

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

VOLUME: 21

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Numerous research studies point to the power that supervisors have to affect staff's morale and shape workforce cultures, which ultimately impacts retention^{1,2}. And you may have also heard it said that staff do not leave their job; they leave their supervisors. That's one more way that supervisors can impact retention.

This issue of the Correctional Oasis is dedicated to supervisors and their crucial involvement in staff's well-being and overall occupational functioning in the high stress and high-trauma career fields of corrections and other public safety jobs.

Caterina Spinaris

References

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND WELLNESS ARE INTERDEPENDENT

BY STEPHANIE RAWLINGS, MSC

In correctional facilities, supervisors play a pivotal role in maintaining the balance between discipline and support, particularly when it comes to staff wellness programs. Some supervisors hold the belief that a wellness program might lower accountability, assuming that fostering wellness compromises the need for clear boundaries and consistent expectations. This belief, however, is a myth that must be debunked for the health of both the staff and the agency. In reality, wellness programs, when properly implemented, do not diminish accountability. Instead, they enhance performance, reduce workplace stress, and promote a more harmonious work environment. A supervisor can lead with a wellness mindset while still maintaining high expectations and ensuring that boundaries remain firm.

Debunking the Myth: We Can't Have Both Wellness and Accountability

One common misconception among supervisors is that wellness programs may cause staff to feel entitled to leniency regarding their actions or performance. Some believe that focusing on wellness could potentially undermine accountability by allowing employees to excuse poor behavior or subpar performance. However, this is not the case. Accountability and wellness are not mutually exclusive; they are interdependent.

A strong corrections wellness program encourages staff to take personal responsibility for their mental, emotional, and physical health. Simultaneously, supervisors maintain their role in ensuring high performance and adherence to established boundaries. Staff who feel supported in their wellness are more likely to remain engaged and productive, leading to improved overall performance. It is crucial to understand that wellness is about empowering staff to manage stress and challenges, not excusing poor decisions or behavior.

Wellness and Boundaries: Coexisting in Harmony

Boundaries are essential in any correctional environment. Supervisors are tasked with maintaining order, ensuring safety, and holding their staff accountable for their responsibilities. However, leading with a wellness mindset doesn't mean loosening those boundaries. Instead, it involves integrating wellness into leadership practices while continuing to enforce performance standards.

By addressing staff wellness, supervisors can reduce their staff's Corrections Fatigue, absenteeism, and high turnover rates, all of which are common in high-stress correctional environments. Supervisors who actively promote wellness can create an atmosphere where staff feel valued, supported, and motivated to meet expectations. This leads to a healthier workplace culture, higher morale, and increased retention rates, all of which contribute to the agency's success.

Tools for Supervisors to Lead with a Wellness Lens

To lead effectively with wellness in mind while maintaining accountability, supervisors can adopt several practices, some of which are listed below.

1. **Practice What You Preach:** Model wellness behaviors yourself. When leaders demonstrate balance in their work-life commitments, stress management, and emotional regulation, it sets the standard for staff to follow suit.
2. **Provide Sincere Feedback:** Give constructive and genuine feedback. This helps your staff grow. Offering feedback from a place of support, rather than punishment, fosters an environment of trust and growth while still ensuring accountability.
3. **Encourage Good Decision-Making:** Teach staff to make thoughtful, well-informed decisions, both in their personal wellness and their professional responsibilities. This reinforces the link between wellness and accountability.
4. **Model Emotional Regulation:** Strive to remain calm under pressure. This sets an example for your staff to follow, demonstrating that handling emotions well is crucial for maintaining professionalism.
5. **Maintain Consistency in Handling Staff Situations:** Be consistent in how you handle individual cases. This helps build trust and reliability, ensuring staff understand that wellness support doesn't mean different rules for different people.
6. **Distinguish Between Fairness and Equality:** Recognize that fairness doesn't always mean treating everyone exactly the same. Some staff may need different kinds of wellness support based on their circumstances, and addressing these needs fairly does not compromise the agency's standards or consistency in applying overarching rules.
7. **Be an Active Listener:** Actively listen to staff concerns. This shows empathy and understanding, and as a result building stronger relationships and encouraging open communication, while also maintaining professional boundaries.
8. **Leverage Crucial Conversations:** Don't shy away from difficult discussions. Address performance issues head-on, while also exploring how wellness might play a role in improving outcomes.
9. **Encourage Individual Wellness Responsibility:** Guide and mentor staff toward taking ownership of their own health. While the agency promotes wellness by providing adequate resources, support, and infrastructure to foster a healthy workplace, the staff themselves are the only ones who can apply wellness-promoting behaviors at the individual level.

