

# CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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A NON-PROFIT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF CORRECTIONAL STAFF AND THEIR FAMILIES

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From Mrs. CO

## Notes from the Home Front

Any outsider having regular contact with correctional staff picks up quickly on some peculiar habits of workers in this profession. For instance, you agree to meet at a restaurant and arrive to find them sequestered at a back table in a seat that strategically provides an unobstructed view of the entire facility. Or, unless you really enjoy the view from the floor, you promise yourself to never again surprise them by sneaking up from behind and yelling, "BOO!"

Corrections is not a profession which instills trust, and the challenge of getting staff to open up about what actually occurs "behind the walls" can be frustrating and seemingly impossible. As the spouse of a corrections professional, I've discovered some ways that help to increase that trust, improve our communication and give me the ability to enjoy my life in this unique and constantly challenging role.

**Provide a listening ear.** I hear stories from the front-lines that both curl my hair and bore me silly. No matter which, be willing to listen calmly and quietly while letting your spouse know they have your full attention.

Minimize distractions. If you're home when your spouse returns from work, turn down the burner, hang up the phone, turn off the TV, whatever you need to do to show them you care about their day and are available to listen, even if they are not immediately forthcoming.

**Be patient.** Patience is not just a virtue. In a correctional family it's a means of survival! Wait until your spouse is ready to open up. "Talk to me, d\*mmit!" is generally not a good conversation starter. If you demonstrate that you are willing to wait for however long it takes, without prodding or pressure, then they'll appreciate your steadfastness and communicate faster and with more openness next time.

**Be compassionate and non-judgmental.** Resist the temptation of giving your opinion, no matter how justified it seems to you. Respond with phrases such as, "That must have been difficult for you," or "You must feel angry/disappointed/happy," etc. Just let them vent their feelings without overreacting to their intensity or

the details described.

**Give praise and encouragement.** Stand by your man...or woman. There's a reason that title was a hit song other than just being a catchy phrase. Let them know how important their job is to society and how much you appreciate and admire the work they do under such difficult circumstances.

**Allow your spouse downtime.** Make an effort not to schedule family activities immediately after work hours. Give them the opportunity to relax and unwind. Dinner can wait! Let them go to the gym, work in the garden, read the paper, soak in the tub, kick back in the easy chair...whatever gives them a chance to disconnect from the prison environment and transition to life at home.

**Make your home a refuge.** Provide soft music, pleasant smells, the gift of a massage...any little gesture you can think of to soothe the senses and make your home feel like an oasis—a place of peace, calm, and safety.

**Be a partner.** Let your spouse know that his or her career is also part of your life and you want to share in

### IN MEMORIAM CO Rodney Kelly & Six Job Applicants

Brandon Anglin; Julius Bouier; John Foye, Sr; Derrick Ivey; Lionel Moore; Henry Simmons, Sr. Motor vehicle accident  
Alabama DOC  
October 3, 2008

### CO Steve Lo

Gunned down at home  
California Medical Facility  
California DOC & Rehab  
October 15, 2008

### DWCO MISSION

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

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THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

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# Preventing Your Unit from Becoming the Next Chernobyl

by Charles Stoy

You enter into your unit and walk the tier checking to ensure that your reports are maintaining the area and monitoring activity in the housing unit. Things look fine, things are where they are supposed to be. The living unit looks clean, a few dust bunnies here and there, but in general it looks very good.

You enter the office where the sergeant and the rest of the crew are relaxing while most of the housing unit is at the gym for rec. The conversation is light and easy. No tension is felt. There is a round of hello's and general chit chat. After checking with the crew, asking if there are any problems to take up front to administration, maintenance or elsewhere, you head back to your office feeling comfortable with what your crew is achieving. But should you? The members of your team are experts in their areas. They have busted several inmate "stores" in the last year. They found some drugs that could have caused significant problems in the unit. The number of grievances being filed by inmates is approximately the same as those filed in any other unit. The crew has been together for so long they know each other pretty well and can anticipate each other's actions.

Now let's take a little trip down memory lane to a land far from here. The time is 1986. The area is a small town to the southeast of Kiev in the Ukraine. A small nuclear power plant is getting ready to run a test of operational procedures. The crew is highly trained, experts in their field, graduates of some of the best engineering schools in the world. They have worked together so long they know what each other will do before they do it.

As experts they know the operations so well, they dream about them. This crew knows the system so well, they take shortcuts, little deviations from procedure that make the job a little easier, a little faster to accomplish. But things are not right.

Operations run smoothly for the first 70% of the test. Then the nightmare happens. In a matter of seconds the core has drained of water. The dampening rods designed to contain a nuclear reaction are almost totally removed. Within minutes, a small nuclear explosion occurs with repercussions felt around the world.

While a prison is not a nuclear reactor, in the same amount of time it took for Chernobyl to move beyond the control of the engineers, a correctional facility can slide out of control of the staff who operate it. Just like

reactors, prisons are complex and dynamic systems. Parts of a prison interact with each other in dynamic, complex ways that defy simple linear planning. First line supervisors see how the different parts can interact with one another when they affect their unit, such as if the heat is too high, if the food is not good, if services are not being delivered. Each one of these aspects impacts a unit. When more than one are off at the same time, the environment can become chaotic in a hurry.

