

# Making **<EXIT>** Interviews Useful To A Correctional Agency

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Exit interviews serve as a tool to uncover departmental characteristics and areas in which departmental change should occur,<sup>1</sup> and they are effective in gathering information from departing employees regarding impressions and experiences in their department.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, the goal of using exit interview questionnaires is to obtain objective information, increase efficiency of the interview process and evaluate aspects of the department through data analysis.<sup>3</sup>

The Nebraska Department of Correctional Services (DCS) contracted with the Center for Applied Psychological Services (CAPS) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to evaluate the reasons for personnel voluntarily leaving their jobs. This project entailed evaluating the current questionnaire, analyzing data available for departing personnel and continued execution of exit interviews. The primary objective of this project was to uncover important issues that influence employees' decisions to leave the department and to identify areas of the DCS that may require changes to improve employee retention.

## *Evaluating and Redesigning The Exit Interview Process*

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the exit interview system used by DCS was accomplished by analyzing exit interview data collected in 2003. This exit interview comprised two main sections: one providing a list of reasons for leaving, in which individuals indicated their top three; and a second, in which employees rated 17 statements assessing perceptions about their jobs.

CAPS identified several problems in the exit interview system that may have limited the department's ability to identify reasons underlying employees' decisions to leave. First, a frequently marked option was "other" (i.e., reasons not listed on the exit interview), indicating the current exit



interview was not sufficiently evaluating major reasons for departure. Second, the portion of the exit interview that assessed perceptions of work did not provide detailed statements for determining reasons for leaving. Responses covered broad multi-dimensional categories, such as "policies were not family friendly" and "improved communication

between supervisors and employees is needed." Third, the exit interview was administered by the department immediately following employment termination. Research indicates that exit interviews are most effective when administered by an outside source after an employee has separated himself or herself from the department.<sup>4</sup>

In response to these issues, CAPS created a new exit interview comprising ratings of 54 statements assessing perceptions of various aspects of work and written responses to three open-ended questions. Statements were grouped by subscale: the job itself, limited opportunity for growth/advancement, supervisor/management, problems with people, wages and benefits, working conditions, company policies and practices, and personal. Each subscale included more specific reasons for leaving, so results indicate particular areas for improvement to reduce turnover. For example, instead of asking if employees left because of supervisor problems, the specific supervisor problems were probed, such as poor communication, lack of guidance/feedback and failure to recognize good performance. Individuals rated each statement using a five-point scale, indicating the importance of the issue in their decision to leave (1 = not an issue; 5 = major issue). Open-ended questions assessed factors influencing decisions to leave, factors that contributed to employees remaining with the department and what would have convinced them to stay. Furthermore, the format of the new exit interview allows for administration either by telephone or mail.

The exit interview questionnaire has undergone minor revisions since its inception. Notably, the “problems with people” scale was broken into two separate subscales: problems with people and problems with inmates. Currently, the exit interview comprises 57 statements in nine subscales.

### *Putting the New Exit Interview to the Test*

As mentioned above, exit interview completion occurs by telephone or by mail. Originally, CAPS personnel attempted completion over the phone. In the event that contacting individuals by phone was unsuccessful, exit interview surveys were mailed. When sent by mail, materials included a cover letter from CAPS explaining the purpose of the survey, the exit interview survey and an addressed, postage-paid return envelope.

Time is a limiting factor when conducting interviews by phone; it is common for a phone interview to require more than an hour to complete. Therefore, exit interviews conducted between July 2004 and June 2005 were by mail only. Materials sent to individuals were identical to those of the previous year, with the addition of a second cover letter that came from DCS Director Robert P. Houston. A slight decline in the response rate was observed when the mail-only surveys were used. Therefore, in July 2005 CAPS returned to phone calls and mailings. However, rather than conducting the interviews by phone, individuals were informed that exit interview materials would be arriving in the mail within a few days. Preliminary analyses indicate that the phone call prior to mailing was beneficial in increasing response rates.

Since the creation of the new exit interview, 219 employees who left the department between January 2003 and February 2006 have completed it either by phone or mail. The department’s human resources personnel provide CAPS with contact information for employees voluntarily leaving the agency. Those individuals represent all DCS facilities, all available shifts and a broad range of positions from entry level to upper management.

### *Evaluating Responses*

Results of the exit interviews reveal that multiple issues are at the heart of many employees’ decisions to leave. The most frequently chosen statement about what influenced decisions to leave was “poor process for resolving concerns/complaints,” followed by “discrepancy between policies and behaviors,” “lack of clear and consistent communication,” “too little recognition for achievement” and “not a family- or employee-friendly department.” A range of issues related to company policies and practices, supervisor/management, and wages and benefits are consistently viewed as major issues across all occupational groups and facilities. Conversely, issues related to problems with people (e.g., problems with inmates or co-workers) and personal issues tend to be viewed as less of a concern across all occupational groups.

### *Leadership Development Program*

Knowing the top five reasons for departure, the department began to address these issues. It began immediate exploration of areas under its control and in its budget for improving the work environment. Diligent work began on a leadership development program for addressing communication and interaction issues between supervisors and employees. The department also took actions to expand its conflict resolution program. Upper- and mid-level managers use these tools not only to resolve conflicts, but also to teach employees positive, proactive communication skills to resolve conflicts themselves.

