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Changing Prison Culture

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Executive Summary

The punitive culture in our correctional system has produced expanding budgets and high levels of recidivism – both indications of a failed system. There have been attempts at changing negative prison cultures, but few have succeeded. One training design has proven itself with staff development training as well as inmate rehabilitation; it is the Immersive Experiential Training[®] model. It is called Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation[®] [TACT[®]] with staff and the Alternatives to Violence Project [AVP] with inmates. Research proven, this model has been shown to be effective in a number of prison systems. The rationale for its success and examples of its impact are reviewed in this article.

Rationale

Recently there has been an increasing awareness of and concern about the reintegration of released inmates back into our communities. Hopefully, this indicates a shift in our consciousness rather than a short lived “fix it” fad. Reentry programs, both government and nonprofit, and the involvement of the community in reentry are all important; but without a change in the culture of prisons, they will not have the impact or give the results we seek. The culture in prisons is unhealthy at best and pathological at worst. Not only is it detrimental to inmates, but to staff and our communities as well. We are not responsible for having created this situation, but we are responsible if we allow it to continue. We inherited our criminal justice system, the roots of which go back to King Henry I of England. It is time we upgraded this system using proven evidence based practices.

The dysfunctionality of corrections is coming to light now because of the budgetary issues and the high rate of recidivism. Those of us working in and around corrections have known this for decades. An inmate often exits the prison system more alienated, marginalized, traumatized and desocialized than when she/he entered. And the social fiber of the communities he/she returns to is deteriorating.

Our prison system is very hard on inmates, but what most people do not realize, it is even harder on staff. The statistics bear this out; the average life expectancy of a correctional officer (CO) is 58 years, while the life expectancy of the general population is 74 years. That’s a difference of 16 years; the average prison staff dies two years before they retire. The divorce rate, suicide rate, substance abuse rate, and cumulative career stress rate (a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) are alarmingly high. Staff report the major source of stress is not the inmates; but other staff, poor supervision and administration policies. No wonder staff turnover is so high. The power and intimidation culture in prison promotes this dysfunction.

The design and approach [warehouse mentality] of our prison system, not the personnel, are responsible for this condition. When staff enter the system without this dysfunctional attitude,

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the culture is so strong they are forced to conform or they will not survive. When over a hundred correctional supervisors [sergeants to majors] were given a staff conflict scenario to respond to, they all responded with an aggressive style, even though their actual supervisory style as determined by the Thomas-Kilmann Inventory was not aggressive. The prison culture dictated they respond in a certain way. Their response was as expected by what was learned from the 1971 “Stanford Prison Experiment.”

In this experiment, Dr. Phillip Zimbardo created a jail setting in the basement of a building where he utilized volunteer Stanford University students – assigning some to be guards and the rest to be inmates. This two week study was discontinued after six days to prevent lasting harm to the subjects. The guards became very aggressive and the inmates very passive. The researchers were amazed by the surprising ease with which normal people could behave sadistically. Equally significant was the extent to which emotional disturbance developed in young men originally selected on the basis of their emotional stability.

This dysfunctional culture is difficult to change. New COs consistently hear on their first day on the job, “You can forget what the training academy taught you, we will show you how it is really done.” No matter how staff training attempts to change the prison culture, it remains relatively unchanged. To get a fuller understanding of this culture, an excellent resource is New Jack; Guarding Sing Sing by Ted Conover, published in 2000. The author is a journalist who asked Sing Sing administration if he could do an article on correctional officers. When he was refused, he decided to become a CO and then write about it. This book is now used by some correctional training academies as recommended reading.

The Immersive Experiential Training® Model

Changing this unsafe [for staff and inmates alike] prison culture is not the impossible task it appears to be. Evidenced based practices must be used, however. Attitudes can change, and in fact they have when given the opportunity. One type of training that has proven effective is Immersive Experiential Training® model. The most widely used Immersive Experiential Training® model is the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). The effectiveness of this attitude and values program is well researched and documented. Over 1,000 workshops are given in the US annually, and there are AVP programs in more than 50 countries being used to heal from war and genocide, in schools, in colleges and universities, in business, in prisons and in the community.

