Twenty-First Century Correctional Outcomes:

Organizational Assessment and Officer Hiring

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Hiring within the field of corrections has become increasingly difficult. Emergent technologies and practices, coupled with public demands, have placed correctional administrators in a position where certain types of officers are necessary. Today's *officers* must possess a skill set that is quite different from that required of past counterparts. Indeed, the application of direct supervision practice alone necessitates that officers of today are judged for their ability to create professional relation-

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ships through effective communication and modeling. Further, research has made it clear that one of the leading determinants of prisoner recidivism relates to the manner in which *officers* go about their daily business.[1] Unfortunately, officers and administrators alike are often placed in confusing situations where jurisdictions or regions do not have clear-cut correctional strategies or philosophies that are consistent with actual practice. Many such jurisdictions may publicly express an interest in ensuring humane treatment and providing program services aimed at rehabilitation, yet establish policies and practices that are quite the opposite.

To realize effective outcomes in officer hiring, jurisdictions must first understand and define the philosophy underlying local correctional practice. All too often, jurisdictions "opt in" to direct supervision facilities based on promises of effective, cost-wise daily practice without making provisions for additional staff training and philosophical changes that must accompany such a transition. After all, within a direct supervision atmosphere, the most important officer attribute is his or her ability to "walk and talk" with inmates. In other cases, administrators "buy in" to the direct supervision concept for their staff, but fail to make personal changes that are consistent with such an orientation. The result is a "do as I say, not as I do" condition where officers are inclined to follow the actions rather than the words of their leaders. These circumstances represent but two of many situations that place correctional staff members in confusing and sometimes less-than-effective day-by-day activities. Therefore, it seems clear that before "opting in" to the correctional strategy of the day, initial system work must be accomplished to clarify expected public safety outcomes and connect them to local correctional practice and philosophy.

As part of this early work, jurisdictions must understand the range of possible outcomes related directly to their correctional policy and practice. Many within our field still hold the notion that "Nothing Works," and therefore take the position that there is little that can be done to influence an offender's life decisions after his/her release. This myth has been carried forth over the years since Robert Martinson's now infamous proclamation. However, despite the popularity of a "Nothing Works" orientation in some correctional systems, current research has discredited the Martinson myth created over 30 years ago. In fact, it has been shown that well-designed, efficiently run correctional programs often reduce prisoner recidivism by up to 30 percent.[2] Given costs (human and fiscal) attributed to a current jail/prison population of over 2 million and upwards of 4.5 million serving sentences on parole or probation supervision,[3] it seems difficult to believe that any jurisdiction within this country would not be interested in correctional initiatives capable of enhanced outcomes that result in reduced recidivism.

Organizational Assessment

The first step for any jurisdiction interested in the consistency of its organizational practice would be to examine the current literature and determine if the successes reported could be applied or replicated locally. Context specific discussion must determine the validity of this research in a local setting. Such discussion must also include policy decisions to take offender habilitation at least as seriously as offender punishment and include decisions on the specific mission of the correctional agency. Some organizations demonstrate a mission that will only support the "warehousing" of inmates, while others demonstrate a sincere desire to have a lasting positive impact on offenders and their communities. Conversations and policy decisions related to correctional practice and the strategies utilized to meet public needs are of great significance when determining what one's local correctional officers should "look like." In fact, without clear direction in these areas, correctional officer hiring cannot be addressed with consistency or effectiveness.

Many have now shown that programming within a correctional milieu, whether institutional or community-based, can yield significantly reduced rates of recidivism.[4] Findings such as these are of great significance and in striking contrast to recently released studies documenting three-year recidivism rates of released prisoners well in excess of 50 percent.[5] These high rates of recidivism tend to be the norm in all areas of corrections where there is no strategy to recognize or address criminal thinking, criminogenic need, or level of associated risk. Yet when these areas are addressed, the results are very different.[6] While description of these important correctional strategies is beyond the scope of this article, the literature states clearly that such strategies must take place within a social learning atmosphere. It is here that twenty-first century correctional officers play an all-important role and here that the new skill set, which at the forefront requires communication and modeling, is essential.

Additionally, when assessing local jurisdictional practice in the context of public demands, regulatory requirements, and operational factors such as crowding, questions such as the following must be considered:

- What steps can we or do we take to ensure that our organizations are operating as effectively as possible?
- What is the organizational direction and mission in the context of long-term public safety?
- How have organizational efforts actually impacted public safety?
- How are organizational efforts consistent with the demands of the public?
- How do we make certain that newly hired staff members put us in the best position to meet organizational needs?

It is only as a result of dialog and examination related to these issues that any jurisdiction, department, or agency can approach the task of hiring with any efficiency. As the old saying goes, "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else."

Officer Screening and Hiring

Once an organization goes through the necessary steps to determine its approach to correctional practice, protocols and procedures related to officer screening and hiring can be developed. Such a process is best facilitated by a consultant or external stakeholder who collaborates with the organization or jurisdiction to ensure that organizational mission and expected outcomes are consistent with hiring procedures. When developing these procedures, questions such as the following must be considered:

- What traits, attributes, and/or skills are most important for correctional officers within your organizational context or setting?
- How do these traits, attributes, or skills put your organization in the best possible position
  - To meet organizational needs?
  - To meet the public's needs?
  - To enhance both short- and long-term public safety?
  - To enhance correctional outcomes in the most fiscally efficient manner possible?

