

Leadership: Seeing The Forest From the Trees

By Brian E. Cronin, Nathan J. Hiller and R. Stephen Smith

How does one become an effective leader, and how can correctional facilities help develop better leadership? Ronald Reagan once advised, “Surround yourself with the best people you can, delegate authority and don’t interfere as long as the policy you’ve decided upon is being carried out.” But is that really how an organization thinks about effective leadership? The answers to effective leadership are rarely simple in practice, but a significant improvement in leadership may come from breaking some commonly held myths that have been found to hinder leadership.

When it comes down to it, most people usually think of leaders as lone trees in a field of followers. They stand out in the crowd and they are easy to identify as strong, formidable individuals. It is the way leaders are supposed to be seen — as the crusaders and visionaries who are always in control. However, it is not a realistic view of the kind of leadership that is sometimes needed in modern organizations, including correctional facilities. Instead of singling out a select person or subgroup as “leaders,” studies have indicated that promoting leadership among subordinates and at all levels of the organization can facilitate higher performance. This does not mean that the chain of command is out the window. The underlying concept is fairly simple — promote leadership in every employee to produce the most dynamic results. In essence, see the forest from the trees.

Three Approaches to Leadership

The National Institute of Corrections’ Correctional Leadership Competencies for the 21st Century, asserted that “given the increasing number and diversity of offenders in the nation’s correctional institutions ... it is now more vital than ever that correctional agencies [develop] effective leaders at all levels of management.”¹ But what is leadership?

In his influential book on leadership, Wilfred Drath² asserts that there are three distinct ways of thinking about leadership: personal dominance, interpersonal influence and collective leadership. These ways of thinking, or “worldviews,” are not opposites but, rather, build on each other sequentially, with the third way of thinking allowing for the most leadership development in organizations and, ultimately, the most

organizational success. These are ways of seeing and understanding leadership, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that these perceptions and assumptions color the way that leadership is enacted.

Personal Dominance. This first approach views leadership as something a person possesses as a result of his or her position or individual traits (or both). In this view, leaders influence followers in a downhill fashion, from leader to follower with the idea that leadership does not flow uphill (see Figure 1). According to this approach, leaders are born with a set of characteristics that makes them leaders, and that these traits or qualities are fundamentally different from those of followers. The core of this approach is that a defined leader (e.g., a captain, lieutenant, warden) is the source of leadership, and followers are receivers of

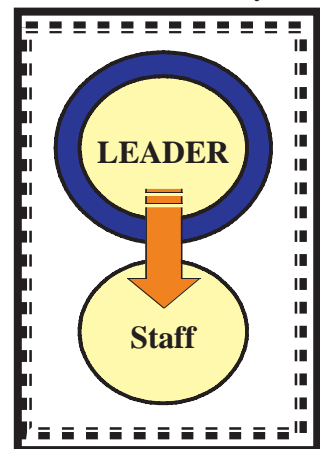
leadership. Throughout history, this has been the predominant way in which leadership has been understood.

Personal dominance is also the leadership style that defines the organizational structure of many organizations. This approach can be quite effective under certain conditions such as emergency situations or when dealing with new staff. However, it also tends to keep the responsibility of leadership in the hands of a select few.

Interpersonal Influence.

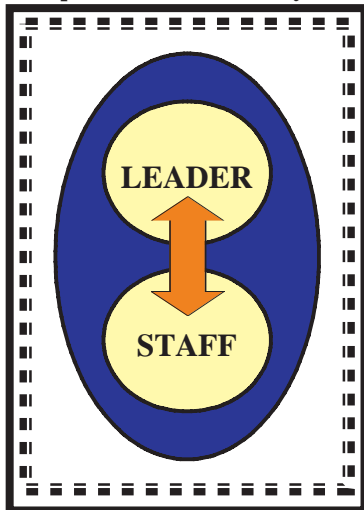
Leadership is not possible without followers. So the second way of looking at leadership is as a process of influence between leaders and followers. This model of leadership differs from the dominance model in that true leadership depends on the follower’s agreement to be led. In contrast, leadership in the dominance model may come about as a result of having authority over someone. In the interpersonal influence view of leadership, “leading” can result from influence and charisma. In this leadership worldview, leadership is not limited to authoritative, top-down leadership; leaders take into account the perspectives of their staff (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.
Personal Dominance Style



Source: U.S. Army. 1973.