The Benefits of Integrating Wellness into Your Leadership Approach

Supervisors who integrate wellness into their leadership approach will see the benefits ripple across the organization. The impacts of fostering a balanced, wellness-focused environment are vast, including:

- **Increased Morale:** When staff feel supported and valued, their motivation and morale increase, leading to higher productivity and job satisfaction.
- **Improved Recruitment and Retention:** A workplace that promotes wellness is more attractive to prospective employees and can retain current staff more effectively, reducing turnover rates.
- **Positive Workplace Culture:** Encouraging wellness fosters a healthy, positive work culture, where staff are less likely to experience Corrections Fatigue, and team cohesion is strengthened.
- **Reduction of Critical Incidents:** When staff are well-rested, emotionally regulated, and supported, they are better equipped to handle stressful situations, potentially leading to fewer avoidable critical incidents.
- **Improved Workplace Relationships:** A wellness-focused approach helps build trust and collaboration between staff and supervisors, creating a more harmonious work environment.

In conclusion, wellness programs for correctional staff, when supported by supervisors, lead to significant benefits for individuals and the agency. Supervisors must recognize that promoting wellness does not compromise accountability, but that rather it enhances it by creating a more motivated, engaged, and responsible workforce. By leading with wellness in mind and maintaining clear boundaries, supervisors not only improve the well-being of their staff but also contribute to the overall success of the organization.



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THEY LOOK TO YOU

BY CATERINA SPINARIS, PHD, LPC

Every correctional leader's goal and every correctional staff member's goal must be to focus on creating genuinely supportive cultures if we are to retain and professionally "grow" and mature staff.

Let's start at the beginning. After completing basic training, new correctional employees are pumped, excited about getting started on the job. Yet deep down they may wonder if they'll be able to "prove themselves" to their supervisors and peers and earn their respect, if they'll react professionally to crises, or if they'll remain firm, fair and consistent in the face of day-to-day pressures. They know that theory is one thing, but practice is quite another.

You, the supervisors, are the ones that new staff look to primarily, at least to begin with. You are the ones who can model to them how it all plays out in real life. You are the ones who can flesh out the lessons taught at the Academy. (And if you do not do so, the staff will turn to their coworkers for guidance, and you will no longer be their leader in actuality. Your other staff will become the de facto, informal leaders.)

Your responsibility and opportunities in this regard are enormous. You have been given the privilege of "professional formation" of correctional staff who are the future of corrections. You are effectively in a mentor and instructor role 24/7. You may do so consciously and intentionally by answering new hires' questions, or by going over an incident and giving them your thoughts on it. Or you may teach and demonstrate by simply doing your job. The way you conduct business is the lesson you teach and pass on to the new generation of employees.

Among other things, new employees observe and even study:

- The way you cope with crises
- How you handle angry or belligerent people—be it staff or people in the criminal justice system
- How you handle staff who are struggling for whatever reason
- The way you speak about other staff in their absence
- What you do when negative rumors circulate about other employees
- What you appear to hold dear regarding your job
- What you say you do to take care of your health
- What you say you do to take care of your home life
- How you guard your reputation
- What you do when you're wrongly accused of something
- How you wield your power

Through your modeling you can teach integrity, wisdom, courage, strength, balance, compassion, perseverance—or not. To be able to keep being an inspiration to others, you yourself need to have worthy

role models to look up to. These can be other employees in your workplace, people in your personal life, and even key figures in history.

As time goes on and the new staff are no longer new, you need to continue to earn and keep their trust, if you as a leader are to maintain a supportive atmosphere, the sense of a welcoming and psychologically safe “tribe” for your staff.

So, supervisors, set the tone with your subordinates – both the new and the seasoned employees.

- Examine your values. Are they constructive or are they likely to lead to preventable, unnecessary conflict?
- Seek training in emotional/social intelligence skills and in leadership skills.
- Listen well.
- Exercise self-control, remaining respectful always.
- Conduct regular check-ins with your subordinates.
- Get to know your people, so you can identify their strengths and point them out to them.
- “Catch” them doing something well, and highlight that.
- Have “huddle times” with them.
- Study and discuss policies and procedures with them.
- Invite them to ask questions, and then answer them.
- Empathize with them about work stressors, such as the mandatory overtime.
- Pitch in at times and take a shift, so they can go home.
- Hold yourself accountable, and acknowledge to your staff your errors.
- Continue to learn from your mistakes and from others’ mistakes.
- Apologize when you drop the ball or react poorly.
- Executive staff, come in to make rounds and visit with staff working nights.
- Advocate for your staff. They DESERVE it. And you NEED them.
- And always remember the importance of tending to your needs for your own refueling, in addition to tending to the needs of others.

