



Leadership in a Correctional Environment

By Michael Montgomery

Editor's note: This article is a shortened version of an article that was published in the May/June issue of *Corrections Compendium*.

The need for sound leadership in the management of prisons is evident after a cursory examination of recent court interventions, media and legislative scrutiny, and escalating budgets. Leadership is essential to good public service, because legislators often provide missions that are vague, if not conflicting, and may fail to provide the necessary resources to carry out the missions.¹ Indeed, according to Dilulio “the quality of prison life depends far more on management practices than on any other single variable. ... If most prisons have failed, it is because they have been ill-managed, under-managed or not managed at all.”

Competencies of Effective Leaders

Seiter encourages transformational leadership to meet the challenges and changing missions of modern corrections. Transformational leadership brings about changes in people and organizations by the leaders having holistic awareness of themselves so that thoughts, feelings and actions are consistent. He believes leaders and followers

must meet new challenges together, requiring an empowered and inspired staff that can exercise creativity for problem solving and help the organization learn. This article presents 10 competencies of effective correctional management that the author developed during his 30 years of public and private correctional service. Using the acronym CORRECTION, he explains that correctional leaders must strive to practice the following ideals:

- Concentrate on the big picture;
- Observe their areas of responsibility frequently;
- Resolve problems quickly;
- Respond to every inquiry;
- Enhance their abilities;
- Communicate with people internal and external to the organization;
- Think outside the box, but not too far;
- Integrity is everything;
- Offer their skills to resolve problems; and
- Nurture their staff.

Concentrate on the big picture. This means establishing a clear vision for the organization and focusing on what is important. This function is central to the leadership role and is a primary determinant of the effectiveness of a leader. Denhardt describes this ability as “creating a vision of the future that already exists in the minds of others.” Leaders develop a vision for the organization and provide the strategies for producing the changes needed to accomplish the vision. Kotter explains that establishing a vision does not have to be brilliantly creative and certainly is not mysterious. It is an exhaustive process of gathering and analyzing data. More succinctly, it requires the ability not only to meet the next situation but to make the next situation.

Creating a vision and communicating that vision to all staff is only part of this competency. Correctional leaders must also be highly observant and cognizant of the interests and desires of stakeholders external to the correctional environment, in other words, “seeing the big picture.” Today’s correctional leader must be acutely aware of both the internal and external environmental factors affecting the correctional system. These external factors may be citizen groups, the courts, legal-aid agencies, media sources, unions, public-health organizations, legislative actors, private correctional companies, and other interested groups or individuals. This competency relates to what Rowe describes as foresight, or “the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation.” This ability may be partly intuitive but can be enhanced with knowledge and experience. Senge adds that creating a shared vision is an ongoing process; that is, there may be a predominant image of the future, but that image will eventually evolve into a new vision.

Effective leaders will observe their areas of responsibility frequently. One of the truisms in corrections or other public services is that in times of crises, the leaders will be held accountable. Too often, correctional leaders convince themselves that they are too busy and tied to the office and, therefore, are forced to delegate the inspection or observation of internal operations to management staff. Time and again, this attitude has proved disastrous. Even with the most experienced

management staff performing the observation role, staff and management still want to see leaders acting as a check and balance to verify their good labor. Simply stated, the staff want leaders in the facility to praise good work, criticize poor performance, reassure that operations are being performed correctly and to simply see their presence. Boin and ‘t Hart provide some wisdom for commissioners, directors, wardens and sheriffs in their statement on expectations for such leaders: “It is assumed they are well-prepared for any crisis that may occur and will take effective measures to protect the public, limit harm and compensate damages. Any event or behavior that deviates from these standards increases public unease and is likely to elicit strong criticism.”

Correctional leaders will resolve problems quickly.

This competency involves concerted listening to learn of impending problems, frequent observation of areas of responsibility, developing strategies to resolve problems, being tenacious about the resolution of problems, implementing a plan for resolution developed by as many staff as reasonable, and evaluating and altering the plan if necessary. It is with this competency that effective leaders must display their talents for leadership. Cooper noted that leaders of public enterprises “should exercise their best technical judgment when tackling complex problems. Their technical knowledge and skills are tools for which they are being paid; they are the specific justification for the fiduciary role on behalf of the people.” Staff are often aware of most problems. And problems that do not receive attention indicate to them that the leaders do not care. Leaders who believe a problem will resolve itself with the passage of time are often wrong and find the problem to have escalated into a serious situation. This is particularly true with personnel problems.

Respond to every inquiry. Leaders of correctional organizations receive many inquiries during the course of a day. Effective leaders will see that every inquiry, both from internal and external sources, receives a response. By their nature, correctional systems are complex and generally closed to the public. When perplexed or disgruntled citizens do not get a satisfactory response to a question, they want to speak to the person in charge. Some of the inquirers are angry, some are confused, some are frustrated, and others may be desperate, but all need an answer to their issues. To avoid a timely reply or to deny a reply by simply not responding is not in the best interests of the leader or the organization.

Enhance their abilities. Effective leaders are continuously learning about themselves, their organization, their discipline or industry, their followers, and new ways to benefit and build value to each of these. Taking courses, reading books, attending workshops and conferences, building coalitions with colleagues to exchange ideas, and subscribing to journals related to corrections are all ways to increase one’s knowledge about this complex field. The correctional environment is continu-

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ously changing, and leaders must adapt to these changes. "Hour to hour, day to day, week to week, executives must play their leadership styles like a pro — using the right one at just the right time and in the right measure. The payoff is in the results," according to Goleman. Leaders recognize the value of knowledge, skills and experience to all employees of an organization but often overlook themselves as needing further development. With the advancement of technology in modern corrections, leaders need an understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of the many new technological applications related to their industry. Leaders are intimately aware of their strengths and weaknesses and work diligently on exploiting each to the best advantage of the organization. This may require that leaders surround themselves with people of superb abilities as compensation or enhancement. Genuine leaders never develop an attitude that they already know enough to get the job done. Kellerman believes that leaders must be reflective in that they should emphasize the importance of self-knowledge, self-control and good habits.

