

# Leadership Drain: Having the Right People for the Right Jobs at the Right Time

By Rick Johnston

*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.*

— Martin Luther King Jr

**T**his quote is discussed during the first day of each correctional leadership-training course conducted by the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services. The leadership program comprises the courses “Excelling as a First-Time Supervisor,” “Correctional Leadership” and “Advanced Correctional Leadership.” These courses are held over a five-day period and offer department employees 40 hours of training to prepare them for future supervisory responsibility. The department offers this training because it recognizes that in the corrections workplace there are many veterans and baby boomers who will retire in the next 15 years. And with those retiring staff, years of experience and knowledge also retire.

In 2000, the United States had about 709,000 employees working in corrections. When broken down into generational age groups, veterans and baby boomers account for nearly 354,000 of those employees, according to the National Institute of Corrections. These are employees who will retire from correctional agencies in the next 15 years. This figure does not take into consideration employees in all age groups who resign their positions, further exacerbating staff turnover issues. In many agencies, a percentage of administrative staff probably fall within the veteran and baby-boomer age groups. For example, in the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services, 489 employees (21 percent) are above age 50, with 43 (about 9 percent) of those employees holding mid-management positions or higher. This may not seem like a large number, considering the agency has 2,360 authorized positions; however, given that these positions are correctional lieutenants and higher, the department will certainly be losing a great deal of experience in the future.

With the loss of employees to resignation or retirement, opportunities arise for remaining staff to assume these positions of responsibility. Fortunately, it has long been a part of the culture in Nebraska to instill in staff the principle that each staff member is a role model, leader and mentor to fellow staff as well as to inmates in the state’s correctional facilities.

## Evolution of the Program

The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services contains in its vision points a Commitment to Staff, which is defined as “committing ourselves to partnering with staff who strive to optimize their contribution to our mission and standards.” To assist the state agency in meeting this vision point and to prepare staff to assume future vacant leadership positions, the agency has created many different training opportunities to help in the transition of the next generation of leaders, from entry-level positions to roles of supervision. These opportunities allow department staff to gain knowledge of what is expected as leaders and how to perform optimally in these positions.

Nebraska’s formal process for achieving this comes from the agency’s Correctional Leadership program, which is conducted annually. This program traces its roots back to the creation of an organizational leadership program in 1992 and 1993. A mid-management program was created in 1994, largely based on the military’s Total Quality Management program. The mid-management program was based on a needs assessment that looked at the basic knowledge necessary for new supervisors. The assessment grew out of a concern that staff being promoted had no experience as supervisors and were fundamentally “cold” to the philosophy of leadership and knowledge of how to lead people. Most newly promoted supervisors relied on behaviors they had observed in previous supervisors or on

supervisory knowledge they had gained in areas other than corrections. At this time, the training was coordinated by the agency's Staff Training and Development Division and taught by agency administrators who developed the courses. The mid-management program was presented in various forms from 1994 to 2002, when the agency's Staff Training and Development Division and Organization Development Division collaborated to re-evaluate the mid-management training. The result was the current Correctional Leadership program. The responsibility for training development and presentation shifted from individual sectors to a joint effort between the two divisions, with each working in concert to develop and support the training.

## First-Time Supervisor Course

"Excelling as a First Time Supervisor," an eight-hour, one-day introductory course that offers "survival techniques" to staff who are new supervisors or staff who aspire to be future supervisors, is the first course offered in the leadership program. Many of the course's topics were derived from comments made by trainees who attended the initial leadership course in 2002, as well as administrative level managers who desired to see training on specific topics for new mid-management level staff.

