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Working in corrections can be very stressful. Studies by F.E. Cheek indicate that the life expectancy of a correctional officer is only 59 years, compared to 74 years for the average American. Correctional staff also experience high levels of alcohol abuse, ulcers, heart attacks, high blood pressure, depression and divorce. Although correctional staff always will endure stress on and off the job, the negative consequences do not need to be so alarmingly high.

If people learn how to minimize the negative aspects of conflict or how to effectively manage or resolve conflict, their stress levels will diminish. This is not new information. A survey conducted by the American Correctional Association indicated that almost all correctional systems engage in conflict resolution training in one form or another. "Using conflict resolution in a correctional setting makes sense," writes Thomas F. Christian in his book, Conflict Management and Resolution in Corrections. "It can lower the tension among all parties involved and can help the disputes understand that there are alternatives in making decisions other than using aggression or force. Such an approach has repercussions, which may lead to lower recidivism and greater management ease in facilities and in the community."

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

The form that conflict resolution training takes is critical to its effectiveness. Thomas J. Costello, commissioner
CONFLICT RESOLUTION TRAINING FOR THE PHILADELPHIA PRISON SYSTEM

of prisons for the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS), wanted to develop training that would be effective and have lasting results. In collaboration with Conflict Resolution Services Inc., a training system was developed to meet the following objectives:

- Improve staff communication and conflict resolution skills
- Improve staff teamwork
- Improve interdepartmental cooperation
- Improve morale
- Reduce conflict among staff
- Train staff to continue the program upon completion of the contract

Experience has shown training organizers that approximately 25 percent of participants want to attend the training; 50 percent don't want to be there but are curious; and 25 percent are openly resistant. Even with these initial attitudes, almost all participants enjoy the training and feel that it is valuable. The results of an independent evaluation conducted by Dr. Marsha L. Miller of Miller Research, Evaluation and Planning indicate that 97 percent of staff who took the training felt it was excellent (69 percent) or good (28 percent).

PPS is a large urban prison system with five institutions and more than 2,300 employees. Two levels of training were developed: a basic level for staff of all ranks and an advanced level for supervisory personnel. Experiential conflict resolution and team-building training, included staff from every department including security, medical services, food services, social services, maintenance and clerical services.

"During the past several years, approximately 65 percent of our work force has participated in conflict resolution training," said Press Grooms, first deputy commissioner of PPS. "Most of the participants feel that the interaction with their fellow employees on all levels is most beneficial. The information gleaned by our staff helps everyone understand their diverse roles here. Different disciplines can empathize and see how their jobs interact, complement and affect everyone else. As a result, communication between units is expanded and improved. Everyone has benefited from the experience of participating in conflict resolution training."

The training focuses on how to prevent or effectively resolve conflicts, which can destroy morale, impede teamwork and decrease effectiveness. However, the skills learned are just as useful with inmates and with family and friends. In a six-month follow-up evaluation by Miller, 71 percent of the staff who had taken the training reported using the skills with inmates afterward. According to the same report, a strong majority (84 percent) were using them with co-workers, superiors (75 percent) and family or friends (87 percent).

"Prior to receiving this training, when an inmate approached me with a negative attitude, I would often feel as if I were developing one myself," a correctional officer with 18 years of experience said. "The training has reminded me that I have the power to make something positive out of most situations. Now, when an inmate approaches me negatively, I simply say I haven't done anything to you, so why don't we try to start over on a more positive note?"
CONFLICT RESOLUTION FOR THE PHILADELPHIA PRISON SYSTEM

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This training model was adapted from the Alternatives to Violence Project, a 24-year-old volunteer organization with a history of more than 10,000 workshops with a variety of groups, including inmates, and with active programs in Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe, Latin America, New Zealand, Russia and the United States. The model is experiential in design, with virtually no lecture.

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Human responses to conflict are learned from life experiences. New behaviors are best learned in the same fashion. This is what the experiential conflict resolution training model does. A lecture on conflict resolution does not have long-lasting effects. To quote an old Chinese saying, "If I hear it, I will forget it; if I see it, I will remember it; but if I experience it, I will understand it."

