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**Train to Retain — Developing Corrections Staff**

April 2023

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All right … you have just been promoted to a senior staff position at a local jail. You are concerned. Your facility is understaffed; the inmates are well aware of the problem. Contraband, plotting and attempting escapes, inmate arguments, booking in and booking out do not take a “short staffing” holiday. There are also plenty of other activities that need staffing by correctional officers to maintain security, such as transportation of inmates, sick call, programs, recreation and so on.

While technology such as better video surveillance, communications, tablets, and kiosks have greatly improved and enhanced the job of correctional officers, one thing has remained constant: We must have enough staff to maintain the posts, walk the tiers and floors, and provide safety and security to everyone who lives, works, and visits a correctional facility. As corrections leaders, we must do what we can not only to hire enough people, but also to help them develop into good corrections professionals. And by doing so, hopefully we can retain them. If we retain good people, it will both improve the department and serve as a legacy.

There is no “magic wand” in staff development. It takes careful thought and a desire to think of the many.

Staff development is a broad subject, but we can begin to tackle it by breaking it down into three areas:

1. *Training:* How innovative training can develop staff not only in basic recruit training, but also in on-site and online training.
2. *Mentoring:* How officers can serve as role models — and they do not all have to be training instructors, supervisors, and Field Training Officers (FTOs).
3. *Building the future:* How everyone can work together to develop and retain staff — as retirements happen, staff members are prepared to take their place. Training and supervisor involvement are critical.

**Training**

New recruits have been hired. Some are straight from the labor pool — they have been working in restaurants, construction, landscaping and so on. Some may have just retired from the military or are in their second law enforcement career after retiring from another agency. Others are right out of college. Some agencies hire at the age of 18, and some hire at age 21 and up. As trainers, the age at hiring must be considered.

In early 2023, Corrections1 [published a poll](https://www.corrections1.com/polls/what-should-be-the-minimum-age-requirement-to-become-a-corrections-officer-JhB1PPlqniWswvkR/) in which 286 corrections professionals were asked what age officers should be hired. [1] Most (59%) said that hiring should be at age 21. A total of 21% of respondents supported hiring at older than 21, while 17% agreed with hiring at age 18. If the decision to hire at age 18 is your agency’s policy, you may find some mature 18-year-olds — and some agencies and trainers have. As for the immature or “very green” ones, that is the hand you are dealt, and training must take that into account.

The corrections agency should take a balanced approach at the beginning of recruit training. First, there must be a “pep talk” about corrections being a noble profession, an important part of the criminal justice system. Staff should try to dispel the myths that the public believes, such as the idea that correctional facilities are nasty places filled with brutal staff. Or that corrections officers are working there because they failed to get jobs as police officers. Many citizens think the ways jails and prisons are portrayed in movies and television are accurate.

In both my in-service and recruit classes, I thank officers for choosing a profession where they go to work every day in an environment where the residents do not like them. I advise them that many people have opinions about jails and prisons, and not all are complimentary. I advise them to remember that police officers, our sisters and brothers wearing the badge, serve the public by in part by arresting people who have broken the law. For those of us in corrections, our job is to keep those people incarcerated until the criminal justice system determines they are ready to re-enter society. Grateful citizens can go to sleep knowing that we strive to keep them safe. I also advise correctional officers that the decarceration and “Defund the Police” movements should not have an impact on how they perform their duties.

Second, staff should frankly discuss the negative impacts of the job: The types of offenders they will deal with, and the toll stress can take on an officer – “newbie” or veteran. There are dangers; corrections officers have been seriously hurt and even fatally injured on the job. Instructors should relay the importance of having good people in their lives to turn to after dealing with the ugly scenes they will see — the violent offenders, the mentally ill, and so on. Advise them that drinking, drugs and other negative coping strategies are not the answer. Encourage them to seek support from supervisors, colleagues, friends and loved ones — not from a bottle, and most certainly not from inmates. Warn them about divorce and suicide rates of correctional officers. Instill in them early the importance of [stress management](https://www.corrections1.com/corrections-jobs-careers/articles/top-10-most-stressful-public-safety-jobs-in-the-us-XqiwNkqercUZjRfK/), and urge them to keep up their mental health training to deal with the stress. Emphasize the maintenance of both physical and mental health. It’s impossible to work effectively and safely inside a correctional institution if they are not physically and mentally up to par.

