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**6 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS**

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Recently, I came across an article I’d read a while back that stuck with me. In “[Principles of Effective Law Enforcement Leadership](https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/perspective/perspective-principles-of-effective-law-enforcement-leadership),” Dan Willis notes, “Developing into an effective leader is a continuous, personal learning process.” He then highlights eight principles of leadership to help law enforcement officers on that development path.

Willis was writing specifically about law enforcement, but many of the principles he outlines resonate for corrections, too. So what follows is my spin—shortened just a bit into six principles of effective leadership for correctional officers.

**#1: Service**

“The core purpose of coming to work every day is to serve, to give our complete attention and effort toward developing and enhancing the abilities and interests of others,” Willis writes. In corrections, service is central to what we do. We are here to protect inmates, our fellow officers and the security of the facility. But for leaders, service takes on a new meaning. Anyone in a supervisory position in corrections has a responsibility to [serve their subordinates](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/why-we-need-servant-leadership-in-todays-fire-service/)—not just by keeping them safe, but also by helping them develop their skills and fulfill their potential. Service for correctional leaders means watching out for [signs of burnout](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/symptoms-and-effects-of-burnout-in-corrections/), helping your officers [identify career goals](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/career-development-in-public-safety-agencies-its-personal/) and providing opportunities to develop new skills—even if that means they will eventually leave your unit and move on to a different position.

**#2: Honesty**

Honesty is important to everyone, regardless of profession. When your job involves restricting someone’s freedom, however, honesty becomes critical. In corrections, honesty comes into play in several ways, including:

* We must be honest with ourselves. We won’t grow as leaders if we lack self-awareness or if we make excuses for our shortcomings. Further, being honest with and about yourself is essential for [building rapport with your employees](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/public-safety-leadership-how-to-establish-strong-relationships-with-subordinates/). Correctional officers respect leaders who can admit their faults.
* We must be honest with those who we supervise. One of the most difficult tasks as a supervisor is to tell a subordinate they need to work more on a skill or they fell short in a performance area. But such feedback is essential to helping correctional officers develop, grow and succeed. Note: It’s equally important to provide honest *positive* feedback. Lack of leadership support is a common cause of correctional officer stress.
* We must be honest with those we report to. Honesty also means having “administrative courage.” While rank commands respect and deference, it does not excuse commanders from hearing the truth. Leaders at all levels have a responsibility to provide their honest assessment of situations or issues that could harm the facility, staff or inmates.

**#3: Integrity**

“Integrity depends on consistently doing what is right, meaning that which is in the best interest of the organization and of others,” Willis writes. Just like honesty, [integrity takes on greater meaning in corrections](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/ethics-integrity-in-corrections/) because integrity conveys incorruptibility. Inmates will do everything they can to [manipulate correctional officers](https://info.lexipol.com/webinar-inmate-manipulation). Integrity is our shield against these efforts. And as leaders in corrections, our integrity serves as an example, helping officers resist the temptation to bend the rules for that special inmate or take out their frustration against that cocky, obstinate inmate.

**#4: Humility**

When I got to Willis’ fourth principle, I paused. In corrections, we are taught to be confident, [in command](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/the-role-of-command-presence-in-corrections/) and firm. Anything less and we will quickly be taken advantage of. This seems the opposite of humble. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized humility is indeed important for effective leadership for correctional officers. Humility isn’t about being vulnerable and allowing inmates to walk all over you. It’s about the constant quest to improve yourself and learn new things. Humility means not feeling threatened when you realize the junior officer on your team has more skills than you in a particular area. It’s [being open to new ideas](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/are-you-learning-from-the-rookie/), even when they’re not yours. Humility also involves looking beyond the influence you have on the organization and working to develop other officers into leaders who can take over when you’re [ready to retire](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/4-tips-successful-public-safety-retirement/).

**#5: Purpose**

If corrections is just a job to you, you likely won’t last long—because it’s tough work that requires a deeper meaning to keep you going. Effective correctional leaders must [cultivate a sense of purpose](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/todays-tips/identity-purpose-in-public-safety/) and passion about our work. This is critical not only to helping us withstand the rigors of a corrections career, but also because of our influence on others. We can help employees see the positive effects of their work. When they are exhausted from a shift of dealing with uncooperative inmates, we can support them and help them reconnect to why they chose this job. As leaders we should also encourage our personnel to cultivate hobbies, interests and passions outside corrections—doing so fights burnout and helps them remain committed to the purpose of corrections work.

**#6: Positivity**

When leaders have an optimistic attitude, Willis writes, it “enables employees to look for the good and to try to be constructive working to change things for the better.” Let’s face it, most confinement facilities aren’t positive places. They can be downright harsh environments. But that’s why it’s so important to strive for positivity as a correctional leader! Inmates and staff are counting on us to provide optimism and confidence that the facility is running smoothly, that rules will be followed, that suggestions for improvement can result in real changes. Being a positive leader doesn’t mean brushing off reality and pretending everything’s OK. But leaders do have a responsibility to help staff work together to support personal and agency growth.

As you look over this list of principles of effective leadership for correctional officers, which ones do you relate to most? Most of us will feel we’re better at some of these principles than others. But that’s OK—in fact, it underscores the point we began with: Leadership is a continuous, personal learning process. I hope this list spurs you to reflect on how you can keep that process moving forward.



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