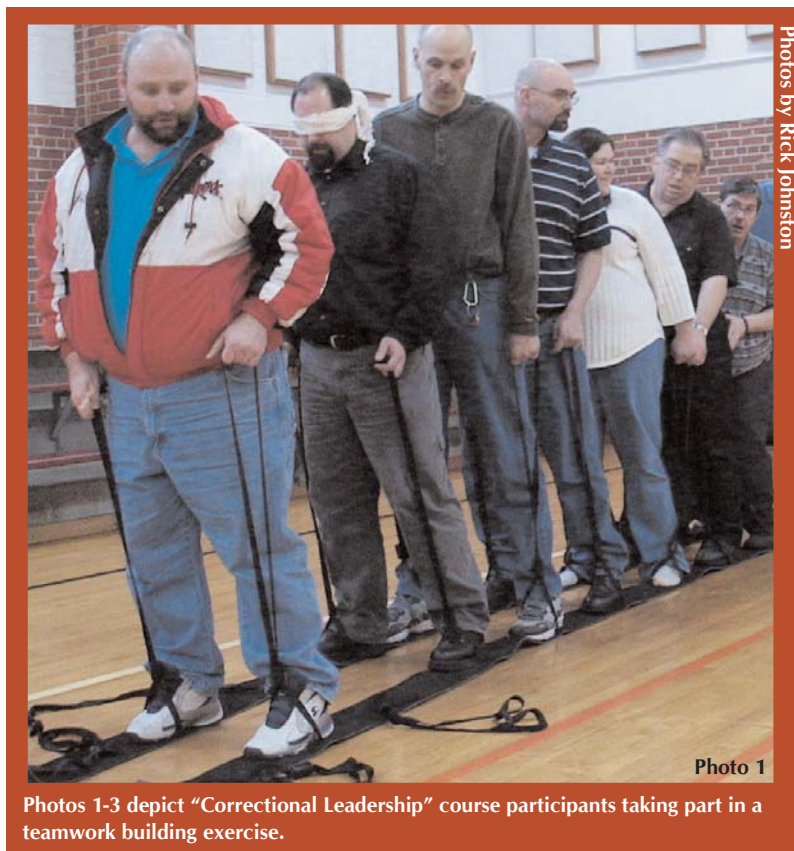
The course begins by exploring and defining different supervisory styles, followed by discussion about when each style is appropriate and when the style should be avoided. How personal factors influence each supervisory style is also discussed. Most notably, participants are asked to describe the traits of a former supervisor that have had the most influence on their own supervisory styles.

The course also examines how supervision is experienced differently by the four generational levels currently in the work force. Participants discuss the expectations of each generation for its leaders and supervisors, as well as its views on authority. Once the different styles of supervision are outlined, the trainees take a supervisory assessment, where they grade themselves on their current level of competency regarding various supervisory tasks (i.e., managing conflict). This is the first of many assessment tools used in the leadership courses. The trainees are individually asked to share how they graded themselves. No trainee is required to discuss any area of the assessment; however, most are open and willing to talk about where they scored themselves lower rather than talking

about areas where they thought they excelled. This allows the instructors an opportunity to let other class members get involved in the training by sharing with one another their own success in the areas where others are struggling.

The course then addresses three critical agency policies of which each supervisor is expected to have strong knowledge: the policy against workplace harassment, the disciplinary process and the misconceptions between counseling and discipline (and when each is warranted and effective), and the responsible use of leave time. Other topics of discussion include: the difference between union-covered (line staff) vs. regulations-covered (supervisor/manager) employees, specifically the differences regarding leave, discipline and grievance provisions; the new dynamics with fellow employees who formerly were equals, and instruction for interaction with previous peers left behind by new supervisors; conflict management; and the relationships between supervision and ethics, specifically focusing on setting the example of positive, professional behavior, regardless of rank, position or title.

Each leadership class also examines communication, based on the agency's recognition that there must be free-flowing communication from the highest echelon of the organization downward to the newest employee, with avenues for new employees to communicate with the highest level of the organization. The communication section of the course also looks at giving performance feedback. All staff in the organization receive regular performance reviews, and effective communication during a performance review can be the



Photos 1-3 depict "Correctional Leadership" course participants taking part in a teamwork building exercise.

most important factor in determining either a successful or disastrous review process for the employee.

## Correctional Leadership Course

The second class in the series is the "Correctional Leadership" course. This course is a 16-hour block of instruction over two days, which is open to all agency staff and does not require a prerequisite.

Differing a good deal from the first-time supervisor course, this course begins to examine the differences between leadership, management and supervision. The first task encountered by trainees is providing a definition



Photo 2



Photo 3

for leadership and then comparing that definition with what they believe are the responsibilities of managers and supervisors. It is not uncommon for participants to discover that leaders, supervisors and managers, often share many of the same responsibilities, simply on different levels. It is here that the class discusses in great detail, without a formal rank structure, that each employee (even entry-level staff) is a leader. For many attendees this is an “awakening” moment in which they understand that all agency staff have leadership responsibilities, no matter what they do. Each staff member is a leader by default because they have an impact on the inmate population that they serve; however, prior to attending this class, many staff do not hold that view of themselves because of their lack of a formal position of authority. Other subjects discussed in this course include principles of leadership, communication, leadership sources of power, diversity, change and empowerment.

