

Leadership Within Corrections: The Creation of Learning Organizations

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The topic of leadership is one that has been considered in many different contexts for thousands of years. Leadership traits or qualities are researched often and have been the focus of many writings. Bass stated, "leadership is one of the world's oldest preoccupations. . . Purposeful stories have been told through the generations about leaders' competencies, ambitions, and shortcomings." (B.M. Bass, Bass and Stogdill's *Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, & Managerial Applications* (3rd. ed.) 3 (1990).) Today, perhaps more than ever, leadership continues to be studied within the context of a rapidly changing world. Rosenbach and Taylor stated, "Clearly, the need to understand leadership continues and the passion for the topic is greater than ever." (W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) xi (1998).) Each of these statements seem to reflect the reality of current correctional practice; for our passion is to understand correctional leadership amidst a time of rapid, interminable change that, at times, seems unmanageable and overwhelming.

Understanding Quality Leadership

Despite many years of study regarding the topic of leadership, there exists little agreement on the subject today. Some examine the qualities that are viewed as important in leaders who have enjoyed success, while others view leadership in a context which does not utilize success as a criteria; for they conceptualize success as a situational factor, rather than one which can be attributed solely to a leader. (A. Gini, *Moral Leadership: An Overview* (1997); W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) (1998).)

Definition and understanding of the concept of leadership is complicated further by the perception of those who confuse position, power, managerial prowess, and authority with leadership. While these traits

are not necessarily exclusive from leadership, in many situations they need not be inclusive either. (J.P. Kotter, "What Leaders Really Do," in W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) (1998).) Gini described leadership as "a power- and value-laden relationship between leaders and followers/constituents who intend real change(s) that reflect their mutual purpose(s) and goal(s)." (A. Gini, *Moral Leadership: An Overview* (1997); W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) 7 (1998).) Reflective of the debates in the leadership literature, correctional leaders are often caught debating the most effective means of controlling their staffs and managing labor disputes.

Differing Models of Corrections Practice

Interestingly, similar to disputes over the fundamentals of leadership, modern correctional practice continues to be mired in debate regarding "proper" correctional practice. Cause for disagreement within corrections can be found in deeply-held and opposing philosophical positions, which argue the merits of offender rehabilitation/treatment models against those aimed at simple retribution or punishment. (S. Torres, "Should Corrections Treat or Punish Substance-Abusing Criminals?," 60 *Fed. Probation* 18-23 (1996).) Unfortunately, despite its apparent validity, the growing body of research known as the "What Works" literature has done little to mitigate these differences. Many correctional leaders are skeptical and tired of the academic community telling them "what works" in "their" business and therefore stick ardently to their personal beliefs. These beliefs, often aligned with a retributive approach, find these leaders in conflict with others outside of their organizational systems, for corrections is no longer a closed world. To further complicate matters, many within the system oppose one another relative to the central idea or proper philosophy.

Inconsistent Policy and Conflicting Norms Formation. Unfortunately, opposing positions result in inconsistent policy

and the formation of norms within correctional environments that are conflicting. In delineating the difficulty of change within a correctional environment, Brown wrote, "Corrections is about people—it's about work cultures, offender subcultures, and sub rosa rules particular to a specific institution or office." (S.D. Brown, "Implementing Change in a Correctional Setting," 58 *Corrections Today* 124-26 (1996).) The actuality of the many formal and informal rules and norms within corrections often causes organizational and personal confusion within these institutions and confronts correctional leaders with unique challenges.

Organizational Stress Within Corrections

It is no secret that correctional officials face one of the more stressful occupations. (J. Kammerman, "Correctional Officer Suicide," *The Keeper's Voice: Mental Health* (1998).) In fact, as a result of myriad factors, stress among all members of the corrections profession has heightened. Prison and jail crowding, decreased staff-to-inmate ratios, increased threat of air- and blood-borne diseases, and increased scrutiny of the profession in general all contribute to stress within correctional organizations. However, often central to this stress is organizational confusion and conflict between and among officer groups, supervisory staff, and management.