Communicate with people internal and external to the organization. Great correctional leaders use every opportunity to convey their vision and values to staff, visitors, volunteers and entities external to the organization in every manner possible. In today's work environment, persuasion can work as effectively (and in most cases, more effectively) as preaching from positional authority. One mark of an effective leader is the ability to convey sincerity and dedication to the organization's mission in a manner that causes followers and citizens willingly to choose to attach themselves to the purposes of the mission. How leaders communicate to staff and citizens with their actions has greater impact than communicating either verbally or in writing. According to Rowe, "Effective leadership is demonstrated minute by minute in the things we do and say, every day. People see, note and feel every action, and word that we utter. Any incongruity in what they see, hear and feel dissipates trust." Trust is "the cornerstone of the servant leader model of leadership, in that collegiate relationships are based on mutual respect and feedback, and direct in-the-field access to leaders."² Servant leadership focuses on the philosophy of supporting people who desire to serve first, and then lead, as a method of providing service to individuals and organizations.

Listening is an important element in communications as well. Denhardt believes that leaders practice empathetic listening, described as "listening for and comprehending the subtle nuances of sound and movement that reflect a person's inner state," and evocative speaking, which is "skillfully using image-based words and metaphors that evoke a sensory or emotional response in those who hear you." For example, an endeavor may be described evocatively as a journey.

Think outside the box, but not too far. It goes without saying that today's correctional leaders must use all the creativity and innovativeness they can muster to meet the challenges of a constantly changing system. There are countless ways in which leaders can express creative solutions to problems without usurping rigid policies and procedures. All creative ideas are not likely to emanate solely from the leader. The leader must establish an environment by which all staff and citizens can freely submit ideas and proposals for problems or simply to increase effectiveness or efficiency. The corrections field is not a profession that particularly rewards creativity too far removed from traditional practice. Before launching a radical departure from standard practice, a leader would be wise to engage in some serious thought about the possible outcomes of such an action.

Integrity is everything in correctional leadership. While the citizenry has devout expectations of public leaders in general, those expectations for public officials working in the criminal justice system are even higher. Some would argue that choosing an ethical path in life is often difficult, because the right choice to take is not clear, given the many choices human beings encounter. Stohr et al. argue that in the workplace, especially in corrections, the right choice is understood and doable but may not be the easiest course to take. Cooper

asserts that leaders' "ethical identity emerges incrementally from the pattern of decisions that they make over the course of a career." Practitioner associations such as the American Correctional Association and the American Jail Association have well-established codes of ethics, as do most correctional departments and sheriff's offices. However, these ethics codes cannot

and are not intended to cover every possible situation to be encountered by a correctional employee. Consequently, it is the correctional leader's responsibility to establish an atmosphere in which employees desire to make a concerted effort to do the right thing. This is accomplished by providing a shining example of how professional correctional employees should behave and conduct the organization's business. Setting a good example on and off duty, establishing and communicating positive values, and recognizing that all stakeholders are scrutinizing every behavior exhibited by the leader are ways to convey the unwavering ethical behavior expected of all employees. This includes disciplining, in an equal fashion, all those who fall outside the acceptable norms, and praising those who exhibit extraordinary ethical behavior. Training for preservice and in-service should cover this topic thoroughly and be reinforced at every occasion by management and the leader.

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Offer their skills to resolve problems. The leader is expected to have knowledge and skills beyond most employees and should offer them to staff on occasions when it is appropriate. Good leaders will make an effort to

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expand the knowledge base and experiential level of promising employees by providing new work tasks. Appropriate delegation of new tasks to select employees can serve to develop future managers and leaders. Leaders should stifle their desire to perform tasks, which subordinates could perform to enhance their career

potential. However, in times of crisis or other extraordinary occasions, leaders should offer their skills and knowledge to resolve issues. This reaffirms the staff's confidence in the abilities of the leader and sends a message that no job is beyond the performance of the leader and instills the team concept.

Nurture their staff. This is one of the primary roles of leaders. True leaders are completely committed to the growth of others and believe that they have value that exceeds their tangible contribution as employees. Leaders cherish their employees and will go to great lengths to retain them. McCormack offered a good rule of thumb for leaders, "There's no mystery to holding on to good employees. Give them a lot of responsibility, don't insult them with their paycheck, and tell them once in awhile how they're doing."

Summary

This article has provided some information on the topic of correctional leadership. Regrettably, there is a scarcity of literature on this specific topic of great importance and impact on the public. While this article presents no empirical data on correctional leadership, it provides areas in which empirical analysis could be conducted to build knowledge on the leadership needs of correctional systems. There is no question that the complexities of leading in the corrections field are increasing. As the expense of incarceration increases and the public becomes aware of the impact of that expense, correctional leaders will, by force, become even more accountable to the public and their elected representatives. Tomorrow's leaders will have to be more creative in matters of correctional effectiveness and efficiency in providing for the safety of the public. California's Proposition 36, which curtails incarceration for nonviolent drug offenses, is just the beginning of this effort by a critical public. Academics and practitioners will have to examine the best methods of developing and recognizing effective leaders and deter-

mining what leadership styles or theories will be beneficial for different classifications of prisons.

ENDNOTES

¹Behn R.D. 1998. What right do public managers have to lead? *Public Administration Review*, 58(3):209-224.

²Howatson-Jones, I.L. 2004. The servant leader. *Nursing Management*, 11(3):20-24.

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