Is your team cutting corners because of problems in other parts of the facility? Are they doing little things that slowly erode operating procedures? Are they becoming so comfortable with the job and each other that they no longer see what is really happening?

Building a team is a challenging task, and keeping the team on target is the most challenging task there is. Add to that the fact that each level of management in a prison has different priorities and responsibilities, and you can see how the complexity of operations and requirements skyrockets.

There are several issues, however, that are relevant to all teams—whether on the tier, front-line supervisors or senior management. You need to visit and re-visit these issues regularly to make sure your team is staying sharp. Here they are.

1. Encourage your team members to continually challenge each other to do the right thing, regardless of the amount of time involved.
2. Encourage your team members to ask questions, in order to continually improve what they do.
3. Encourage your team members to keep records and to track their performance to know whether or not they are on task, and not just think they are.
4. Rotate your team members jobs to keep them from getting "stale." That helps them stay familiar with different tasks. This does not mean they cannot have permanent jobs. It just means that they periodically change assignments to get a fresh set of eyes looking at things.
5. Involve them in planning their performance reviews. Agree upon a set of physical standards that must be accomplished and work with them to ensure that they meet those standards. Your staff will appreciate your assistance. Keep them apprised of their performance on a monthly basis so that they have time to correct their performance. Give them every chance to succeed.

## Notes from the Home Front

(Continued from page 1)

both the good and bad times of their professional life in corrections.

**Pamper yourself.** Being a correctional spouse can be a tough! Don't neglect your own needs. Make time to do the uplifting activities that give you joy and satisfaction.

**Finally, pray for your spouse and their coworkers.**

Be thankful that you have been given the very special ministry of being a correctional spouse. Make it a habit to just say a little prayer when they leave for work or when you think about them during the day. Ask for safety and wisdom for your spouse and everyone around them. Pray that the facility where they work be filled with peace and calmness. Request that you be shown

how to be a source of comfort and unconditional love to them as they strive to protect and defend our community while working in such a hostile environment.

I understand that, depending on your particular family situation or your own work schedule, some of these suggestions might seem close to impossible or even ridiculous. I'm not saying you should be waiting at the door clad in sexy lingerie or silk boxers, your spouse's favorite meal in the oven, anxiously waiting to fulfill their every need and acknowledge every syllable they utter. (Though frankly, I myself wouldn't object to the food and the boxers.) But any attempt, no matter how small or frequent, to just be there with compassionate understanding can make a world of difference for your spouse, their career, your family and home life, and the success of your marriage.

## Building Blocks of Leading

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Corrections is the ultimate "people business" as it involves directing, containing and influencing people in environments of potential danger and duress. And influencing others is the essence of leadership.

Oftentimes correctional supervisors develop their leadership skills on the job after they promote, without additional specialized training on leading bigger or more complex teams. This can be a challenge, as what was effective at one level may not be as applicable to the next.

Below is a summary of seven leadership essentials, based on current literature.<sup>1</sup> Implementing them wisely can help build harmony among team members, improve morale, and increase a team's output. It can also decrease the leader's preventable stress.

### 1. Casting a Vision

- Articulate your team's vision and mission.
- Mobilize people to follow your leading by appealing to their ideals.
- Help build pride in the work and increase team commitment by spelling out repeatedly:
  - ◇ Why collectively employees are vital for helping make the big picture happen.
  - ◇ How each individual's work fits into the big picture.
  - ◇ Why even the most mundane tasks are significant and essential.

### 2. Mentoring

- Help people identify their unique strengths and talents.
- Link these strengths to personal and career aspirations, and to the organization's goals.
- Motivate by appealing to people's agenda—linking people's job description to their long-term goals.

### 3. Connecting

- Foster a workplace climate of friendly interactions.
- Show that you care for your employees—that you don't just focus on getting the job done.
- Spend time talking to your employees about themselves and their views. In so doing you are building goodwill that can be tapped into when the pressure hits.
- Value and allow downtime.
- Help connect people to each other based on common goals or interests.
- Give team members credit publically for team successes.

### 4. Allowing Employees to Have their Say

- Seek and show you value employees' input.
- Get commitment through participation.
- Seek to build consensus.

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# Desert Waters

Correctional Outreach



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

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## Building Blocks of Leading

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- Help gather fresh ideas about how to execute the organization's vision.
- Remain open to all feedback, not just to what you want to hear.

### 5. Performing Acts of Service

- Motivate employees by taking an active interest in their lives and needs.
- Address employees' needs after becoming aware of them.
- Put employees' needs ahead of your own agenda at times, such as during staff's personal crises.
- Perform small acts of service without drawing attention to yourself.
- Care for your employees as people.

### 6. Setting the Pace

- Keep your staff on task.
- Help employees meet work goals.
- Motivate your team to meet deadlines.

### 7. Directing

- Soothe staff's anxieties and diminish uncertainty by giving clear direction in emergencies.

Supervisors develop their leadership styles over time based on personal strengths and learning experiences. Like skilled craftsmen, good leaders can tell which of the above tools need to be implemented on different occasions, and how to keep a balance among various facets of leadership. This is why leading, whether in corrections or in other industries, is both an art and a science.

<sup>1</sup>Primal Leadership, Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A.

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