

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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Are You Hard-hearted?

By Kenneth Demmo

Kenneth Demmo is a Correctional Officer at the Orange County Corrections Department working with Training & Staff Development. Published in corrections.com on 03/22/2010. Reprinted with permission.

Reflecting back on my career in Corrections, I have grown up quite a bit and had my share of self-induced hard times and great times throughout the years. One issue has been on my mind for some time now, and I have come to realize or had an epiphany as to a hidden dark secret of Corrections. Most of us never see it coming or realize that it affects us, yet it has a profound effect on our lives both here at work and home. I am referring to the hard-hearted conditioning that we as Correctional staff experience. I am by no stretch of the imagination justifying any of my past transgressions or blaming any one else for my misfortunes. Nor do I think that this is or was an excuse for any actions that have occurred. I just need to express it in words and share this condition with my colleagues.

The Hard-hearted Condition: Webster's dictionary describes the condition as unsympathetic, inexorable, cruel and pitiless. The Collins Essential Thesaurus has words like, hard, cold, cruel, indifferent, insensitive, callous, stony, unkind, heartless, inhumane, merciless, intolerant, uncaring, pitiless, unfeeling, unforgiving, hard-as-nails, and affect-less as synonyms to the word. Unbelievably, there is only one word as an antonym. Are you ready for this? Kind. Just kind. "That's it", I thought! What a concept, just four letters: K-I-N-D. Kind! How have I gone so long in this profession and been in

this hard-hearted condition for so long that I never saw it coming? Well, I will tell you. This is not something that just appears one day out of the blue and you become hard-hearted. Oh no! It is much more sinister than that. In a profession where you are in contact with people, especially people in crisis, personal struggle, incarceration, pain, agony, and distress, it is easy to gradually become hard-hearted due to the disassociation of our feelings from the situation.

This condition is common among other professions as well. Take a doctor or nurse as an example. How many times do they need to see injured people, conduct surgeries, or help people overcome a major illness before they stop treating the patient as a person and start seeing them as a number?

Here is another example. How many times do mental health specialists have to assess patients before they begin to assign their patients a label and not truly listen and/or cater to the specific needs of the individual, but rather just medicate and separate the individual from society? These are just two examples of what I mean when I say hard-hearted.

So now that you know what I mean by the condition of hard-hearted, how do Correctional staff become accustomed to this condition? There is no one answer for this question, but I will share a personal experience to this issue. As a former US serviceman, I was broken down and built back up during boot

IN MEMORIAM

Johnny Arias
Unit Manager
2/3/2010
PNM, NM

Jon Carlson
Former Sgt.
4/11/2010
SNDoc, KS

William D. "Bill" Finke, II
Deputy Warden
Feb. 21, 2010,
ECF, KS

Sgt. Robert L. "Bob" Finney
12/ 29/ 2009
WCF, KS

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Are You Hard-hearted?

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camp to be a specific way or think in line with the military standard. Coming into Corrections and what is considered a paramilitary organization, I had many expectations on how things were or should be inside a Correctional Facility. The “Lock them up and throw away the key”, or “You did the crime, so you should do the time” philosophies were ever-present and in most cases the norm. As I grew and blossomed into a veteran officer, I not only became hard-hearted toward the inmate population, but my friends and family outside of the jail environment also felt the wrath of my change of heart. I heard things like, “Man, you’re cruel,” and “You insensitive bastard!” I lost most of my close friendships, but gained a bunch of new ones here within the facilities, other officers just like me who were experiencing the same emotions and realizations as myself. Now some of you would say, “How is that a bad thing?” Some of my best friends work here at the Jail and I would never want to change or lose them as friends. But because of my heart’s change, I lost a lot of time and relationships with my previous friends and some family members that can never be brought back.

I had been working for Orange County for close to 10 years when I was selected for the position I currently hold in Training. After I was selected, a few weeks had gone by, and I was standing out in front of the Horizon building. A now retired Lieutenant walked up to me and said, “Congratulations”! He shook my hand, looked me dead in the eye, and said these nine words to me that are forever etched into my memory. He said, “Now you can go home and love your family!” Then he walked off. My initial reaction was bewilderment. I truly had no clue what he meant. It was about six months later that I finally realized what he was talking about. Now that I was in the Training Section I was not working around the inmates so closely. I stopped hearing all the problems they have and the issues surrounding their lives. I no longer spent hours

talking to other staff or sitting around complaining about “how things are” and “what needs to be changed.” I actually left each day with a feeling of peace. I didn’t go to my home with bad feelings and anger from a day spent in one of the worst environments to work in. I started to love my family again. That was huge!

How do I change the way I am if I don’t know if I am hard-hearted? In this profession, from the civilian staff all the way up to the Chief of Corrections, all of us are susceptible to this condition. No one is truly exempt. I made it a personal mission to tell my experience to each new staff member who came through the New Employee Orientation program that Training offers to all staff. Some of you may remember me talking about this and how to prevent or change the way you are or may become.

Several years ago I noticed that a now retired Major used to keep a small globe on his desk. One day I was in his office and asked him, “Why do you keep that small globe on your desk?” He sat back in his chair and began to tell me a story about how things used to be in his life and how they have changed. For him that small globe represented his life inside of the walls of the facilities. Each day when he was about to leave work, he would take that small globe, put it in his briefcase, and leave all the worries from this place right there. He wouldn’t simply forget about it, or ignore it, but realize that his life is not inside these walls. Life began when he clocked out.

That is how simple it is to either break the cycle you are in or just prevent it altogether. You need to have a trigger mechanism, something to do, say, or touch that reminds you that, albeit important, this job is not your life. If you haven’t done so already, recommit yourself to your family. Make them your first priority in your life after whatever higher authority you believe in. Make them feel like they mean more to you than anything in this world, and watch how quickly they respond and how things in your life will change for the better. It worked, it really worked for me!

