

The missing link in reentry

Changing prison culture

BY JOHN A. SHUFORD



One of the most significant developments in criminal justice policy over the past 15 years has been a fundamental shift in thinking about the primary purpose of prisons and jails. Not long ago, elected officials saw the principal responsibility of corrections administrators as providing for the care, custody, and control of people who are incarcerated. Today, there is widespread agreement that government has a responsibility to ensure that when people are released to the community from jail or prison, they are less likely to reoffend than they were at the start of their sentence.¹

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The Second Chance Act and the recent Justice Reinvestment Act have funded many noteworthy advances in reducing recidivism. Most of these programs have focused on preincarceration diversion and services and postrelease services, which are critically important. These include drug courts, veteran treatment courts, Stepping Up Initiative (which aims to reduce the amount of jail inmates with mental illness), other mental health diversion programs, Ban the Box (a campaign to end employers asking if applicants have a criminal record), government IDs, reducing technical parole/probation violations, etc. However, as corrections officials acknowledge, reentry begins when an inmate walks through the gate into the prison.

Reentry and prison culture

If released inmates walk out of the prison where they had been marginalized, alienated and desocialized, their chance of success is greatly diminished. There must be an increased focus on what happens while someone is incarcerated. The services and culture in the prison significantly impact each inmate's rehabilitation, making postrelease success more or less likely. Recently, there has been an increase in inmate services for treatment and vocational training; however, leadership gave little attention to prison culture. A coercive culture decreases the mental wellbeing of staff and inmates, making services less effective and rendering the daily routine an "us vs. them" struggle.

This kind of coercive culture in prisons is relatively common, creating high stress levels in staff and resulting in a high divorce rate, addictions, high suicide rate, 30 percent with PTSD, 30 percent with major depressive disorder, high staff turnover and use of sick leave, and a life expectancy 20 years shorter than the general population (59 years vs. 79 years).² The high turnover and use of sick leave results in staff shortages, which increases the stress on those remaining. In fact, when staff get asked why they leave correctional services, they don't answer that it is because of inmates, but rather, they leave due to poor supervision and stress caused by other staff. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) reports the typical problem areas with staff:

- Lack of trust.
- Lack of recognition.

- Unclear reward structure.
- Lack of good communication.
- Procedures not being followed.
- Lack of respect.
- Lack of diversity.
- Sexual misconduct.
- Use of force.
- Corruption.³

All of these factors relate to the working culture within a prison. Thus, if there is to be a significant reduction in recidivism, there must be a significant improvement in the working culture among prison staff, i.e., a significant improvement in how staff relate to each other. The North Carolina Department of Public Safety, under the leadership of Chief Deputy Secretary David Guice and Director of Prisons Kenneth Lassiter, have initiated a staff development training program that will directly address the issue of improving the working culture in North Carolina prisons.

The only way to change the prison culture is to modify its focus, i.e., add to the goal of security the goal of staff well-being. If you keep doing what you've done, you will keep getting what you've got

Types of organizational cultures

NIC, in its series, "Culture and Change Management: Using APEX to Facilitate Organizational Change," describes four types of working cultures: hierarchy, clan, market and adhocracy. The hierarchy culture focuses on security and prioritizes structure, control, coordination, efficiency, stability, timeliness and smooth processes. The clan culture values cohesion, participation, communication, mentoring, nurturing and tight social networks, and it concerns itself with the well-being of staff. The market culture is results-oriented, i.e., focused on the final

product or outcome of the service offered. Hopefully, the outcome is the rehabilitation of inmates. Finally, the adhocracy culture is dynamic, entrepreneurial and values innovation, adaptability, risk taking, and cutting-edge services or products.⁴ The hierarchy culture must be present, because without security, chaos will follow. However, if security is the only focus, the working culture will become coercive.

To the foundation of security (hierarchy) must be added elements of the clan culture, which values staff, the most important asset of a prison beyond bricks and mortar. All too often, facilities view staff as expendable rather than essential. When a well-functioning staff exists, attention can be drawn to developing the market culture elements or the rehabilitation of the inmates. Now, with a focus on rehabilitation from a base of security, the creative elements of the adhocracy culture can be explored.