In addition to the information being presented, a unique quality of the training is the method by which it is conveyed – participants are actively engaged in the learning process. They have fun; maintain high levels of energy throughout; learn by experience; open up to new ideas as a result of the trust and respect that develops; and create their own sense of community. They learn the skills well, retain them longer and use them in all aspects of their lives.

"There are many things I loved about this training," one sergeant said. "Most important, it made me think about how I deal with people and how and why they deal with me in certain ways. I have come away from this training with some valuable tools. It was one of the first times I have been in a situation in which I did not 'negatively prejudge.' I saw positives in everyone who was there.

TRAINING ON A FIRST-NAME BASIS

The workshop begins by breaking down barriers and building a sense of trust among participants. This is done in several ways: fun activities, focused group tasks and non-threatening sharing exercises. First, the participants create their own "community commitments," which are guidelines by which they will interact with one another, e.g., be respectful, be honest, listen to one another, keep personal information confidential, be open minded, participate, be punctual and have fun. Next, participants get to know one another’s names by using fun and often humorous adjectives attached their first names, such as Dynamic Dave, Beautiful Brenda, Sensational Steve, Happy Harry, Awesome Ann and so on. By using first names, everyone is treated equally and not addressed by rank, which results in the participants beginning to relax. (Only first names are used in the context of the training.) Participants then speak in rotating pairs about topics such as: someone I really respect and why, how my family handled conflict when I was growing up and something I’ve done that, I’m proud of. Participants share what they feel comfortable sharing and, as they do so, begin to feel more at ease with one another.
CONFLICT RESOLUTION TRAINING FOR THE PHILADELPHIA PRISON SYSTEM

USING ATTITUDE TO AFFECT OUTCOME

The next major section of training focuses on the ways that attitude can affect the outcome of a conflict. "Transforming power," which is an attitude that can change violent or potentially violent situations into less violent, nonviolent or often positive outcomes, is discussed. There also is discussion of specific tools for changing attitudes. Participants then learn the causes of conflict and the five styles of approaching a conflict: competing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising and collaborating. They then have an opportunity to practice these styles, which helps them gain a better understanding of the value of each approach and when it is appropriate to use each one.

The third, fourth and fifth sections focus on the three major conflict resolution skills: active listening, "I" messages [assertiveness] and six-point problem-solving. Skills are demonstrated and then practiced individually. Next, participants use their new skills in role-plays they create from their work experiences. Finally, in the sixth section, the organizers summarize what has been taught and the impact it has on teamwork. Participants then divide into small groups and discuss what they individually can do to improve teamwork on their jobs. At the end of the session, participants write personal contracts stating goals they wish to achieve as a result of the training and fill out evaluations.

Modern learning theory holds that training should be designed to maximize learning with whole brain teaching methods. The left brain needs lecture, structure, clear and explicit instructions, repetitive tasks and handouts. The right brain needs spontaneity, experiential opportunities, playfulness, group interaction and risk-taking. If a training design neglects either side, some or all of the participants may be lost – they will be bored and closed to the new information and ideas presented. This is why simple lecture trainings do not work well with adults. According to Carol Cummings in her 1984 book, Managing to Teach, by appealing to both sides of the brain, participants are more open, trusting, willing to look at themselves and learn new skills.

BRINGING CONFLICT RESOLUTION TO WORK

It also is important that positive relationships develop within the group that carryover into the work environment. One captain said, "I personally have seen a major difference in the way they perceive themselves, the way they interact with one another and the way they interact with support staff, whether they be social service or maintenance. Also, the rate of sick abuse or not coming to work has dropped and the overall attitude of the workplace has improved."

An example of the training's impact on teamwork between departments is shown by a comment made by another captain. "The Philadelphia Prison System, like so many other departments, has had its share of conflict between the various disciplines within the department," he
said. "However, this training has resulted in a new camaraderie between those same disciplines. It's amazing to see how staff who have had the training are working together, solving problems and getting the job done without conflict."

There are many factors that separate us: rank, profession, gender, race, ethnic group and belief system, just to name a few. It is important to honor these differences but not let them divide us. In the workshop, the focus is on commonalities. The more diversity there is among the participants, the better the experience, so each workshop includes participants from several departments and various ranks.

