

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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The Parable of the Fork Lift

By Joe Bouchard

There was once a high-low driver who enjoyed her job very much. She did her job well. On her forklift she was an artist on the move. As she hauled heavy loads from tangled piles to precarious points, she and her high-low personified poetry in motion.

She manipulated the machine like a well-practiced violinist plays their violin. The high-low was her instrument. Among her skills were her muscle memory and knowledge of the machine's capabilities. She knew its quirks and its power. Above all, she knew the layout of the shop floor. To say that she could navigate blindfolded on the shop floor was not an overstatement.

Little did she know that the way she had operated for years was about to change. First, in an effort to economize, the layout of the shop was reconfigured. The routes on which she effortlessly maneuvered her forklift were in no way like they had been.

Also, the older but comfortable forklift was replaced by a smaller one. She was rendered completely ham-handed because the controls were different than her well seasoned forklift. The play on the steering wheel and brake pedal were so different from what she was used to, she wondered if she would ever adjust.

In anticipation of change, she was given some new driver training. At first she thought that this would be beneficial. After all, she had a new machine to acclimate to. But the trainer was unsure and gave contradicting orders while monitoring the practicum. She found that because of the tight controls and nervousness of the trainer, there was too much overcorrection as she drove.

The training was simply nerve-racking. The driver was, in effect, unlearning the finesse and pathways that she employed for nearly two decades. Matters were made worse by the many subsequent changes to the layout of shop floor. It seems that once the new configuration was in place, no one could go without suggesting a change.

The driver realized that the only constant in her work life from this point on was change itself. The anxiety of the ever-morphing paradigms and continually retooled skills soon spilled into her home life. She became irritable and unpleasant, contrary to her vivacious and gregarious attitude.

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The Parable of the Fork Lift (continued from page 1)

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One day she was moving an expensive load. It seemed rather well-balanced on the skids. However, her sense of equilibrium was destroyed by the trainer who yelled instructions contrary to her movements. Because of an over-correction that she made, the high-low lurched forward. Four things happened:

1. The load fell to the cement floor, breaking all the specialized, expensive parts.
2. During a second of panic, she collided with a support column. The shoddy, little new forklift, far from being the heavy metal model that she had been used to, was now out of commission.
3. She fell during the collision and landed wrong. Trying to brace her fall, she broke her left wrist. Adding insult to this injury, her left hand was her dominant hand.
4. She felt that she was suddenly useless at something which she did so well for so many years.

The high-low driver was hit with many changes from the different angles. Her old, familiar fork lift - her critical tool - was replaced by something unfamiliar and of a light duty design. Her training was not comfortable. The map of the workplace was literally transformed into something alien that sometimes changed twice a week.

Corrections staff experience similar bewilderment when, for example, they are thrown blind into a new computer system with little or no instruction.

Of course, in uncertain economic times, change is more likely to occur. There's no question that this causes stress, especially in an anxiety-prone vocation such as corrections. How do we lower the stress and increase safety in the meantime? Here are some things for all of us to reflect on during tumultuous times.

- Immediate change may be necessary. But it takes time for offenders and staff to get used to them.
- Old habits die hard. Long-term, ingrained task patterns are hard to undo.
- Shortcuts can make for long delays.
- Patient and well-conceived training will go a long way in fostering the success of new changes.
- Safety is always the most important component in corrections.
- When suggestions for change are sought, some may forward ideas in order to make their mark. Their suggestions may be based more on ego and less on concern for the benefit of overall operations.
- Agitation is common in times of uncertainty. It is up to the individual to refrain from adding to it.

There are so many dimensions to change. In the end, we are all small parts of a large system—interconnected programs and the safety machine. Change is not comfortable, but it is inevitable. Because of this, we must pull together so we can cope in the best way possible.

For New Supervisors—No Longer A Grunt?**By Barry Evert**

The last thing you will have to come to terms with is that you are no longer an officer. In the days that you were an officer you may have been the first one at an incident, handling business. You may have been constantly on top of things such as searches, fights, and major incidents. It is now time to step back a bit.

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For New Supervisors—No Longer A Grunt? (Continued from page 2)**Page 3**

You have to distance yourself from almost every situation to the point where you are not directly involved whenever possible. If a fight breaks out on the yard, it is not your job to be the first one there and rush in to break it up. There may still be times when this is necessary due to being short-staffed, but overall you should hang back. Let the officers take care of these situations. You are their eyes and ears during these situations now. It is your job to assess situations to make sure nothing gets missed.

