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Immersive Experiential Staff Development Training The Need and Proven Benefit in Corrections

The security and safety of any correctional facility is directly and inextricably linked to the health and maturity of its internal working culture. The culture of a facility describes how staff interact with each other, with inmates, with outside people, etc. The more mature the internal culture, the higher the morale, productivity, creativity, teamwork [trust and cooperation], communication and institutional control. An organization can be seen as a macrocosm of an individual, and just as with individuals, organizations grow and mature. An organization in which employees feel disconnected from each other is immature, and often experiences poor/ineffective communication, authoritarian supervision, staff conflict/competition, lack of cooperation between shifts and departments, racism, sexism, high levels of use of force, low morale and high turnover [often attributed to the poor quality of recruits]. A lot of energy is expended or wasted on power and control over others, competition and negative energy, leaving little energy for creative, productive problem solving and innovation.

Many correctional facilities are realizing the impact their working culture/environment has on security, costs, productivity, law suites, grievances, employee satisfaction and turnover. The old paramilitary culture does not work as effectively today because of the political, social and economic changes we have experienced over the past few decades. Even though many correctional facilities are looking to improve their working culture, it is not easy. The Immersive Experiential Staff Development Training Model is designed to help prisons make those changes. It has transformed departments from dysfunctional, conflict-ridden agencies into effective, collaborative and innovative organizations. It does so by transforming attitudes and relationships and providing appropriate skills with which the staff make the desired changes themselves, without coercion.

The Immersive Experiential Training Model has been effective with all types of groups in the US and overseas. It works because it addresses our basic psychological needs, which are the same for everybody, whether a CO, Lieutenant, Social Worker or Warden. The more we feel connected to others and the group, the more our basic psychological needs are met. After our physical survival, the strongest need we have is for connection, or belonging. You might say this is the core of our emotional survival. This is especially true in corrections where connection with other staff is so essential for safety. Once we feel connected, we can then address our higher level needs of meaning, control and fun. This is true of all humans, in all cultures.

Our needs are the following:

- Need to survive: food, safety, shelter
- Need for connection: fulfilled by loving, sharing, cooperating with others, and a sense of belonging
- Need for meaning in life: fulfilled by achieving, accomplishing and being recognized and respected
- Need for control and power over one's life: fulfilled by having and making choices
- Need for fun: fulfilled by laughing and playing

If participants in a training feel trust and respect, they will experience connection, i.e., feel a sense of community. They will then open up to new ideas, including new interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Without this experience of community, participants will hold on to their fears, resentments and need for protection, thus, greatly limiting their trust, respect and learning at all levels.

The antithesis of a cooperative community is a competitive community. If there is internal competition within a training or organization, it tends to lead to dysfunction and a lack of cooperation, collaboration and creativity. Competition, by definition, means disconnection. In our culture, competition worked more effectively while we experienced connection in the rest of our lives. Today, with the breakdown of the family unit, neighborhoods, community schools and other social institutions, the support we used to experience is no longer there. As a result, we feel more disconnected, and we may escape into drugs, TV, the computer, alcohol, sex and crime [whether Enron or street crime].

When an organization, agency or team experiences detrimental conflict and tension, it is because trust and community have broken down, resulting in increased fear and internal competition. In order to reverse or repair this dysfunction, a sense of community needs to be re-established. This sense of community cannot be achieved by keynote speakers, didactic trainings or by administration "willing" it to happen. It must be experienced by the employees themselves. This is precisely what the Immersive Experiential training model is designed to provide. Likewise, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are learned or developed through our experiences in life, and generally not out of books or from lectures. To learn new, and hopefully healthier attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, we need to learn them experientially as well. This experiential aspect of training is an important part of community building.

In order for community to be established in a training, several things need to occur:

- Participants need to feel validated and respected as people and as professionals.
- Participants need to learn from and about each other, and as common ground between them develops, so will empathy [the capacity to understand and respond to the unique experiences of another], which is a necessary attribute of community.
- Participants must experience common ground at a level deeper than superficial similarities, likes and dislikes.
- Participants must feel the training experience is meaningful to them both personally and professionally.
- Participants need to feel a sense of control within the training.
- Participants need to have fun, which keeps the energy up and keeps them engaged as well as enhances learning and memory.

If community is effectively established, participants naturally lower their defenses/barriers, increase their empathy for others, enhance their own and others' sense of value and self-worth, and improve their attitudes and behaviors. Most of the time this occurs effortlessly and naturally with almost no awareness it is occurring. The participants are often only aware that they are having fun, and feeling better about themselves and the others in the training with them. All types of learners [auditory, visual and kinesthetic] respond well to this approach. The design is very flexible and adaptable. It is totally different from traditional lecture or even experiential trainings and it is easy to learn. Training academy staff, as well as regular line staff can learn this staff development training model with a little coaching.

One large county jail system [Philadelphia Prison System] provided these types of trainings to over 70% of its staff and has now incorporated the Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation [TACT] training into their Pre-Service Training of all new recruits. They found that the recruits functioned better as a unit and learned more individually with the addition of this component. Independent research at PPS found that in over 160 in-service trainings, 97% rated their training as either excellent or good. This is especially significant when you consider that 75% of the participants didn't want to take the training because it was "Conflict Resolution" and they had been mandated to attend. A follow-up study was done and found that over 80% of the participants were continuing to use the skills learned more than six months later. The participants enjoyed, appreciated and valued the trainings, and the internal culture of this multi-site jail system improved. Departments were proactively cooperating more, individuals were treating each other with more respect, supervisors were using more effective skills and general negativity among staff was reduced. The supervisor of the intake unit reported that prior to the training, there had been three or four documented "uses of force" per month, and four years after the training, they had had only three or four in the previous two years. Similar positive results were experienced in North Carolina [four prisons experiencing significant morale problems], with 90% of participants rating the training as excellent and 27% as very good.

Organizations and agencies that are experiencing problems, as well as those that are not, can benefit from Immersive Experiential training programs. This design will not only help participants build on skills they already possess, but it will also help them tap into their own innate health and the innate health of the organization itself. The development of the organization will mature more toward connection and further away from disconnection. It is amazing what people can and will accomplish when given the opportunity. Immersive Experiential trainings are not a panacea in and of themselves. They provide a framework from which the organization can continue efforts to grow and mature in ways not felt realistic or possible previously. In fact, when organizations are planning on implementing quality improvement programs, Immersive Experiential trainings can provide an environment within which the new programs will be more readily accepted and implemented. When you transform the internal culture of an individual or organization, anything is possible.