Answers to these questions will allow those responsible to formalize a desired profile or skill set for their local correctional officers. Armed with this profile, organizations may then consider different methods of testing and/or screening protocols.

Who should be involved in the process of developing hiring protocols? It seems obvious that those in power will and must be involved; however, not so apparent is the fact that others such as supervisory staff, peers, and potential applicants should have input. Individuals not employed within the organization can also make valuable contributions. In fact, whether through an organizational consultant or collaborator, or with the help of an outside official "on loan" from another department or agency; it is imperative that an opinion be sought from some source outside the daily workings of the correctional facility. This unbiased, uninvolved third party will render many benefits throughout the process of determining agency perspective and priority, as well as developing improved screening and hiring protocols consistent with organizational needs. To this end, such a third party will have no preconceived perception of existing staff characteristics or traits and will thus be less likely to use any of the "same old criteria."

Actual hiring/screening/interview protocols differ greatly from organization to organization. However, there is little doubt that such a protocol is most efficient if structured and developed with specific organizational considerations in mind. An interview needs structure and should vary little, if at all, from applicant to applicant. Questions asked should be uniform. Situations presented must be the same. Tests used must be consistent. If working as an interview team, a standardized evaluation form should be completed by each interviewer prior to sharing impressions, results, or evaluations with others. The interviewers should also be provided with desired responses for each question or role-play simulation. Candidates may answer questions or act out a role differently, yet demonstrate all of the elements or behaviors necessary for a positive evaluation. These practices avoid inherent biases and ensure that each applicant is viewed as a unique individual, yet evaluated fairly in the context of the overall applicant pool.

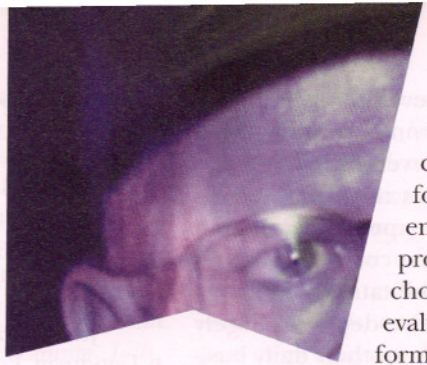
The Elements of Effective Hiring Protocols

Most common among hiring/screening protocols are background checks and basic information. These essential elements are enhanced greatly when utilized as part of a "bigger picture" rather than as stand-alone evaluations. For instance, when background checks or compiled information lead to suspicion that an officer candidate has poor communication skills or becomes involved in frequent disputes, structured interview questions designed specifically

to evaluate communication skills can shed further light on this issue and allow decision makers a glimpse of an applicant's future.

Advanced screening protocols can also include situational simulations. Structured simulations must be designed to evaluate key aspects of an applicant's personality and level of skill in the context of agency needs or required skills. Simulations must not be too complicated, yet involved enough to emulate key day-to-day functions that are normal for today's correctional officers. It proves invaluable when, in their organizational context, seasoned interviewers are able to evaluate candidate responses and compare them with expected behaviors as well as the responses of other candidates. As time goes on, and as a result of ongoing information gathering, agencies can become more and more adept at recognizing potential desirable and undesirable responses that might not have been so evident previously.

Preemployment psychological screening can also help to offer interviewers insight regarding an officer candidate's propensity to succeed within today's correctional world. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Assessment, 2nd Edition (MMPI-2) is the most commonly utilized personality assessment for correctional officer screening.[7] It has been shown that it is effective in predicting some areas of correctional officer performance, such as officer absenteeism; however, it seems less than efficient in predicting others, such as communication effectiveness.[8] Therefore, far more effective would be a preemployment psychological screening protocol that utilizes different tests or psychological inventories that are proven to evaluate effectively specific areas of performance that are thought to be essential for success within our field.[9] Questions should be asked of testing services to determine the validity of a given test or tests in the context of the skill set that interviewers or administrators view as most important.



Recommendations offered by interviewers or interview committees to administrators must also be standardized and uniform from applicant to applicant. As with other areas of screening and employment evaluation, this practice limits inherent biases and/or discrepancies that diminish the credibility of the hiring process as a whole. Decision makers are far more equipped to make difficult hiring decisions through candidate comparison when the information that they receive is in the same format and, while candidate specific, reports the same type of information for all.

Conclusion

Given emerging demands of working within today's correctional atmosphere, correctional officer hiring is key to organizational success. Organizations must establish the

premise by which they operate and develop hiring protocols accordingly. "What Works" information must play a significant role in recognizing and developing local correctional policy and practice. Officers must perform as role models in a way that one would expect a habilitated offender to perform; for it is clear that correctional officers play a major role in offender habilitation.[10] In short, the success of any correctional initiative depends largely on the manner in which officers go about their daily business. Emerging "What Works" literature has made clear the fact that the efficiency of a social learning atmosphere within a correctional setting might be most highly correlated with enhanced correctional outcomes and reduced recidivism.

The premise is simple: our officers must reflect the type of person that we wish our offenders to become. To assist them in this endeavor, we must provide our officers with training that is relevant, meaningful, and lasting; for they must take to heart the reality that their professional behavior is all important to the success of their organization as well as the enhancement of public safety in their respective community. This type of interaction and commitment to innovative correctional practice that results in enhanced public safety, both short- and long-term, must be the norm within the twenty-first century. The time must pass where we as corrections professionals believe that our responsibility to this ideal stops at the jail doors. Rather, we must recognize our potential impact on public safety and, through our officers, take the organizational steps necessary to approach our vision for a better tomorrow.

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