

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

**A PUBLICATION OF DESERT WATERS CORRECTIONAL OUTREACH
A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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Presence

By Alice Domann

First of all, there is no corrections officer big enough to walk into a pod full of inmates and not be outnumbered. The size of an officer is not the determining factor as to whether or not an individual will succeed as a corrections professional. Along the same lines, gender is no more of a determining factor than size is. Many people in fact think that the presence of women staff helps keep the atmosphere of the facility calmer and more at an even keel.

Now, the word “presence” is the key. I define presence as the way you carry yourself—confident, head up, making eye contact, not walking like a victim, professional and taking pride in your appearance. Presence also comes from knowing your job and the rules you are expected to follow and enforce.

Presence for the inmate means they know you will, without exception, enforce your Department’s rules and enforce them fairly and in the same way with all inmates. In other words, if you tell one inmate to tuck his shirt in or wear his ID properly, you tell all inmates to do so when needed, without exception. You do not vary.

You are the one who tows the line. They just follow you.

Inmates will also not respect you if you do not respect yourself. You show self-respect again by your presence, i.e., how you carry yourself and how you enforce the rules. It is a rule that they are not allowed to abuse you or any other staff member. If you allow them to abuse you, they will not respect you. You have to show you command respect by doing just that...commanding it. Don’t let an inmate “front you off” in the presence of other inmates. They lose respect when they are fronted off, and, to

their way of thinking, so will you. If an inmate makes an inappropriate comment to you—says you look sexy, calls you a bitch, whatever—take him aside and advise him that you expect to be treated with respect and, if he can’t comply with your expectation, you will take disciplinary action.

Sometimes you may not act quickly enough or in the way you would have liked. That’s OK. They will make that same mistake again. In corrections you always have time to plan for a future you know is coming. Always write a narrative of the incident and advise the inmate you will be informing your supervisor so that they know that a third party will be involved. Let them know you don’t keep secrets.

We have a high concentration of manipulators, predators and others with severe personality disorders in a prison population. I am not smart enough to tell by looking at one of these guys that he’s harmless, and neither are you. So don’t let an inmate try to be your friend. If they want to be your friend you can safely assume that it is for their good, not yours.

DWCO Conference
Corrections Staff Wellness
May 7 & 8, 2009
Colorado Springs, CO
More details soon!

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

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

THRIVING IN CORRECTIONS	2
PRESENCE	3
WE NEED TO WORK	3
THRIVING IN CORRECTIONS	4
STAYING WELL BOOKLET	4
MANY THANKS	4

THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™
866-YOU-VENT
youvent@desertwaters.com

(Continued on page 3)

Thriving in Corrections

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Whenever I come across well-functioning correctional staff, I ask them about the “secret of their success.” Here is some of what I’ve heard over the years. It is divided in three categories which correspond to the three areas DWCO targets in its mission—the occupational, personal and family well-being of corrections staff.

Occupational

- Create an atmosphere of order and authority emanating from your presence.
- Exercise fairness and self-control when confronting.
- Aim to leave a trail of positives behind you daily. Spread words of affirmation and encouragement. Point out people’s progress, no matter how small.
- Treat EVERYBODY with respect.
- Remember that offenders are human too, regardless of how some of them behave. Treat them as human beings. Appeal to their craving for dignity.
- At the end of your workday, think of three good things that happened. Even if the day was a disaster, good things also took place. For one, you are still alive.
- At the end of your shift, think of one thing you could have done better. Resolve to put that improvement to practice at the next opportunity. Then leave the issue behind as you transition to home life.
- Reject the “machismo” mentality that kindness is weakness. Kindness is an expression of inner strength. Be there for others. Become known for being considerate with coworkers and fair with offenders. Remember: You reap what you sow. Aim to sow good seed.
- Avoid backstabbing and spreading negative rumors. If you absolutely have to bring up a negative issue about coworkers, also mention positive things about them.
- Never use profanity or other humiliating behaviors with offenders or coworkers.
- Never retaliate against offenders or coworkers. Instead, go through appropriate channels or resolve issues within yourself with the help of your support system.
- Value your integrity. When it’s all said and done, your name, your reputation and your track record are all you have.
- Remind yourself that you are making a difference, impacting hundreds, even thousands of people, during the course of your career. Use your influence for good!

Personal

- Zero in on possibilities. Train yourself to look for the

- upside, the positive aspects in everything. Resolve to turn any manure that life hands to you into fertilizer.
- Acknowledge reality—do not minimize, rationalize or pretend something is not so. Tell yourself the truth.
- Remember that even big, tough correctional workers get negatively affected by what they experience on the job. When that happens, get yourself competent help.
- When away from work, give yourself permission to process the job’s impact on you. Acknowledge what’s going on within you by observing your thoughts and emotions, and talking or writing about them. Vent, take responsibility for your behavior, encourage yourself, and/or come up with a plan to address issues. If you keep “stuffing” negative emotional reactions, no matter how big your “trash compactor” is, you will eventually run out of space and spill over.
- Make sure you have a healthy downtime at the end of your shift to help you re-enter the “free world.” Military personnel returning home are given time to transition. For some corrections workers the workday is like doing 8 hours in Iraq and then returning home and trying to fit in and act “normal.” Staff needs transition time for their bodies to calm down and for them to “digest” some of what they’ve been exposed to during their shift. This helps them let go of the “crud,” at least till the next shift. One couple, who both work in corrections, spends the first 30 minutes after work venting and discussing what transpired during their work day. After that time period, they put work aside and focus on their evening together.
- Have fun and play regularly, especially outdoors.
- Laugh often, but not at others’ expense.
- Beware of sweeping negative generalizations and prejudices about people. Aim to look at each person with a fresh set of eyes. You may be pleasantly surprised. There ARE good people out there. And even difficult people have good traits.
- Reject the “machismo” mentality that needing help is a sign of weakness. We all need help and we all depend on one another. Usually those who maintain that they need nobody are hooked on a chemical or some other addiction—a potentially deadly dependency.
- You are more than your job. As you go through life invest in areas outside of work—family, hobbies, leisure activities, volunteering, spiritual pursuits.

