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6 ways investing in leadership provides benefits behind bars

The corrections world is changing – have you equipped your people to change with it? What can happen if you don't? Investing in stronger leaders can save facilities big in the long run. Learn how Excelerated Leadership Partners' unique approach can benefit your system

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Few American industries have been spared from current workforce shortages. In corrections, though, the situation is especially troubling.

In Georgia, an officer told a state House committee last year **he had only 6–7 corrections officers to oversee 1,200 people and had been responsible for roughly 400 by himself**. In West Virginia, **the governor has declared a state of emergency for the state's prison system and called in the National Guard to help**. In Michigan, they're discussing **luring retired officers back to work by letting them keep their retirement benefits**.

Part of this is likely a result of familiar factors like low pay and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in jails and prisons. But some of it could also be attributable to a traditional culprit that's hamstrung many fields: *poor leadership*.

In an environment as unique as corrections, leaders need the right skills and approaches – and those aren't the same as they once were. Today the job still includes familiar challenges like managing budgets and ensuring safety and security for both inmates and staff, but leaders must also pay heed to a range of more modern concepts that are vital to an institution's smooth functioning. These include more abstract concerns like culture, transparency, teamwork, and ethics.



An investment in developing leaders and improving future operations can end up saving correctional facilities big in the long run. (fpphotobank)

Those who neglect such areas often experience the harsh truth of business: People don't leave jobs – they leave bosses. Sustaining healthy institutions requires developing bosses – and those who will become bosses – into the best leaders they can be.

WHO'S TRAINING TOMORROW'S LEADERS?

In the correctional world, leaders are often promoted in hierarchical fashion, based on factors like length of service or performance in a subordinate position. "It can be very much like the military," said Philip Swift, Ph.D., city marshal in Fort Worth, Texas, a veteran of more than two decades in law enforcement and corrections.

But being a good corrections officer doesn't always translate into being an effective supervisor, manager, or executive. The skill sets that drive excellence in managerial roles differ markedly from those focused on execution, such as that of a corrections officer. And while the military focuses heavily on officer development, many correctional systems don't emphasize instilling leaders with the traits they'll need to excel in a modern system.

While some leaders in such situations may adapt and thrive, others will struggle. That can lead to a cascade of problems that become difficult to contain.

"You have to think about larger policy development, budget and all these other things," said Swift. "Developing employees to oversee those positions definitely can be a weakness. And in agencies where you don't realize you're doing a bad job at it; you eventually see an erosion in quality."

In a field where institutions have often been left to fend for themselves, there is now help available in the area of leadership. **Excelerated Leadership Partners** (ELP) is a Virginia-based company that brings experience in corrections and other high-risk, safety-intensive fields such as commercial nuclear power to **leadership training for jails and prisons**. The company helps institutions improve their systems and processes and develop cultures centered on trust, respect, and accountability. ELP's approach starts with a needs analysis that drives customized leadership academies to give personnel key tools, paired with a unique strategic performance management process to facilitate process and behavior improvements. The results include more focused and aligned leadership, better safety, improved transparency, and less turnover.

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT TO THRIVE

Investing in leadership can bring a range of direct benefits to correctional environments.

Hiring and retention — With everyone from local police departments to McDonald's desperate to hire (and often paying more for workers), restless employees have unprecedented options. During the ongoing "great resignation," **around four million U.S. workers a month are leaving their jobs**. Money is one driver, but virtually every look at why employees move on cites issues that result from poor leadership, including lack of **appreciation, engagement, challenge** and **opportunities to grow**. Investing in leadership development equips employers to provide their personnel an optimal environment to thrive and helps eliminate the toxicity that drives them away.

Culture and morale — Beyond improving nuts-and-bolts systems and processes, investing in leadership training demonstrates to workers that they have value. If people are a facility's greatest asset, they are worth nurturing, growing, and striving to keep around. Doing that contributes to a positive culture and high morale.

Accountability — Some institutions may not have detailed protocols that spell out clear standards to govern behavior and operations. At a time when many jails and prisons have too few staff for too many prisoners, that can be dangerous. Corrections officers who feel overwhelmed or threatened may be quicker to cut corners or resort to force and open their systems to legal claims. Developing and holding providers to clear standards is a core component of improved leadership – and will cost less than paying out a judgment.

Inmate safety and wellness — Inmates may have neglected their health on the outside or be subject to threats and violence or self-harm inside. Institutions must be able to show they're attentive and proactive on inmate health matters. "Even for deputies making rounds, it's no longer good enough just to write in a notebook, 'Hey, I made a round on this hour, and everything was OK,'" said Swift. "The expectation is that we will have better documentation than that, and we'll be able to say, 'When I saw this inmate the last time, they were healthy, and nothing was going on.' Anything that contradicts that obviously increases your liability. Documentation is a huge issue." Training is important to teach the value and key aspects of documentation and make sure it's always done correctly.

Corruption and ethics—**Contraband is a problem in jails and prisons, and corrections officers have been implicated in helping inmates obtain it**. Facilities can combat this directly with technologies like scanners, but instilling leaders with a strong ethical baseline can provide a larger solution to issues

that might lead to compromise. An ethical workforce will do the right thing no matter the dilemma, reducing not just one symptom but an entire set of problems.

Transparency and public trust — Both lawmakers and members of the public may rarely hear about corrections until things go wrong. They may be ignorant or mistrustful of how things operate. Like many industries, corrections have had to become more outward-facing and answerable to the public. In traditionally insular systems, that requires new skill sets. Correctional leaders also need to be able to present their cases publicly when competing for limited funding. These skills have their own rewards, but the systems around them benefit also by demonstrating that, by taking discrete steps to improve, they care about doing the right things.

INVEST NOW TO SAVE LATER

Hiring, onboarding, and training new workers isn't cheap, but defending claims against your facility can be devastating. A front-end investment in developing leaders and improving future operations by creating a more focused, aligned, and accountable leadership team can end up saving correctional facilities big in the long run.

Your employees – your team – deserve great leadership.

Visit *Excelerated Leadership Partners*, call 703-999-5676, or email Robin@elpadvantage.com for more information.

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