

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

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

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Shoe-eating & Other Oddities

by CO Wife

"He ate his shoes!" was what my husband mumbled over and over one evening during his first couple of months on the job in the prison system. What sort of job had he found himself in and what sort of people would eat their shoes? Thus began his life as a corrections officer, dealing with not only shoe-eaters, but inmates that would do just about anything.

Corrections is a field that is unrecognized, underappreciated. It is rarely thought about, other than by those working in it or who have family that spend their days or nights working in this environment. But without the folks working behind the walls, the rest of us would be in a world of hurt. And with the ever-increasing inmate population at all security levels, the challenges and risks of this job increase right along with it.

As the wife of a corrections officer, I know I don't hear even half of what goes on during his workday. But I have sure picked up a whole new lingo, which is required if you want to keep up with a day in the life. Bang-in, hack, shank, SHU, Boss, shake-down, hooch, tat, kite, bubble, sally-port, grill, lockdown, cop-out, chit, body alarm.... Is there such a thing as a prison lingo translator? Wonder how much it would pay?

Then you have the fact that the corrections employees don't know their fellow workers first names! Going to a work sponsored event or bumping into coworkers out in the world is always interesting when getting introduced. Everyone is either just their last name, Thomas, Rodriguez, Hughes, Miller, whatever, or they are their title—Warden, Captain, Lt. Or someone says "I'm sorry, I

don't know your first name." First names are rarely used on the job, and thus they remain a mystery to most.

Here are a few more thoughts on corrections peculiarities.

1. Dental coverage should be handled in the same way as a uniform allowance for those in the corrections field. With the stresses of the job, grinding of one's teeth while sleeping can sometimes be heard throughout the house keeping all awake—all other than the officer, that is, who has finally managed to shut their mind off long enough to fall asleep. And all that grinding takes a toll on the teeth, thus the need for good dental insurance.

2. Restaurants need to spend a little more time thinking about how to decorate their walls since many an officer tend to sit with their back to the wall, leaving the others at the table facing the wall. Without some lively decorations, the view can get old real fast, even as the officer keeps their eyes on the move, watching for shady characters, weapons, and anything else out of the ordinary that might be cause for alarm.

3. Remember the saying that hair makes a man? One of the reasons I fell for my man was his hair. In the world of Corrections, hair can kill a man. Having hair on your head in

IN MEMORIAM

Michael Thomas
8/8/09

Randy Reece
8/10/09

Rich Greenleaf
8/12/09

James Zupkofska
8/22/09

Scott Tommey
8/23/09

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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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Adjusting as a New Supervisor

by a Retired Associate Warden

Caterina Spinaris Tudor & Sgt. Barry Evert are compiling materials for a Handbook for New Supervisors. This is an excerpt contributed anonymously.

In my experience going from a CO to a Sgt. may be the single most challenging adjustment a new supervisor faces. Going from being "one of the guys" to being the boss requires a paradigm shift that can be difficult to achieve. However, just because it is difficult it does not mean it is impossible. The key question is for many new supervisors is "Will my friends still be my friends?" The bottom line answer is some will and some will not. To advance in your career, you have to be willing to accept this as fact. Experience and hard knocks has taught me that there are several things a new supervisor can do to mitigate this concern.

You have to understand for **yourself** what your new role is. To supervise staff in a correctional environment you have to accept a high degree of responsibility for their safety and security. Therefore, you have to accept a high degree of responsibility for their professional activities while at work. **YOU** haven't changed, but your **role** has. Whether the staff you will be supervising are friends or not, they will be looking to you, by virtue of your role, to be a leader. Remember, there is a huge difference between being a boss and being a leader. Learn all you can about leadership and what it means to be a good leader. Then be one.

Personally communicate to the staff you supervise what your new role means to you and to them. I truly believe, after 28 years experience in prison operations, that there is no one staff member (including Wardens) that is more or less important than any other staff member at correctional facilities. It is obvious though that there are significant differences in the role individual staff members play. That is the nature of organization and chain of command. It is the way it is. You are still you, but your role in the organization is now different. Therefore there will be, of necessity, a different **professional** relationship that must now be established.

The most important aspect of this different relationship is the basis on which you must now make decisions regarding staff issues such as shift assignments, days off assignments, post assignments and vacation sign-ups. Equally important is how you handle staff performance issues.

You need a basis on which to make decisions that are fair to all, credible with all staff and most importantly

provide safety and security. I discovered a method of doing this that satisfies all these concerns. **Make decisions based on your facility/unit Mission Statement!!!**

This will provide consistency, fairness and accountability not only for you, but for the staff you supervise, as well. Good Mission Statements are an **absolutely necessary** tool for effective and efficient operations and offender management. If your facility and/or unit does not have a clear and concise Mission Statement, take the initiative to develop one **with the staff you supervise.**

There is a lot of information available to you about the development of Mission Statements, value and philosophy statements. Meet with each new staff member that comes into your unit and make sure the new staff member is aware of the mission, values and philosophy that you expect. Let all staff know that your decisions are based on the mission, values and philosophy stated in these documents and the policies of the Facility.

