

19
YEARS

HELPING CORRECTIONAL AGENCIES BUILD A MORE ENGAGED WORKFORCE!

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

A Desert Waters Publication

DECEMBER 2022

From The Director's Desk

Safeguarding Staff Wellbeing

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Big Bad Tough Guys

Tactical Empathy



Volume:19

Issue:12



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

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

In this issue of the Correctional Oasis we address a subject that we do not visit often: direct interactions with those in the criminal justice system that you are tasked to manage in some capacity.

The reason we address this topic is that the data point to the fact that the quality of these interactions can be a powerful game-changer that impacts staff health and wellbeing. And since corrections staff wellness is Desert Waters' focus, we take time to examine this topic at some length.

While we are addressing this subject, I'd like to bring your attention to terms we use to refer to people involved in the criminal justice system.

Over the years, I have seen a number of terms used in this regard. An old term that is no longer used is "convicts," for those in prison. Other commonly used terms are "inmate" and "offender" for those in jail or prison. For those in jail, the term "detainee" may also be used, "probationer" for those on probation, and "parolee" for those on parole. Newer terms are "incarcerated persons" for those in prison, and "justice-involved persons." We have also heard the term "residents" for those in prison or jail, and "clients" for those on probation or parole.

I have started using the term "incarcerated persons" for those in prison. I have also started using the general term "justice-involved persons" because it is an umbrella term that covers every person in the criminal justice system – those in jail (including those awaiting trial), prison, defendants on pre-trial release, those on probation, those on parole, and those in work-release community settings. It is also a term that is purely descriptive.

I realize that this is a new term that some people are not used to seeing or comfortable using themselves, and that of course is perfectly acceptable. However, as you dive into reading the following articles, be aware that much thought has gone into the terminology used to identify those you have been tasked to manage.

Caterina Spinaris

SAFEGUARDING STAFF WELLBEING

By Applying the Big 7 to Interactions With Persons in the Criminal Justice System

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

In this article I'd like to share with you some thoughts on ways to possibly reduce the occurrence of *avoidable* high-stress events at work, and the wear-and-tear (whether visible or invisible; physical, psychological or spiritual) that you suffer due to these events. One type of these high-stress events is the escalation of conflict due to clashes with other staff or the justice-involved persons you manage.

In the October issue of the Correctional Oasis we addressed staff bullying as a major source of staff stress. In this issue I'd like to talk about an approach to potentially avoid or de-escalate conflict and reduce tension in your interactions with those in the criminal justice system who are under your care.

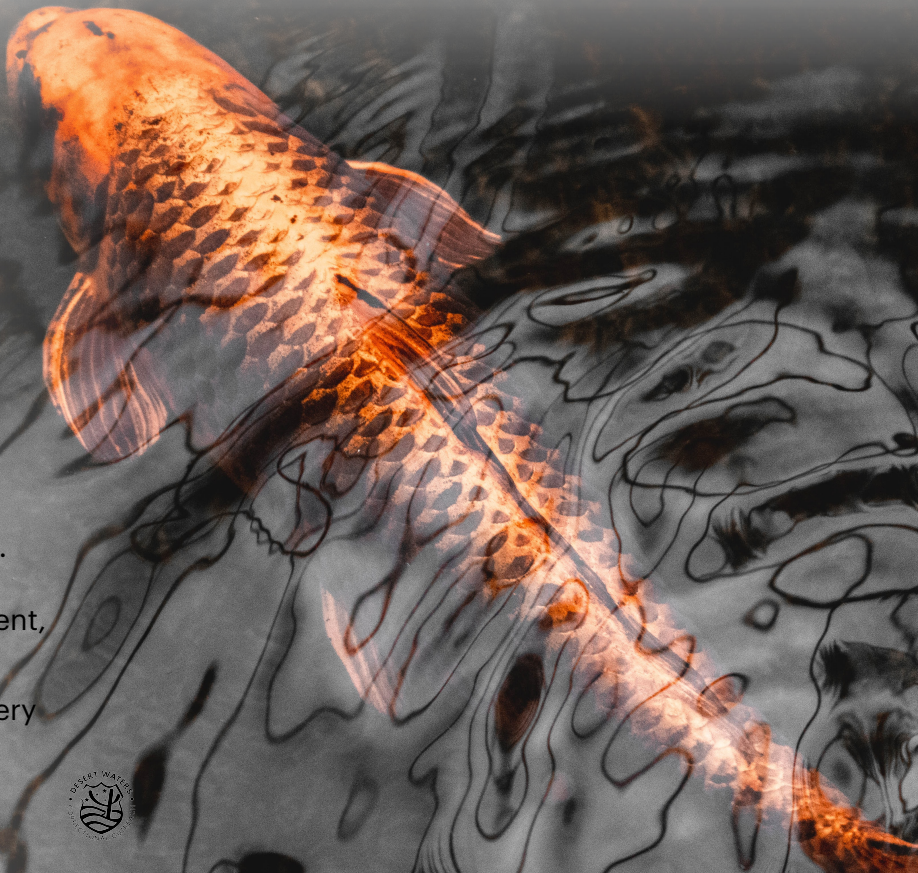
My goal is to *humbly* offer you some tools towards your wellbeing – “your safety and your sanity,” and towards the fostering of healthier, lower-stress work environments than what you may be experiencing now.

