

ENGAGING STAFF MORALE p. 32

# Corrections Today

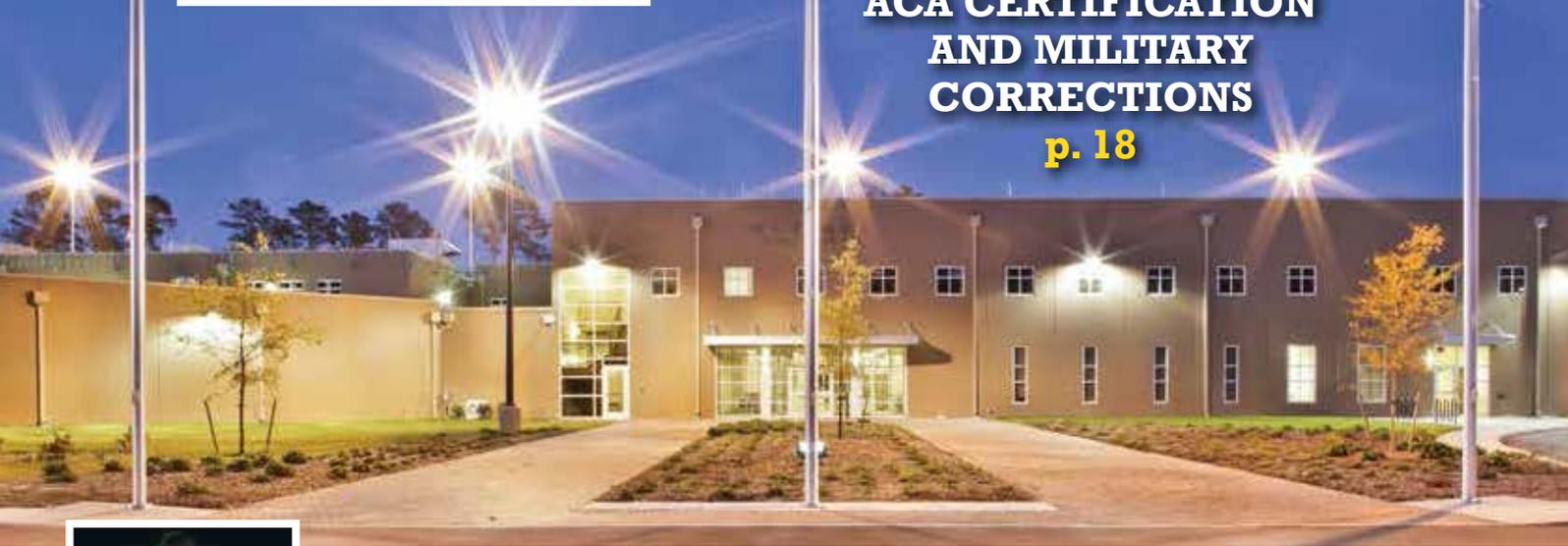
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*By Alexander Carrigan and Arnela Hadzisulejmanovic*

Cover photo courtesy of the Navy Consolidated Brig

# Empowering staff: The path to improving morale

BY JOHN A. SHUFORD

**M**any departments of corrections (DOCs) are experiencing critical staff shortages that are reaching crisis levels. This situation has been building for years and it now seems evident that we cannot hire our way out of this near crisis. DOCs are losing as many or more staff than they can orient and hire — many within the first year of employment. The only way out of this situation is to retain the staff we have. There are a number of reasons for this situation: changing laws that increase the number of inmates; the fact that a larger proportion of inmates are violent; our policies being reactive rather than proactive; and our hiring standards are being lowered out of necessity.<sup>1</sup> A couple of consequences of all this are higher stress levels and lower morale. This article will present ideas and suggestions on improving staff morale by addressing staff well-being.

