

19
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BECOME WORKPLACES OF CHOICE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

APRIL 2022

From The Director's Desk

19+ Years

Tactical Empathy

Softer, Kinder, Gentler, Lost

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A non-profit for the health of correctional agencies, staff and families

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Life is, well, alive. It keeps on living, moving, changing, developing, hopefully for the better. In this issue of the Correctional Oasis we are pleased to present a variety of topics which we hope you'll find of interest and benefit, since your life as a corrections professional also keeps on moving, changing and developing.

To start with, we list some numbers about Desert Waters' activities during the past 19+ years in the United States and abroad. It's been a busy time! Looking back, we are amazed at how much the field of corrections staff wellness has grown over the years. And we are beyond grateful for the privilege to serve you in the areas of staff wellness research, curriculum development, training, book publishing, and other mental health interventions and resources!

Another article, written by Greg Morton, provides intriguing insights on the topic of tactical empathy. In case you have not come across this term before, tactical empathy can be defined as purposeful acknowledgement of another person's feelings, in order to validate the other party's concerns. Benefits of tactical empathy can include prevention of angry outbursts, diffusion of conflict, de-escalation of hostile behaviors or acts of desperation, and perhaps even the gathering of intelligence. (The latter was pointed out to me by Susan Jones.) Tactical empathy can achieve these very valuable, and at times even life-saving, goals through credible demonstrations of respect, caring, and consideration, all without committing professional boundary violations.

The author of this article, Greg Morton, shared with me that one of the main points of his piece was to show how simple tactical empathy can be to do, and how much it can accomplish, even though at first the concept sounds complicated. With his usual consideration for corrections staff, Greg added that staff do not need another convoluted interaction tool in their tool box when a single simple tool will work just as well, at least in the moment.

The rest of the issue addresses complexities that can arise from changes in correctional philosophy in the United States regarding how staff are expected to interact with the incarcerated, and ways to lessen professional boundary violations in corrections.

Enjoy!

Caterina Spinaris

19+ YEARS OF FULFILLING DESERT WATERS' MISSION

Our mission at Desert Waters is to advance the well-being of correctional staff and their families, and the health of correctional agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training.

In an effort to better quantify the degree to which we have been fulfilling our mission since our incorporation as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit in 2003, we recently took stock of some metrics related to our work.

Here is a summary of some of Desert Waters' activities during the past 19+ years:

- **developed and written 7 courses**, of which 5 include the option of Instructor Training with certification
- taught **81 Instructor Training courses, equipping 1,094 instructors** to deliver these same courses to colleagues within their agencies
- facilitated the **direct delivery of 196 courses**
- Written or edited and published five books with estimated **total sales of 69,725 (units)** since 2009
- Gifted another **4,811 books published by Desert Waters** where the need was recognized

In addition, here are some further numbers demonstrating the scope of our services:

- Conference Presentations : 82
- States where trainings were conducted or staff came from these states to receive our training: 39
- Additional countries outside of the United States who have utilized our services: 4
- Webinars: 14
- Research Studies: 7
- Expert Witness Testimony: 5
- Federal Contract Agreements: 3 (National Institute of Corrections, 2; NY Office of Victim Services, 1)
- Awards: 2 (Desert Waters' founder, Caterina Spinaris, received the 2014 Harry Tinsley Award by the Colorado Criminal Justice Association; 2016 Commercial Product Award of Excellence for the course "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™" by the International Association of Correctional Training Personnel)

Thank you for allowing us to serve you.

TACTICAL EMPATHY

BY GREGORY MORTON

Correctional agencies have different terms for the offender interaction skills that they want their employees to use. And we ran across an interesting one recently – Tactical Empathy.

Empathy is a characteristic that is often included in the list of behaviors and attitudes corrections professionals should have in their toolbox, but those of us who do corrections training frequently find it a difficult idea to make convincing to co-workers. And there is no doubt that the folks we interact with sometimes make it extra challenging.

Seeing it paired with the conscious choice implied in the word “tactical” causes another re-evaluation. In trying to interpret this concept further, we did some word replacement and came up with “purposeful acknowledgement” and “deliberate understanding.” And while those are commonly used words, they still make the idea seem more complicated than it needs to be, particularly if we want it to become a natural daily practice. After all, we have taken a two-word phrase and gone from six syllables to seven and then eight. As if making the idea more complicated makes it more professional.

So let’s revisit the original term with a personal story that demonstrates how simple tactical empathy can actually be.