When all four cultures are present, the prison will become a high-functioning organization that values staff and produces meaningful results, and its image in the community will be transformed. This must be the long-term goal: an organization that is highly prized as a place where people want to work. Turnover will dramatically drop and staff shortages will be a thing of the past.

Another way to look at this process is in terms of the goals of the organization:

- **Current goals** = just security.
- **Culture-change goals** = security, then the well-being of staff, then the rehabilitation of inmates.

The only way to change the prison culture is to modify its focus, i.e., add to the goal of security the goal of staff well-being. If you keep doing what you've done, you will keep getting what you've got. The addition of staff well-being will also improve the security and the safety of staff. Then, add the goal of inmate rehabilitation, which will also improve security and reduce staff stress, and all three goals are in place, providing a full transformation of the working culture in a prison.

Changing prison culture

To effectively change the working culture, a top-down conditions for bottom-up change approach must be considered. One such approach is called PASR (Policies,

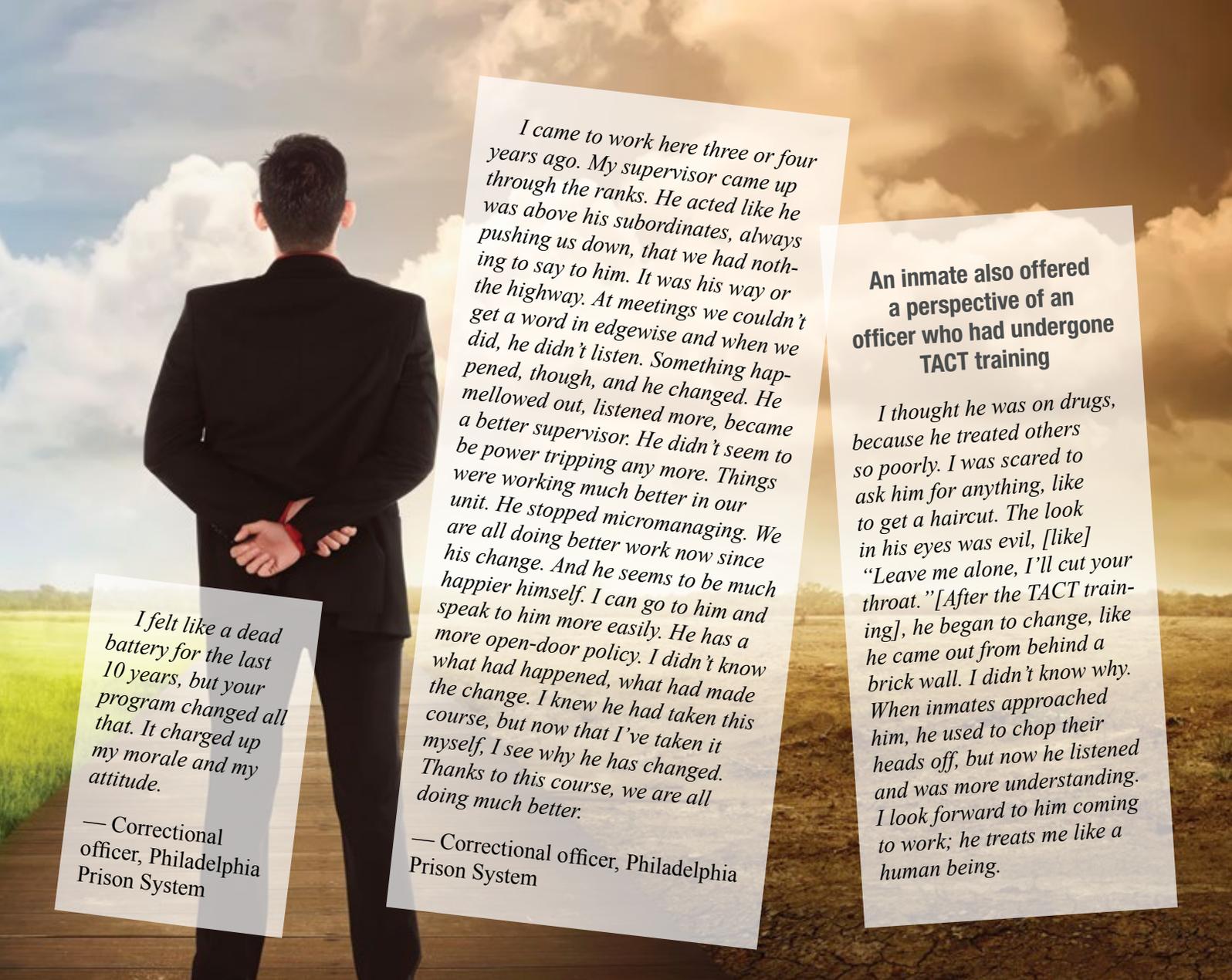
Other comments from correctional staff about TACT training