## Staff morale

In 2017, a staff retention and recruitment study was done of a large DOC, showing some alarming data indicative of low morale, a condition common to other DOCs.<sup>2</sup>

Below are some of the findings:

- 71 percent responded negatively to the statement that administration was actively making efforts to retain staff.
- There was a general perception that administration was out of touch and unconcerned with employee morale, poor management, favoritism and stress.
- 56 percent stated that they considered looking for another job in the past six months.
- 39 percent were currently looking for another job.
- 46 percent replied that they participated in decision-making.
- 40 percent felt fairly satisfied with their job.
- 47 percent felt unsure who their boss was when given direction.
- 46 percent felt proud to tell others they were part of the organization.

This is not an indictment of one DOC, but it is illustrative of the issues over which we should all have concern.

The National Institute of Justice states in its 2017 paper, “Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis” that “institution-related dangers pose greater mental health-related risks than physical risks,” and are directly linked to officer stress and burnout. The following examples of institution-related dangers are under the control of administration and staff: role conflict and role ambiguity; lack of administrative leadership and officer input into institutional decision-making; poor recruitment, selection and training of officers; and finally, co-worker conflicts. Role conflict comes from the inconsistency in following policy where one supervisor says to do it one way and the next supervisor says to do it another way. This is also the case when academy training is disregarded on the actual job. Role ambiguity is when the staff member does not have the necessary information to carry out the duties and responsibilities of a given position. This is the case when orientation is far too short to adequately prepare for the demanding work of a correctional officer (CO) and is left to on-the-job training, which often results in failure. Finally, the differing and changing philosophies in corrections from

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treatment/rehabilitation to retribution to deterrence and incapacitation can leave staff confused and stressed.

## Sources of stress

Other factors increasing stress are high caseloads, demanding paperwork and deadlines, demanding shift work and extended work hours, which are related to insufficient staffing. Possibly more important is staff’s relationship with administration. Staff often express a lack of trust in administration; that administration is more afraid of inmate lawsuits than the welfare of staff, that administration decision-making practices are not good, and that there is “a lack of administrative leadership and an absence of officer input into decision-making.” One study stated that “officer stress and burnout could be predicted by their distrust of prison administration... If administrative officials desire to maintain harmony with correctional staff, it is imperative that they forge trusting and long-lasting partnerships with their subordinates.”

The cultures at work and at home are so different that it can be another source of stress. It is very difficult not to bring the work culture home and many staff say their partners have told them they do not like being treated like an inmate. This “dissonance between work and family environments can manifest in the form of chronic fatigue, cynicism, pessimism and sarcasm,” and loss of a sense of humor and spontaneity. This is often not welcome at home and both CO and partner can become frustrated. A common reaction is that the CO shuts down and no longer shares with their partner their work life, and thus an

important outlet for the CO is lost. This adds to the level of stress and burnout. Add to this that COs are often reluctant to share their work experience with non-correction employed friends because of the misconceptions rooted in the negative characterizations of corrections, which results in higher stress levels, isolation and reduced self-esteem.

The consequences of this high stress level in corrections are well documented: physical conditions such as chronic neck, back and knee injuries, heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension, weight gain or loss and psychological problems, such as impaired cognitive, emotional and motor functions, and higher rates of PTSD, depression and suicide than the general public. One study found that the rate of suicides for COs was double that of police officers.

“Correctional researchers, administrative officials and prison systems in general have largely neglected the health and safety concerns of COs. . . . Many prison institutions lack the resources (whether monetary or otherwise) that could be used to introduce mental health counseling for COs, and there are no established professional organizations to address the unique psychological and physical needs of COs (with the possible exception of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach). Additional impediments include mental health treatment providers’ lack of awareness of psychological selection strategies and laws specific to corrections including PTSD treatment for COs and how family matters interact with work problems for COs.”<sup>3</sup> The programs that do exist are either post-incident interventions or symptom relief, rather than addressing the causes of stress. According to a 2013 ACA report, “Of the more than 4,000 prisons in operation across the U.S., fewer than 100 had any type of employee assistance program (EAP). Moreover, very few of these programs have been scientifically evaluated to determine their effectiveness in improving CO well-being.”