I say *humbly*, because you are the ones doing the heavy lifting. You are the ones who day in and day out deal directly with the challenges of corrections/detention/probation/parole work. We at Desert Waters are outsiders who come alongside you to offer you coping tools, encouragement, and support.

The level of health of your workplace environment, AKA your workplace culture, is of critical importance, because you are immersed in it every

minute of your working day. If you were a fish, it'd be the pond you swim in for many hours daily. You breathe in it, you consume what is in it, every pore of your being is saturated by its water. You cannot escape it.

Similarly, whatever atmosphere you or anyone else create at work – whether tension, hostility, and negativity, or safety, order, and positive regard – everyone present is subjected to it. If a nutrient is released in your pond, everyone benefits from it; but if toxins are released there, everyone gets affected by that action just the same. No matter how well-equipped and tough you may be, it is impossible to remain a healthy fish in an unhealthy, polluted pond. That is why it is in your best interest to do whatever is within your control to ensure that your pond remains as healthy as possible.



In this article I'll first present to you some research findings that underscore the critical role that workplace culture plays in corrections staff's wellbeing. After that I'll describe to you some basic steps you can take (if you are not already applying them) to help your workplace culture become healthier, more positive than it already is, and reduce the probability of conflict erupting with the persons you manage.

What one study tells us about the impact of workplace culture on corrections staff's health

A research study of corrections staff's health showed that the most significant variable studied in regard to staff wellbeing was staff's **Work Health (morale, energy level – physical and emotional, and job satisfaction)**.

More specifically, Work Health affected staff's Family Health and Mental Health unusually strongly, and affected their Physical Health strongly. (By the way, Work Health – *morale, energy level – physical and emotional, and job satisfaction*, taps into our concept of Corrections Fatigue, the negative changes in staff's personality, health and functioning due to unresolved negative effects of work stressors.)

The effects of Work Health were found to have a much greater impact on aspects of staff's health than the effects of exposure to traumatic events at work or working in a custody/security role.

Equally important was the finding that staff's **Social Health (quality of relationships with direct supervisors, coworkers, and justice-involved persons)** strongly impacted staff's Work Health. In other words, as Social Health improved, staff's Work Health improved; and in turn, staff's Family Health, Mental Health, and Physical Health

improved. Conversely, as Social Health deteriorated, so did staff's Work Health, and that was followed by deterioration in staff's Family Health, Mental Health, and Physical Health, with possibly catastrophic consequences as severe as suicide.

The combination of Social Health and Work Health largely comprise what we mean by "workplace culture."

These study findings mean that **the workplace culture has a greater impact on staff's family health, mental health, and physical health than exposure to danger or trauma, or working as a custody/security employee.**

That is a highly significant finding which leads us to conclude that when considering improvements to correctional employees' wellness, **our most promising target ("most likely to succeed") is the quality of the workplace culture**, by taking into account the following:

1. **The best way to impact staff's Family Health, Mental Health, and Physical Health (which is our focus) is through the improvement of Work Health.**
2. **The best way to impact Work Health is through the improvement of Social Health.**
3. **The best way to improve Social Health is through the improvement of the quality of staff's professional relationships with direct supervisors, coworkers and justice-involved persons.**

When it comes to health and wellness in correctional workplaces, **quality of relationships is king!**

It is as simple (and as complex) as that.



