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A House Divided CANNOT Stand: The Critical Need for Staff Unity

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I’ve heard many a time the saying that perception IS reality.

Since perception at times may in fact be *misperception*, and not actual, true reality, I take this saying to mean that the way we perceive situations can “push our buttons” and cause us to react in certain ways regardless of whether the perception is accurate or not.

In the workplace, if having healthy and harmonious staff relationships matters to us, then staff’s negative perceptions of their agency—whether founded or not—must be addressed, discussed, clarified and worked on as needed, or else these negative perceptions will breed division and discord.

What I’m about to discuss here is a very delicate matter at the heart of the philosophy of corrections in the United States.

We probably agree that the pendulum (regarding how and why corrections is being carried out in the United States) has swung from a strictly containment, “warehousing,” even punitive model to a more rehabilitative and treatment-oriented model, which is humane, necessary and good.

This approach has been gaining momentum as prison reform advocates continue to break new grounds and gain support.

This shift in approach has necessitated changes in criminal justice policies and practices, including consequences for offender rule infractions or policy violations, sentencing options, etc.

For successful changes of this magnitude in correctional agencies, the impact of these changes on every component and level of the system must be evaluated and managed.

The perceptions I want to draw your attention to here are perceptions we’ve heard repeatedly from custody staff across the country regarding changes in correctional philosophy related to offender management.

In a nutshell, because of changes in policies and practices, some custody staff perceive that their professional authority is being undermined, and that their safety is being sacrificed in order to promote offender privileges, rights and treatment.

That is, frontline staff perceive that they are no longer allowed to do their job as they were trained, and/or that their safety is being jeopardized in order to assist offenders as they proceed on their path to rehabilitation.

It goes without saying that such perceptions—whether based on truth or not—are highly detrimental to staff morale, and ultimately to the successful fulfillment of their agencies’ mission, and therefore must be dealt with.

Again, I’d like to repeat that this article does not address whether such perceptions are objectively true or not, or to what degree they are true. It simply addresses the existence of certain perceptions.

Research evidence suggests that custody staff are not opposed to a more rehabilitative, treatment-oriented approach for offender management. In fact, the majority of correctional officers in one study agreed that rehabilitation programs should be made available to those offenders who wish to engage in such activities. In that study, 86% of correctional officers who responded endorsed items that supported drug and alcohol treatment of offenders, 82% supported academic training (such as GED preparation), and 77% of respondents endorsed items that supported offender vocational training (Lerman, 2017).

However, when they perceive that their own safety is on the line, staff’s view of rehabilitation approaches becomes less favorable. For example, in the same study, custody staff who reported suffering from PTSD symptoms were less inclined to state that rehabilitation is a central goal of incarceration and more likely to agree that the goal of incarceration is to maintain public safety (Lerman, 2017). That is, staff who experience PTSD symptoms may be less optimistic that offenders can be rehabilitated, and their concerns about their personal safety trump their investment in rehabilitative models.

Similarly, our conversations with custody staff indicate that they are *not* against rehabilitative efforts. Rather, what staff object to is what they perceive to be a lack of procedural justice and fairness in how they are viewed and treated by their leaders, especially compared to how they perceive convicted felons are being treated.

Custody staff are vastly outnumbered on the job, where they deal with potential threats daily and even hourly. When, due to policy changes, certain threats are not lessened or removed like they used to be, staff’s anxiety and agitation skyrocket. This can easily result in them becoming more reactive in a “fight or flight” way, and/or feeling helpless, and/or coming to believe that their employer is unconcerned about their welfare. This can result in disengaged and at times highly volatile employees.

Frontline staff have shared with us that their offender management “tools” are being stripped away from them due to reduced consequences for offender misbehavior, or due to the reduction or elimination of certain disciplinary practices. It is the frontline’s strong perception that this renders their correctional workplace more dangerous than it used to be for all concerned.

For example, if administrative segregation is now meted out only in cases of staff assault, staff worry that they will get assaulted even randomly when offenders who are concerned for their own safety want to go to segregation in order to get away from the remainder of the offender population.

Similarly, when threatening or assaultive offenders are not removed from the general population, staff worry that these individuals will be emboldened to continue with their threats and intimidation of staff or other offenders, or carry out such threats, due to lack of substantial negative consequences for such behaviors.

Staff from across various regions of the country and agencies have talked to us about their perception that their managers favor and believe offenders over their employees, and act as if the frontline staff are guilty until proven innocent. For example, staff report being blamed for offender behavior when offenders aggress against them - instead of the offenders being held accountable for their actions. After they are assaulted, staff may be asked, "What did YOU do to cause the offender to hit you?" One can only begin to imagine how such a response impacts staff still reeling from a recent assault.