I personally have seen a major difference in the way staff perceive themselves, the way they interact with one another and the way they interact with support staff, whether they be social service or maintenance. Also, the rate of sick [leave] abuse or not coming to work has dropped and the overall attitude of the workplace has improved Our prison system, like so many other departments, has had its share of conflict between the various disciplines within the department. However, this training has resulted in a new camaraderie between those same disciplines. It's amazing to see how staff who have had the training are working together, solving problems and getting the job done without conflict.

— Captain, Philadelphia Prison System

Attitude, Skills and Reinforcers). Policies will create the top-down conditions, and changes in staff attitudes and skill sets will produce bottom-up change with reinforcers continuing the change process through time. This approach incorporates four organizational development strategies that create a positive and higher performing organizational culture purported by NIC in its "Culture and Change Management" series:

- Create a positive tone in the organizational climate.
- Promote positive interpersonal relationships with and between staff.
- Stress positive communication at all levels of the organization.
- Infuse purpose and meaning into the work life of all staff.⁵



I felt like a dead battery for the last 10 years, but your program changed all that. It charged up my morale and my attitude.

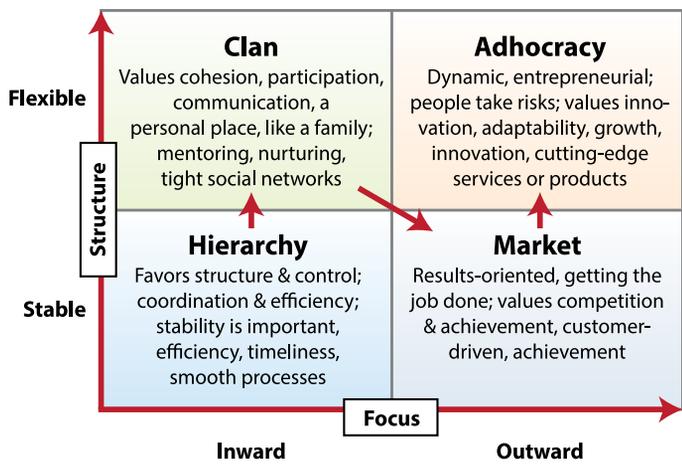
— Correctional officer, Philadelphia Prison System

I came to work here three or four years ago. My supervisor came up through the ranks. He acted like he was above his subordinates, always pushing us down, that we had nothing to say to him. It was his way or the highway. At meetings we couldn't get a word in edgewise and when we did, he didn't listen. Something happened, though, and he changed. He mellowed out, listened more, became a better supervisor. He didn't seem to be power tripping any more. Things were working much better in our unit. He stopped micromanaging. We are all doing better work now since his change. And he seems to be much happier himself. I can go to him and speak to him more easily. He has a more open-door policy. I didn't know what had happened, what had made the change. I knew he had taken this course, but now that I've taken it myself, I see why he has changed. Thanks to this course, we are all doing much better.