Finn identified the five general sources of stress among officers as, "issues in the officer's personal life, the pressures of law enforcement work, the attitude of the general public. . . , the operation of the criminal justice system, and the law enforcement organization itself." Common among the corrections and law enforcement profession is confusion and stress related to obscure and inconsistent policy and procedure. In fact, the most common source of stress among law enforcement officers involves difficulties in understanding or concurring with the policies and procedures of their own agencies. (P. Finn, "Reducing Stress: An Organizational-Centered Approach," 66 *The FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 20 (1997).) Adding to these factors, and resultant from the reality that a

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correctional officer's job is lower profile and generally less valued by the public than that of a police officer, is the fact that the public is generally unwilling to take time to understand the job of a correctional officer and is therefore less willing to offer support. "For the public, when the criminal has been locked up, the problem has been resolved." (Kammerman, *supra*.)

In their study of varying attitudes by occupation found within a correctional environment, Robinson, Porporino, and Simourd concluded that correctional officers "reported the lowest levels of organizational commitment, were less positive in their attitudes toward corrections as a career, perceived the organization as most rigid in terms of organizational change, and were personally less open to change initiated by others." However, they also found that among correctional officers, those who perceived themselves in greater control of their environment and its outcome reported lower levels of stress and increased job satisfaction. (D. Robinson, F. Porporino, L. Simourd, "Do Different Occupational Groups Vary on Attitudes and Work Adjustment in Corrections?" 60 Fed. Probation 45 (1996).) Hepburn and Knepper stated "that correctional 'program' officers were generally more satisfied, had a lower role strain, and felt a greater sense of authority over prisoners than correctional service officers whose roles involved a greater emphasis on custodial duties." (J. Hepburn and P. Knepper "Correctional Officers as Human Service Workers: The Effect on Job Satisfaction," 10 Just. Q. 315.) It seems clear that the degree to which officers identify with organizational goals and perceive their relative importance to the organization influences their level of stress and job satisfaction.

Systems Thinking: The Creation of Learning Correctional Organizations

Leadership Through Modeling. It is no secret that the process of change in the organizational structure of any correctional system is extremely difficult. While the reasons for the difficulty of change in correctional philosophy and practice are multifaceted, perhaps the most difficult relates to changing informal work norms and empowering correctional officers to participate in a transformational atmosphere. How then, must we as correctional leaders realize change within our organizations that

brings correctional staff "on board" and ensures that our organizations function at optimal efficiency in the name of long-term public safety? This daunting task is best accomplished through a process of feedback and support where innovators and leaders model their belief and show those on the front line that they "walk the talk." (L. Wright, "Protecting the Health of Correctional Employees is a Long-Term Endeavor," *Corrections Today* 1 (Apr. 1998).)

Leadership through modeling is not only beneficial to the growth of new and innovative programs through the changing of informal work norms, but it also allows officers the experience of learning through modeled leadership. It also facilitates officers' understanding regarding the importance of *their* modeled influence within the organization. Correctional leaders must recognize this burden of modeling. This "burden" must be accepted in full prior to the implementation of system initiatives or strategies that require consistent, common thinking and practice.

Open-Mindedness is Key. Peter Senge, a leader in organizational research and development, stated, "Perhaps the most salient reason for building learning organizations is that we are only now starting to understand the capabilities that such organizations possess." However, to develop and integrate systems thinking within any organization, it is necessary for those within the organization to adapt to and ready themselves for new ideas. Indeed, key players must understand that systems philosophy requires that they model consistent open-mindedness. Unfortunately, many times "models" of management or "best practices" guidebooks prevail and the tasks inherent within a functional learning organization are ignored. Senge suggested that the answer to this resistance lies in leadership paradigms, which are often outdated. (P.M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* 5 (1990).)