And one last, but crucial, thought. Given the grueling conditions of corrections work, it’ll be a lot easier for leaders to continue to remain engaged at the heart level with their staff, if they themselves are supported by their own supervisors.

APPROACHING DISTRESSED STAFF

BY AN ANONYMOUS ASSOCIATE WARDEN (RETIRED)

Statistics show the results of stress that correctional professionals experience. This issue should be dealt with head-on at every opportunity, with no minimizing. Staff needs to know the warning signs of stress-related negative behavior and its effects on staff, families and friends.

Staff also needs to understand that help is available to cope with stress, and that seeking such help does not mean staff are weak or aren't making the cut. Stress is a natural by-product of working in corrections. When we are physically ill, it is natural to go to a medical doctor. When we experience emotional distress, it ought to be natural to go to someone who can help.

It is never an easy task to approach a staff member who you, as their supervisor, believe is having personal problems. There is one rule that applies though. **Care enough to confront.** Staff members struggling with personal issues are not outwardly focused. Rather, they are inwardly focused. Such staff members are a detriment to themselves and to the safety of other staff and offenders. They are probably not fully aware of what is happening in their environment. Distractions may result in security failures. People can get hurt. Lives can be lost.

How you confront is just as important as that you do confront.

Let the staff member know your expectations and the importance of remaining focused. I trust you know your staff well enough that you can decide on the best approach to take with each one. Some require "kid gloves," others require more direct communication. The bottom line is that you are a supervisor in a correctional environment, responsible for the safety of the staff and offenders you supervise. Are you doing all you can to assure their safety within the policies of your facility?

Remember never to dismiss staff who are suffering as "weak" or "not worth the effort." The world's greatest Leader once said, "Let he who is not guilty cast the first stone." Have you never



struggled? How would you want to be treated if the situation were reversed? You are dealing with a person who needs help and perhaps doesn't realize it or doesn't know what to do about it. **Care enough to confront, and do so compassionately.**

Starting such an intervention can be a challenge. NEVER do this in front of other staff or offenders. Dignity and pride are important. If you take these away, you have lost the battle to help a staff member. Confront the staff member privately by saying something like: "I am concerned that you seem to be distracted lately, not focused on your job. Is there anything you need to talk to someone about?" Ask them not to divulge personal information to you, especially of a medical nature, but tell them that there are professionals to whom they can speak confidentially.

Get to know your staff well enough ahead of time so you can formulate the best approach for each case as the need arises. Many jurisdictions have in-house services available to staff. Know these resources and make sure your staff knows them. Encourage the staff to avail themselves of these resources as needed.

Corrections is a difficult and stressful occupation, and sooner or later most of us need to reach out for assistance to cope. It may become necessary to make this an expectation for some staff.

Until the issue is resolved, you could perhaps assign the staff member to a less stressful post in the facility. Always be upfront and honest. Let the staff member know you wish to help. In the event your jurisdiction does not have in-house services of this nature or the staff member does not want to use them for whatever reason, offer to staff a list of community and **national resources**. Also *Desert Waters' Ventline* is an excellent resource, and it is offered at no charge to staff and their families.





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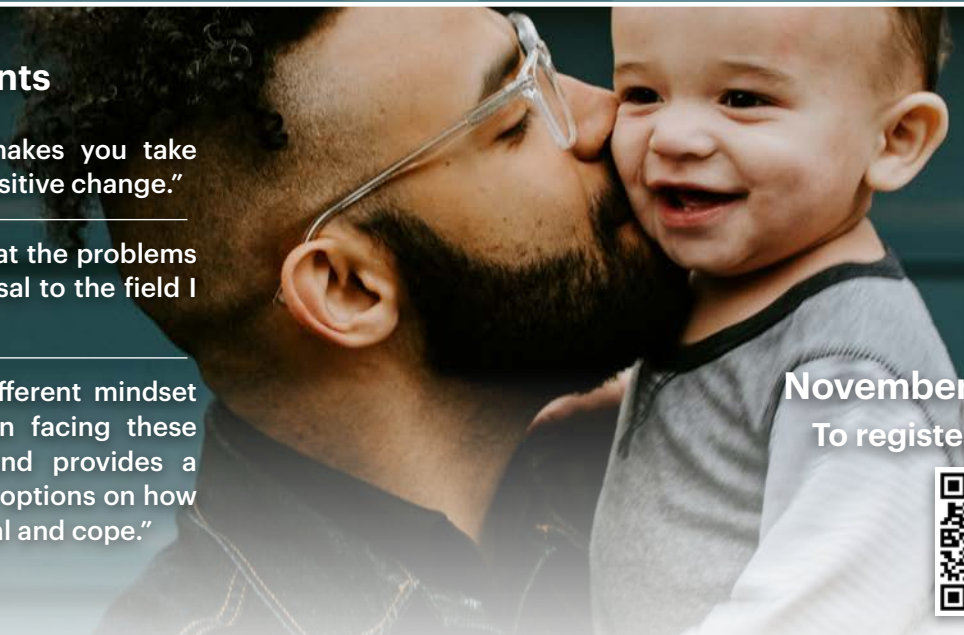
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- When Work Comes Home
- What Might My Loved One Face at Work?
- Help for the Family
- The Basics of Self-care
- Family Scenarios