For example, a small fight breaks out in the middle of your yard. Rather than jump into the dog pile, take the time to look and scan over the facility if other inmates are out. Do you see anything unusual? Is there a stabbing taking place on the other side of the yard? It is critical that you understand that you are now the tactical eye for your officers. Presumably your officers are capable of dealing with this disturbance while you scan the area for another incident or even a set-up to attack staff. This is not to say there are not going to be times when you still need to get down and dirty. It is just best you stay back and evaluate the situation before you get involved. Should the situation “go south” you need to be able to make the right decision for your team, something that is much easier to do when you are not “in the mix.”

Another hard thing you are going to have to do is delegate responsibilities to other officers. A Supervisor is only as good as his team. You are going to be inundated with paperwork and other tasks that can often be delegated to other trusted staff members. Including them in this day-to-day operation of your facility will build trust, and help officers understand what it is that you have to do on a daily basis.

Part of delegating is going to be special assignments that you get from upper management. If the gangs unit calls you and tells you they need you to search an inmate’s cell for something specific, you should be able to trust your officers to handle the job. Delegate this out to a couple of officers and have them report to you, rather than go out there and do it yourself. There is nothing more frustrating than having a supervisor come in your unit and complete a task that you know you can do just as well. You need to have the faith in your staff to complete a task as well as you can. This can be hard for some people, especially when their mantra is “if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.” You need to distance yourself from this attitude. Again, your staff is relying on you to be a leader, not an excellent cell searcher, etc.

With this in mind it is important that you follow up when you give an assignment. Not necessarily a physical inspection every time; sometimes a phone call will suffice. Make sure you follow up on assignments you hand out by communicating with your staff. Most often I will ask my staff to notify me when they have completed a task that is out of the norm. In the cell search example, I would ask them to call me as soon as possible after searching the cell. This way I know the task is done. I can also guess at the quality of their search by how long it took them to get it done without standing over their shoulder hounding them.

You should have enough rapport with your staff that during an incident or situation you can take charge and hand out assignments with the trust of your staff members. After the incident, always debrief your staff and ask them what it is that they saw going on during the incident. Give your input of what you saw that went well, and what you saw that could have been better. Take suggestions from staff members on how to improve the staff’s response, and what they would like to see done differently next time. You may hear something you had not considered before.

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Remind yourself that you are now a supervisor. You will learn volumes from your staff if you choose to listen, but you have to be willing to take a step back and supervise. Your staff already know what kind of officer you were. It is time for them to see you in your new role. You have nothing to prove other than your dedication to the safety of your staff and your willingness to lead in a firm, fair and consistent manner.

He's Not Heavy He's My Brother

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An earlier version of this article was printed in the Correctional Oasis in 2005. Sadly, given a spate of corrections officers' suicides lately, we are reprinting a revised version of this piece.

In line with their brothers and sisters in law enforcement, correctional workers have a high suicide rate. A large U.S. study determined that correctional officers have a 39% higher risk of suicide than other professionals.¹

Why is this so, and what could be done to lower these numbers?

People consider killing themselves when they do not think they have other ways out of situations which, at the time, feel unbearable to them. Most people who entertain thoughts of suicide do not really want to die. What they want is for the pain, the bad situation, the anguish to stop. In their distress they are incapable of exploring viable alternatives on their own. They are unable to come up with ways other than suicide to find relief. To them, exiting life and their predicament is their only acceptable option.

Several factors may render people at risk for suicide. Some of these are the experience of grave loss; illnesses such as major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia; past suicide attempts; and a family history of depression and/or suicide.

In what ways might stressors in the corrections workplace contribute to suicidal thoughts or behaviors of corrections staff?

For a variety of reasons the corrections workplace can promote negative emotions and thoughts. Corrections staff serve in what a corrections officer has cynically described as "hate factories." Some offenders simply hate corrections workers and would like nothing better than to see them upset, compromised, hurt or killed. Managing people who hate you is emotionally and spiritually draining. It is also highly taxing to be looking over your shoulder continuously while you work—aware that anything can happen at any time—yet acting like nothing offenders do "gets to you," that you're not bothered or scared.

In that pressure-cooker environment, tension builds up and tempers may ignite among staff, adding to the overall negativity and stress. We are repeatedly told by staff that most of their stress comes from other staff, not offenders. It is doubly discouraging to be worried about other staff—trying to avoid being mistreated, bullied or retaliated against when you're only trying to do your job.

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He's Not Heavy He's My Brother (continued from page 4)

The end result of extreme and routine stressors is that they cause the body to be flooded with various chemicals, with the ensuing poisoning of soul and spirit. Cynicism, disillusionment and hopelessness set in. Staff might come to believe that life—including their life—is cheap, that nobody cares, that nothing is worth living for.