## Understanding staff well-being

In order to address staff well-being, it is necessary to understand how the basic human needs of staff are or are not being met in the current working culture. If staff needs are being met, they will stay and if not, they will leave. It’s that simple. Our basic psychological needs are for connection, meaning in life, control and power over our own life and a need for fun. The need for connection is fulfilled by loving, sharing and cooperating with others along with a sense of belonging. We are not able

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to survive on our own, so being part of something bigger than us is essential. This is why gangs, churches, political parties, social clubs and other organizations have such a central role in many of our lives. They give us a sense of security and of belonging. Being part of corrections could satisfy this need if there existed a sense of emotional safety. However, the lack of trust and respect that exists today undermines this and the lack of a positive professional identity in society only adds to the sense of isolation. Thus, the need for connection is not being met.

The need for meaning in life is fulfilled by achieving, accomplishing and being recognized and respected. This need for growth, for setting and achieving goals, shows us that we matter, that there is a reason for us to be here and that we make a difference by what we do. This need is not being met in corrections when there is little to no positive feedback, when promotions are based on favoritism or passing a test of policies and when corrections staff are treated as just a means of filling a position and that the only goal is “eight and the gate,” or going home without injuries, which is not really a goal.

The need for control and power over one’s life is fulfilled by having and making choices, giving a sense of security and safety for the future. This includes having access to information and being part of decision making on matters that are impactful. The most effective way to totally undermine this need is micro-management. It not only devastates morale, but also renders the organization much less effective and micro-managers can be so busy making decisions for others that they are not able to do their own job effectively. This flies in the face of the principle of making decisions at the lowest level possible, where the information for making the best decisions exists.

The last psychological need is for fun fulfilled by laughing and playing. When this need is met, staff are open to learn new information better, feel more connected to other staff and the organization, are more creative and perform



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their jobs better and morale is greatly enhanced. Although a CO's job is very serious, managers who discourage staff getting together outside of work, fearing it will negatively impact the supervisor-supervisee relationship, are in fact losing a good opportunity to improve morale. At a recent staff development training, staff complained that they used to feel like they were a family, but that was now lost because they were discouraged from gathering together after hours. The loss of a sense of humor and enjoyment in life are consequences of low morale and often carryover to family life, which adds to the sense of isolation and frustration.

## Morale improvement

In order to improve morale, it is helpful to know what motivates staff and base any changes on those factors.

The most significant factors include:

- Management and leadership actions that empower employees.
- Transparent and regular communication about factors important to employees.
- Treating employees with respect.

- Involving employees in decisions about their work and job.
- Minimizing the number of rules and policies in an environment that demonstrates trust for employees.
- Providing regular employee recognition.
- Feedback and coaching from managers and leaders.
- Above average benefits and compensation.
- Providing employee perks and facility activities.
- Positively managing employees within a success framework of goals, measurements and clear expectations.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that when administrations address the morale issue, they usually look at a quick fix by increasing wages and benefits, both of which are rather low on the list.

With the above-mentioned staff psychological needs and motivating factors in mind, the following are recommendations for improving morale and transforming the working cultures in our prisons:

1. Establish committees comprised of all levels of staff that have the authority to make and change policies.



istock/Suriyapong Thongsawang

Wardens/superintendents will always have final say, but they should focus on empowering this committee. The organization dialogue meeting promoted by the National Institute of Corrections is a good model with which to begin the process. Establish a morale committee or staff well-being committee and possibly use focus groups to gather information. The quality of the work environment should become a priority and regular assessments of it should be established. It is essential to engage and empower staff.

2. Eliminate micro-management by reintroducing unit management and creating unit committees to encourage both upward and downward information flow. Have all supervisors attend a supervisors training that includes emotional competency skills, problem solving/mediation skills, motivating staff skills and basic leadership skills. One training that accomplishes this is the three-day Effective Supervisor Training (EST), which trains emotionally competent supervisors who are less focused on being in charge and more on empowering those in their charge.<sup>5</sup> As one participant in the EST training commented, “The training academy taught us what

to do and the EST training taught us how to do it.”