Development of a Shared Vision. "Our traditional view of leaders—as special people who set the direction, make key decisions, and energize the troops—are deeply rooted in an individualistic and nonsystematic world view." (P.M. Senge, *The Leader's New Work*, <http://www.sol-ne.org/res/kr/newwork.html> (1999).) Leadership within a learning organization requires the ability to design a system in which people recognize a shared vision. While the development and design of a

shared vision is certainly integral to any learning environment, correctional leaders must recognize that meaningful change is a slow process in which gradual empowerment is essential. Skills need to be acquired that allow leaders to seek sources of resistance, design processes in which people can manage critical issues, and recognize that people only learn when they are ready. Without question, the notion of abandoning that which has "worked" in the past evokes fear among many leaders who are tasked with the development of a learning atmosphere. Used frequently is the old adage, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Regardless of place or position within an organizational structure, all of those who lead within learning organizations do so in the context of a greater calling or what Senge describes as a "purpose story." (Id.) It is with this purpose that such leaders are driven to work toward a shared vision within their organization. As in any organization within corrections, this exercise needs to be designed to help organizational players function more in unison to realize far greater efficiency. Of course, greater efficiency enhances personal satisfaction so long as employees at all levels feel part of organizational successes. As such, success within a learning atmosphere requires the abandonment of the traditional hierarchical organization. Outdated methods of hierarchical leadership are insufficient to meet today's challenges. This is not to say that it is possible to abandon hierarchy within correctional institutions; rather, it is to say that proactive leaders of different types must be recognized, heard, enlisted, and supported.

Types of Successful Leaders. Within learning organizations, Senge delineated three types of leaders who are integral to long-term organizational success: local line leaders; executive leaders; and internal networkers. (Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, *supra* at 5.) Within correctional organizations, local line leaders are first or second line supervisory staff (usually corporals, sergeants, or lieutenants) who possess significant organizational responsibility and a "bottom-line" focus. Such individuals are responsible for moving the organization through transformational change with their ability to undertake new and innovative principles or practices. They may create subcultures within the organization for the purpose of experimentation, pilot studies, or in response to recurring business problems. However, all of their actions must remain in keeping with the organization's shared vision.

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Importance of Line Leaders and Managers. The success of any learning organization is dependent largely on local line leaders or managers. Indeed, throughout his years of research and practice, Senge has "seen no examples where significant progress has been made without leadership from local line managers." (P.M. Senge, *Leading Learning Organizations*, <http://www.sol-ne.org/res/kr/leadlearn.html> (1999).) Senge's research highlights the importance of first and second line supervisory correctional officers who are proactive and work within the context of the organizational mission.

Function of Executive Leaders. Within a learning organization executive leaders are viewed in a very different sense than in traditional, hierarchical leadership models. In fact, a large portion of the executive leader's function relates to his or her ability to support, assist, and mentor local line leaders. This perspective is contrary to models of management in which all responsibility for decision-making lies with top executives. Senge stated: "Cultures are not changed through singular decisions, and decision making power does not produce new learning capabilities." (P.M. Senge, *Leading Learning Organizations* (1996); W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) 175 (1998).)

Perhaps the most important function of an executive leader within a learning environment is to offer guiding ideas. However, learning organizations rely heavily upon the ability of local line leaders to test guiding ideas and initiate related practices, rather than relying on the power of the executive. This practice spreads power throughout the learning organization while striving for goals in context with a shared vision. Unfortunately, often the most difficult task for many executive leaders is to relinquish some power that has been garnered through hierarchical practice and allow others to enhance their positions as organizational leaders. In no way does this spreading of power forbid executive leaders from making tough decisions related to personnel differences or practices that are contrary to the organization's mission. In fact, with the input of subordinate staff, it is imperative that these situations be handled swiftly by executive level leaders.

Influence of Internal Networkers. Internal networkers are often the most unappreciated of the three leadership types with-

in a learning organization. Their contributions are invaluable, however. Individuals who lead through internal networking do so through their own strength of character and conviction. They possess little if any organizational authority. Often their efforts are assisted by local line leaders who have similar philosophies.

Within a correctional institution, internal networkers operate from the lowest levels of the hierarchy, yet their influence on organizational function is great. Given the fact that internal networkers' only source of organizational authority results from their own convictions and beliefs, individuals who choose to follow do so based on identification with either the person or his or her ideals. Obviously, organizational members who choose to participate in learning efforts will be far more committed than those who have been forced to participate by an organizational authority. Regarding the authority of an internal networker, Senge stated that, "This, we find time and time again, is the only legitimate authority when deep changes are required, regardless of one's position." (P.M. Senge, *Leading Learning Organizations* (1996); W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) 175 (1998).)