From Corrections
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INSTRUCTOR TRAINING

Online Training &
Independent Study



2023 Online Instructor Training Dates

- > Training 1: Feb 21-24, Feb 27-28 & Mar 1
- > Training 2: Sep 11-15 & 18-19

Times

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- Based on research in psychological trauma, resilience, and Positive Psychology
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Fee: \$1,495.00 per Instructor Candidate.



CF2F

Course Author: Caterina Spinaris, PhD., is DWCO's Executive Director and a Licensed Professional Counselor with over 30 years of clinical experience. Caterina conducts research, and offers research-based trainings and interventions to corrections agencies to counter the effects of occupational stressors, and to increase organizational health and employee well-being.

In addition to CF2F, she authored the following courses: "True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™," "Correctional Family Wellness™," "The Supportive Supervisor™," "Improving the Well-Being of Corrections Professionals™," and "Peer Supporter Training™." Caterina is the 2014 recipient of the Colorado Criminal Justice Association's Harry Tinsley award.

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- Practical and easy to grasp by both new and veteran employees, and by managers
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- At least 5 years of working in corrections
- Experience working through work-related challenges
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- Ability to be an empathetic listener
- Ability to moderate emotionally-heated discussions
- Ability to team-teach



**DESERT WATERS
CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH**

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation (EIN 30-0151345) with the mission to advance 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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admin@desertwaters.com

Cancellation Policy: No refunds less than three weeks prior to the training. Registrations are transferable to another instructor candidate of the same agency as long as instructor candidate criteria are met.

*CF2F licenses can be renewed for another three years by passing an online exam (fee \$490).

**Instructors can teach on their own if necessary; Co-instructors must always team-teach with an Instructor.

***Instructors and Co-instructors are NOT certified to train other instructors or individuals outside of their agency.

Corrections staff wellbeing and the use of the Big 7

But how can we go about improving the quality of staff's professional relationships in workplace environments that are characterized by high-stress conditions and events?

In a nutshell, my best answer at this point in time is **THE BIG 7**.

Staff who have taken our course "From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™," (CF2F) or any of our other courses, know that the Big 7 refer to seven dimensions which have to do with seven basic psychological needs. These dimensions are **Physical Safety, Psychological Safety, Trust, Power, Respect, Connection, and Meaning**.

The Big 7 are catalysts of professional fulfillment in corrections work, and the foundation of positive workforce cultures, as they foster constructive relating.

In our CF2F course we introduced the Big 7 dimensions regarding staff-with-staff interactions.

What we want to do here is present ways to **apply the Big 7 dimensions in interactions with justice-involved persons**, and in doing so (a) **help improve**

the interpersonal climate – the Social Health – of the entire workplace – the pond you swim in; and (b) as a result, **help reduce the likelihood of occurrence of high-stress and even critical events, and the damage they cause to staff's body, soul and spirit.**

In other words, we expect that application of the Big 7 at work will help improve the quality of interactions between staff and justice-involved persons, and, as a result, overall safety and security at the institution will increase, in addition to reductions to staff's levels of Corrections Fatigue.

The following are my suggestions as to how to apply the Big 7 in staff's interactions with justice-involved persons. You will probably have additional ones that work for you. We strongly recommend that these proposed actions be applied **consistently**. Consistency is the key to changing workplace cultures, as people's expectations change when they see behaviors implemented routinely, being "the way we do things around here."

Use of the Big 7 is particularly vital under times of high-stress when "buttons get pushed," people are "triggered," emotions become volatile, tempers flare, and both staff and justice-involved persons can become knee-jerk reactive, provoking, or combative, without considering possible negative consequences. That is why we urge staff to



consciously and intentionally keep the Big 7 in mind, doing their best to apply them, *especially* when under pressure. The saying comes to mind, “It is especially important when it is hard.”

So here are some ways you and your coworkers can put the Big 7 to good use with the justice-involved persons you manage.