Change and empowerment are subjects that are closely explored in the course. Empowerment is important for enhancing staff morale and growth. It means delegating to staff additional responsibilities, and getting them involved in more than the routine operation of their areas during an eight-hour period. Failing to empower staff can have consequences such as instances where it is difficult for them to make decisions because of fear of repercussion in the event of an error, or their lack of experience exercising authority can leave them without the courage to make decisions. Participants discuss how important it is to allow staff to make decisions and also to make mistakes and learn

how to deal with them once they are made. Participants learn how giving staff positive reinforcement for good decisions gives them the courage to make decisions and gives them more confidence to do so in the future. They are cautioned, however, that if they are ever unsure of what to do in a situation they should contact the next level supervisor for guidance.

Change is another important subject for class participants to discuss. Usually evenly split on their feelings toward change, about half the participants admit that they welcome and embrace change, while the other half fails to share the first group’s enthusiasm. The effect of change is humorously illustrated for the class by showing a clip from the opening scenes of the film *A Bug’s Life*. The clip shows ants collecting food and taking it in a single-file line to the collection point. When a leaf falls from a tree and breaks up the line, the ant that is separated by the leaf from the ants in front exclaims “I’m lost!” At this point, another ant — trained in crisis handling — steps in and guides the remainder of the ants around the leaf where they can again see the line. It is a humorous way of illustrating how some people view change. Participants learn why change in an organization is beneficial and that the corrections field will continue to change and evolve, and that staff must always be prepared for it.

To break up the instruction and provide an element of competition and team camaraderie, the class is split up into teams to play the game *Outburst*, with the winning team receiving a prize. Team camaraderie is not discussed as a subject, but as is proved in any working environment, cohesiveness and camaraderie are two essential elements for a team to function well together. At the end of each day of instruction, large scale, full participation activities are conducted to emphasize the teaching points of the day.

## Advanced Correctional Leadership Course

The third course, “Advanced Correctional Leadership,” is the only course in the curriculum that has a prerequisite for attendance. Participants must complete the “Correctional Leadership” course before taking the advanced class, which picks up where the correctional leadership class left off.

The two-day course begins with discussions about the qualities of exceptional leaders. As in the previous course, performance feedback, communication, employee morale and cohesiveness, and ethics are subjects of discussion. To assess themselves on their own ethics, participants mark their choices on a form called an ethics indicator. New course topics include listening skills and multifactor leadership.<sup>1</sup> This type of instruction is intentionally left for the final course because these subjects are broader and more complicated than the subjects discussed in the earlier leadership classes.

## Summary

Nebraska’s leadership courses are unique in that, from the beginning, any agency staff member — regardless of position title, tenure or level of responsibility — can attend the training. Previous Nebraska correctional leadership

classes were restricted to staff in mid-management positions or higher. In the current training curriculum, supervisors and nonsupervisors at all levels of the agency train together. The dress code for the training is a casual style, which eliminates a rank structure in the room and allows staff to freely discuss the issues without the intimidation of sitting across the room from a visual major's oak leaf cluster, for instance.

**Fortunately, it has long been a part of the culture in Nebraska to instill in staff the principle that each staff member is a role model, leader and mentor to fellow staff as well as to inmates in the state's correctional facilities.**

The training is also conducted differently than what would be considered a traditional classroom setting. Prior to attending each training course, participants are sent a welcome letter that clearly defines the expectations of the class, primarily that the attendees will actively participate. Class participation, however, is rarely an issue. The instructors moderate the classes, while participants drive the discussions on each subject. Each class follows a specific objective-based format, with the topics discussed remaining the same for each class; however, no class is exactly the same as the previous class, simply due to the demographics, experiences and personalities of the class members.

Since the merging of the Staff Training and Development and the Organization Development divisions in co-sponsoring the training, Nebraska's Department of Correctional Services has witnessed the growth of class sizes and discussion topics taken to greater depths and higher heights than what was initially imagined. The staff who have attended these classes have challenged each other and their instructors with their ideas and philosophies. The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services is fortunate to have many tremendously talented staff poised to assume the positions of supervision and management that will surely occur in the future. The agency's hope is that this training will help to shape them on their journey toward levels of supervision and management.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bass, Bernard M. and Bruce J. Avolio. 2004. *Multifactor leadership questionnaire feedback report* (prepared for the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services executive staff). Menlo Park, Calif.: Mind Garden Inc. (January).

---

*Rick Johnston is the CSI Industries accreditations coordinator and federal surplus property manager for the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services.*