The agency’s leadership development program is designed to give supervisors an opportunity to continue to develop their skills and knowledge in order to be more effective supervisors. The goal of the program, which formally started in October 2006, is to develop leaders/supervisors who are well-rounded and have shown the initiative to challenge themselves. The leadership program focuses on diversity of work experience, effective communication, conflict resolution, ethics and cultural competency. The program also assists with the retention of quality staff by having the most effective leaders in supervisory positions.

The leadership program comprises six components (described below). The three-year program is targeted at second-level supervisors (i.e., supervisors whose direct reports are also supervisors). However, anyone can apply to the program, which has a competitive selection process. Each participant’s leadership program path is developed around his or her needs.

**Job Shadowing.** In fulfilling the supervisor job shadowing section, participants are required to work with supervisory staff in their area of interest for a total of 40 hours. Participants see first-hand how supervisors handle daily issues professionally and ethically. This also facilitates participants’ ability to view issues from a wider perspective than perhaps they have before. In addition, it gives the supervisor an opportunity to mentor another supervisor.

**Diversity-of-Work Job Shadowing.** This section requires that participants work with other staff of their equivalent rank in a different department/program for a total of 40 hours. This encourages team building and good communication among different departments. It allows participants to gain new knowledge of a different department/program in order to enable them to be more of a systems thinker. It also gives supervisors who generally do not have a lot of interaction a chance to network and mentor each other.

**Job Challenges.** Participants must complete a job challenge and then write a three- to four-page essay on how the job challenge positively impacted their ability to be an effective leader/supervisor for the department. During the three-year leadership program, participants must complete at least three job challenges, which include:

- Temporary assignment to another function/covering for a colleague during an extended absence;



- Managing in a new area or function;
- Launching a new project, program or facility;
- Dealing with a crisis situation;
- Participating in the hiring or promotional process;
- Representing the department to outside interest or the media;
- Participating in labor negotiations;
- Serving on a community task force/community involvement board;
- Designing and conducting training;
- Being a team member or team leader on an American Correctional Association audit or security audit;
- Serving on a work team/process action team;
- Working with a business manager to develop a facility budget; and
- Being a field training officer/mentor/coach.

**Personal Development.** Participants are required to take at least three personal development courses. The courses must be about leadership, supervision, effective communication, ethics or diversity. The courses are intended to assist participants with further developing these skills.

**College-Level Courses.** Participants must take at least two college courses. The type and level of courses that they are encouraged to take depend on each participant's current education level. The state universities in Nebraska have been involved with the development of this section of the program and have agreed to waive prerequisites and applications for admittance on a case-by-case basis.

**Varied Job Experience.** To complete this section, participants must become involved with institutional or department initiatives. Staff are also encouraged to work in at least two departments/programs and at two different work sites/institutions. This section concentrates on giving participants a wider understanding of overall department operations and initiatives.

### *Additional Initiatives*

Currently, the supervisory selection process is undergoing marked changes. The screening and interview processes now include an emphasis on soft skills — which address leadership/management abilities more than knowledge questions — as well as preparation for employees who wish to be a leader of people and to make a difference. Additionally, tools such as Smart Hire (a software program customizing communication, critical-thinking and decision-making skills) support the design of soft-skill and leadership questions. The DCS has an active, open-door policy for any employee to speak directly with his or her supervisor, warden and agency director.

Improving communications for consistency and clarity are coming about in a variety of ways. To facilitate consistent communication, a field-training program, in which new hires are mentored by experienced custody and housing staff, is in place. In this program, new employees learn security protocols and effective communication skills with inmates and employees. Annual in-service classes are undergoing redesign, including smaller classes and increased frequency. This

format is in place for new-hire or preservice classes, and has received positive feedback. A work team is exploring a “team within a team” concept for shift staff at two of the largest prisons. These efforts all go toward creating opportunities for supervisors to have more one-on-one interaction with employees, as well as having quality time for employees to ask questions regarding policy and other changes.

Employee and family benefits offered to staff include 100 percent college tuition assistance reimbursement for 15 credit hours per year. Also, uniform polo shirts are now issued to more staff, including community custody staff. This action is a cost savings to employees who were spending their own money for work attire. Where applicable, employees have a say in work schedules by having voluntary overtime assignments count as mandatory overtime, thereby helping to ensure getting time off. Another scheduling change explores opportunities to have nontraditional work hours as a means to better accommodate an employee's personal and family needs. Also, the department recognition program includes the new Ambassador Award, which honors an employee who is a role model the department values both at work and in the community.

The above actions represent a fraction of the improvements the department is taking in response to the exit interview survey. The results also have led to CAPS conducting employee focus groups, which provide current employees with an opportunity to tell the department what changes are needed and which practices to reinforce in order to retain quality staff. This presents further validation of the information obtained from employees who left the agency. In addition, hiring and retaining quality staff leads to the department having a pool of individuals with a leadership mindset, who are ready and able to move into supervisory positions.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Giacalone, R.A. and D. Duhon. 1991. Assessing intended employee behavior in exit interviews. *The Journal of Psychology*, 125(1):83-90.

<sup>2</sup> Harris, D.H. 2000. The benefits of exit interviews. *Information Systems Management*, 17(1):17-21.

<sup>3</sup> Giacalone, R.A., S.B. Knouse and A. Montagliani. 1997. Motivation for and prevention of honest responding in exit interviews and surveys. *The Journal of Psychology*, 131(4):438-448.

<sup>4</sup> Knouse, S.B., J.W. Beard, H.G. Pollard and R.A. Giacalone. 1996. Willingness to discuss exit interview topics: The impact of attitudes toward supervisor and authority. *The Journal of Psychology*, 130(3):249-261.

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