In the US the Immersive Experiential Training® model has been used primarily in prisons with inmates, and to a lesser extent with staff [TACT®]. The National Institute of Corrections thought so highly of this model, it incorporated it into its nationally televised “Strategies for Building Effective Work Teams” training for correctional staff. Also, the International Association for Correctional Training Personnel gave its “2004 and 2018 Awards of Excellence” to this training design, and in giving this award the President of the Association stated this training should be part of the training of correctional officers in every state.

Immersive Experiential Training® focuses on three types of skills: interpersonal skills, attitude skills, and community building skills. Interpersonal skills include listening skills, assertiveness skills and problem solving skills. These skills are effectively taught using the experiential training model, which is widely used throughout corrections. Attitude skills, on the other hand, cannot be effectively taught using the experiential training design alone. These skills include self-

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awareness, empathy, personal responsibility and emotional management. Attitude skills combined with community building skills are the transformative element of Immersive Experiential Training[®]. These skills can only be taught, acquired or realized in an atmosphere of trust, respect and inclusivity. The experiential model does not generally provide this.

The primary training models used today in corrections are: lectures or didactic training, experiential activities and the interdependent-compliance models. They are used to change behavior, which is not the same as changing attitude. Behavior change results in compliance, where attitude change results in commitment. Compliance means an individual acts in a prescribed manner because of external rewards or punishments. Commitment, on the other hand, is the individual taking personal responsibility for themselves and their actions. This difference between compliance and commitment is monumental, especially if you are concerned with culture change.

Attitudes are developed through the experience of life; so if they are to change, it must also be through the experience of life. The Immersive Experiential Training[®] model provides the opportunity for this to occur. In the training, the facilitators help participants create a community or container based on trust, respect and caring. This container of safety is the transforming element in the model. When participants feel safe, they let down their barriers and their defenses. This means they let down their identities.

Everybody has an identity which is who we feel we are, and thus how we believe we should behave. It is through this identity that we see the world and interpret the events that impact us. Some examples of identities are: I'm a failure, tough guy, rescuer, mother, father, lawyer, police officer, university professor, etc. We interpret events in ways that support our perception of our identity. Information that is incongruent with our perceived identity will be denied, minimized or altered. When someone lays down their identity, they are left with their humanity and this allows them to connect with others in a safe, honest and caring way. This transforms the individuals and the group, and this transformation is not temporary; new neuro-pathways are created in the brain and as they are reinforced, they become permanent.

TACT[®] Staff Development Training

The following are some examples of the types of impact TACT[®] trainings have had with corrections staff:

A 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 Immersive Experiential 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 Immersive Experiential Training[®] elements in their courses.

The Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) had serious conflicts between medical and security and after Immersive Experiential Training[®], they came together on their own and began collaborating.

A warden told a Captain to transfer a CO out of the mental health unit because of all the altercations and uses of force the employee was experiencing. The Captain asked if the employee could take the TACT[®] training, which he did. At the end of the year the employee not only transformed his attitude, he became the Employee of the Year.

The same large inner city jail's intake unit was experiencing 5 or 6 documented uses of force every month. After the TACT[®] trainings, they experienced 4 or 5 uses of force in two years (1997-1999), a reduction of 96%.

What is interesting about these staff trainings is that nowhere in the training is there mention of conflicts with inmates or working with inmates. The focus of the trainings is solely working as a team with other staff. The transformation that occurs from the TACT[®] training is not only with fellow staff, but with inmates and at home with their families. Over six months after the trainings 71% of the staff stated they were using these skills with inmates, 84% with coworkers, 75% with supervisors and 87% with family and friends. In a period of 31 months, use of force in the Philadelphia Prison System reduced 24%.

A specific example of the impact on a CO with 18 years experience is:

“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. 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.”

An inmate gave an unsolicited comment about this same CO:

“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. I watched him for a month, thought he had problems at home. He said one day that he had to lock-up because he was going to a program. [After that] 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. Now I come out of my cell and talk with him, when I used to stay in my room. I rarely talked to him before and now I talk with him all the time. I look forward to him coming to work so we can talk; he treats me like a human being.”

Again, with the TACT[®] staff training, no mention is made of working with inmates, just working with coworkers, yet the impact effects relationships in all aspects of their lives.

The impact on supervisors can be seen in the following comment:

“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.”