— Correctional officer, Philadelphia Prison System

An inmate also offered a perspective of an officer who had undergone TACT training

I thought he was on drugs, because he treated others so poorly. I was scared to ask him for anything, like to get a haircut. The look in his eyes was evil, [like] "Leave me alone, I'll cut your throat." [After the TACT training], he began to change, like he came out from behind a brick wall. I didn't know why. When inmates approached him, he used to chop their heads off, but now he listened and was more understanding. I look forward to him coming to work; he treats me like a human being.



TACT training

Built into the PASR approach is the TACT (Team-building, Attitude, Conflict and Transformation) staff-development training.⁶ This training modality immerses the participants in actual experiences of the kind of desired culture. It engages, energizes and empowers participants to make positive changes in their work life and, thus, their part of the prison work culture. This training is an antidote to staff isolation, which contributes to suicide, PTSD, major depressive disorder, addiction, divorce, shortened life expectancy and turnover. With this training, staff feel connected to each other, and departments cooperate more fully. The change in attitude and skills also improves staff relations with inmates and with

others off the job — especially at home. This change is not temporary, as indicated by the fact that 75 to 85 percent of staff in the Philadelphia prison system reported continued use of the skills six months after the training.⁷ In that same prison system, at a meeting with the system’s administration on March 1, 2002, departments reported working better together, and the intake unit reduced its documented use of force by 94 percent from five or six incidents per month to four or five in two years.

One department training academy was so dysfunctional and acrimonious that they were in the process of bringing in all new staff (except the director and deputy director). Before anyone was transferred, however, staff underwent the TACT training with positive results: no one got transferred, individuals dealt with conflicts in positive ways, the academy became an effective training team and individual instructors improved their effectiveness by incorporating some of the TACT training elements in their courses. Craig Conway, director of the New Jersey Department of Corrections Bureau of Training, wrote:

Words cannot express the value of the training you have conducted at the Academy. The impact you have had on my staff, personally as well as professionally, is remarkable. There is actually a paradigm shift from rigidity and inflexibility ingrained in corrections, to the understanding and acceptance of the value of community and teamwork. Your [effective] Supervisor Training certainly addressed the [Bureau] of Training’s need to have our supervisors better enabled to motivate and lead line staff. I am constantly amazed at the transformation our staff experiences during your training sessions. My greatest hope is that the teamwork and supervisory tenets you shared with us will eventually become the tenets by which the Department of Corrections manages.

One interesting factor about the TACT training is that staff attitude does not matter when they come in. Because they are mandated to do so, many do not want to take the training, and yet, within an hour, they become very engaged and have so much fun they forget their negative attitude.

Warden Chris Money of the Marion Correctional Institution (MCI) in Ohio commented:

It is generally thought to be the best training program that staff has participated in. The labor unions are strong supporters of it and employee grievances have dropped to an all-time low. Thank you for helping us change the culture at MCI. It is the best investment of resources that we have ever made.

To change the working culture in the long run, staff must feel supported by administration, so policies need to be addressed. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to get staff input through committees. NIC has promoted the Organizational Dialogue Meeting (ODM), where all levels are represented, and the group has the authority to make policy decisions, of course, with the approval of administration. Whether or not the ODM is utilized, committees need to be established with input from all levels. One principle that has proven valuable is to make decisions at the lowest level possible. This means encouraging input from correctional officers, which often results in better decisions that are supported by those who will enforce them. These committees address not only the “P” (policies) in PASR, but also the “R” (reinforcers), because staff feel more ownership. For another “reinforcer,” one might place posters around the facility, similar to what is being done with PREA.

All-around change

Changing prison culture cannot be done solely by policy. Staff will comply with policy, however, that is not enough to change attitudes and thus the culture. Cultural change requires commitment from staff to transform the culture, and that will come when they have a sense of hope that change is possible and beneficial. The TACT[®] training accomplishes this by giving staff the experience of a trusting, safe and connecting experience with all levels and departments. Once staff is onboard, then programs focusing on inmate rehabilitation will have more impact and the working culture will improve. This will result in less staff-on-staff stress, better job performance, better interdepartmental cooperation and better health outcomes overall for staff.



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Endnotes on p. 102

CRITICAL MASS

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WHERE, OH WHERE, DO WE FIND THE TALENT?

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