"I liked the group interaction because it showed that no matter how diverse the group was, we were still able to arrive at a common goal," reported a correctional officer.

As participants relax and feel more comfortable, they will take risks and get out of their "comfort zones" more easily and, therefore, open up to new ideas and experiences. This concept of an "affirming learning environment" is supported by current education theory. As Carolyn Chapman writes in her 1993 book, *If the Shoe Fits: How to Develop Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, a student's ability to learn is determined to a much greater degree by the learning or workshop environment than by IQ. The learning environment within a workshop is crucial if long-term learning is to be achieved.

Training is designed around the following themes: affirmation, cooperation, community-building, communication and problem-solving. In addition to the basic skills of listening, assertiveness and problem-solving, this training offers much more. As a correctional officer with more than 16 years in the system stated, "In the beginning, I thought most of this material should have been learned by any experienced correctional officer. However, I was surprised to learn quite a bit more than I had expected."

The honesty, respect and caring modeled by the trainers often affect participants. They sometimes go back to their jobs and try to recreate this level of respect and trust, and if their efforts are supported by others, especially supervisors, the impact can be felt.

"It's one of those things you can't really know the value of until you get the training," said one captain. "There are a lot of obstacles and a lot of reasons those who have not taken the training will say that you can't do 'whatever', but if you just try with those you are forced to be in contact with on a daily basis, you will see that positive thinking or a positive approach will change a person. For me, and for those who work under me, I find this to be one of the benefits of conflict resolution."

Another benefit is improved morale. Although morale is difficult to measure, one correctional officer said, "I've been with the prison system since 1980. I was excited and fresh when I started. I got a lot of recognition for helping out. About six or seven years later, I began to feel differently. I wasn't as motivated as I once was; I didn't feel good about my attitude, and my morale seemed to be at an all-time low." He added, "Conflict resolution [training] helped me revive my morale and rededicate myself to the tasks at hand. I know some of the other correctional officers in the training with me also are getting more involved. I can't tell you exactly what it was in the training, but it dealt with how you respond to something negative with something positive. I now feel like a real professional and that I am accomplishing something. I felt like I had been a dead battery for years and the training got me to see if I could recharge and see if I still worked. It charged up my morale and my attitude toward my peers."

**KEEPING THE PROGRAM ALIVE**

Experiential conflict resolution training will have more impact if it is ongoing, so new employees can be exposed to it early in their employment. The more staff who receive it, the more support for positive change will exist. The training does not tell staff what changes to make, but empowers them with the attitude and the tools to make changes they feel need to be made. It all begins with changing themselves first.

Line and support staff were trained as trainers to enable the program to continue beyond completion of the contract. Two "Training of Trainers" workshops were given for staff who showed effective communication skills and a good grasp of the concepts behind the training. None of

**THE TRAINING FOCUSES ON HOW TO PREVENT OR EFFECTIVELY RESOLVE CONFLICTS WHICH CAN DESTROY MORALE, IMPede TEAMWORK AND DECREASE EFFECTIVENESS**
those taking the workshop had any previous training experience. They were given the opportunity to facilitate several workshops as part of a training team coached by Conflict Resolution Services staff. Now, as they gain more confidence and competence, they take on more and more of the workshop until they are able to facilitate a whole workshop as part of a staff team, without any outside support.

Training is held weekly, except on major holidays. The number of participants is limited to 20 for both maximum diversity and community-building. Training lasts 21 hours and extends over three days. It is important to have supervisors in every workshop because it shows support for the training, and that the system accepts the fact that all levels can benefit from the program. Lasting change must start with line staff, but also must be supported by administration. This training has been so successful that PPS contracted for advanced supervisory training for all its supervisors, up to and including wardens.

Any prison system could implement its own program within six to eight months if fully committed to it. Full commitment means a training session every week and full administrative support, including assigning staff, especially apprentice trainers, so they can get the appropriate amount of practice. The training model is simple and clear enough that any prison would have plenty of trainers within its line staff.

“No matter what a person does in life, all can learn from this training,” a correctional officer said. “It brings you to terms with your humanity.” Comments like this show that PPS made the right decision to fully commit to this program.

REFERENCES


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