to the highest levels in a decade, with 58 percent of organizations reporting difficulty retaining their employees.¹⁴
- The current ratio of probable workers (ages 25 to 64) to probable retirees (age 65 and over) is 4-to-1. By 2011, the first of the 76 million baby boomers will start to retire, driving the ratio to 3 to 1 in 2020, and it will approach 2-to-1 in 2030.¹⁵
- Sixty percent of all corrections executives will be eligible to retire within the next five years.¹⁶
- Forty-one percent of executive-level personnel in community corrections are eligible to retire within the next five years, and developing future agency leaders was ranked among the top 10 issues facing community corrections in 2005.¹⁷
- It has been predicted that corrections will be second (after health care) on the list of occupations that are “most likely to be most affected” by an upcoming shortage of workers.¹⁸

Independently, these descriptive observations do not have the statistical power of their inferential counterparts. But when viewed collectively, they reflect a trend that clearly sounds serious warning bells. Visionary leaders heed the warnings. With data-driven decision-making guiding their actions, they are launching proactive initiatives to address the anticipated drought of experienced correctional managers and administrators, well before the seriousness of the situation demands an immediate response.

Yet, the foresight of empirical information has not typically shaped correctional decision-making. To the contrary, corrections has historically been associated more closely with a reactive, crisis management orienta-

tion.¹⁹ The reasons range from political pressures to media influence, public opinion and economic realities. Perhaps most detrimental to integrating research into correctional practice and policy-making is the widespread gap between those who produce it and those who are in a position to use it.

Both researchers and practitioners would likely agree that “research must be good, creditable, timely, and relevant.” It is the first two criteria, however, that are of greatest concern to researchers, whereas practitioners primarily emphasize the latter two.²⁰ To researchers, statistics are inadequate if they are not sufficiently rigorous. To correctional leaders, research findings are irrelevant if they do not adequately address current informational needs. Moreover, both view the process of collecting and analyzing data from different perspectives. To researchers, it is “difficult, complicated, time-consuming, and expensive,” whereas practitioners believe it ought to be “easy, simple, quick, and cheap.”²¹

Additionally, much of the research literature is not communicated in a user-friendly fashion that is readily accessible to — or adaptable by — those in a leadership capacity. Until research can be effectively translated and disseminated in a manner that has utility to practitioners, it is unlikely that it will have a significant impact on correctional decision-making.

Ultimately, researchers and practitioners share mutual interests. As long as research is underutilized, corrections is destined to be a product of reactive management rather than proactive leadership. By the same token, as long as researchers are disinterested in promoting the operational utility of their findings, empirical information is destined to be uninformative in correctional decision-making.

For whatever reasons, once the impact of distant trends appears, it is too late. By then, clear-sighted leadership shifts to crisis-oriented management. Proactive measures based on calm, analytical foresight are replaced by demands for immediate, reactive responses. Leaders hoping to prevent such a situation in the correctional work force, are well aware of statistics that point toward an onslaught of employee retirements and increasing-

ly stiff competition for talented workers.²² To maintain a viable work force, proactive leaders today are anticipating and planning for what descriptive statistics indicate will seriously affect corrections tomorrow. Without reliance on such data-driven decision-making, others are waiting for the inevitable crisis to drive them into action. But by then, it may be too late.

ENDNOTES

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¹⁹Perroncello, Peter. 1989. The role of the jail supervisor: Proactive or reactive? *American Jails*, 3(3):74-76. (Fall).

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²⁰Petersilia, J. 1996. p. 225.

²¹Travis, Jeremy. 1997. Measuring what matters. *National Institute of Justice: Research in Action*, 1, quoting Carl B. Klockars. (November).

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