3. Establish mission and vision statements that focus on staff well-being. Also, create specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely (SMART) goals focusing on staff well-being that is directed to achieving the mission and vision. These would be in addition to the mission of security and rehabilitation.
4. Teach staff emotional competency skills (emotional intelligence) through training programs such as the Team-building Attitude Conflict Transformation (TACT) trainings, which are experiential rather than lecture or Cognitive Behavior Training focused.<sup>6</sup> PowerPoint presentations have been proven to be very ineffective at changing attitudes and behavior. There are better models for training available.
5. Make staff training a priority. Redesign training to improve the quality of both orientation and in-service; which staff often say is death by PowerPoint and repetitive of what they have had previously. The job of a CO is too important to have anything less than a six- or eight-week orientation and it should include both supervisor and emotional competence skills. COs are in fact supervisors.

6. Revise promotion procedure to include an interview by HR, staff input and effective supervisor skills training. Poor supervision is a big complaint from staff and a major reason for low morale.
7. Recommend all policy changes get input from staff, especially those impacted by the proposed changes.
8. Focus on recognition, which is one of our basic psychological needs. “Dirty” staff do not enter correctional service with the intent of becoming dirty. When they don’t get their needs met by co-workers, supervisors or administration, they turn to inmates and that is when trouble can start.
9. Provide a mentor program, either one-on-one or group. This should be considered post-orientation training and an essential part of the overall training program.
10. Establish accountability and feedback mechanisms like 360 evaluations where staff give feedback on supervisors and managers with whom they interact.
11. Create and promote opportunities for staff to connect socially.
12. Involve staff in rehabilitation programs so they support those efforts.

The above recommendations address ACA’s Correctional Policy on Employee Wellness, which states:

1. Ensure that all work practices, the work environment and culture will value, enhance and protect the health and well-being of all employees;
2. Support workplace wellness by creating and supporting a wellness initiative that offers programs for personal and professional well-being of its employees;
3. Educate and raise awareness about how to mitigate the stressors relating to working in a correctional environment.<sup>7</sup>

If we are to improve the morale in our institutions, we must make a concerted, focused effort where all staff are engaged and empowered to make the changes necessary. This means top down conditions for bottom up change. Staff must feel administration is fully on board with this process and open to changing their own approach. We cannot keep doing what we have done. We may have reached the end of that road. If we don’t stop the flow of staff out of our institutions, the near crisis may turn into a disaster, making staff more and more vulnerable to injury and death.

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Pouring more money into wages and benefits won’t stop the outflow of staff. Changing the work culture is our only long-term option and we can do that without a major infusion of funds. We can change the work culture by changing how we do business and how we relate to and respect each other. We must all get on the same page. Staff well-being must be our focus and with that, we can then focus on the rehabilitation of inmates, which was our original charge as the Department of Corrections. Without staff well-being there can be no rehabilitation of those in our charge.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ferdik, Frank V., Smith, Hayden P. “Correctional Officer Safety and Wellness Literature Synthesis. National Institute of Justice, July 2017, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bonner, Heidi S. “Recruitment and Retention Evaluation (update)” East Carolina University, February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO) is a Colorado-based 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation founded in 2003 with the mission to promote the occupational, personal and family well-being of the corrections workforce through the provision of evidence-informed resources, solutions, and support. Website: desertwaters.com

<sup>4</sup> Heathfield, Susan M., “You need to know what motivation is – Really.” www.thebalancecarers.com, November 2017

<sup>5</sup> Effective Supervisor Training [EST] is a product of Collaborative Resolution Services, Inc., www.teamcrs.org

<sup>6</sup> Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation [TACT] trainings are a product of Collaborative Resolution Services, Inc. www.teamcrs.org

<sup>7</sup> ACA Correctional Policy on Employee Wellness, *Corrections Today*, May/June 2018, p. 81-82.



*John A.S. Huford is a correctional training coordinator II in the department of prisons, North Carolina Department of Public Safety. He is a contract employee.*