

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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Professionalism and Safety

by Gene Atherton

Of all the words commonly used in corrections, “professionalism” or being “professional” is probably the most worn-out catch word. It is used constantly in policy statements and speeches. It is commonly used to refer to someone who follows the rules and does the job well.

In corrections, when everyone is being “professional,” the work is being done effectively. Professionalism means safety and control are being achieved along with a variety of other positive outcomes for the operating correctional institutions. People work better together and feel better about the job.

Fortunately, only a small percentage (less than 5 percent) of the correctional workforce exhibit disruptive and unprofessional behavior. When it does happen, however, we often forget that even just one person’s behavior can have a negative effect within the organization, contributing to a decline in safety and successful operations.

UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

The following examples may be familiar to experienced correctional staff.

Example 1: An inmate or detainee has caused a series of incidents that are particularly offensive and threatening to officers involved in managing that person. In response, an officer who is generally respected on the shift by other staff begins to become verbally offensive and threatening towards the inmate. Some staff are comfortable with this behavior, while others believe that the officer is out of line in retaliating against the offensive/dangerous inmate. They are also concerned that the aggressive officer has created additional problems. As these events reoccur, a rift develops in the organization, depending on which side of the issue the staff support.

Example 2: The staff in Unit A has a reputation in the institution as having and sharing all the juicy “lowdown” on staff and inmates throughout the institution. Much of the information being shared is unverified, offensive, and of a personal nature. It has become a tradition, and anyone who wants to tap into the rumor mill knows they can talk with those staff to get their information. Many

staff have complained and are angered by this practice.

Example 3: Staff member X is a leader on a shift in living Unit G. He is known to have a very aggressive point of view about his colleagues. He likes some and dislikes others. When he makes his rounds, he clearly chooses his favorite staff to work with and is unkind, if not offensive, to the rest. He feels such decisions are his prerogative, and that his relationship with staff is part of his right to personal expression. Those that are not favored by him find it unpleasant to report to work. He uses profanity frequently, including language that refers to race and gender. He views it as something everyone should get used to in a correctional environment.

Example 4: Staff person Y, a member of an intake unit in a large urban jail, has been reported as falling asleep or nodding off while on duty assignment. She has been addressed for this behavior by her immediate supervisor without success. She does not admit to the sleeping at work or that there is any problem with her behavior. She sees any expression of concern over her behavior as just another example of unlawful gender discrimination.

IN MEMORIAM

CO Jose Rivera

June 20, 2008

USP Atwater, CA

Murdered by two inmates

CO Donna Fitzgerald

June 25, 2008

Tomoka Correctional
Institution, FL

Murdered by inmate

DWCO MISSION

To increase the occupational, personal and family well-being of staff of all disciplines within the corrections profession.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

MALE, FEMALE OR CO?	2
PROFESSIONALISM	3
MALE, FEMALE OR CO?	3
PULLING TOGETHER	4
MANY THANKS	4

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(Continued on page 3)

Male, Female or Correctional Officer?

by Sgt. Barry Evert

Since the introduction of female Correctional Officers in the 60's and 70's, many have tried to solve the inevitable chauvinism and discrimination against them with a toolbox full of slogans and rules. None of these can be truly effective if the discrimination still exists in the heart of the male Officers.

Before I go any farther, allow me to tell on myself. I have been as guilty of gender discrimination as the next Officer. When I was a young Officer working a maximum-security facility, I was assigned my first female partner. She was a young Officer also, and new to the department. She was 5'3" and maybe 130 pounds soaking wet. I groaned to myself when I saw her, knowing our unit was volatile, and physical confrontations were a daily occurrence. The mistake I made was that I saw her as a female Officer, not a Correctional Officer. Less than two hours into the shift I received a call from my Sergeant instructing me to search a particularly hostile inmate for contraband. I had a pretty good idea that it was going to lead to a physical confrontation, and picked up the phone to arrange for extra staff. As I was doing this, the inmate in question came to our office. I readied myself for battle, and told the inmate to face the wall. The inmate immediately became loud and boisterous. Sure of his intentions now, I took the sunglasses off my head and handed them to my partner, telling her to hold onto them. The next couple of minutes are a blur now, but I do remember my partner being the one to cuff the inmate up. She did not say much to me at the time, but I had a new respect for her ability and willingness to be there when needed. Years later she brought the incident up to me when we were discussing training new staff. She told me she had never been so mad at anyone in her career as she was with me that day. I had treated her as a lesser Officer, solely based on her gender and appearance. She went on to tell me that I was not the only one to do this to her, but I was the first. My eyes were opened.