I was teaching a class of 15 inmates in my state’s maximum-security facility. It was a morning class, starting at 7:30, right after chow. One day I was late. I got stopped by a train. A slow train. One that goes one way, very slowly, then stops, then goes back the other way, even more slowly. I ended up being about 10 minutes late for class. By way of apology to the group, I explained that I had been stopped by a train. A slow train. And one of my guys said, “You ought to be in here. This is a real slow train.”

[FREEZE THE SCENE]

At this point I could have said any number of things, including some demeaning ones like “That’s not the train’s fault”, and the famous “Should’ve thought of that before you did whatever got you here.” Or some hollow but well-meant cheerleading like “It won’t last forever.” (Except for those in the class for whom it will last forever. Or at least the rest of their lives.)

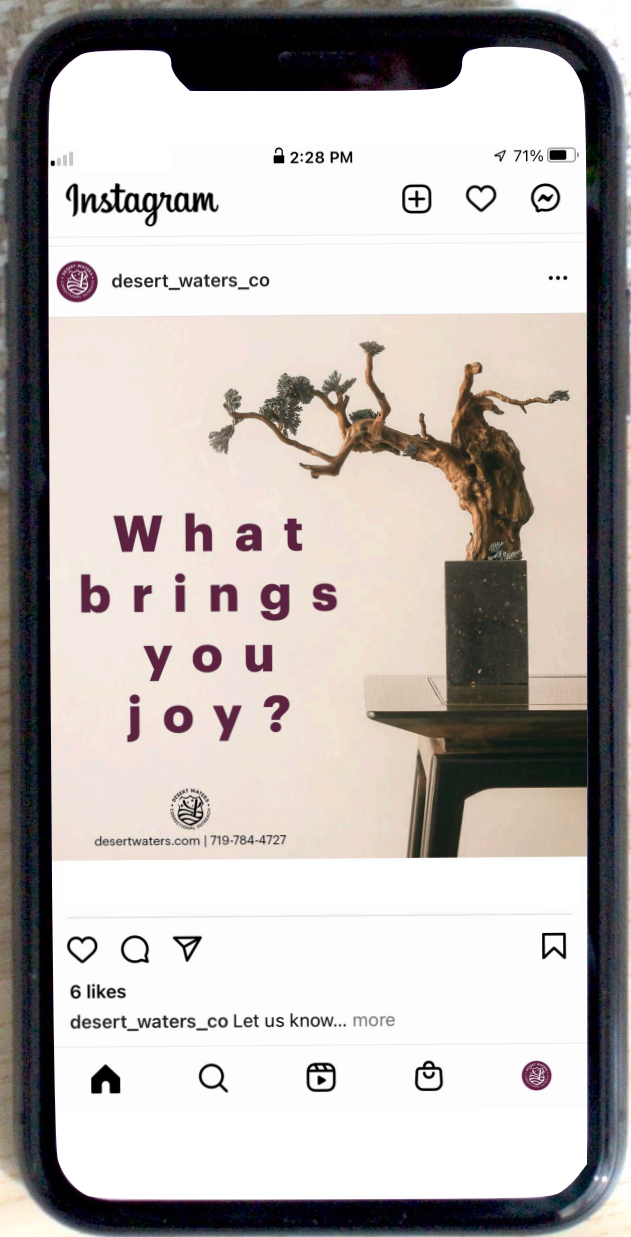
But all I said was, “Good point.” And nodded my head.

In doing that, I acknowledged their current difficulty, avoided a debate about causes that might include dodging responsibility, and reinforced our professional connection. Much like a doctor saying, “Yep, it is” when a patient talks about how hard it is to quit smoking. I didn’t breach any professional boundaries. I didn’t make any long speech. I didn’t patronize. I didn’t dig into parts of their lives that were irrelevant to our class.

I say this because I think of the times when one of the individuals we supervise, maybe our clerk or orderly, does have an extra bad day – a visit that cancels at the last minute, a death in the family, even an annoying cell mate that they can’t get away from – and who then tells us about it. Each of those moments is an opportunity to demonstrate a deliberate and intentional, in other words, tactical acknowledgement of that human experience. All it might take is a couple of words. Or even just a nod of your head, or heavy sigh. Just body language. It doesn’t have to be complicated. But if done with a genuine understanding, it does role model the pro-social interaction style that we, as corrections professionals, are looking for in return.