3rd Annual DWCO Conference—Creating A Healthier Culture—May 6 & 7, 2010

We’d love to have you join us as we explore ways to build a healthier workplace culture.

We thank our sponsors, **Canyon City Counseling** and **Credit Union of Colorado**, for their support.

More information about the conference at http://www.desertwaters.com/DWCO_FLYER_2010.pdf.

Hints for Supervisors

By Veteran COs

A lot is written about leadership in corrections. Here is some input from some leaders' followers, seasoned corrections officers, as to what they need from their supervisors. Many thanks to all of you who contributed!

My best supervisor:

1. Pointed out our strengths.
2. Used our strengths.
3. Rewarded our strengths.
4. Trained us regarding our weaknesses.
5. Was a good listener.
6. Allowed us to vent and voice our opinion.

1. Remember that you were once a CO.
2. When COs work overtime they are giving up their free/family time. So they should be taken care of as far as duty assignment before your normal shift officers.
3. Work some CO overtime so that COs can have a little break from all the OT.
4. Lead by example.
5. Insure that COs have the tools they need to do their job to the best of their ability.
6. Check on your officers' well-being, not only their performance.
7. Remember that just because you are a Sergeant does not mean that you know everything. There is nothing wrong with asking a CO a question.
8. Never embarrass an officer in front of another officer.

1. It is so easy for supervisors to become lazy. They now make their own schedules, have internet, access to the break room, telephones, TV. PLEASE do not become lazy. Your COs can't afford to be or they may be risking their life or someone else's.
2. One of the most respected supervisors I've had was an old Army guy who would come into the mod and ask me, "What can I do to help you do your job better?" He said that is the Army way of doing things and it always made the troops feel supported. He truly wanted us to have what we needed to do our jobs.
3. PLEASE respond to your COs' emails, phone calls, questions, comments, etc. I will take a "No can do" over no response at all.
4. I never ask an inmate to do anything I wouldn't do, i.e. clean up poop/puke, eat moldy food or food that fell on the floor. Don't ask your COs to do things you wouldn't do, such as to listen to someone continually

threaten them or constantly bang on windows.
 5. Please don't call me a f---r, dumbass, piece of s--t, retard or bastard/bitch. I get enough of that from the inmates.

1. You need to come to the new position with a clean slate for everyone. As we progress through our career we have many preconceived notions about our fellow officers. These are formed by our association with them as co-workers. One must forget all this and start anew.
2. Lay down your expectations to all the people you supervise and stay as consistent as possible about your expectations with everyone.
3. LEAD, LEAD, LEAD! Be prepared to step up and make decisions!!!
4. Not only do you need to know your job, you need to know mine. The days of saying that you have done my job are gone. You will need to stay abreast of the constantly changing workplace, not only of your job but of those under you as well.
5. Never take the word of an inmate over that of your officers unless there is other substantiated evidence that your subordinates are lying to you.
6. Never blanket punish your subordinates. Step up and single out your problems. It's part of being a responsible supervisor, no matter who the offending person is.
7. Be prepared to face YOUR superiors with the issues brought to you by subordinates. Don't hide issues to make your shift look good.
8. Be personable, approachable, intelligent, and likable.
9. If all else fails, kick ass and take names!!

Anonymous Post-traumatic Symptom Survey for Correctional Workers

In spite of exposure to traumatic stressors at work, to date there are no statistics available as to the frequency of post-traumatic symptoms among corrections staff in the U.S. We at Desert Waters, together with Mike Denhof, Ph.D., are starting to gather such data **ANONYMOUSLY**. Whether you live in the U.S. or another country, if you are or have been a correctional worker, go to the home page of our website at <http://www.desertwaters.com> and fill out our **easy 25-question anonymous online survey**. Your input is history-making! Please take the survey **NOW**. It will take you **about 15 minutes** to do so. Help us help correctional workers and their families!

Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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From The Old Screw

No Feelings

I often wonder what people think about us when they can see no emotions on our faces. I wonder if they're thinking, "Is this person cruel, unfeeling, hard-hearted?"

The truth is just the opposite. We do have feelings. It's just that for 8 to 12 hours a day we hide them. In our line of work it doesn't help when the inmates can work on our emotions.

Unless you can read emotions in an officer's eyes, you will think them cold and heartless. And some of us learn to turn off our feelings so well, that even our eyes give very little away.

I had an inmate cut his wrist one evening. I called for medical and returned to his cell to watch him. By then he had cut the other wrist. I asked if he wanted to put his arms out of the bars so I could put a tourniquet on them. He just smiled and said, "No." While I was waiting for backup (this was a max unit) some inmate yelled out, "Aren't you going to do something for him?" The inmate that had cut himself just looked at me, smiled and said, "No, he's the coldest-blooded SOB in this joint." Never again did I have an inmate cut himself when I was working Max. I had all kinds of emotions running through me that night, but I showed none of them.

Even female staff learn to not show emotions. The inmates think they can read female staff, that just because they are female they can't hide anything. Boy, are they ever wrong! Female staff learn their lessons too.

The problem becomes that it is hard to show your emotions after you leave work. Even now, years after retirement, I have friends and loved ones that say, "You never show your true feelings." I joke and cut up, but they are right. I don't take my mask off often.

I don't have the answer for our problem. Yes, there are people that are supposed to be able to help us, and sometimes they do. Corrections is one of the hardest, most unforgiving jobs out there. Will it ever change? I think not. As long as we work around criminals, we will have to hold our emotions in. You don't want your fellow staff to think you are soft. And you don't want to be manipulated by the inmates.

And so it goes on and on. May the powers that be help us all.

Take care, *The Old Screw*