Figure 2.
Interpersonal Influence Style



Source: U.S. Army. 1973.

leadership in the early 1970s. The U.S. Army Handbook³ asserts that using this style is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength that employees will respect, and it is normally used when leaders have part of the information while their employees have the other parts. More recently, the Army has more fully and officially recognized this model of leadership as being necessary to fit the needs of the modern world.⁴

In the field of corrections, the strength of the interpersonal influence view has also begun to gain traction. As explained in NIC's publication on correctional leadership: "Interpersonal relationships are the primary factor in a leader's career success or setback. Successful leaders value contributions made by others, listen well ... are team players, and share decision-making when appropriate."⁵ This approach to leadership is advantageous because it builds relationships in organizations and brings more people into the leadership process.

Collective Leadership. This orientation is based partly on the idea that the difficult demands of modern organizations are too much for a single leader to handle, and the focus is on the process and organization-wide nature of leadership, which inherently includes follower involvement. Leadership is seen as a property of the group, rather than one individual leader, and is understood to emerge as a result of collaborative interaction (see Figure 3). To use the tree and forest analogy, the emphasis is on the forest rather than the biggest tree. This approach may seem a little unusual at first, but top organizations are integrating this notion into their practices.

This approach is unique because it sees leadership tasks as a shared responsibility of all group members and, not surprisingly, involves more people in the leadership process than either of the first two approaches. It does not negate the value of power and influence and realizes that these leadership approaches can be effective, but the collective leadership approach places a stronger emphasis on the shared processes. It

The interpersonal influence style involves leaders including their employees in the decision-making process and, as a result, it involves more people in the leadership process. Leaders use their employees to determine objectives and how to achieve them most effectively. Ultimately, however, formal leaders maintain the final decision-making authority and will use their influence to guide the process. The Army began to explore this style of

leadership in the early 1970s. The U.S. Army Handbook³ asserts that using this style is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength that employees will respect, and it is normally used when leaders have part of the information while their employees have the other parts. More recently, the Army has more fully and officially recognized this model of leadership as being necessary to fit the needs of the modern world.⁴

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creates effective leadership through involvement of all people at all levels, wherever possible. The collective leadership approach does not advocate for the dissolution of formal management structures because they are critical for numerous organizational functions. It does, however, suggest that all members of the group/organization share in the leadership process when appropriate. Assigned leaders such as lieutenants and nonassigned leaders such as correctional officers must be seen as critical to the functioning of the organization and be a part of the leadership process. In this model, each member shares in the process of identifying as well as defining organizational needs, and all members are responsible for shaping solutions.

The benefits of the collective leadership approach are numerous:

- The work required to achieve certain organizational objectives is spread out, which reduces the burden on senior management;
- The process of contributing to organization-wide initiatives often creates buy-in among junior-level staff and cultivates dedication to success;
- It is useful to gain the input and perspective of staff who, in many cases, are the people who encounter the problem daily and will ultimately be putting the plan to use; and
- Finally, by empowering all staff to share leadership responsibilities, leaders are cultivating tomorrow's executives.

The Nebraska Department of Correction's leadership program does an excellent job of incorporating this approach into its training curriculum. The DOC labels the shared-leadership approach as the "joining" approach and defines this style as, "participat[ing] in the decision as 'just another member' and agree[ing] in advance to carry out whatever decision the group makes ... as long as it fits within the policies and procedures." Although this may be most effective with an older, more experienced staff, the goal should be for everyone to be involved in the leadership process.

It is important to understand that, far from being exclusive ways of thinking about leadership, these three approaches can be thought of as concentric rings, with personal dominance in the center, interpersonal influence surrounding personal

dominance and shared leadership in the outer ring (see Figure 4). As researchers⁶ and leadership programs convey, effective leaders (and leadership organizations) who can appreciate the collective leadership approach are usually able to use any and all of