Alternatively, staff have recounted times when, in line with policy, they have written offenders up for violations, only to have their documentation be thrown out as not serious enough or otherwise not worth pursuing.

Frontline staff also perceive that mental health providers are making decisions that impact physical safety in the workplace. They are disturbed that these providers, who may have not worked in correctional systems for any length of time, end up having the last word, that is, control of operations, even when this puts everyone in harm's way by increasing their risk of exposure to violent offenders. An example of that is when explosive offenders who are making threats against staff are not removed from the general population, or when very brief lockdowns are implemented after a staff assault, or when assaultive offenders are returned to the general population much sooner than they used to be.

Granted, the influx of offenders who are battling serious mental health disorders in prisons and jails has necessitated the involvement of mental health providers in the running of correctional operations. However, every effort should be made to *communicate and demonstrate* to frontline staff that the welfare and interests of *all* parties concerned are taken into consideration when decisions are made about the management of psychiatric conditions in correctional settings.

The perception (due to the shift of correctional philosophy) of reduced consequences for offender violations, and of custody staff as the sacrificial lambs, has been accentuated as never before due to COVID-19. During that time, some agencies relaxed their disciplinary standards with offenders in the midst of extreme staffing shortages, and also due to the offenders' anxieties about the virus, and the lack of visits and other educational and recreational activities for them. This has only served to aggravate custody staff's perception that they are left unprotected, unappreciated by their leaders and even expendable to them, and with no one in their corner.

To look at these matters from the perspective of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the circumstances that custody staff are experiencing that cause them to feel continually unsafe at work leave them in the bottom rung of the hierarchy, since their basic needs for physical safety are not met. Additionally, moving up the hierarchy, it is also the staff's perception that their psychological needs are not being met in the workplace due to the substantial disunity among various ranks.

Assuming that these basic and psychological needs are not met for a considerable number of frontline staff, it can be expected that they will very rarely function in the top tier of Maslow's hierarchy, where they would see the bigger picture of rehabilitative efforts and options, think creatively, and find meaning in their daily work.

Since research indicates that staff are not opposed to the "new" rehabilitative efforts, these efforts might be understood and accepted by them on an intellectual "head knowledge" level, but will be difficult for them to grasp and implement from the heart until they feel safe, appreciated, supported, and unified with their supervisors and administrators.

Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that, until staff perceptions of rehabilitative efforts change, the mission of correctional agencies as centers of rehabilitation would be undermined due in part to the fact that basic and psychological needs of staff are not being regularly met.*

In these times of high stress and hardship, a "win-win" approach for all parties concerned is critical to pursue.

Given the acute staff shortages in corrections agencies nationwide, challenging conversations need to take place between correctional leaders and their employees in order to build or rebuild trust, and strengthen staff's engagement and commitment to the agency. Unity in the workforce and teamwork are essential to staff morale and also to staff retention.

Yes, this will require an ongoing, long-term balancing act that includes wisdom, empathy, excellent listening skills, and dialogue, and a desire to hear frontline staff's suggestions about practical, "hands on" solutions and policy decisions regarding offender management. After all, frontline staff are the ones who have direct experiences regarding how interactions with offenders play out day by day.

Persistent attempts must be made by administrators to try to understand frontline staff's perspective (as they are the ones with "skin in the game"), validating their concerns even if they do not necessarily agree with them.

Similarly, frontline staff need to be educated about the rationale behind changes in correctional philosophy, with clear and detailed explanations and real-life examples from United States correctional agencies as to how such changes can be advantageous for staff and for their communities as a whole.

Frontline staff who come to perceive that their administrators truly "have their back" will be more likely to do their best to manage complex interactions with offenders professionally and humanely than if they perceive that they have to fend for themselves.

And that is why this topic is so important to acknowledge and to discuss.

The alternative of not addressing frontline's staff's negative perceptions of rehabilitative efforts is not a viable option, as it will most likely prove to be much costlier in the long run in terms of reduced safety of operations, reduced quality of rehabilitative efforts, and reduced staff retention rates.

A house divided cannot stand—at least not for long.

**Observations regarding staff functioning in the context of Maslow's hierarchy of needs were contributed by Daria Mayotte.*

References

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Live to See Another Day

By an Anonymous Correctional Officer

It's been almost three years now, but it is a day, a time that I will never forget.

I was seated in my wife's van at the top of the parking garage at the airport. When our son moved away and started coming home on occasion, we found a great spot to watch planes land and take off. I had just watched our son and his fiancé's plane lift off for their home in another state.