(Continued on page 4)

Presence

(Continued from page 1)

Maintain a professional distance. If you fail to do that, inmates will lose respect for your authority. We are not here to play their game. They are here to learn ours. Professional distance does not mean that you cannot be pleasant, say "Hello," talk about the weather or the game, or look at pictures of an inmate's family. Professional distance means that you do all these things without divulging any of your own personal information. When you talk about the game, don't say what your brother or son thought about it. When you look at pictures of his family, don't talk about your own.

The only thing an inmate needs to know about you is that you are here to do your job.

Remember, you tow the line, so that they will tow the line. We do this work to change their behav-

ioral patterns. We make them follow rules so that they learn to follow rules. We make them respect us, so that they learn to respect others. We draw the line, because they can't or won't. We do not allow them to abuse us in any way, because they are here to learn not to make victims.

You may be surprised to hear that your job is that important. It is. You are here to administer the policies of your Department of Corrections and to fulfill its Mission Statement. That's it.

If the requirements of this job conform to your personal values and life philosophy, you may have picked the right career. If not, you need to keep looking.

Alice Domann started out in corrections as an officer in 1989. She is now a counselor with the Kansas Department of Corrections at Ellsworth Correctional Facility, Ellsworth, KS.

The Old Screw

We Need to Work Together

You know it is a crying shame when correctional staff says that the worst thing about their work is dealing with their fellow workers, and that the next worse thing is the administration. And finally, sometimes, and very few times, it's the inmates. What's wrong with this picture??

People, we all should and need to work together. If we don't look out for each other, who is going to?

Our careers have enough problems going with the long hours and shift work. Why do people have to complicate it by putting the make on someone? Why is there so much back-biting and favoritism that goes on? Yes, we have a very boring job at times, and a very scary one at others. Perhaps that contributes to all this.

In the old days staff would just shut you out when you caused trouble for fellow staff or acted like a fool. I have seen staff work a whole shift and no other staff speak to them except in the line of duty and then as little as possible. Very few last long

when this happens.

Don't think some inmates don't pick up on staff problems and use them for their advantage. They love it when they see staff downing a coworker. You can be sure that they will be all so sorry and care for the underdog. Yeah, it works. I've seen it time and time again. Where do you think some of the dirty staff come from? No, they don't wake up one day and say, "Today I'll become a dirty staff." Rather, they start to believe that no one among their fellow workers likes them, no one cares what happens to them, and, on the contrary, they notice how caring the inmates are.

If you're not sick by now, you should be. You and I know that these things are true. So let's treat coworkers in ways that help prevent such disasters. Let's learn to work together.

Take care,

The Old Screw

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

Caterina Spinaris Tudor, Ph.D.
Executive Director

P.O. Box 355
Florence, CO 81226
(719) 784-4727

DESERTWATERS@DESERTWATERS.COM

WWW.DESERTWATERS.COM

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Thriving in Corrections

(Continued from page 2)

- Reject the temptation to hate others.
- Spend time thinking about whatever is noble, admirable, beautiful, inspiring, encouraging. This practice will give you joy and peace. It will also refuel your soul, giving you the energy to keep facing life at work and at home, and leaving you with enough hope and faith to pass on to others also.
- Pursue love, truth and goodness. Remind yourself that they are more powerful than meanness, deception and evil, and they WILL prevail in the end.
- Work toward building and maintaining healthy support networks that include family, friends and perhaps even helping professionals. Do so while the going is good, so that your support systems will be available to you when you need them.

Family

- Remember, your family members are your most important support system. Continue to invest in these relationships and work to maintain them. Again, bear in mind the law of sowing and reaping. Sow commitment, faithfulness and good will if that is what you want to reap later on.
- Before you make choices, think ahead about how they may impact your family and your relationship with them.
- Learn to work through problems together with loved ones, instead of giving up or aggressing against them.
- Share your thoughts and feelings with your significant others. This helps you maintain a strong connection with them. When you confide in them about work experiences, skip gruesome details. However, share enough about your work life to avoid becoming estranged from them over time.

Staying Well: Strategies for Corrections Staff

This booklet, written by Dr. Spinaris Tudor and published by Billy Graham's Institute for Prison Ministries, will be available from DWCO in January at \$5.00 each plus \$1.00 S&H. To order, send checks to DWCO, P.O. Box 355, Florence, CO 81226-0355. For inquiries about bulk prices, please email desertwaters@desertwaters.com. To pay by credit card, please call 719-784-4727.