1. **Physical Safety:** Follow policy, and remain vigilant. This communicates to justice-involved persons you are responsible for that their physical safety is of paramount importance, and that you are doing whatever is within your professional authority to ensure that they remain physically safe.
2. **Psychological Safety:** Operate in ways that demonstrate that you do not engage in or tolerate behaviors that degrade, humiliate, dehumanize, belittle, ridicule, mock, or abuse people. Ensure your conduct is that of a “straight arrow.” If you are going to write incarcerated persons up for an infraction, tell them you are going to do so, what you will include in your report, and why.
3. **Trust:** Follow policy to the best of your understanding. Consult with your supervisor regarding handling more complex, “gray zone” situations, where it is not a simple black or white, either-or decision. Act in ways that convey that you are dependable by delivering as you promise; or if not able to do so, let justice-involved persons know why you will not be able to do so, and what you can do instead at this point. Ways to earn their trust to some degree includes “owning” your behavior or even apologizing when you realize that you have erred or forgotten something.
4. **Power:** Empowering justice-involved persons may not sound like something you want to do, but the way the concept is used here is aimed at improving the overall climate, and consequently increasing the safety of all involved. This type of empowerment includes encouraging incarcerated persons to engage in programs aimed at self-improvement (such as by pursuing their high school education or vocational training); to engage in self-care and personal growth (such as by taking a class on parenting skills, seeking mental health services, complying with their medications regimen, engaging in restorative justice, or partaking in spiritual activities); or to engage in helping others (such as by engaging in dog training – if there is such a program at their facility, restorative justice activities, or activities aimed to help their communities). Empowering justice-involved persons also involves encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions – recent or old.
5. **Respect:** This is the one element, the one of the Big 7 that I believe you must make every effort to always keep at the forefront in your interactions with those in your care, even when you are irritable, angry, hungry, anxious, or tired. Make every effort to treat others as respectfully as you want to be treated. Respect - or lack thereof - is reflected in your facial expression (eye rolling, looks of disgust, snorting, or huffing and puffing), your tone of voice, how you address people, hand gestures, and the content of your verbal communication – your choice of words. Avoid making (and never endorse) comments that are sarcastic put-downs, demeaning, or veiled or not-so-veiled threats. (See Psychological Safety above.)

6. **Connection:** Yes, you can “connect” with justice-involved persons at a professional level without violating policy and without violating your professional and moral principles. This can be done by taking the time to actively listen to them when they speak to you, showing that you are interested in what they have to say by asking open-ended questions when they talk to you, or making an empathic comment about difficulties they may be experiencing.
7. **Meaning:** Encourage justice-involved persons in your care to use their time in the criminal justice system to their benefit to improve themselves (see the section on Power above), and to help others by taking advantage of opportunities offered to them at the jail, prison, or the community. Encourage them also by pointing out and affirming efforts or progress you observe that they made. Talk about the importance of having truly helpful people in their lives who also hold them accountable, a safe place (or preparing for one), and a positive purpose, a good reason to go on, such as to go back home to take care of their families.

In conclusion

It is a very rare occasion indeed that we utilize this space to discuss direct interaction with justice-involved persons. And yet, it is a topic that must be addressed if we truly expect corrections staff to thrive through the improvement of Social Health and subsequently Work Health. The data on the subject are robust and very convincing. It would be highly unwise to ignore them, as corrections staff’s health is on the line. It is worth repeating: When it comes to health in correctional workplaces, **quality of relationships is king!**

The suggestions above are some very simple yet powerful ways to change the workplace climate, helping reduce stress for all stakeholders, and possibly conflict or violence – without violating policy, and, by doing so, reduce the probability that you or your coworkers will be stressed, injured or traumatized.

As you model prosocial behaviors, this approach may also spark the beginning of positive changes in the persons you manage, which is always welcome, and which will increase your sense of meaning about the work that you do in the criminal justice career field.

Yes, applying the Big 7 at times requires effort and self-control, but we know that doing so pays back dividends. If you are already practicing satisfying the Big 7 with your coworkers, the next step is beginning to apply them as suggested here with the persons you manage. And, if these are unfamiliar practices to you, what may be required is taking a leap of faith, trusting that indeed the Big 7 work if you work them, followed by baby steps in their application with both coworkers and the justice-involved persons in your care.

Remember, we are discussing this topic because we want you to remain safe and well, and your working environment to be as healthy, safe and low-stress as possible, by avoiding avoidable negative interactions.

We look forward to hearing back from you. Email us at admin@desertwaters.com.

