

Politics, Power, The Press and Prisons

By Roderick Q. Hickman



In today's world of rising prison populations and costs, correctional leaders must demonstrate many talents. They need political acumen and the backing and input of peers, employees, policy-makers and the public. Additionally, they must possess the ability to manage the press in an honest and straightforward manner.

Not long ago, a correctional leader could work with a certain amount of autonomy and could define success simply as "safety, security and silence." However, that is not the world of corrections today — politics, power, special interests and the press define today's environment. A successful manager must engage and communicate with all of these distinct entities.

In the era of blogs, webcasts, instant messaging and political action committees, correctional leaders must navigate these worlds while continuing to manage the organizations they are charged with overseeing. They must walk the halls of the legislature as frequently as they walk the yards and housing units. They also must spend time in classification committees and with editorial boards.

The world of corrections has become increasingly complex, and contemporary correctional leaders must become more adept at playing on the "entire field" and not being

myopic or insular. They must be aware of the changes that take place and must grow and adapt. If not, the profession will be influenced by those who have mastered the game by using the entire field.

Do Not Ignore the Politics

All correctional agency directors either have been appointed by an elected official or elected to their position. Most elected officials do not spend any time educating themselves about prisons or detention operations. The old saying in the world of politics is, "No one has ever been elected for wanting to improve jails or prisons, but they have lost re-elections for letting them fail." Therefore, most correctional executives have been told to "keep prisons quiet" and "keep them out of the news."

As a result, correctional leadership historically has not invested the time necessary to develop relationships and build consensus with the key political stakeholders who determine what programs are recognized and funded. In fact, most correctional leaders try to avoid the political environment. However, the consequence of that relationship void creates a credibility deficiency for correctional

leaders. Thus, that relationship void is filled with other stakeholders who influence the process, and that influence creates a hostile environment for the correctional leader, who is forced to enter and fight for funding and appropriate policy.

Those stakeholders include employee unions, offender advocacy groups, election-conscious politicians, vendors, inmates' attorneys and religious groups. With all of these groups entering the debate on correctional policy and funding, the cobbling of coherent policy is a gamble at best. This dysfunctional process usually ends with the correctional manager being charged with increased program expectations and a decreased budget with which to achieve it.

To increase success in this ever-changing world, where term-limit laws are often in existence in many jurisdictions, the contemporary correctional leader must:

- Invest time with key staff of all influential legislators;
- Educate all legislative and agency staff on agency facts;
- Require executive leaders to engage and influence key stakeholders;
- Train agency staff to testify before legislative/oversight bodies;
- Analyze the issues being brought forward by detractors and respond;
- Be transparent — let the operational challenges and costs be known as well as the agency's recommended resolutions;
- Invite interested stakeholders to observe operational processes; and
- Be honest and open.

In canvassing the landscape of national corrections, it is clear that corrections is paramount in the minds of policy-makers, whether the forums are federally mandated, such as the Prison Rape Elimination Act Commission, or privately funded like the VERA Institute's commission. It is clear that the political world has openly intersected with the correctional world. How the "rest of the world" views this profession will be shaped by the national correctional leaders' willingness to engage in discussions with political stakeholders.

The reality is that the policy changes will be made. The question remains, will correctional practitioners help shape the policy changes or only begrudgingly respond?

Enhancing Corrections' Power

The power in corrections is being taken away, in part, by unions and other labor organizations. Correctional managers must be cognizant of the tactics being used by these groups and be prepared to respond.

The power of these special interest groups is much more than political influence being used to change policy to better serve the narrow constituency. They also have the ability to influence elected officials in all of their decision-making. That influence is based on the ability of these groups to organize well-funded political action committees that orchestrate everything from the decisions being made by district attorneys to prosecute, to sex offenders and sentencing law, and ultimately, gubernatorial elections.

However, the power in corrections is not only be wielded by unions. Private prison operators, substance abuse vendors, education lobbyists, environmental groups, human rights groups and victims' rights groups all have the ability to finance support for their position in a manner that correctional executives do not. All of these powerful groups have a narrow mission: to influence decisions that best suit their monetary or policy gains.

The consequence is that policy decisions are not in the best interest of the public, which has resulted in long-term correctional operational commitments to employee contracts, retirement contributions, health care benefits and bond financing for capital outlay. In fact, the debt service alone on most government bond funding would more than fund the programs needed to reduce the true driver of correctional costs — population.

The long-term commitments mentioned above are not fiscally sustainable. The same fiscal conditions that bankrupted many large private or publicly traded/funded companies and government entities during the past few years are going to continue to occur in many jurisdictions across the country. The fiscal dilemmas that will inevitably arise will require correctional executives to look at operational efficiency, procurement reform and litigation compliance/management in a new way. The strategies of the past — cutting staff and programs — will not accomplish the necessary cost reductions that will be needed.

Correctional leaders must become more willing to identify resources and expertise that exist in academia and the private business world to assist them in analyzing, designing and implementing major re-engineering, reorganization and reforms. The era of continual building and crowding is coming to an abrupt end. The era of innovation and re-engineering must begin if correctional practitioners are going to continue to advocate for appropriate offender programs designed to reduce recidivism.