An important attribute of the TACT[®] training model is that the participants' attitude about taking the training was not an indication of what they will gain from it. The Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) has 2100 employees, 75% of whom took the training. Of those that took the training, 75%

did not want to take the training and 25% were openly hostile. Yet, the final evaluation showed that 70% thought it was excellent and 27% thought it was good, 2% said it was fair and 1% poor. The PPS has since incorporated TACT[®] training in the second week of training new COs; they found it greatly impacted how much the new recruits learned, how well they worked together as a team and how well prepared they were when they got on the job. New Jersey has also incorporated it into new recruit training for the same reasons. Massachusetts is in the process of training their training academy staff in TACT[®].

AVP Training for Inmates

Both staff and inmates play a part in maintaining the prison culture. Thus, transforming staff attitudes is only part of the process. The other is changing the attitudes of inmates. The Immersive Experiential Training[®] model through AVP has been equally successful with inmates.

“Before AVP I only thought about violence, there was no second option. AVP saved my life, it gave me another option. The violence in my life got worse and worse. I spent most of my 11 years in prison in the hole. I am not a sensitive, caring, understanding individual, but this program has really had an impact on me. During my first basic training as a facilitator, there were a number of inmates there whom I had previously been very violent to. I knew if I was to be a role model, to live AVP, I had to apologize to them for what I had done. It was odd to apologize to someone I had defeated and who had pleaded for his life to me. Some friends got out of maximum for having beat up some correctional officers and came to me anxious to get some action. I explained to them that that type of activity was not me anymore. You could see the hurt in their eyes and it hurts me because I know I cannot do it and I cannot allow them to do it. It is a whole different world, it’s different for me. When I was a warrior, I fought with all the tools I could fight with. I learned to be the best that I could be. Now to be a warrior for nonviolence, I had to learn the tools of AVP.”

“I have been in every group in the institution and they were all generic. They gave the same information. There were very few solutions offered. When you are given the information without the solution, you are still lost. AVP gave me some concrete solutions.”

The effectiveness of AVP can be seen in two research studies: the AVP Recidivism Study (M. Miller 2005) shows that AVP reduces recidivism by 46% and the AVP Effectiveness Study (S. Sloane 2002) found that AVP reduced inmate behavioral write-ups by 60%.

Two major research works support the importance of changing attitudes. First is a meta-analysis of thousands of studies by Doris Layton MacKenzie published in What Works in corrections: Reducing the Criminal Activities of Offenders and Delinquents. Dr. MacKenzie states, “Almost all the effective programs focused on individual-level change (attitude change) . . . None of the effective programs focused on punishment, deterrence, or control . . . (Also) the ineffective programs frequently focused on developing opportunities in the community (employment, life skills) . . . This (attitude) change is required before the person will be able to take advantage of opportunities in the environment . . . (In terms of reentry) such (attitude) transformations are necessary before a person makes initial moves toward a different way of life . . . Reentry programs that focus on opportunities for work, reunite families and provide housing . . . will not be effective if there is not also a (preceding) focus on individual-level transformation.”

The second research study is the Pennsylvania Parole Outcomes study published in 2007. The study reported that the primary difference between successful parolees and violators was attitude. Violators had anti-social attitudes, values and beliefs, poor coping or problem solving skills, lacked empathy and did not take responsibility for their negative behavior. Both groups were able

to find housing and employment and they both had negative emotional experiences and faced significant life problems. The difference was attitude.

“All my life, negativity has been around me. I am negativity. It has created me. My thoughts were negative. When I dealt with other people, it was in a negative realm, even when I tried to do what I thought was right. AVP took out the negative and put in positive. It gave me new avenues to view, new alternatives, other ways to see things. Where as before, I saw everyone as a potential enemy. Like most of us here, we came from a war zone, America is a war zone. You have to look at life as a soldier everyday. Now I sit back and look at the world in a different way with a different perspective.”

Contrary to public opinion, most released inmates do not want to re-offend. They get caught in the cycle of crime and despair. The Pennsylvania Parole Outcomes study stated that most violators (75%) experienced strong negative emotions, which could be described as hopelessness or despair, shortly before violating. This sense of despair can be attributed to poor attitude, poor coping skills and poor interpersonal skills. Substance abuse problems are a way of self-medicating when despair sets in, which explains why 80% of inmates have substance abuse issues.

AVP training has been very successful in helping inmates transform their attitudes, and develop effective coping and interpersonal skills. When participants experience the container of safety allowing them to drop their defenses and lay down their identity, they are left with their humanity through which they connect with others in an honest, caring way; and this is transforming. They are no longer alone or isolated; they are connected to others, which is a core human need. For many, this is the first time they have experienced this connection and it is certainly the first time since coming to prison.