There are three ways to treat an Officer, and only one of them is correct. You can treat an Officer as a Male Officer, a Female Officer or as a Correctional Officer. If you treat a partner or a subordinate differently based solely on their gender you are wrong. There are plenty of Officers who happen to be female that I would rather have on my side during a battle than their male counterparts. If you treat all staff like Correctional Officers, using

their strengths and understanding their weaknesses, you are doing things the right way. This does allow for what some may say is discrimination.

If a particular Officer is not very good at tactics or lacks the physical ability to perform certain tasks, and you decide not to use them as part of a special team, you must make sure that you are basing this on the knowledge of that particular person as an Officer, not based on their gender. There will be times when a particular Officer may show less than useful skills in an area that makes it stereotypical, but this is unavoidable. Just don't be afraid to explain to the Officer that you have noticed that this particular area is not their strength, so they were not selected for the assignment, team, etc. There is no tactical sense, nor is it a good safety practice, to pick your teams with the sole intent of being "politically correct." I can't think of very many Officers who want to win an assignment or place on a team based on their gender. This is not fair to the Officer or others on the team. Every Officer has strengths and weaknesses, and by understanding what those are, the Officer can work to improve or compensate for their weaknesses.

There is one exception to all of this, and this is what earns me a lot of grief when I speak on it. The exception to my "Correctional Officer" rule is the worst case scenario of a hostage situation. When the time comes that hostages are taken inside of a male prison, and it turns into a long-term standoff, my number one priority besides ending the conflict, will be to get the female hostages out as soon as possible. Some of you may be spitting fire now, but understand a couple of facts first. In the last 8 years, there have been numerous hostage standoffs. I will not name anyone specifically to protect the Officers who were victimized. During these standoffs, almost every time there was a female staff member being held hostage, she was brutalized, raped, and usually killed to conceal the crime. It is a matter of fact that male inmates, especially sentenced for long periods of time, will often victimize female hostages. During these situations they have complete control of the hostages, and feel they have nothing to lose. This is a deadly mix of adrenaline and control that will often result in the brutal treatment of female hostages. Sorry guys, but if hostages are released, my priority is to take away the temptation as soon as possible. I have come to peace, as have

(Continued on page 3)

Professionalism and Safety

(Continued from page 1)

As events surrounding these problematic staff lead to formal action, the behavior is characterized as failing to be “professional” or as “unprofessional conduct.”

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

In my experience, the most important impact of unprofessional conduct upon the operation of correctional institutions is that it directs staff attention away from getting the job done. Problematic or unprofessional staff make other staff’s job more difficult to perform.

Unfortunately, as a profession we tend to endure or put up with such people as much as we take effective action. This may result in work not getting done consistently and thoroughly, which may become the basis of crises in the form of injury, escape, or destruction of resources. Almost every major correctional crisis is preceded by systematic failure to perform the job.

STRATEGIES TO REMAIN PROFESSIONAL

The following strategies can help in achieving professionalism when managing correctional institutions.

Self-correcting culture: In the best case scenario, the institutional culture, in the form of communication with peers and immediate supervisors, is self-correcting. In such a culture staff influences those exhibiting problem behavior to improve and change their actions positively. Sometimes a hand on the shoulder saying, “Hey, we don’t do that here!” is all it takes to correct the problem.

Formal communication: Too often, however, early warnings are ignored. The problem employee may overlook the constructive advice. In those cases carefully composed communication, spoken or written, may get that person’s attention. I have witnessed behavior that was extremely offensive, but hard to define. Once the right words were chosen, the person seemed to get the message and make positive adjustments.

