

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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The Dire Need for Empathy

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When I ask corrections staff where most of their stress stems from, the reply usually is, "Other staff." Correctional workers repeatedly identify interactions with administrators, supervisors, and co-workers as much more stressful than other working conditions, including dealing with offenders. The underlying common denominator of this stressor seems to be staff callousness. This "hardness" is a symptom of Corrections Fatigue.

Corrections Fatigue is the term I coined to describe negative changes in the personality of corrections workers as they attempt to adapt to the demands of their workplace. Among other damage, Corrections Fatigue results in staff becoming hardened and indifferent. It usually starts with the dehumanization of offenders. "Didn't bother me! He was just an inmate," is what I often hear when I ask staff how an offender death affected them. Eventually, like a contagious disease, insensitivity spreads toward most others in the workplace and beyond.

I understand why some correctional employees "turn off their compassion switch" toward offenders. It is hard work to continually walk the tightrope between limit-setting and caring, between being a cop and a rehabilitator. Staff are also concerned that caring will render them vulnerable to manipulation. It seems easier to write offenders off and stop regarding them as human beings. Also, repeated exposure to offender violence results in staff becoming emotionally numb, which is one of the symptoms of psychological trauma.

Shutting down our empathic response toward others, however, is costly. It impairs our ability to have good relationships, to gather important data about people, and to make

effective decisions.

What is empathy? Empathy is the capacity to understand others in ways that lead to a caring response toward them. Empathy involves the proverbial walking a mile in someone else's moccasins, if only in our minds.

Just understanding what makes someone tick does not constitute empathy. Indifferent individuals may be aware that people are hurting, but do nothing to comfort them. Manipulative people may "read" others accurately, yet proceed to exploit them. Empathy involves going a step beyond understanding to actively caring.

Empathy emerges through identification with others. Imagining what people may experience helps us climb out of our perspective and see the world through their eyes. For example, a male supervisor becomes more empathetic toward his female staff if he spends time thinking about the ways they are treated by some male offenders and staff, and how that may affect them.

Focusing on shared experiences also helps bridge the gap between *us* and *them*. "Yes," you may think to yourself, "I remember what it was like for me when I was a Correctional Officer working in seg."

Corrections personnel can build empathy by listening to other staff about what they tackle on their shift or about how work affects their home life.

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DWCO MISSION

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

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DWCO's Women in Corrections Project is Here!

We are pleased to announce that a multitude of material has been posted on our website for the *Women in Corrections Project* at http://www.desertwaters.com/wic_project.htm. The material is currently organized under the following categories: *Women in Corrections, Gender Differences, Con Games, Boundaries with Offenders, Offender Sexual Behavior, Boundaries with Staff, Women's Strengths, Self-confidence, Self-care, Family Issues, Divorce, Childcare, Support & Solutions.*

Thank you to all who contributed valuable input to start this "living manual." We would be nowhere near this stage without you. Also thank you, Colleen Abdoulah, for contributing much needed funding to the WIC Project through the Abdoulah Family Fund.

We invite our readers to send additional input by emailing caterina@desertwaters.com, with the subject line "WIC." Approved submissions will be posted in the appropriate category.

If you wish to use any of the material for staff training, please email us at desertwaters@desertwaters.com for conditions of use and written permission.

DWCO's First Quarter 2009

- Caterina Spinaris testified for the King County Corrections Guild on the effects of mandatory overtime at an arbitration hearing in Seattle, WA, on March 18, 2009.
- She also offered the training *Wellness at Work & at Home* for the Annual Refresher Training at FCC Florence. 900 staff attended. Thank you, Anne Gard, for conducting the last of the 11 trainings.
- Ventline Contacts: 49. Counseling Sessions: 50. Website Hits: 85,026.

THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

866-YOU-VENT

youvent@desertwaters.com

Top 10 Ways You Know You're a Corrections Officer

CO I Clayton Lauffer, WCF, KDOC, KS

10. When you buy a new house and move, you consider it a bunk move.
9. When you punish your kids, you read from the KDOC rule book and call it "Restriction of Privileges."
8. When a trip to the grocery store is referred to as "canteen day."
7. When a family member comes over and you call it "visitation."
6. When on the phone, you find yourself using ten codes.
5. When you wait till the top of the hour to go anywhere, because that is "movement time."
4. You pat search your kids before they leave and after they get home from anywhere.
3. You password-lock your home computer, and the password is "Security."
2. You try to hand your spouse a key tag to borrow their car.

AND THE NUMBER ONE WAY YOU KNOW YOU'RE A CORRECTIONS OFFICER:

1. You try to call a condition when someone hacks you off.

For all of you uninitiated :), a "condition" is a "Condition 30" radio code, and it is called when an Officer needs help. It is called when there is an incident in the housing units, such as a fight or an irate inmate, and the Officer needs backup.

The Dire Need for Empathy

(Continued from page 1)

Empathy at work can increase through observation of coworkers. If we also did others' job for a while, tasting their work conditions firsthand, we would acquire an even deeper appreciation for their work life.

