

The Missing Link in Reentry: Changing Prison Culture

“One of the most significant developments in criminal justice policy over the past 15 years has been a fundamental shift in thinking about the primary purpose of prisons and jails. Not long ago, elected officials saw the principal responsibility of corrections administrators as providing for the care, custody, and control of people who are incarcerated. Today, there is widespread agreement that government has a responsibility to ensure that when people are released to the community from jail or prison, they are less likely to reoffend than they were at the start of their sentence.” June 2017, the National Reentry Resource Center and the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments.

Significant advances in reducing recidivism have been made with Second Chances Act and Justice Reinvestment Act funding. The focus in most of these funded programs has been on pre-incarceration diversion and services and post-release services, which are critically important. These include drug courts, veteran treatment courts, Stepping Up, mental health diversion, Ban the Box, government IDs, reducing technical parole/probation violations, etc.

Reentry and Prison Culture

However, as correction officials acknowledge, reentry begins when an inmate walks through the gate into the prison. If a released inmate walks out of the prison in a state of MAD [marginalized, alienated and de-socialized], his/her chance of success is greatly diminished. There must be an increased focus on what happens while someone is incarcerated. The services and culture in the prison will have a significant impact on an inmate’s rehabilitation, which will make post-release success more likely or less likely. Recently, there has been an increase in inmate services for treatment and vocational training; however, there has been little attention given to the culture in prisons. A coercive culture will decrease the mental well-being of both staff and inmates, making services less effective, and rendering the daily routine an “us vs. them” struggle.

This kind of coercive culture in prisons is relatively common, creating high stress levels in staff resulting in: a high divorce rate, addictions, high suicide rate, 30% PTSD, 30% Major Depressive Disorder, high staff turnover and sick time use, and a life expectancy 20 years shorter than the general population [59 years vs. 79 years]. The high turnover and sick time use results in staff shortages, which increases the stress on staff. In fact, when staff are asked why they leave correctional services, it is not because of inmates, but because of poor supervision and stress caused by other staff. The National Institute of Corrections reports the typical problem areas with staff are:

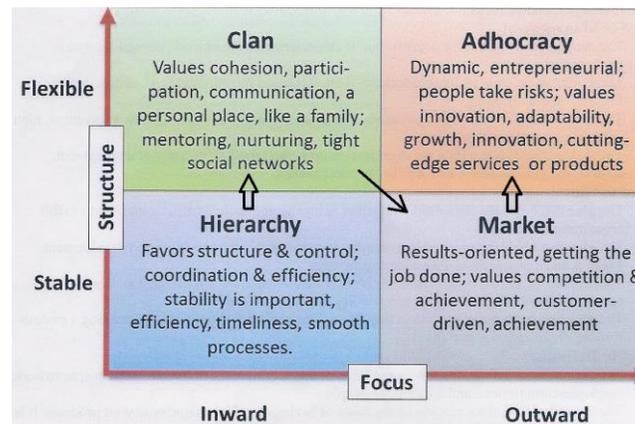
- Lack of trust
- Lack of recognition
- Unclear reward structure
- Lack of good communication
- Procedures not being followed
- Lack of respect
- Lack of diversity
- Sexual misconduct
- Use of force
- Corruption
- Code of silence
- Apathy

All of these factors are related to the working culture within a prison. Thus, if there is to be a significant reduction in recidivism, there must be a significant improvement in the working culture in prisons, i.e., a significant improvement in how staff relate to each other.

Types of Organizational Cultures

The National Institute of Corrections [NIC] in its series on “Culture and Change Management: Using APEX to Facilitate Organizational Change” describes four types of working cultures: hierarchy, clan, market and adhocracy. The hierarchy culture focuses on security and favors structure and control; coordination and efficiency; stability, efficiency, timeliness and smooth processes. The clan culture values cohesion, participation, communication, mentoring, nurturing, tight social networks and is concerned with the well-being of staff. The market culture is results-oriented, i.e., what is the final product or outcome of the service offered. Hopefully, the outcome is the rehabilitation of inmates. Finally, the adhocracy culture is dynamic, entrepreneurial and values innovation, adaptability, risk taking and cutting-edge services or products. The hierarchy culture must be present, because without security, chaos will follow. However, if security is the only focus, the working culture will become coercive.

To the foundation of security [hierarchy] must be added elements of the clan culture, which values staff, the most important asset of a prison beyond bricks and mortar. All too often staff are viewed as expendable rather than essential. When a well-functioning staff exists, attention can be drawn to developing the market culture elements or the rehabilitation of the inmates. Now, with a focus on rehabilitation from a base of security, the creative elements of the adhocracy culture can be explored. When all four cultures are present, the prison will be a high functioning organization that values staff and produces meaningful results and its image in the community will be transformed. This must be our long-term goal; an organization that is highly prized as a place where people want to work. Turnover will dramatically drop and staff shortages will be a thing of the past.