This feeling of safety and connection is especially important for people who have been traumatized, and almost all of the women in prison and a majority of men have been traumatized (repeatedly raped, molested, physically beaten or otherwise abused) as children, and to this is added the trauma of prison. Many exhibit symptoms of traumatic stress and some of post traumatic stress syndrome, i.e., withdrawing, isolating themselves, cutting themselves off from their emotions and in general, constricting.

Trauma therapy heals by reversing this constricting process. The first stage in any trauma therapeutic process is to create a safe space or container within which barriers can be let down. These barriers are not only to others, but also to their own emotions. AVP is not therapy, so the participants do not connect with the trauma directly, but they do connect with their emotions. Although the trauma is still there and needs therapy, the impact of the trauma in cutting off emotions is mitigated. By reconnecting with their emotions, they are able to greatly increase their self-awareness, which enhances their self-esteem. This is key to developing empathy and empathy is one of the important skills for success in life.

Empathy is being in touch with your own emotions so you can relate to the emotions of others. Without self-awareness, there can be no empathy. Inmates have said the following about their experience with AVP:

“There is good in everyone. We have not known how to see that good without being perceived as weak and vulnerable. AVP showed me how to reach down and see it, to tap that guy that has always wanted to come out but was afraid to come out. When growing up, if you couldn't fight, you were a cast-a-way. Being tough was the thing. When I became an adult, I

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should have outgrown it, but it became a learned behavior and I carried it into my marriage and I lost it all. When I see someone now, I see them with a different perspective. I'm looking for something good, whereas before I was looking at all the negative things in someone."

"I went into the workshop as a pessimist and I came out a changed person. I was alive, I was actually alive. I liked what I saw in myself. It was a real high and I've been doing it for two years and I love that feeling; and to see other people awakened in the workshops, to see their lives change."

"Thank you for showing us how to divert our violent attitudes into a positive and peaceful outcome. Peace of mind is so hard to find these days. By some miracle, I found it here in the AVP program. I looked inside of me and found a loving and caring me."

Immersive Experiential Training[®] not only increases self-awareness, empathy and connectedness, it also increases participants' sense of responsibility for themselves, their behavior and for how their behavior impacts others; not only those they know, but the wider community as well.

"If there is such a thing as a miraculous change in an individual, I can truthfully say that it was during my involvement with AVP that I began to grow from a person filled with hate, anger and despair into a person who believes he too is responsible for the protection, preservation and enrichment of humanity."

Immersive Experiential Training[®] model and Culture Change

Traditional methods of changing prison culture tend to be met with resistance and even open hostility; resulting in total failure or at best, limited or short-lived success. Even experiential programs, which are effective in teaching skills, do not affect attitude change, and are met with resistance. Immersive Experiential Training[®] has been successful because it does not dictate what changes need to take place. It empowers the staff and inmates to make the changes they realize need to be made. Delaware DOC Commissioner Stan Taylor commented:

"I would like to take this opportunity to express my support for and admiration of the Alternatives to Violence Program. As a warden of a state prison in Delaware, I saw AVP facilitate a dramatic reduction in the number of assaults between inmates in what had been a difficult maximum security unit. As the program continued to run and 'graduate' more and more inmates, the overall climate improved to a point where the inmates were actually seeking out ways to positively affect their living environment. As Chief of Prisons for Delaware, I've seen similar results in each of the prisons that have implemented Alternatives to Violence Programs. There have never been any security breaches and the staff and inmate population alike respect the AVP volunteers. I'd highly recommend the Alternatives to Violence Program to any correctional manager."

Warden Money at MCI Ohio stated,

"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."

Immersive Experiential Trainings[®] give staff and inmates the intrapersonal skills of attitude, self-awareness, empathy, personal responsibility and emotional management as well as the interpersonal communication skills to transform traditional, dysfunctional prison cultures into ones that are receptive, supportive and enabling of rehabilitation. This transformation is

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necessary if we are to prepare inmates for successful reentry and reintegration into the community. This is not a luxury or something that would be nice to try; it is essential and it is proven. Evidence based programs like Immersive Experiential Trainings[®] need to be part of the overall reentry strategy leading to the transformation of our prison systems into something we can be proud of and into a system that works.