Gregory Morton started his career at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) as an academic counselor in the mid-1970s, and then served as OSP’s Staff Training Coordinator for eleven years. He was the department’s Staff Training/Professional Development Administrator, and Labor Relations Administrator until retirement in 2009. He has been a Master Instructor in Desert Waters courses since 2013. He holds a Master’s degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, concentrating on the consequences of work-related trauma and chronic stress, and the rapidly expanding field of human neuroscience. Concern for the health and skills of the corrections workforce has been his motivation throughout.





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SOFTER, KINDER, GENTLER, LOST

BY ANONYMOUS CORRECTIONAL PROFESSIONAL

When I began my correctional career during the first decade of this century, correctional culture was nearing the end of “hard” inmate supervision. There were still large areas of prisons lacking security cameras, and use of force by staff against inmates was frequent.

The amount of time dedicated to attempting to negotiate a peaceful end to a cell being held “hostage” was short, and cell extractions were common. Disciplinary reports were frequent, and disciplinary sanctions were harsh. While intentionally mistreating inmates was no longer tolerated by the administration, many line staff continued to mistreat inmates because your peers didn’t report you, and the investigator never believed the inmate’s side of the story.

My, how things have changed! A recent trend in corrections has been the introduction of a series of practices informed by a philosophy of treating inmates with respect, dignity, and humanity. Development of professional relationships with inmates is now highly encouraged. A few of the many softer, kinder, gentler correctional programs out there include Strategic Inmate Management, Core Correctional Practices, and AMEND. Depending on the correctional agency, sometimes there is not a specific program, but instead the change is represented through overhauls of operational policy and new employee training curricula.

Many of my line staff coworkers began their correctional careers in the 1990’s. When they interviewed CO’s at that time, administration was not looking to hire anyone who was all about being softer, kinder, and gentler. We have an entire cohort of veteran security staff who were trained under a fundamentally different correctional philosophy, and each of these staff members has thousands of hours of practice using tried and true methods of effective inmate supervision. Then recently they all took turns attending a 2-day training on the new inmate supervision model, with no additional follow up.

To say that the new model failed to take is an understatement. With few exceptions, most veteran staff continue to practice what they know best, with modifications of dropping certain practices that are no longer permitted.

It has been an easier transition for more recently hired staff – I'll count myself among them - who have enough of an exposure to a different philosophy of inmate supervision to be open to learning the new model, but were also brought up under a security-first system. This group has a strong foundation in correctional fundamentals including con games, gang management, and other (in my opinion) critical proficiencies since discontinued from the new employee curriculum.

New hires are the most receptive to the new model, but ironically this is also the group that seems to have the toughest go with it.

Corrections attracts a new kind of worker these days; one who expects to be more interactive with inmates. From day one they are taught to get to know the inmates, be present, available, and intentional. There are staff playing basketball and card games with inmates now.

The fatal flaw in this set-up is the absence of appropriate safeguards to prevent new employees from succumbing to personal boundary violations. A significant percentage of new hires are leaving work in corrections due to forming inappropriate emotional, personal, and sexual relationships with inmates. It seems that little thought was given by the administration as to how to mitigate the obviously elevated risk of such relationships forming that comes right along with encouraging staff to rub shoulders with inmates.

Softer, kinder, gentler has transformed prison culture in many positive ways. There is far less violence, fewer critical incidents, less trauma, and the practices allow staff to preserve more of our own self-respect, dignity, and humanity. There's little downside to it if you're an inmate. I'll rate the philosophy itself as an "A."

The downside has come almost entirely from the sloppy, poorly-executed implementation, and non-existent top-down staff support.

Whether intentional or not, the message this sends from administration is that we line staff are expendable. If you can't adapt, resign. If you can't spot a con game, we'll fire you.

I'll rate the implementation as an "F." I have petitioned extensively for top-down staff support regarding our new inmate supervision model, and it is a complete non-starter.

Given enough time, the ship will right itself. However, something doesn't seem right about having line staff bear almost the entire brunt of the growing pains.



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Online Training &
Independent Study



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PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES IN CORRECTIONS

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD

One of the thorniest subjects in correctional work settings is that of professional boundary violations. We are human, which means that we have needs, and that we are vulnerable to temptation, especially during “needy” seasons in our lives.

Like a cancer, professional boundary violations have caused untold grief to staff and justice-involved individuals, and the families of both. They have caused much damage to the reputation of individuals and agencies, and they have cost significant monetary penalties when correctional agencies lost lawsuits or settled out of court.

Here are a few suggestions aimed to avert sexual boundary violations.