The late Peter Drucker, who many describe as the father of modern management, taught that true change in society will require collaboration between the public, private and social sectors. Enhancing the power of the correctional leader will require leading that collaboration. Bringing together all the stakeholders associated with probation, detention and post-release operations in the spirit of collaboration will assist correctional leaders in playing on the entire field. Some of the most capable leaders in the country are correctional leaders such as Richard Stalder and Christopher Epps, who have demonstrated exceptional leadership skills in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

As stated by Francis Hasselbein, chairperson of the Leader to Leader Institute, "In times of challenge, people are looking for leadership." The fiscal challenges facing this country as a result of poor social and correctional policy-making are not insurmountable. Now is the time to lead. Corrections must create the collaborations needed to enhance the profession and level the playing field.

Working With the Press

The press is no longer narrowly defined as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. With the advent of webcasts, podcasts, broadband, instant messaging and the

Internet, the traditional methods of communication have been rendered essentially obsolete.

Therefore, correctional leaders must expand their view of the media to include all of its current incarnations. Correctional organizations must advertise their missions, goals and responsibilities. Leadership must establish a correctional brand and embody it. As discussed previously, politics and power are a reality, and the one constant for success in both arenas is the ability to influence. The press is a powerful means of influence.

There is a wealth of leadership writings that identify influence as a responsibility of leaders. This concept can be found in the Bible as demonstrated by Moses and Aaron, or the writings of Nanus, Kotter or Senge on leadership. Leadership must articulate a vision and mobilize followers. Mobilization requires the ability to clearly communicate, and good communication achieves influence.

With an unprecedented population in the country associated with the criminal justice system, it is paramount that correctional leaders become more influential in the various forums debating correctional policy. Without vocal professional input, the existence of ill-informed policy-making will continue.

Correctional leaders not only must engage in providing information through the multiple vehicles of media communication, they also must become masterful at using the ever-evolving mediums. This is crucial, given the propensity of the public to obtain information faster via electronic mediums.

Correctional managers are charged with leading a very newsworthy profession. Correctional issues, events, successes and shortcomings have been reported through a lens of sensationalism. Therefore, correctional leaders also are responsible for educating the policy-makers and public on a subject they sometimes would like to forget. The reality is that the public cannot be allowed to forget, if for no other reason than that the current policy direction is fiscally unsustainable.

Leaders in the profession must start to change the tenor of reporting to a realistic tone. If the public and policy-makers are to become enlightened on the current reality of corrections relative to the continual drain on public resources, leaders must change the images being portrayed. The following are examples of strategies that can be used to become more successful in communicating with the media.

Be brutally honest. Consistently explain to the media that prisons can be dangerous places and have an important role in public safety with significant public costs. No matter how long executives have been in the business, the reality is that something can go wrong and the media must be prepared to report on the worst. Hold press conferences and media conference calls. Consider holding these press conferences at one of the most volatile or historically significant institutions.

Using this strategy will not, and should not, alleviate the leader from being held accountable for terrible incidents and outcomes. What it does is establishes credibility and

removes the misperception that corrections has something to hide.

Use simultaneous internal and external communications. When leaders communicate with staff, use multiple mediums (e.g., video-taped messages, e-mail messages, conference calls, video conferences, employee forums, blogs, newsletters, and walk and talks).

Whatever is chosen as the medium to communicate internally, it is imperative that the leader has the ability to simultaneously deliver the same message to the media. Consistent messaging to all parties will prevent others from “spinning” the information. This will not insulate the leader, but it puts him or her in a better position.

When the organization is going to make a major policy or procedural change, enlist the support of expert third parties to speak on behalf of the agency (e.g., peers, academics, consultants, nonprofit organizations). Significant policy changes often are met with resistance, and having expert parties echo the ideas will help with positive messaging.

Build a partnership. As much as correctional managers are concerned about trusting the press, they cannot afford not to trust the media. It must be a partnership, and it is always advantageous to develop and nurture this partnership. A correctional executive, or any trusted representative of the leader, must communicate honestly with the press and always return calls and contacts, even if the outcome could be negative. If information reporters have heard is not confirmed or clarified, the reporter will only dig deeper and view the organization as attempting to hide something. Look into the matter a reporter broaches and respond to him or her. Correctional leaders have a responsibility to be a part of any story, if for no other reason than to attempt to ensure that the information is accurate.

Be a leader in the community. Many institutions are built in rural areas of the country. Correctional leaders often are charged with leading the organization that is the largest employer in the area. It is imperative that leaders go before editorial boards and avail themselves of opportunities in public television broadcasting forums. In these forums, leaders must stay on message and articulate those established in their internal/external communication strategy. The key for all correctional leadership is to become more influential in shaping the correctional policy of the future.

The time has come for correctional leaders to exert themselves. Who knows the policies that will improve outcomes from offenders better than correctional practitioners? Use the opportunities presented by the insertion of politics, power and the press into prison operations as a vehicle for true, informed public policy change.

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