

## Work Force Improvement:

# Developing Staff Through Professional Certification

By Gloria Boyd and Allen Peaton

Photos courtesy Alabama Department of Youth Services



Study group member Chris Narcisse, CCS, makes a presentation to the study group.



Group member Janice Johnson, CCS, discusses leadership skills for managers in her presentation to the group.

**H**ow many times have corrections professionals asked themselves or their co-workers, “Where are the future correctional leaders and managers coming from?” The Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) realized that tomorrow’s agency leaders were not going to appear by magic or be hired off the next list of eligibles provided through the state merit system. The DYS realized that tomorrow’s leaders would need to be nurtured and developed within the department.

The American Correctional Association’s Correctional Certification Program offered a framework for this staff development process. According to ACA’s Web site, the purpose of the association’s certification program is to “advance the overall knowledge level of practitioners in the corrections field, promote the capabilities of corrections professionals to the public, and enhance society’s image of corrections personnel and, thereby, aid in the recruitment of new, talented staff members.” ACA’s program offers certification in the categories of adult and juvenile corrections, correctional health care and security threat groups at the executive, manager, supervisor and officer levels.

Although the concept of professional certification is relatively new to the field of corrections, it has been recognized in many other disciplines as a valuable tool in work force development. Professions as diverse as medicine, engineering and the building trades have long recognized how valuable professional certification can be. One may



Study group members learn team-building skills during an adventure education activity.

not immediately think that there are a great deal of similarities between the construction industry and corrections, but the following comment is equally applicable to both. The American Institute of Contractors has summed up its view of the work force by concluding, "If we expect to attract and keep good people in construction, we must improve the construction industry's image, and we must do it quickly." To accomplish this turnabout, the institute organized a professional certification process and established a professional standard with recognition as a certified professional constructor. For more information, see the institute's Web site at [www.aicnet.org/na/aspen\\_pfv.asp](http://www.aicnet.org/na/aspen_pfv.asp).

There is a similar recognition within corrections of the value of developing a professional certification process. The DYS recognized that retirements, turnover due to job stress and changes in management philosophy had created a serious shortage in the pool of staff who are qualified and prepared staff to assume future leadership positions within the department. Since DYS Executive Director Walter Wood, CCE, was the first juvenile corrections administrator to gain certification, he recognized the potential of using the certification process for professional development. Based on his firsthand knowledge of the process, Wood pursued a partnership with ACA to explore innovative ways to develop the department's work force.

## Certification Process Within the DYS

In 2005, the DYS had the opportunity to make a giant leap in improving its work force. Through a leadership development program coordinated by ACA, several employees were given the chance to become certified through the association's national certification program. In an effort to get employees certified, two weeks in 2005 were devoted to intense training with trainers provided by ACA. Outside of the two weeks of training, employees were given

a plethora of reading in preparation for the certification exam. Employees had to be serious and self-motivated to successfully complete the certification process.

Twelve DYS employees became certified through the program. Once the employees obtained certification, it had to be maintained. In other words, those employees did not just hang their certificates on the wall; there was additional work to be done. Many professional organizations require professional members to maintain certification, mainly by attending regional or national conferences, and that is nothing new. However, ACA requires more of its certified professionals than attending a few conferences each year. Conferences can serve as an outlet for extensive networking with other professionals as well as provide a wealth of information on current best practices, trends and changes occurring in the profession, but with the ever-changing work force, there must be other opportunities for employees to grow professionally and maintain their certification. There are a variety of activities that a certified professional can engage in to maintain certification. A few examples include: taking corrections-related training/education courses (academic, in-house or online); publishing a book, book chapter or article on a corrections-related topic; serving as an accreditation auditor; being part of a task force; teaching; and serving in a leadership role in a national, state or local professional organization. Having a variety of activities to choose from gives certified professionals some diversity in their ability to maintain certification.

## DYS Study Group

In addition to the opportunity to participate in the more traditional types of staff development, a formal corrections-related reading/study group was formed within the DYS. The group was created not only to fulfill the recertification requirements for ACA but also as a means for employees to grow and develop professionally with the overall intent of

improving the department's work force. The study group was organized under some of the basic guidelines given by ACA.