Changing Prison Culture

In order to effectively change the working culture, a “top-down conditions for bottom-up change” approach must be considered. One such approach is the PASR© approach. PASR© stands for Policies, Attitude, Skills and Reinforcers. Policies will create the top-down conditions and changes in staff attitudes and skill sets will produce bottom-up change with reinforcers continuing the change process through time. This approach will deliver the four organizational development strategies that create a positive and higher performing organizational culture purported by NIC in its “Culture and Change Management” series:

- Create a positive tone in the organizational climate
- Promote positive interpersonal relationships with and between staff
- Stress positive communication at all levels of the organization
- Infuse purpose and meaning into the work life of all staff

TACT© Trainings

Built into the PASR© approach is the TACT© [Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation] staff development training. This training modality is an immersion experiential training where the participants actually experience the kind of culture that is desired. Participants are engaged, energized and empowered to make positive changes in their work life, and thus, in their part of the prison work culture. This training is an antidote to staff isolation, which is a contributing factor in staff suicide, PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder, addiction, divorce, shortened life expectancy and turnover. Staff feel connected to each other and departments cooperate more fully. The attitude and skills change also improve staff relations with inmates and with others off the job, especially at home. This change is not temporary, as indicated by the fact that 75% to 85% of staff in the Philadelphia Prison System reported continued use of the skills 6 months after the training. In that same prison system, departments reported working better together and the intake unit reduced its documented use of force by 94% from 5 or 6 per month to 4 or 5 in two years.

One DOC training academy was so dysfunctional and acrimonious that they were in the process of reassigning all the staff (except the Director and Deputy Director) and bringing in new staff. All staff experienced the TACT© training resulting in no one being transferred, conflicts being dealt with in positive ways, the academy becoming an effective training team and individual instructors improving their effectiveness by incorporating some of the TACT© training elements in their courses. The Director of that training academy wrote:

"Words cannot express the value of the training you have conducted at the Academy. The impact you have had on my staff, personally as well as professionally, is remarkable. There is actually a paradigm shift from rigidity and inflexibility ingrained in corrections, to the understanding and acceptance of the value of community and teamwork. Your Effective Supervisor Training certainly addressed the Office of Training's need to have our supervisors better enabled to motivate and lead line staff. I am constantly amazed at the transformation our staff experiences during your training sessions. My greatest hope is that the teamwork and supervisory tenets you shared with us will eventually become the tenets by which the Department of Corrections manages."

Other comments from correctional staff:

"I personally have seen a major difference in the way staff 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." Captain

"Our prison system, like so many other departments, has had its share of conflict between the various disciplines within the department. 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." Captain

"I felt like a dead battery for the last 10 years, but your program changed all that. It charged up my morale and my attitude." 18 year CO

"I came to work here three or four years ago. My supervisor came up through the ranks. He acted like he was above his subordinates, always pushing us down, that we had nothing to say to him. It was his way or the highway. At meetings we couldn't get a word in edgewise and when we did, he didn't listen. Something happened, though, and he changed. He mellowed out, listened more, became a better supervisor. He didn't seem to be power tripping any more. Things were working much better in our unit."

He stopped micro-managing. We are all doing better work now since his change. And he seems to be much happier himself. I can go to him and speak to him more easily. He has a more open door policy. I didn't know what had happened, what had made the change. I knew he had taken this course, but now that I've taken it myself, I see why he has changed. Thanks to this course, we are all doing much better."

And from an inmate's perspective about a CO who had taken the TACT© training:

"I thought he was on drugs, because he treated others so poorly. I was scared to ask him for anything, like to get a haircut. The look in his eyes was evil – leave me alone – I'll cut your throat. [After the TACT training] he began to change; like he came out from behind a brick wall. I didn't know why. When inmates approached him, he used to chop their heads off, but now he listened and was more understanding. I look forward to him coming to work; he treats me like a human being."

One interesting factor about the TACT© training; it does not matter what the attitude of staff is when they come to the training. Many are mandated and do not want to take the training and yet, within an hour, they are very engaged and having so much fun they forget their negative attitude. Warden Chris Money [Marion Correctional Institution in Ohio] commented,

"It is generally thought to be the best training program that staff has participated in. The labor unions are strong supporters of it and employee grievances have dropped to an all-time low. Thank you for helping us change the culture at MCI. It is the best investment of resources that we have ever made."

In order to change the working culture in the long run, staff must feel supported by administration, so policies need to be addressed. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to get staff input through committees. NIC has promoted the Organizational Dialogue Meeting [ODM], where all levels are represented and the group has the authority to make policy decisions, of course, with the approval of administration. Whether or not the ODM is utilized, committees need to be established with input from all levels. One principle that has proven valuable is to "make decisions at the lowest level possible." This means CO input is encouraged, which often results in better decisions that are supported by those who will enforce them. These committees address not only the P [Policies] in PASR, but also the R [Reinforcers], because staff feel more ownership. Another reinforcer might be posters placed around the facility, similar to what is being done with PREA.

Summary

Changing prison culture cannot be done solely by policy. Staff will comply with policy, however, that is not enough to change attitudes and thus the culture. What is needed is commitment from staff to change the culture and that will come when they have a sense of hope that change is possible and beneficial. The TACT© training accomplishes this by giving staff the experience of a trusting, safe and connecting experience with all levels and departments. Once staff is onboard, then programs focusing on inmate rehabilitation will have more impact and the working culture will improve. This will result in less staff-on-staff stress, better job performance, better inter-department cooperation and better health outcomes for staff.

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