FOLLOW UP! FOLLOW UP! FOLLOW UP!

BY LT. BRYAN HUGHES

This article is for all staff within the Department of Corrections regardless of what state you live in, but here I really want to speak to Supervisors and Managers. Before I go into my rant, I want to say that anything I talk about in my articles, you can be sure I have either done it, experienced it or had it done to me. I am speaking from my own experiences, so just know I am not judging anyone. Most of the things I discuss I have done myself and I continuously learn from them.

With that being said, let me get to the point. I feel we as Supervisors and/or Managers need to be better at follow up care with our staff. I am guilty as charged and I am really trying to get better at this. Some of us hired in so long ago, that prison has continuously changed over the years and it's a whole different world than when we started. When I hired in over 24 years ago you had to be tough. There was no whining or complaining about your assignment or your partner. At least not to a Supervisor. And when we were involved in a critical incident, we weren't allowed to be human and allow it to affect us. But it did affect us. We just couldn't show it because that would make you weak. You would deal with what we call a Significant Emotional Event, and were expected to go right back to work like nothing ever happened. Oftentimes it was never spoken of again. If you did make a comment about a serious situation you were involved in, you might have been told to suck it up, get back to work, stop whining, just quit, McDonald's is hiring, the list goes on and on.

I've said these things at times myself. Thankfully I've become wiser over the years and don't make these senseless comments anymore. What we need to do is become better at follow up! If we have a serious assault such as a stabbing, after the scene is handled and my staff have control, I will absolutely ask if everyone is okay. Of course, they are going to tell me yes. At that moment, with adrenaline pumping and other staff members around they are going to tell me they are fine. What I need to work on, and I am, is follow up. Maybe they are okay, but maybe they aren't. Instead of pretending it wasn't a traumatic event, instead of telling them to just get back to work, I'm going to ask if everyone is okay. Depending on their answer at that moment will dictate my next move. But what I do different now is, I go back to these people a week later, two weeks later, a month later, and just check in.

I might say something like, "That stabbing we dealt with last week was pretty brutal. Are you doing okay with it?" Maybe they are fine, and that is great. Maybe they haven't slept more than 2 hours at a time since that stabbing. Maybe they are paranoid at work thinking they may be next, and that is affecting their job performance. Maybe that was their first stabbing, and it was such a culture shock than the world they come from, they are having nightmares about it.

Should these people just "Suck it up," "Get back to work," "Stop whining," "Just quit," or "Apply at McDonald's?" Absolutely not. These people should be able to come to a Supervisor and express what they are going through. They need to be able to reach out to someone, anyone, and know what they are telling

you is confidential, and they won't be judged. It is essential that they can trust their supervisor in times like this and not have to worry about repercussions or being treated differently. Obviously if they are an immediate threat to themselves or others than that would need to be addressed differently.

I can already hear some of you "old heads" now. Please tell me this isn't one of those "tell me about your feelings" articles. I understand exactly where you are coming from. I used to feel the same way. I don't share stories and experiences to brag or share my resume, but I have done a lot, experienced a lot, and been through a lot. I was letting this job bring me down and make me hardened. Instead, I now like to use my experiences to relate to people that may be struggling with things they have seen and/or done. We as corrections employees are excellent at putting out fires. We get called to emergencies and we handle them like pros. We lay our lives on the line every single day for our partners, prisoners, non-custody staff, and maybe even visitors. We risk our lives daily without a second thought, but when it comes to self-care or to offering others emotional support, we hesitate to seek or offer help, or don't reach out at all.