For example, the group takes formal minutes/notes for each meeting; there is a sign-in sheet to document each member's attendance; group members created a group name; and topics of discussion are focused on leadership- and corrections-related topics. Group members decide the meeting dates, time and location. The DYS study group is open to all employees who not only want to apply for recertification but are also looking for an avenue to assist them in improving their current leadership role. Currently, the study group has a diverse mix of members, consisting of both top-level and mid-level management staff. Participants' certification levels include certified corrections executive, certified corrections manager and certified corrections supervisor. This group brings together a wealth of knowledge and correctional experience that allows for a rich discussion on topics related to both leadership and corrections.

During the past year, DYS study group members have given presentations to the group on a variety of topics and readings. Group members have presented on books written by John C. Maxwell, Colin Powell and Steven Covey, to name a few. Other topics presented have included:

- Stress management techniques;
- The changing work environment/diversity in the work force;
- Dealing with the difficult employee;
- Improving cohesion; and
- Team-building skills.

As with any group that meets month after month, things could get stale. However, DYS group members have done a great job keeping meetings engaging with creative and informative presentations. Topics are presented in various ways, from PowerPoint slides by computer-savvy group members to the old stand-by flip chart. There have also been small group activities. For example, females and males separated into groups to discuss how men and women lead differently. The group also used outdoor interactive activities (adventure education) when discussing team-building skills. One of the outdoor interactive activities titled "Animal Call" focused on developing trust and required members to be blindfolded while walking outdoors under the leadership of another person who could only communicate nonverbally. Another activity, "Flip Side," focused on space barrier issues, communication and group problem-solving skills, and another, "Traffic Jam," explored decision-making and communication.

The benefits of the study group can be seen as twofold. There are benefits to the individual group members, and the DYS benefits by enhancing and improving its work force — the future of the agency. Through these presentations, group members have the opportunity to hone their presentation skills, which is needed in any agency.

When asked to share the benefits and value of the study group, members shared the following:

- "Being a part of our study group has challenged me to conduct a serious self-evaluation. As a result, I have been able to identify and accept my strengths and weaknesses. I now focus on my strengths and work toward developing them."
- "Participating in the study group has forced me to look at the various flaws that I have and find ways to correct them or to minimize them."
- "The study group has forced me to grow as a leader and has taught me to use various skills to approach situations or problems that may occur in my field."
- "Being a part of this study group has helped me raise the standard of being a leader."
- "Many of the discussions have been extremely helpful, but I must say that utilizing the stress management techniques has helped me to stay focused and keep things in perspective."

From a professional perspective, one group member noted: "The study group has helped me to realize that as a leader, you have to make professional growth and development a priority or else you can get left behind." A common benefit of the study group that was mentioned by all group members is the opportunity to get to know other group members better and develop a great respect and understanding of the other person's duties and responsibilities within the agency.

Meeting monthly with a focus on leadership- and corrections-related issues has undoubtedly helped to improve the department's work force. The study group has provided an avenue for employees to share and exchange thoughts, ideas and information among peers. Hopefully, the gains of the group members will be reflected in the everyday operations of the department.

## Sustaining a Vibrant Organization

ACA's Correctional Certification Program, and especially the study group process, has brought tremendous benefits to the Alabama DYS. As Wood reported to the agency's governing board, "This program offers one of the best opportunities I have seen for developing our work force."

In addition to work force development in the traditional sense of skills enhancement, professional certification means much more. Taking another example from the American Institute of Constructors: "The importance of certification in work force development is simple: The professionals who pursue certification hold themselves to a higher personal standard. They're not afraid to put skills to the test, demonstrate their abilities and hold themselves accountable to a code of ethical conduct."

These are the professional employees who the Alabama DYS seeks. The ACA Correctional Certification Program, along with the recertification study group, develops the employees needed to lead and sustain a vibrant organization that meets the needs of its clients and the community.

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