Not surprisingly, people often take their irritability and emotional disconnection home. Relationships with loved ones take a beating. Anger, disrespect, aggression, substance abuse and isolation may become the norm. At times affairs with co-workers complicate the picture further. Due to their increasing mistrust of others, corrections workers tend to not have effective support systems. Their immediate family may be their only lifeline. As significant relationships crumble and custody battles rage, many corrections workers have no one in their corner to help them handle the devastation. Depression and despair come flooding in. Violence may erupt in the home and threaten their job security. Excessive use of alcohol combined with accessibility to firearms may lead to seductive thoughts of suicide or homicide-suicide as a “way out.”

In addition to family break-ups, other high-risk scenarios for corrections workers are based on shame and fear of negative consequences of their behavior. Staff arrested for driving under the influence, under investigation for alleged policy violations, or charged with crimes are at risk for suicide. Staff caught in the web of addiction, such as gambling, are also at risk when threatened with public humiliation or financial ruin. Those who have been diagnosed with serious illnesses, and those who experience other significant losses are also at risk. Corrections staff who are routinely exposed to threats, violence, injuries and death may develop psychiatric conditions. *To us it's just another thing*, a corrections officer once said. But is it truly “just another thing?” Gruesome or anger-provoking memories may haunt staff for months or even years after such incidents.

Both our 2010 and 2011 studies indicate that corrections staff indeed suffer from high rates of psychological disturbances related to their exposure to workplace violence, such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, associated functioning impairments, health problems and dissatisfaction with life. A study of members of the general public found that suicidal thinking was elevated after traumatic events. More than three times as many individuals with full PTSD reported current suicidal thinking than people who did not have PTSD symptoms. Suicide thoughts were increased even in those who met only partial PTSD criteria (that is, they had some, but not all symptoms required for a PTSD diagnosis).²

What can be done to help corrections workers get through personal crises safely?

First comes awareness. Then caring. Then expressing one's caring through questions, suggestions, and actions. These may include proposing or initiating potentially life-saving interventions, such as seeking immediate professional help through having a person taken to the ER or through meeting with a mental health professional.

Staff, family members and friends need to be on the lookout for signs of suicidal thinking and severe depression in corrections workers faced with grave losses and serious stressors in their professional or personal lives.

Some signs of depression are tearfulness and crying, insomnia or hypersomnia (sleeping too much), difficulty concentrating or remembering, excessive fatigue, loss of appetite or overeating, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, self-hate and self-blame, irritability, withdrawal, and loss of interest in people and activities one used to enjoy.

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He's Not Heavy He's My Brother (continued from page 5)

Most people who are considering suicide communicate their intent, usually indirectly. They may drop hints by making statements such as, "Soon I won't have to deal with that anymore", or "You won't have to put up with me much longer", or, "I found the final solution." Questions, uncharacteristic for the person, about life after death, or about the eternal consequences of suicide, should raise huge red flags. "Wrap-up" statements by a person in crisis, such as "I want you to know you've been a great friend," could also be veiled goodbyes and communications of suicidal intent.

Communication of suicidal intent may also be through actions. Giving away prized possessions, setting one's affairs in order, making a will out of the blue, or getting a friend to promise to take in their beloved pet if something happened to them, are examples of "red flag" behaviors.

In those situations you need to "pop the question." Do not be afraid to ask a person about possible suicidal thinking gently, yet directly. Asking someone if they are suicidal may bring up painful and intense feelings in both you and them, but the question itself does not make them suicidal. Instead, questioning shows your concern, and that you are comfortable addressing a subject which most people would avoid. It also tells the other person that you are not judging them, and that you can imagine they are in a lot of pain.

For example, picking up on a hint you may say, "You said that this is too much to take. Has it gotten bad enough that you're thinking of suicide?" If the person says "Yes," do not show alarm and scare them off. People may have thoughts of suicide at difficult periods of their lives. So go on and ask, "Do you really want to die or do you want the pain to go away?" If they say that they want the pain to go away, steer them toward getting help (more on that later in the article) so they can begin sorting through their situation.

If they indicate they really do want to die, that they do not think anything can make their life better, the situation is extremely serious and requires immediate action. Ask, "Have you thought of a way to kill yourself?" If they reply in the affirmative, ask what their contemplated method of suicide is. Then ask, "Do you have what it'd take to carry this out?" If the reply is "Yes," follow that question with, "Do you intend to kill yourself at this time?" You can also ask, "Have you picked a time and a place, when and where to commit suicide?"

The more "Yes" replies to the above questions, the higher the risk for suicide. Do not get angry at the person. That would just make him/her regret having been honest with you. Let them know you cannot even begin to imagine the pain that they must be in.