I then reached into my backpack and a notebook inside, just like the one I originally wrote this article on, to write a letter to our son. As I started to write this letter, tears started trickling down my cheeks. This would be my last letter to him. I needed to tell him how proud I was of him and the life he had made since he graduated from college. I needed to tell him how much I loved him, and that what I had done was not his fault in any way.

This letter would be followed by one to our other child, then a final one to my wife. When these were complete and sealed in a few days, my plan was then to take my life. There were so many things to say, but.....

I was in a very dark place and had been for some time. I was tired, I was beat up emotionally, and I just wanted the pain to end. I had a terrific, very supportive wife, I had co-workers and a friend or two that I could talk to. I had resources through my employer that I could access. I also had my faith that had helped me in the past during dark times. For some reason, this time was different. This darkness had really enveloped me, and taking my life just seemed the logical choice.

I fought with myself. To even consider taking my life.... Those voices in my head were telling me, "You're weak. You're going to hell when you do this. You're a coward. You have no guts."

I just wanted the pain to stop. That's all. I was in a tunnel and I saw only one way out. Taking my life would surely devastate my wife and children. I had friends at work that I could have reached out to that would have probably been very hurt. They would have said that they never saw it coming, which was by design. Right? When you're in that place, you're not thinking straight or logically. You are only focused on the pain. Besides, my family would be better off. Right?

The things we see, the things we're exposed to in our profession, this stuff just adds up, and then maybe something happens in our personal life, and it all just seems to overwhelm us.

One day I was going about my duties at work and the thought occurred to me that I wished that I could just not feel. It would make it easier to handle what we deal with.

This profession is not for the faint of heart. It never was and never will be. We try our hardest to say, to think that what we're exposed to doesn't bother us, but we all know it does. The people that I have had the honor

to work with are some of the toughest folks you could ever meet. Reaching out for help does not mean you are weak or falling apart. It actually is just the opposite.

I did not finish those letters to my family after all, thank God. Life got better. I did not seek out professional help and in retrospect, I really should have. Please, if you are in that place that I was, reach out to a peer, or your minister, or seek professional help. Talk to someone.

Live to see another day.

“What’s Better about Me as a Person as a Result of Working in Corrections?”

By Gregory Morton, M.Sc.

Reprinted from DWCO’s monthly e-publication, the Correctional Oasis, Volume 12, Issue 9, September 2015.

Desert Waters’ course entitled *From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™* covers a great deal of territory. It allows staff to explore the challenges inherent to the corrections profession; it validates the difficult times that staff may have experienced on and off the job trying to handle those challenges; it gives groups the time and opportunity to ask themselves, “What are WE going to do about it?”; and it even connects our work life to our home life.

And then, late in the afternoon, it asks the question found in the title of this article: “What’s better about me as a person as a result of working in corrections?” Answers vary of course. That’s the beauty of it. But my favorite answer has come to be, “I’ve never thought to ask myself that question.” So let’s spend a few minutes and do just exactly that.

What’s better about you as a person as a result of having worked in corrections?

Are you more dependable and reliable? “Yes,” people say. “I understand the consequences of not following through or not being available when somebody needs me, because of all the times it’s happened to me.” Or, “Doing something so that people don’t trust me anymore? I can’t live with that.”

Are you grateful for the good things you have in life? “Oh boy, absolutely,” people say. “Having my freedom limited would be terrible.” “I don’t take my freedom for granted anymore.”

And how about being able to respond to problems other people want to ignore? Or being able to talk to difficult people that everyone else in your family is afraid of? A lot of those answers end up being real stories, “The neighbor’s dog got hit by a car and broke its leg. They just lost it and didn’t know what to do.” Or, “There was this time at a family picnic”

Are you more honest, more accountable? A lot of people say “Yes” to that. “I would much rather have someone like my boss hear from me first about what I did than from someone else. Hiding something only makes it worse. Even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard.” Or, “Not facing up to the mistakes I’ve made is a slippery slope. Once someone gets comfortable doing that, they can cause all kinds of damage to others and not care.”

But what is most amazing about the answers people give, regardless of what they are, is the shift in tone in

the room that comes with the answers. The room becomes filled with a sense of pride and integrity, an unshakeable confidence, a reality that is both genuine and very, very strong. Most people don't have to do what we do. Most people don't have to adapt and overcome like we do. Most people don't have to face the very worst in life and handle it with fortitude and courage. And then come back the next day to do it all over again. And again.