Spinaris, C. G., & Brocato, N. Descriptive study of Michigan Department of Corrections Staff Well-being: Contributing factors, outcomes, and actionable solutions. (2019). https://www.michigan.gov/documents/corrections/MDOC_Staff_Well-being_Report_660565_7.pdf

2023 Online Training Schedule

- **Feb 21-24, Feb 27-28 & Mar 1** – From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™
- **Mar 6-10 & 13-14** – True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™
- **3rd Wed of the month, Mar-Dec** – The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™
- **May 2-5 & 8-10** – Improving the Well-being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™
- **Jun 5-9** – Towards Corrections Fulfillment: For New Staff™
- **Jul 10-14** – Correctional Family Wellness™ (For Families™ & Staff™)
- **Sep 11-15 & 18-19** – From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™
- **Oct 23-27 & 30-31** – True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™
- **Nov 6-10** – Towards Corrections Fulfillment: For New Staff™
- **Nov 27-30 & Dec 1** – Correctional Family Wellness™ (For Families™ & Staff™)
- **Dec 5-8 & 11-13** – Improving the Well-being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™

Select a course above
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BIG BAD TOUGH GUYS

BY THE OLD SCREW

Every inmate in prison has already been judged and sentenced to prison as punishment. It is not staff's responsibility to punish an inmate. We are there to make sure the inmates stay there, and follow the rules and regulations of the State we work in.

In my 35 years in corrections in three States and 3 penitentiaries I have known some bad, tough officers, and I have watched some of them fall, sometimes real hard. I'm not saying my methods will work for everyone. You must come up with what works well for you. Yes, you can play the big bad tough guy, and while the inmates may fear you, they will have no respect for you. Respect is all we have.

Some of the most respected and professional staff I have known were quiet, mild-acting people. You'd better believe the inmates know the difference, and can and will respect someone that shows them respect. They also respect someone that they know can and will get it on if needed.

One of the most respected staff I ever knew was a short, quiet officer that never raised his voice, and when he did say something, it was said quietly. He almost seemed too mild to me. Of course, I was new, and I didn't know squat. I asked a fellow officer about this man and was told he was one of the most respected and feared officers in the prison. He never disrespected the inmates, but if he went to get one when he had reason to, he got him. A few, very, very few had tried to not follow his orders and wanted to fight. Afterwards, they never again gave him problems.

Doing what you have to do, and knowing when to do it, is what makes a professional. I decided that was the kind of officer that I wanted to be, like that man. I guess I must have been good at it, because I never had to hit an inmate, and I was only cut once, on the arm, while breaking up an inmate fight. The cut was not meant for me, and the inmate who cut me apologized to me later.

I still remember this officer's outlook after 35 years.

Be a professional with inmates. They know who is a jerk and who is not.

TAKE CARE,

THE OLD SCREW

Wes Connett started writing for the Correctional Oasis in 2005, using the pen name "The Old Screw." He worked for over 35 years in corrections, starting in the 1970's, most of them as a Corrections Officers in three States – Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado. He retired as a Lieutenant. After a long life of having very generously taken care of many people, Wes left this world in 2021.



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Research suggests that the quality of corrections staff's professional relationship with their supervisors affects staff's morale, job satisfaction, energy level (physically and emotionally), and also their mental health, physical health, and family health¹. Additionally, a supportive supervisory style can reduce staff's use of work-related sick days^{2,3}.



Target Audience

Federal, state, county and city supervisors who work in correctional/detention institutions or probation or parole offices, and who supervise staff who manage justice-involved adults or juveniles. Course participants can be from the same correctional agency or from different agencies.

Course Author: Caterina Spinaris, PhD, LPC, is DWCO's founding Director and a Licensed Professional Counselor in the State of Colorado. Dr. Spinaris has been treating and training correctional employees and their families since the year 2000. She also develops wellness-related educational materials, and conducts research on correctional employee wellness. In addition to this course, Dr. Spinaris has also authored DWCO's signature course, From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™ (CF2F), True Grit: Building Resilience in Corrections Professionals™, Towards Corrections Fulfillment: For New Staff™, Improving the Well-being of Corrections Professionals: Understanding, Acknowledging, and Overcoming Traumatic Stress™, and Correctional Family Wellness™. The CF2F course received the 2016 Commercial Product of the Year Award of Excellence by the International Association of Correctional Training Personnel. Dr. Spinaris is the 2014 recipient of the Colorado Criminal Justice Association's Harry Tinsley award, and the author of the books Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff, and More on Staying Well: More Strategies for Corrections Staff.