Do not leave suicidal people alone under any circumstances. If a person seems to be in imminent danger of self-harm, call 911 so they can be driven to the ER securely and be assessed there by a clinician. If at work, talk to their supervisor. Choose life. Don't keep secrets. It's better for a co-worker or loved one to be alive and mad at you than dead.

If a person seems blue and has had thoughts of suicide but does not seem to be in imminent danger, contact their family members, and/or medical or mental health providers, if you know who they are, and/or their supervisors. Have someone stay with them 24/7 until they begin to receive help and the emotional crisis blows over. Steer them away from alcohol. Do calming things with them, such as going fishing together. (Continued on page 7)

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Corrections workers are notorious for believing that they should be able to handle everything by themselves. Do whatever it takes to talk them into seeing a mental health clinician or physician, and spiritual advisor if faith is part of their life. Persist in your suggestions that they seek help. Assist them in finding professional help and in setting up an appointment. Go with them to their first session (or subsequent ones, also), if necessary.

Lastly, department policies must openly mention the stresses and strains of the job, and offer a variety of resources, such as coping skills trainings and inservices, abundant EAP and peer support services, and affordable mental health treatment.

Public acknowledgment of the emotional fallout of corrections work, coupled with acceptance of the fact that it's OK for tough corrections workers to seek help, can go a long way toward preventing the tragic loss of life through staff suicide.

¹ Stack, S.J., & Tsoudis, O. (1997). "Suicide risk among correctional officers: A logistical regression analysis." *Archives of Suicide Research*, 3 (3), 183-186.

² Marshall, R.D., Olfson, M., Hellman, F., Blanco, C., Guardino, M., & Struening E.L., (2001). "Comorbidity, Impairment, and Suicidality in Subthreshold PTSD." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 158 (9), 1467-1473.

One More Chance From This Old Screw

It's easy to take your life. No more problems for you, you think, no worries, things will finally become quiet. But you have no proof.

If you are thinking about taking your life you have one last chance to stop yourself. Think about your loved ones and the effect on them. The loss to your children, growing up with no guide though life. Anger, self blame. Kids don't understand. They blame themselves, that maybe it was their fault. They may hate you for leaving them. For the rest of their lives they will pay for this. Your wife/husband will go through their lives asking themselves what could they have done to stop you, why didn't they see what was wrong. And think about the rest of your family and your friends.

You must remember, once you do it you are a long time dead. Think. There is always someone to talk to, there is always help, a way out other than taking your life. A fellow staff person, your doctor, your preacher, Desert Waters or other groups. Myself, I'll be darned if I give up. I will fight to the end.

YOU HAVE ONE MORE CHANCE. DON'T BLOW IT!

Take Care,
The Old Screw

Reader Q&A

Dear Caterina:

I work in a correctional facility. In the past year several correctional staff have chosen to end their life. A few days prior to staff A taking his life, I was at work and as I approached him I noticed his spirit was gone. It was as if the light had gone out inside of him. I smiled at him and he just looked at me without a response. It was an odd interaction. After a few long seconds, he finally responded by smiling back. His eyes did not smile. I did not know him well and exchanged short surface pleasantries with him. A few days prior to staff B taking his life, I also noticed he was different. He was quite agitated, standoffish, and unfriendly. After a few minutes of conversing with him, he seemed more like himself, still agitated, but more relaxed. I have reflected back on both of the described interactions and believe I could have done more. I could have verbally expressed what I witnessed in the countenance of each coworker with the hope of opening the door and showing them that someone notices and cares, possibly providing hope that this too shall pass.

What suggestions can you provide that will help coworkers who have a casual non-personal relationship reach out when odd behavior is noticed in a coworker?

**Thank you,
Karen in Oregon**

Dear Karen in Oregon:

It is quite common for those who knew people who completed a suicide to wonder about what more they could have done to have prevented a suicide. I hope that the article in this issue, "He's Not Heavy He's My Brother," addresses your question to some degree. In addition, if you sense that something is wrong with a coworker, you approach them and gently point out what you noticed about their mood, demeanor or behavior that causes you concern. Then ask them what is going on. Do not take "I am fine," for an answer. Persist in your expressing concern and invite the person to have coffee with you or a meal after work. Share with them about times when you may have struggled yourself and how you dealt with that. Contact the coworker's friends, family and/or supervisors. Of course you cannot control what someone chooses to do, but you can increase the possibility that they may be assisted to seek help.

Caterina

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Quote of the Month

It's not what we eat but what we digest that makes us strong; not what we gain but what we save that makes us rich; not what we read but what we remember that makes us learned; and not what we profess but what we practice that gives us integrity.
Sir Francis Bacon

DWCO Mission

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