Figure 3.
Shared-Leadership Style

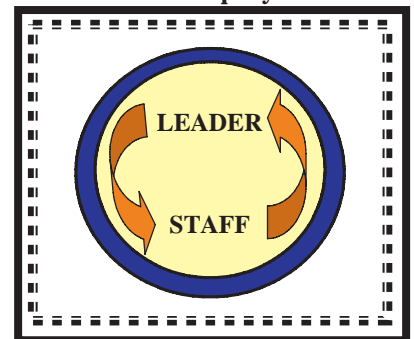
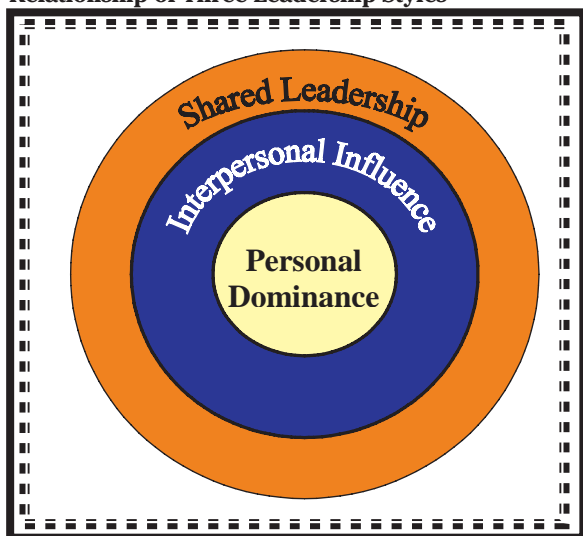


Figure 4.
Relationship of Three Leadership Styles



Source: W. Drath. 2001.

the three approaches, depending on the situation. Conversely, when personal dominance is the primary viewpoint, a collective or influence approach is not possible.

Developing Leadership Organizations

The concept of a leadership organization is being used here to describe organizations that grow leadership at every level. It also describes organizations where leaders are able to effectively use all three leadership styles. This type of organization does not develop overnight; it requires a commitment to the development of leadership throughout the organization, including a focus on developing individual leaders. This growth process is ideally comprised of four steps (see Figure 5):

- Defining and understanding leadership inside and outside of the organization;
- Assessing current “in-house” leadership practices;
- Developing leadership through training (with emphasis on “high potentials” first); and
- Monitoring leadership performance.

Define Leadership. Defining leadership inside and outside of the organization is the first critical element of growing a leadership organization. The three leadership approaches described above are a useful framework to begin the definition process. To start, characterize what leadership currently means to the organization. This can often be done by revisiting executive-level communications as well as the organization’s mission statement and objectives. Using these sources, answer the questions: Which leadership approach(es) does the facility/community/state value? Does the organization need to modify or expand its definition of leadership?

Next, understand leadership as it is described in relevant materials from outside sources. For example, NIC, the American Correctional Association and many

other national bodies publish leadership guides that can be used to understand the latest leadership concepts in the corrections field. In addition, it is useful to gather leadership program materials from neighboring states and stand-out states to better understand best practices in the field. Finally, using the information gathered internally and externally, work with the appropriate stakeholders to define leadership while moving toward growing a leadership organization. A shared vision of leadership will facilitate the growth process.

Assess Leadership. Assessing current in-house leadership practices is another critical step toward leadership growth. This process will help to reveal the common leadership approaches used by facility leaders and the organization as a whole. Assessment is important because it can help to determine where the organization is excelling in its leadership practices and where more training emphasis is needed.

The evaluation process should be approached from two equally important sides: the organization and the individual. Organizational evaluation involves analyzing current training practices as well as the leadership message provided to staff. Training should be assessed to determine if the approach used in-house is consistent with goals of the organization and with national best practices. Communication to staff through memos, instructions and performance measures should also be assessed to determine the leadership style that is being encouraged by the organization.

Individual leadership assessment involves evaluating the current leadership styles of leaders within the organization. This allows leaders to understand their own styles as well as their strengths and weaknesses as they move through training, while allowing the organization to determine the aspects of training that should receive the most emphasis.

Train Leadership. After defining and assessing leadership as an organization, it is time to train leadership. Training is probably the root cause for almost all growth as a leadership organization. Organizations must realize that leaders do not develop by themselves; they must grow through the right experiences and the right training opportunities. With these opportunities, leaders can develop each of the leadership styles described and other tools that will facilitate their success.