OBJECTIVES

1. Identify values and behaviors of supportive supervisors
2. Present research-based evidence on the impact of supervisors on subordinates' health and functioning
3. Emphasize the importance of self-regulation and self-care
4. Present information about mental health conditions correctional staff may be experiencing, including suicidal thinking, and ways supervisors can respond constructively
5. Describe skill-based behaviors for supervisors to interact with subordinates to create healthy workforce cultures

Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation (EIN 30-0151345) with the mission to advance 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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¹Spinaris, C.G., and Brocato, N. (2019). *Descriptive study of Michigan Department of Corrections Staff Well-being: Contributing factors, outcomes, and actionable solutions.* https://www.michigan.gov/documents/correc6ons/MDOC_Staff_Well-being_Report_660565_7.pdf

²Duchaine, C.S., Aubé, K., Gilbert-Ouimet, M., et al. (2020). *Psychosocial Stressors at Work and the Risk of Sickness Absence Due to a Diagnosed Mental Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis.* *JAMA Psychiatry*, 77(8): 842-851. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0322.

³Milligan-Saville, J.S., Tan, L., Gayed, A., et al. (2017). *Workplace mental health training for managers and its effect on sick leave in employees: a cluster randomised controlled trial.* *Lancet Psychiatry*. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(17\)30372-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(17)30372-3).

TACTICAL EMPATHY

BY GREGORY MORTON, M.SC.

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.

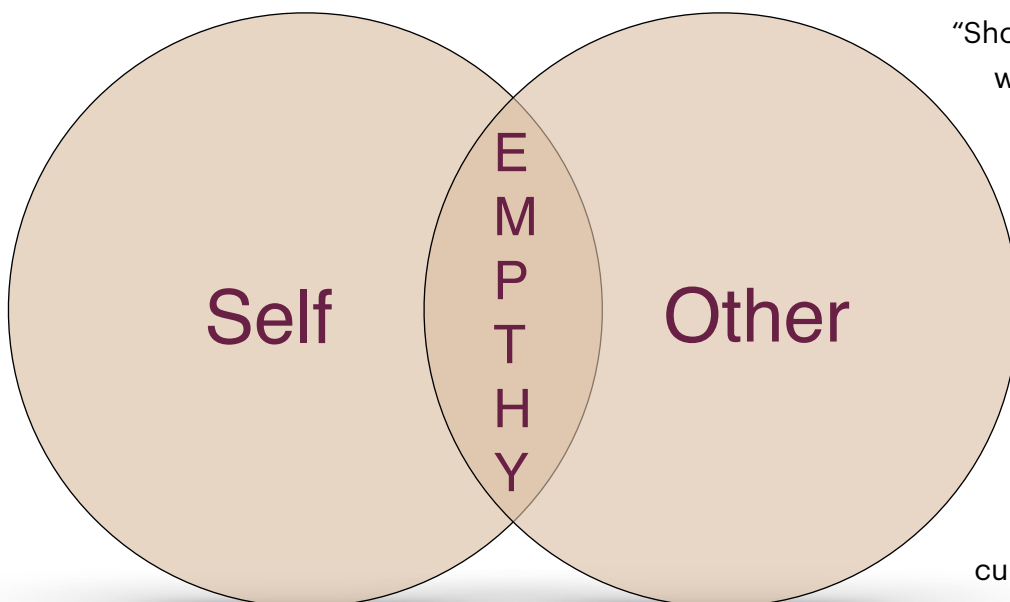
So let’s revisit the original term with a personal story that demonstrates how simple tactical empathy can actually be. I was teaching a class of 15 inmates in my state’s maximum-security facility. It was a morning class, starting at 7:30, right after chow. One day I was late. I got stopped by a train. 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 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 prosocial 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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IN MEMORIAM

**Jamie Brockwell,
Correctional Officer,**
Michigan Department of Corrections

**Dallas Anthony Savoy,
Correctional Officer,**
Charles County Sheriff's Office, Maryland



Quote of the Month

"As you grow older, you will
discover that you have two hands,
one for helping yourself, the other
for helping others."

~ Maya Angelou

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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