Power Differential

- Stay cognizant of your occupational responsibilities and context. You are working with people—the incarcerated, parolees or probationers—in a professional capacity, where your professional role gives you power over them.
- Because of this power differential—the power conferred to you by your professional role—the responsibility for decision-making, and for defining and maintaining professional boundaries ultimately rests with you, the corrections professional.
- It is your responsibility to be aware of, contain and restrain your own sexual energy and desires.
- In your interactions with justice-involved individuals, it is your responsibility to place a boundary around their sexual energy and desires by not accepting, inviting or tolerating certain behaviors, certain topics of discussion or certain types of humor.

Setting Limits

- Educate justice-involved individuals on appropriate limits physically and verbally, and role model that.
- Do not engage in friendly, playful, or affectionate behavior with justice-involved individuals.

- Do not extend privileges or share treats with justice-involved individuals based on who you like or who you are getting along with well.
- If justice-involved individuals sexualize interactions with you or others, this should be documented, and steps taken to stop the inappropriate behaviors.
- Learn how to firmly and indisputably set limits with justice-involved individuals who act seductively toward you or other staff. Inform them that they must stop engaging in such behavior or you will have to report and document it.
- Never think of or refer to a justice-involved individual as “my inmate,” a “bad boy” or a “naughty girl.”
- Do offer appropriate verbal support or empathic statements when warranted.

Proactively Protecting Yourself as a Professional

- Regularly remind yourself and other staff of the power differential between corrections staff and justice-involved individuals.
- If you run into “grey areas” regarding how to interact with justice-involved individuals, ask your supervisor for advice as to how to best handle these situations.
- Establish a “straight arrow” reputation among both staff and justice-involved individuals, a reputation of having firm and appropriate professional boundaries.
- Align yourself with staff who are consistently ethical and security-conscious. Such alliances can help keep staff accountable and safe.
- Never make sexualized comments or jokes about anyone else’s physical appearance.
- Do not ask about or make comments about justice-involved individuals’ sexual history, orientation or preferences, unless this is part of your professional role.
- Be clear about the “rules of engagement” - your agency’s Administrative Regulations, and Policies and Procedures, and review them periodically.
- Try to understand justice-involved individuals’ thinking, needs, and mode of operation in order to be less likely to get caught in a web of their needs.
- Develop and maintain appropriate and ethical ways to meet your self-esteem needs, your social needs, and your sexual needs.
- Regularly “inspect” your professional boundaries, and repair any breaches to them. Boundary repairs can be done, for example, by reviewing the effectiveness of your coping strategies in the face of stressful circumstances, exploring more efficient ways to meet your social needs, and rejecting rationalizations about lowering your professional “walls” with justice-involved individuals.
- Role-play setting limits with others and communicating assertively, firmly and consistently —saying “No” to inappropriate requests, as required by your professional role.
- Set appropriate limits on yourself, including on your thoughts and fantasies; say “no” to yourself as warranted.

- Be keenly aware of your emotional vulnerabilities, such as during a relationship breakup, and take steps to meet your needs appropriately during these emotionally distressing times. This can help you stay emotionally healthy, ethically sound and as impervious as possible to temptation. It may include seeking peer support, spiritual support, or the assistance of mental health professionals.
- Be on the lookout for signs of complacency in yourself.
- Remain brutally honest with yourself about your thoughts, feelings, desires and motives, and engage in honest self-assessment of your boundaries on a weekly basis. Are you beginning to “slip” and lose professional and ethical ground anywhere? Are you trying to manipulate a person or a situation to meet a personal need?

If Tempted to Violate Professional Boundaries

- Try to understand your needs and motives at the present time, and seek safe ways to address them—ways that do not involve professional boundary violations.
- Identify signs that you may be starting down a slippery slope, such as being drawn to fantasize about a justice-involved individual.
- If you become aware of being attracted to a justice-involved individual romantically or sexually, acknowledge these feelings to yourself as soon as you experience them and BEFORE you take any steps towards satisfying your desires. (Here we are not referring to a fleeting, one-time thought or feeling of attraction; rather, we are referring to persistent thoughts and emotions to which you may find yourself reverting periodically.)
- ASAP take well-thought-out and deliberate steps to prevent committing professional boundaries violations. Talk about your romantic or sexual attraction to mental health providers, spiritual leaders, chaplains, family members, trusted friends, peer supporters, or supervisors.
- “Keep yourself on a short leash” by making yourself accountable to these trusted people.
- Proactive actions may also include seeking to transfer to another facility or another shift, or requesting changes to your client load, where your interactions with the individual towards who you feel attracted, will be minimized. Proactive actions may even include leaving the agency, if no other acceptable solution presents itself to you. That may sound radical, but it is preferable to your having criminal charges pressed against you, or to being fined or incarcerated yourself due to professional boundary violations.
- If in doubt as to whether your feelings of attraction towards a justice-involved individual are acceptable professionally, ask yourself if you would be comfortable sharing them with someone to whom you are accountable, such as your spouse, your supervisor or your warden.
- Behave as if you are continuously being on camera or videotaped (and you may well be).