**Six Considerations for Correctional Officer Training** [2]

1. ***Methods of training should be innovative.*** Conventional in-person platform training is the usual method, but other innovative methods include online platforms, webinars, conferences and roll calls. Make it fresh and interesting, addressing the needs of the agency. If, for example, inmates have escaped from a nearby jail, trainers should gather factual information from well-written news reports and go over escapes during roll call. Other potential topics include inmate manipulation, the proliferation of contraband, searching, report writing, suicide prevention and recognizing mental illness.
2. ***Training should be supported by all supervisors and the “brass.”*** There will always be some correctional officers who frown on attending training — especially if they have a know-it-all, I-am-a-veteran attitude, or just show up to class for the hours. Supervisors must stress the importance of training, including showing up in an academy classroom. When a supervisor sits with the line staff in a training session, it sends the message that training is for everyone.
3. ***Training personnel — presenters and curriculum developers — should be veterans with good presentation skills.*** If your academy or training department does not offer instructor training, it should. Gone are the days where officers get a nice training assignment simply because they have been on the job a long time.
4. ***There should not be a limited audience.*** Everyone, including the cooks, clerks, medical staff, maintenance personnel, programs and volunteers-should have training customized for them if they have daily encounters with inmates. For example, we are all concerned about the inmate manipulator. Training is not just for the sworn officers; it should be for all staff.
5. ***When presenting training, be aware of your officers’ corrections philosophies.*** There have been many debates on what exactly corrections is supposed to do. I narrow it down to three views: (A) The *punishment view* advocates control (security), separation (keeping inmates away from society), retribution (society is punishing inmates for breaking laws), and deterrence (the threat of future incarceration deters them from committing future crimes). (B) The *rehabilitation view* advocates programs, education and treatment for problems that lead to criminality. (C) The *prevention view* includes diversion programs and community corrections programs. A well-rounded officer should realize that in the course of their career, they may be assigned to a squad (punishment/control) or to a programs post (treatment or rehabilitation). Training should discuss flexibility in thinking. Many inmates take advantage of programs that can help them get sober and cease criminal behavior. Some do not, and never will. A well-trained correctional officer is level-headed, taking an all-of-the-above approach to the various ideologies. They accept transfers to different divisions and make the most of it. Watch for the problems, though. Heavy-handed officers — quick with the physical force rather than talking — may think they are in corrections to punish. Training should drive home that not all offenders will cooperate, and safety is key.
6. ***Teaching formal skills such as searches, counts, inspections and so on is great.*** Security and safety depend on the skills your personnel develop. However, many officers have told me that people skills – the informal skills they learn – are also invaluable. Correctional officers deal with every type of personality imaginable. An officer’s informal skills may include being an information agent about the facility, a parent correcting bad behavior, a counselor, a diplomat and a legal “advisor.” Skills can also involve giving inmates advice about programs to participate in, informing inmates about basic functions of the court (without giving legal advice), and when possible, calming inmates down and settling disputes. Finally, an important informal skill is being a lay psychologist, recognizing the symptoms of possible mental illness and making referrals to medical and mental health staffs. Interacting with inmates, helping them, and building positive relationships with many of them, builds self-confidence. [3]

**Mentoring**

Mentoring, either by supervisors or line staff, is crucial to staff development. A mentor is an agent of change, correcting other officers’ substandard job performance, fixing mistakes, counteracting low morale, or helping officers deal with the stress of the job. Mentors take pride in the job and want to help others. They are the ones that supervisors will tell you make the place run smoothly.

To illustrate, did you ever sit with your grandpa and watch one of those old black-and-white World War II movies or television shows? If you have, you may recall scenes where the new replacements get off the truck and meet the battle-weary veterans. The sergeant greets them and assigns each one to some of the best veterans in the squad — those who know the ropes. The old veterans may have called them the “Steady Eddies” because of their unflappable demeanor and literal grace under fire.

Mentors are valuable. When I was hired to work inside the jail, my squad corporal took me aside and explained a lot about the jail, staffing, inmates, and operations. He put me with a seasoned officer, and things went smoothly.

A mentor who is also a supervisor may notice that an officer is making mistakes. If the mistake is not too serious, he may decide not to write them up, but privately talk to them about doing things right. The goal is improving work habits. If this direction is performed correctly and with respect, the officer may feel better about the job, learn from the intervention and handle stress better. These are teachable moments. A mentor’s actions may counteract complacency, defuse anger, and in many cases prevent officers from acting in a negative manner toward inmates. [4]

**Retention**

Now that you have hired staff, trained them, and used mentoring to ease their transition into the job, it is time to think how you can keep and develop your best staff members. Supervisors may say they would rather [work short-staffed](https://www.lexipol.com/resources/blog/fallout-the-stress-of-working-short-in-corrections/) with good people rather than work fully staffed with bad people. To many in corrections, that may be true, but I am an optimist: I think we can achieve full staffing with good people. Good supervision and staff development mean you try your best to build up the good staff. If you can instill a sense of pride and self-confidence in officers, chances are they will want to do more, do it well and keep learning and improving. They will realize opportunities for promotions exist. However, there will always be some officers who move on to other jobs, both in the private and public service sectors. Working inside a corrections facility is not for them.

If officers are having consistent positive experiences with their jobs, chances are they will stay on. Constructive relationships with supervisors, visibility from the “higher-ups” and close work relations with other officers and civilians can help correctional officers feel fulfilled in their work. When I was on the floors, it was nice to see a captain, a major or the sheriff walking around and asking how officers were — and being *sincere*. Negative aspects of the job have the opposite effect. When supervisors are stingy with praise, refuse to recognize good work or stay cloistered in their offices, they drive morale down. Another concern is the media; if you want officers to stay on, support them publicly with good media relations and positive community involvement.

As a stress management author and trainer, I have come to understand how important it is to involve the families. When family members support their careers and help them through the rough times, correctional officers can [cope with the job stress](https://www.corrections1.com/mental-health-1/articles/how-to-implement-a-mental-wellness-program-in-corrections-fzeEPCa4QakDszcm/) more effectively — which in turn supports retention. Through social activities and family events, supervisors can get to know their workers’ families and extend a helping hand to assist with stress if necessary. Employee assistance programs and peer support programs are likewise helpful. It seems that training academy graduation ceremonies are too often the first and last times “the brass” sees family members … until an officer is taken hostage, hurt or killed. Keep the connections open.

To retain, you must train! Corrections managers should realize good training is invaluable. It helps with morale, boosts employee self-confidence, improves job performance and helps with staff retention. In a recent [Talent LMS survey](https://www.talentlms.com/employee-learning-and-development-stats) on The State of Learning and Development, 76% of those surveyed said they are more likely to stay with an organization that offers continuous training. More than half — 55% — say additional training helps them perform their jobs more effectively. They feel involved with the agency.[5]

Developing staff is possible, and by doing so you leave a lasting legacy for the future. Train your people well, help them mentor each other, and you’ll retain the best ones to replace you when you retire.

Good luck!

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