Documentation: In this day of performance standards, outcome measures, and litigation review, I have often heard it said, “If it is not documented, it didn’t happen.” Whether we praise highly professional performance, address problematic conduct, or defend ourselves in court, the age of technology in the form of software, reporting mechanisms, and cameras can be our best resource. Those mechanisms can assure us that the job is being done in relation to inmate management, while we address staff conduct that may have a negative impact on operations.

Problem-solving mechanisms: These must be in place for staff having difficulty on the job, including griev-

ance mechanisms and policies that give priority to issue resolution. Supervisors must be trained to be accessible and effective in managing staff relationships, so that early problems are detected and resolved informally.

Interpersonal skills: Relationships among staff at work must be recognized to be a critical component of job performance and professionalism. If someone does not relate well to others, this must be seen as failure to fulfill the mission of the correctional institution.

How the correctional institution reacts to problematic behavior gives an unmistakable message to all involved. Those processes shape the culture of the institution, which in turn determines the level of professionalism and how well the job is being performed. Of course, it all comes back full circle to safety and control each day on every shift.

When future corrections representatives use the word “professional” in reference to the correctional world, I hope everyone will view it in the context of safety.

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Male, Female or CO?

(Continued from page 2)

many others, that I would rather stay and take my chances, if it will result in the release of a female hostage. There are worse things than dying.

Having shown my somewhat chauvinistic side now, allow me to drive my core point home here. There are neither male Officers, nor female Officers. There are Correctional Officers, period. Each Correctional Officer has their own abilities, which we should amplify and recognize. Each Correctional Officer also has areas that need improvement, and we should help them with those. We can never assume that a person’s abilities or areas that require improvement are based solely on their gender. There is a need for this equality, but also a need for tactical sense as I have described above.

I know that I work with some of the best Correctional Officers in the world. I trust them with my life everyday, and I couldn’t care less if they are male or female. All I know is that they are my partners, and we would all lay down our lives for each other.

You can post your comments in response to this article on <http://www.womenincorrections.blogspot.com/>.

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



*a non-profit organization
for the well-being of correctional
staff and their families*

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Pulling Together

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June and July were hard months. Staff have been mourning the loss of coworkers CO Donna Fitzgerald and CO Jose Padilla to offenders in Florida and California. Grief and somberness prevail. Also anger. Prior months were also distressing due to various facility disturbances. The blows have been adding up.

"This could have been me!" The awareness is inescapable. Line staff once again take stock. "Do I really want to be in this job? Is the retirement worth it?"

Significant others at home may be hanging onto denial—"Such things don't happen at his/her institution. They've got it all under control." Or they become adamant that they want their loved one to find a safer place to work. NOW is the time to pull together.

Be brutally honest with yourself, especially if you intend to make corrections your career. You may be getting pummeled by fear like never before. You wonder how you will handle the next confrontation with violent offenders. Will you call them on their behavior? Will you stand your ground? Or will you seek relief from your anxiety by looking the other way, letting things slide, or even making deals with offenders for protection?

After facing once again the dangers of your profession, you need new resolve to tap deep within your reservoirs

of courage. Everyone has limits. You may need to let your supervisor know that you've taken as much as you can for now and you need to move on to other areas of the institution. Choose to be there for your coworkers as well, listening, validating, encouraging them. Do the same with loved ones at home. Shower them with compassion for their concerns while explaining why you choose to keep working where you do. And be real with them. Seek their comfort when you feel your anxieties rising.

Supervisors, be particularly on the lookout for ways to support agitated and worried staff. Have talks with them about dealing with the forbidden "F" word—Fear. DO NOT SHAME THEM for it. The chances are that, in their shoes, you'd be experiencing the same fear and anger mix. Let them know they're normal people having normal responses to environments of unpredictable danger and potential mayhem. Allow them to vent their frustrations. Ask them what they need from you so they feel sure you have their backs. Bring up the issue of dealing with frightened loved ones at home and ways to handle it. Treat them with respect and kindness.

Other than the paycheck, your humane and caring treatment of them may be their only reason to keep coming back.