Leading From Various Strategic Standpoints. Leading within a correctional organization is a task which is multifaceted and requires work far beyond the capability or capacity of any one person. True learning within such an organization can only occur when those on the front-line choose to buy into a vision which is recognized and shared by members of all organizational levels. While hierarchy is inevitable within correctional organizations, it is the task of executive leaders to relinquish authority and allow others to lead from various strategic standpoints within the organization.

Executive leaders must take a stand and allow changes to occur within their organizations that facilitate continued learning and growth among all and encourage practices that empower organizational members. Unfortunately, "in the absence of this stand, the learning disciplines remain mere collections of tools and technique—means of solving problems rather than creating something genuinely new." (P.M. Senge, *Leading Learning Organizations* (1996); W.E. Rosenbach and R.L. Taylor, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (4th. ed.) 175 (1998).) Such a "stand" must also

recognize the responsibility of executive leaders within corrections to educate those "outside the walls." For executive correctional leaders, new-found time (resulting from internal power shifts) must be utilized to the fullest outside the organization to enrich and expand the capacity of correctional organizations to create links with local communities and other agencies.

Education and Media Initiatives

Wittenberg identified the importance of educational initiatives and public relations strategies as a means to repair the image of corrections and allow correctional agencies to operate within a proactive, rather than reactive atmosphere. (P. Wittenburg, "Leadership and Management of Agency Image," 61 *Fed. Probation* 46 (1997).) Such initiatives must be undertaken and led by administrators, practitioners, and experts from within the field of corrections, rather than by those without practical experience. This is the work of executive leaders within corrections. Unfortunately, corrections tends to do a poor job of selling itself. Executive leadership often allows others to publicize inaccurate portrayals of correctional organizations without offering an explanation, clarification, or response. Correctional leaders expect the media to do harm to their organizations and are therefore numbed to the negative effects of media scrutiny.

Utilize Quiet Times for Media Days. For many it does seem that the press is only interested in correctional practice when it involves escape, assault, homicide, or other sensational events. In fact, many agencies have procedures designed to respond or react to such crises; but few have procedures or practices designed to educate the public related to the many proactive or prosocial events that occur as a result of innovative correctional practice. During quiet times, due largely to the reactive nature of corrections and the daily rigors of maintaining the status quo, correctional administrators tend to maintain a low profile. While this is understandable, these are prime times for administrators to take the opportunity to lead correctional initiatives through "media days," make formal announcements of new or innovative programs, share information and assets with other agencies or sections of government, and/or submit written materials explaining operational aspects of their respective facilities. (Wittenburg, *supra* at 46.)

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The Future of Corrections: Leadership Responsibility

Hopefully, as a result of educational initiatives which offer public opportunities to look inside correctional atmospheres, leaders in correctional practice will both garner the support that is necessary to meet the changing demands of today's world and obtain assistance from those outside of the field who are interested in linking assets. Such a practice could allow for better allocation of resources for transitioning offenders, and reduction of recidivism, which contribute to enhanced, long-term public safety, and perhaps most importantly, a consistent societal mission for corrections. (Witten-

burg, *supra* at 46.) Consistency in mission could then foster consistency in policy and practice within correctional institutions and lessen the levels of stress and confusion which correctional officials experience regarding these issues. (G.E. Christensen, S.T. Lifrak, and A. Callisto, Jr., "21st Century Correctional Outcomes: Organizational Assessment and Officer Hiring," *American Jails* (Nov./Dec. 2003).) Most notable might be the fact that such an approach could have the capacity to empower the public as well as outside agencies to recognize themselves as part of the process of change within corrections, rather than distant, reluctant funders of a practice gone awry. Society could then undergo its own transformational change regarding correctional practice and

participate toward the attainment of a shared vision related to evidence-based correctional practice. The attainment of such a vision would epitomize a learning organization.

In the face of these exciting possibilities, we must remain aware of the difficulty and magnitude of change within existing correctional systems. Despite failures and falters that will occur as a result of day-to-day reality within corrections, leaders must continue to recognize the need for change, prepare themselves for the challenge, and ready themselves for the risks that must be taken. Only then will they affect proactive change within their respective organizations or agencies. Only then will the field of corrections at large resemble other great organizations that continually learn, mature, and improve. ■