So why don't we ask ourselves that question more frequently? We're really good at asking the opposite – why this work has caused us to gain weight, or to be grouchy, or to get divorced, or call in sick when we're not, or to drink too much, or only sit with our backs to the wall in public, or to not even go out in public anymore, and so on. Ask corrections employees what they don't like about the job or their agency or their facility or office, and get ready for a 60-minute monologue about every rock they've ever had in their shoe. Frankly, that question is easy to answer. In fact, too easy.

I've come to believe that answering "What's better about me as a person as a result of working in Corrections?" is the fundamental, threshold question on the path to Corrections Fulfillment. That is, it is the required first step on the path. Until we ask ourselves this question, until we each individually conduct the necessary personal assessment to determine what really is better about ourselves as a result of our career choice, we are doomed to be stuck in the cycle of Corrections Fatigue. The question "How am I a better person?" is the doorway out.

The greater, more academic, and also more dramatic concept here is known as Posttraumatic Growth (PTG). As a culture we've started to spend a lot of time focusing on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). And rightfully so. It is a devastating condition if not responded to. But PTG is as valid a psychological concept as PTSD is, and it may well have functionally opposite, neurobiological effects.

PTG is a universal phenomenon and has been well established throughout human history. The arts, specifically literature, drama and, more recently, cinema, are crowded with centuries of stories of people transforming themselves as a result of the barriers they have had to overcome. We are entertained by those stories every day. And yet, we rarely apply them to ourselves and our chosen career. We may have experienced real, direct trauma at work. It happens. We all know that. Or we may have experienced indirect trauma through reading, viewing, or just hearing and talking about traumatic events. In either case, trauma has been a part of our professional lives. And while it may have influenced us negatively, as we are, oh, so eager to tell people, our ability to overcome it has influenced us positively as well.

So, as you continue on your path to Corrections Fulfillment, it is good to frequently stop and ask yourself, "What's better about me as a person as a result of having worked in corrections? How have I grown? How have I been transformed?"

What is stronger about me, smarter, tougher, more resilient?"

And once you have those answers, share them.

New Desert Waters' Course!

"The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™" (TSCS)

Goals

The *Supportive Correctional Supervisor™ (TSCS)* is a highly interactive 46-hour course offered monthly over a 10-month period. The course is designed to equip supervisors with research-based skills and knowledge to support and mentor subordinates constructively, while also addressing their own needs.

Online Content Delivery

One module per month for 10 months, including small and large group interaction, and participant feedback regarding the application* of course principles in between training sessions - 2.5 hours per online session.

**As an integral part of the learning experience, participants will be asked to apply a key principle of each module taught. This will take place independently between sessions, and, in the following session, participants will provide feedback to the whole group on their implementation experience and outcomes.*

Time Frames

25 hours of DWCO Instructor-led online training and facilitation; 15 hours of independent implementation/practice; 6 hours of independent reading

Fee: \$1,490.00 per supervisor

Dates: TBD

For more information, contact us at admin@desertwaters.com.

Comment about Desert Waters' course From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment (CF2F)

"Very good course. This course actually saved my marriage and family. I did not realize the changes I had since the start of my career. After I took CF2F I went home and asked my wife about my personality, and was faced with my worst fear: 'I have actually already talked with an attorney for divorce.' I literally broke down and we talked about everything. We did save our marriage and we are better than ever. Thank you!"

M.M., Correctional Officer

What Are Key Ingredients of Staff Wellness Programming?

At Desert Waters, one of our greatest dreams and desires is to see effective and comprehensive wellness programs instituted in every correctional and detention agency in the US, as well as in every probation and parole office and jurisdiction.

Towards that goal, it makes sense to us that we need to find out from the consumers of such services - the staff themselves and also their family members--what components they believe are needed to build such programs.

That is why we ask you now to tell us what you would want to see offered to you by your employer as part of a staff wellness initiative.

You can send us your reply using the form at: <https://desertwaters.com/admin-contact-page/>.

Or email us at admin@desertwaters.com.

We'd love to hear from you.

Quote of the Month

"We are living through a significant turning point in correctional practice. From day one, health and wellness of staff has to become the fabric of correctional practice. We need to find ways to address the worries, stress, and tension this work brings, and recognize the value of good mental health and the importance of staff care."

~Stephanie Rawlings, Illinois Department of Corrections Staff Wellness Program Administrator

Many Thanks

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IN MEMORIAM

Luis Hernandez, Correctional Officer, Texas Department of Criminal Justice

DWCO 18 Years—2003-2021

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Advancing the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies,
through data-driven, skill-based training

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