A few years ago I was the miserable, hard-nosed Supervisor telling people to quit if they couldn't handle the things we see. We had a prisoner die in a dramatic way. It wasn't natural causes. Two of the Officers that performed CPR took a couple weeks off after this event. In all my wisdom, my advice was, "If you can't handle that, this may not be the job for you." This was the first time these new Officers had dealt with a prisoner that had died right in front of them, and that's the best I could do. I cringe every time I think of those words I spoke that day. I hope they don't remember me saying it to them, but they probably do. I sure can't forget it. These Officers were dealing with things that they had never seen or had to do. They deserved and were owed my support, not my great advice to quit.

So, what was my turning point in my thought process? Why the sudden change from old, grumpy veteran Supervisor to empathetic and caring Supervisor? The number one reason is because it's just human decency to be supportive of our fellow brothers and sisters. But most importantly, I am tired of burying corrections Officers due to suicides. It crushes my soul to hear of another staff suicide. In my state, the numbers grow every year, and this must stop. We must let officers know we are there for them. They can come to us with concerns and open up honestly about things they are going through. I am working hard to let staff know I care, and they can come to me. And guess what, when staff know they can trust you and they can speak openly with you, they will. I've had staff thank me for just listening to them about their situation, and that is rewarding in itself. I may never know if any of my words or actions stop anyone from attempting or completing suicide, but I will work every day to be there for anyone that needs an ear.

Please be there for each other. This is a dangerous and stressful career. We don't need any added stress. Instead of criticizing staff, let's reach out. And FOLLOW UP! Check in more than once or twice. I promise you will be surprised how soon someone will open up to you. We all need someone to trust and depend on. We need someone to care. Who better to look out for each other than us?

Be safe, be vigilant and have each other's backs!

HINTS FOR SUPERVISORS

BY ANONYMOUS CORRECTIONS FRONTLINE STAFF

This article was printed several years ago in the Correctional Oasis, and we are reprinting it, as it is still relevant.

Much is written about leadership in corrections. Here is input from seasoned corrections officers, as to what they need from their supervisors. Many thanks to all of you who contributed your thoughts and suggestions!

Correctional Officer #1

My best supervisor:

- a. Pointed out our strengths.
- b. Used our strengths.
- c. Rewarded our strengths.
- d. Trained us regarding our weaknesses.
- e. Was a good listener.
- f. Allowed us to vent and voice our opinion.

Correctional Officer #2

1. Remember that you were once a CO.
2. When COs work overtime they are giving up their free/family time. So, they should be taken care of as far as duty assignment before your normal shift officers.
3. Work some CO overtime, so that COs can have a little break from all the OT.
4. Lead by example.
5. Insure that COs have the tools they need to do their job to the best of their ability.
6. Check on your officers' well-being, not only their performance.
7. Remember that just because you are a Sergeant does not mean that you know everything. There is nothing wrong with asking a CO a question.
8. Never embarrass an officer in front of another officer.

Correctional Officer #3

1. One of the most respected supervisors I've had was an old Army guy who would come into the mod and ask me, "What can I do to help you do your job better?" He said that is the Army way of doing things and it always made the troops feel supported. He truly wanted us to have what we needed to do our jobs.
2. PLEASE respond to your COs' emails, phone calls, questions, comments, etc. I will take a "No can do" over no response at all.
3. Don't ask your COs to do things you wouldn't do, such as to listen to someone continually threaten them or constantly bang on windows.
4. It is so easy for supervisors to become lazy. PLEASE do not become lazy. Your COs can't afford to be or they may be risking their life or someone else's.

Correctional Officer #4

1. You need to come to the new position with a clean slate for everyone. As we progress through our career we have many preconceived notions about our fellow officers. These are formed by our association with them as co-workers. One must forget all this and start anew.
2. Lay down your expectations to all the people you supervise, and stay as consistent as possible about your expectations with everyone.

3. LEAD, LEAD, LEAD! Be prepared to step up and make decisions!!!
4. Not only do you need to know your job, you need to know mine. The days of saying that you have done my job are gone. You will need to stay abreast of the constantly changing workplace, not only of your job but of those under you as well.
5. Never take the word of an inmate over that of your officers, unless there is other substantiated evidence that your subordinates are lying to you.
6. Never blanket punish your subordinates. Step up and single out your problems. It's part of being a responsible supervisor, no matter who the offending person is.
7. Be prepared to face YOUR superiors with the issues brought to you by subordinates. Don't hide issues to make your shift look good.
8. Be personable, approachable, intelligent, and likable.
9. If all else fails, kick ass and take names!!

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

Example is not the
main thing in
influencing others;
it is the only thing.

Albert Schweitzer



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Advancing the well-being of correctional and other public safety staff and their families, and the health of correctional and other public safety agencies, through data-driven, skill-based training

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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional and other public safety agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

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