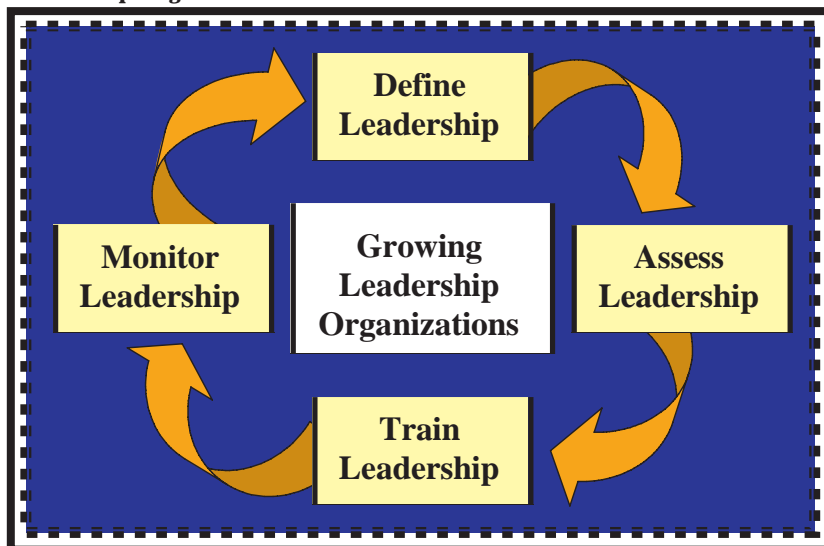
The Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s leadership program is an excellent example of a program that embodies the priorities stressed here. In a recent *Corrections Today* article, Brad Livingston, the department’s executive director, explains that it is critical to develop leadership in corrections from the bottom up because “today’s correctional officer is tomorrow’s correctional officer supervisor.”⁷ He stresses that as training for new officers is enhanced, facilities must also consider the training needs of the experienced officer about to assume leadership responsibilities. This is an important note because it is often assumed that high performance at one level of the organization will translate to high performance at the next level, and this is simply not always the case.

While internal training efforts will provide the greatest growth for leadership organization, external programs are also quite valuable. These programs are typically designed for higher-level leaders and can be found in the corrections field through associations such as ACA, which provides a 10-day development program designed to groom future leaders to work in all aspects of corrections. Programs can also be found outside of corrections (e.g., the Center for Creative Leadership — www.ccl.org), where participants can learn best practices from a diverse set of organizations and trainers.

Monitor Progress. It is important to monitor leadership progress to determine if the goals of the organization and the objectives of the training programs are being achieved. Measurement can be achieved in a number of ways but, at a basic level, performance measures involve setting objective standards that can be used to evaluate progress on a predetermined basis. In this type of performance measurement system, it is often useful for human resource administrators to oversee the process, getting input from all levels of the organization (i.e., 360-degree feedback). Measuring leadership allows the organization to celebrate its success and to refine how it defines, assesses and trains leadership. Thus, the growth cycle continues.

The Virginia DOC stresses the importance of developing and monitoring leader performance in its leadership development program. The agency's program focuses on leadership development at all levels of the organization to encourage a work culture of continuous

Figure 5.
Leadership Organization Growth Process



learning, information sharing and professional development and it underscores the importance of appraisal to provide a shared understanding of what will be monitored and measured. This aspect of its program allows the DOC to continuously improve its process.

Understanding Leadership

It is important to understand leadership and to develop it at every level of the organization. The three leadership approaches and the four growth steps described in this article provide a foundation to recharge an agency's leadership program that will enable the organization's leadership capacity to grow.

ENDNOTES

¹ Campbell, Nancy. 2005. *Correctional leadership competencies for the 21st century: Executives and senior-level leaders*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Corrections.

² Drath, W. 2001. *The deep blue sea: Rethinking the source of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³ U.S. Army. 1973. *Military Leadership*. U.S. Army Handbook.

⁴ Day, D., S. Zaccaro and S. Halpin. 2004. *Leader development for transforming organizations: Growing leaders for tomorrow*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

⁵ Campbell, Nancy. 2005.

⁶ Drath, W. 2001.

Hiller, N. 2005. An examination of leadership beliefs and leadership self-identity: Constructs, correlates, and outcomes. Doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University.

⁷ Livingston, B. 2005. Training the next generation of leaders: Texas' Approach. *Corrections Today*, 67(7):60-61.

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