Here is an example. A staff member wishes to be assigned to the Graveyard (10pm-6am) shift. Perhaps the reason is to further education, family reasons or financial. (Many jurisdictions offer "shift-differential" or "premium pay" for other than business hour shifts). At your facility, Graveyard Shift is a formal training shift where new staff get a chance to become familiar with the physical plant, the security program, and offender management philosophy. The mission of this shift is training. For each current staff member taking up a Graveyard-assigned position, that is one new staff member who has to go to a different shift without benefit of the formal training available on Graveyard Shift. Does the current staff member's request to be re-assigned to Graveyard for a personal reason meet the mission of the facility/unit? If so, it is possible the staff request could be granted. Are there positions on Graveyard that need to be filled but aren't? Would the staff member making the request be a good trainer for new staff? Would the staff member be willing to commit to a lengthy period of time and commit to the training program? If the above conditions are not met, perhaps, based on the Mission, the staff members request would have to be denied.

Let your staff know where you stand on the "Family" verses "Mission" continuum. Here's what I mean.

THE CORRECTIONS VENTLINE™

866-YOU-VENT

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Shoe-eating & Other Oddities

(Continued from page 1)

any length over an inch gives the inmate something to grab hold of. Regular haircuts at home become part of the routine. The good news is that this also becomes a way to help the environment, by leaving the pile of hair outside for the birds to use in their nests. Spending your day inside the walls can be a dark experience and you never know what the day will bring. But where else can a person get the idea for a

limerick such as this:

There once was an inmate who knew

He'd get protein by eating his shoe

Canvas laces and soles

He didn't need any bowls

Though he bit off more than he could chew

Thank you to all those working in the Corrections field. You are a special group of people and your willingness to spend your day in this environment, risking your lives, is much appreciated!

Adjusting as a New Supervisor

(Continued from page 2)

Imagine a line with two extremes on either end. One end is "Family." That end represents support, acceptance and meeting wishes. The other extreme is "Mission." This end represents the Military Model of "succeed in the Mission at all costs." The hill must be taken regardless of casualties or cost. Most Supervisors are somewhere between these two extremes. For you to succeed as a Supervisor and have credibility with your staff, you must first determine where you are at on this continuum. Then you must communicate that to the staff you supervise. Obviously, you must be consistent and not make exceptions for "old buddies." The bottom line is that most will respect you for this. If they do not, ask yourself if they were really your "buddies" to begin with. As a supervisor I was 60% Mission and 40% Family. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate. Safety and Security fail when communication fails. Staff deserve to know the why's and wherefore's. There are obviously some situations that occur where this does not apply, but for normal, everyday operational issues, staff left in the dark about why's and wherefore's are staff that are not well prepared to do their difficult jobs. This is where leadership vs. boss-ship comes in.

You may not like what I'm about to say. Experience taught me that communication breaks down primarily at

the Captain and Lieutenant level. When I was Assistant Warden at a High Security Facility I had a meeting with all Captains and Lieutenants regarding a significant policy change. The Captains and Lieutenants asked questions and provided input. When the decision was made they were told to explain to the staff they supervised why the facility was making the change. A week later, I was making rounds through the facility and several staff asked me why we were doing what we were doing. I explained and then ask them if their supervisor had talked to them and explained why. They said they had talked to their supervisor and their supervisor had told them to just do it. I told them to ask the supervisor why he had not explained to them the rationale behind the change. For some reason, I never had a similar problem from that supervisor again. Share information. Communicate. Even old buddies will respect the effort. Finally, sometimes as a Supervisor you simply have to decide if you want your staff to like you or respect you. You'll never hit a 100% on either of these. But you can achieve "critical mass" in terms of getting people on board. Leaders are respected for their knowledge, commitment, honesty and ability to achieve a "critical mass" of staff willing to buy-in and respond to their leadership. "Liked" Supervisors aren't always "respected" Supervisors. Yet, for safety and security in a corrections environment it is my opinion that "respected" is more important than "liked."

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Correctional Outreach



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

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From the Old Screw

Earning Respect

It is so sad that female correctional officers are still having problems with male staff. No, guys, female correctional officers are not here for your pleasure. They are not here for a conquest. Female correctional officers are here for a career, just like you are. They have families, just like you. They are professionals, just like you. They go through the same training you do. They can get hurt and killed in this line of work, just like you.

No one knows if they will walk out of work at the end of the shift. If something should happen, I would much rather have a female correctional officer supporting me that I had treated professionally, not someone I had tried to put the make on without taking "no" for an answer.

Respect is an earned thing, and it is one of the few things we can do on our own. Respect yourself and your fellow officers. Leave the kid games at home. If you conduct yourself in a professional manner, you may be surprised at the respect you get back. All staff—and it is really true for female staff—need help, not harassment from you or anyone else. If you are a

sergeant, lieutenant or higher, it is your job to protect all your people.

Now, women staff, as with everything, there is a catch. You must act like professionals. If you tell "dirty" jokes and act like one of the boys, don't be surprised if at least one of the boys puts the make on you. You must also remember that skintight uniforms will draw the eye of every male, staff and inmates. Wearing your clothes too tight will cause you to lose respect.

As I have already said, respect is the one thing in corrections you have to earn. When staff has respect for you, they will be more willing to help and guide you. Inmates on the whole will also give respect to a female officer who earns it, and, like male officers, will put the make on female officers they have no respect for. I'm thankful there are only a few male and female officers who behave like this. Both female and male officers who are looking for a career should be aware of respect and leadership. I have known several female staff who have risen to the top rank and almost all were professional.

Take care, The Old Screw