- When around the justice-involved individual towards whom you feel attracted, behave as if your mother or your supervisor/warden/director were standing next to you.
- Remind yourself of legal consequences to sexually inappropriate choices in your professional setting.
- Take other staff's warnings or cautions about your behavior very seriously and evaluate them with humility.
- Have a life outside of work!
- And always remember: Any professional can be tempted to cross boundary lines. No one is immune. Do not allow yourself to get cocky or overconfident.



MANIPULATION THAT CAN RESULT IN SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

BY BRENT PARKER

Inmate manipulations aiming at instigating sexual relationships with a staff member often begin as mundane, non-sexual conversations around some common interest. This is why it is so important for staff to maintain “professional distance” regarding what and how much they share with inmates. A simple discussion about the weather, goes to “Do you like warm or cold weather?” .. to .. “Warm, so you take your vacations to Florida or somewhere warm?” .. to .. “I bet you look nice laying on the beach!” Inmates are chameleons. They will morph into whatever the intended victim likes, so they can find common ground and form a connection with them. They may have never been to the beach, but they will learn all they can about it. They will visit the library, ask other inmates, and create their own story (based on untruths) to fit the victim’s desires and needs. The conversation will continue each time opportunity presents itself. The game has begun.

Staff with a solid life outside of work are more able to separate work and home, and less likely to find comfort and conversation with inmates. Most inappropriate inmate-staff relationships can be traced back to the staff member having no mate, few friends, or being separated or recently divorced. Inmates can be good listeners and will comfort the needy. They can be infinitely patient and may be playing several staff at the same time. The over-use of mandatory overtime puts staff around inmates way more than around their families, and makes people tired, so they are not as alert, letting their guard down, and increasing the risk of boundary violations. Let the games begin!

Now here is an interesting dynamic worthy of note. Male inmates will often use attention, affection, favors and gifts toward the long-term goal of sex. Female inmates often use sex to gain favor, gifts and the hope of long-term attention and affection. This formula is not 100% accurate, of course, but it often explains how the temptation to violate professional boundaries differs by gender, specifically regarding sexual boundaries.

Lastly, inmate manipulations, especially those ending in sexual relationships, are a “no brainer” especially for male inmates. They have very little to lose by engaging in them, and will willingly trade a write-up, a transfer or even lockdown time, if it means they could get sex. They come away with a notch on their belt, a great story, an improved reputation as a manipulator, and their life goes on.

The employee, on the other hand, has everything to lose. He/she is shamed and fired, will most likely never work in law enforcement again, and may face criminal (PREA-related) charges. They will suffer high legal fees along with lost income, and possibly face divorce and child custody issues. If convicted, they would have to register as sex offenders, and they may be incarcerated, since Correctional Officer sexual misconduct is a felony in most States.

Brent Parker has a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice Administration from Illinois State University, Brent retired from the Colorado Department of Corrections, after 30 years of service, where he moved through the ranks from Correctional Officer to Director of Training. After retiring from the CDOC, Brent served locally at the Fremont County Sheriff's Office, where he developed training programs and worked with probation and local specialty courts. Brent has devoted his working life to the success and safety of both staff and offenders, and he continues to promote corrections employees' well-being as the Director of Training for Desert Waters Correctional Outreach. He has been involved in corrections at all levels and understands from first-hand experience the challenges faced by correctional staff and administrators.





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TRAINING & INDEPENDENT
STUDY

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- > Nov 14-16

Times

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Breaks included

**30-hour
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TARGET AUDIENCE

Adult family members of new correctional staff and adult family members of seasoned correctional employees (jail, prison, probation or parole) of all disciplines and job roles

COURSE TOPICS

- Corrections Work Realities
- When Work Comes Home
- What Might My Loved One Face at Work?
- Help for the Family
- The Basics of Self-care
- Family Scenarios

IN MEMORIAM

Jack King,
Colorado Department of Corrections



Quote of the Month

There are no great people in
this world; only great
challenges which ordinary
people rise to meet.

William Frederick Halsey Jr.

MEET THE CORRECTIONAL OASIS TEAM



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DWCO Mission

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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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Inc., is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.



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