How do we show empathy? Empathy often results in acts of compassion, big and small. It involves giving of our time, energy and even money. Just listening and nodding (instead of opposing and criticizing) can be sufficient in some situations. Facial expressions and tone of voice that match the other person's emotional state are a strong way to communicate empathy. The biblical admonishment, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep," (Romans 12:15) is an excellent recipe for showing empathy.

Empathy may simply be about expressing support to a coworker or offering comfort in the form of encouraging words. When you see colleagues appear to be troubled, stop and earnestly ask them how they are doing. Arrange to meet with them for coffee after work or offer to help them with whatever you can.

Validation is another tool for showing empathy. Validation does not mean agreement. It only conveys understanding and respect for another's point of view. "This must have been intense!" "I can imagine why that bothered you even though it did not bother me." "I see where you're coming from, and I'd also like to share with you my perspective on it."

What are the benefits of empathy?

1. Empathy makes it possible for us to "read" people accurately and to understand the complexity of situations we are addressing. It broadens our perspective and improves our problem-solving. "How are COs affected when they have to do doubles over and over?" "What are the pressures on administrators who have to run institutions on much reduced budgets?" "What might correctional educators experience while they teach offender classes with no security staff around?" "What is it like for correctional nurses or mental health workers to deal with irate offenders?"

2. Empathy allows us to respond to people in appropriate and relevant ways. Instead of drawing conclusions mostly from our own experience, which may be irrelevant, we consider others' perspective and come up with suggestions and ideas that "hit home" with them.

3. Empathy helps us make ethical choices by giving us a preview of consequences of contemplated actions. This is how this works. If we entertain the thought of treating

a correctional employee a certain way, empathy will lead us to run the scenario through our mind, putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and answering the question, "How would it feel if I was on the receiving end of this behavior?" If the answer is "Not good," empathy can restrain us and stop our hurtful behavior.¹

4. Empathy can lead us to live out the Golden Rule to its fullest, to do unto others what would truly be best for them.²

5. Empathy can help staff be "resonant" leaders, able to understand, engage and influence the people they lead.³ Empathy helps leaders discern what people need to function well. Empathetic leaders motivate staff to do their best and to be committed to the organization. One way administrators can do that is by regularly spending time among staff at their posts, pointing out a job well done, and asking questions and listening.

6. Surprisingly, empathy benefits us also. We feel more alive, "connected," and happy when we care for others. In showing compassion we receive what no money can buy—meaning for our lives. In his book *Wired to Care*, Dev Patnaik states, "Having empathy for others can do more than drive (an organization's) growth. It can also give people the one thing that too many of us lack: a reason to come in to work every day."⁴

The above addresses the issue of empathy among staff. Regarding offenders, staff can empathize with them in the sense of trying to understand their needs, and reminding themselves that offenders are indeed human beings. Staff who focus on teaching offenders to abide by policies and to develop empathy for others offer both the offenders and society a great service.

Empathy is the glue that keeps people in positive relationships. It desperately needs to be practiced among corrections workers of all ranks if correctional institutions are to create and maintain a positive workplace culture and reduce avoidable stress among staff.

Footnotes:

¹ Dev Patnaik with Peter Mortensen, *Wired to Care: How Companies Prosper When They Create Widespread Empathy*. Upper Saddle River: FT Press, 2009.

² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³ Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

⁴ *Op. Cit.*, Patnaik, p. 200.

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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www.desertwaters.com/a-donations.htm

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The American Jail: Cornerstone of Modern Corrections

From time to time we like to introduce new resources to our readers. For those who work in county jails, *The American Jail: Cornerstone of Modern Corrections*, by Gary F. Cornelius is a must-read. Written from a practitioner's point of view, the book's goal is to give the reader a hands-on view of this often overlooked institution. *American Jail* covers the history and development of jails, types of jails, how jails work, and jail staff duties. Critical issues, such as the characteristics of typical and atypical offenders, offender management techniques, the climate, and security are discussed, as well as main jail operations, including booking and classification. The book also covers staff recruitment, management techniques and training. Insights from those within (both staff and inmates) reinforce the book's "real world" perspective, and current statistics and research document the operation of local jails. *The American Jail*'s list price is \$58. For more information, please email Eugene O'Connor at eugene.o'connor@pearson.com or call 201-236-7929.

DWCO's 2nd Conference

WELLNESS THROUGH POSITIVE LEADERSHIP May 7 & 8, 2009

The Castle at Glen Eyrie, Colorado Springs, CO
Learn about strategies that promote staff wellness & exceptional performance through powerful positive principles.

May 7:

- Creating a Positive Workplace Climate
- Fostering Positive Workplace Relationships & Positive Communication
- What? Me a Leader? Developing a Personal Philosophy of Leadership
- Seven Habits of Highly Effective People
- Discussion Panel on Leadership Issues

May 8:

- Leading Successfully
- Leading through Critical Incidents
- Ethical Leadership
- Creating Positive Meaning

A limited number of one-on-one consults (up to 30-minutes each) will be available on a first-come/first-served basis.

More information at www.desertwaters.com.