

CORRECTIONAL CONTRADICTIONS: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING OFFICER BURNOUT

By Sarah J. Tracy

"Are there any more questions?" asks the jail captain during a correctional officer training session. There is silence. Then, finally: "No questions because we're so satisfied," is the response.

"Come on," replies the captain. "No questions?" Another officer mumbles, "I'm keeping busy back here. I find my questions get me into trouble."

This was just one of many exchanges observed during an 11-month research project (May 1999 through March 2000), during which time in-depth ethnographic research tracing issues of burnout and stress among correctional officers was conducted. The study included interaction with 109 correctional staff employed at a county mixed-gender jail, "Nouveau Jail," and a state women's prison, "Women's Minimum," (both pseudonyms). Officers were shadowed as they worked, training documents were examined and 22 recorded interviews were conducted with correctional employees.

The following quotations illustrate some of the more problematic mentalities found among some correctional officers, namely withdrawal and detachment, literalism and paranoia — central manifestations of organizational burnout.

"They want someone who's like a robot. ... If in the rule book, there's a Y, you either go left or right. ... The person that doesn't know how to get there is the person that they want because ... if you don't know what it is, look it up. It's right there. What do I do? It tells you what to do in every situation so there's no room for you

to think," according to one correctional officer who was interviewed.

"I guess I grew hard and cold about a lot of things. The biggest thing that doesn't affect me is injuries and death. I just don't have the same feelings I used to have," said another correctional officer.

"I find myself fighting to not be so paranoid. I'll go to the store. I'll go to Kmart or Target ... and I'll look at somebody and you'll think, he looks like an inmate. I have no idea where it comes from ... and I don't even know if I'm right," explained a third correctional officer.

Beyond an Individualized Approach to Burnout

The idea that officers experience stress and burnout is nothing new. Criminal justice research paints a picture of correctional officers as hardened, cynical, stressed, ritualistic and alienated. These problems have been linked to high levels of turnover, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress and a life expectancy of 59 years, according to *Stress Management for Correctional Officers and Their Families*, by Frances E. Check.

While many correctional facilities have increasingly realized and attended to these issues, burnout and stress are often treated as problems that correctional officers can and should deal with on their own. As such, employees are usually trained to identify personal stressors and address them using tactics such as biofeedback, meditation and relaxation techniques. And when employees are considered too stressed to do their work effectively, they are referred to employee assistance programs to work out their emotional difficulties behind the scenes. In other words, programs regularly focus on stress and burnout as an individual pathology. This organizational practice is problematic for three central reasons.

First, while individualistic stress interventions may assist with personal coping, they gloss the working patterns that contribute to and define stress. Second, individual remedies such as meditation and muscle relaxation do more to reactively focus on the symptoms of stress rather than to proactively tackle the job stressors themselves. Third, due to the private, separated nature of employee assistance programs and the fact that they have historically been associated

with alcoholic or otherwise deviant employees, the programs tend to be stigmatized and thus, underutilized.¹ These problems suggest that understanding and tackling issues of burnout must go beyond individual treatment of “sick” employees to examining the organizational structures and norms that encourage and construct stress in the first place.

Contradictory Tensions

Indeed, the observation conducted at the jail and prison during an entire year illustrated that correctional officers’ issues with paranoia, literalism, withdrawal and detachment may be directly associated with the norms or expectations that mark correctional organizations — norms that together form contradictory tensions that many officers find emotionally difficult to navigate. While Table 1 lists these norms and resulting tensions in a neat and tidy manner, these norms could only be classified and labeled after a detailed analysis of the numerous data collected from interviews, shadowing officers doing their jobs, and investigating training sessions and documents.

As summarized in Table 1, four tensions characterize officers’ everyday work. On one hand, officers are encouraged to be respectful of inmates, whether that means calling them by a courtesy title or holding open the door. At the same time, officers must be consistently suspicious of inmates and wary of being drawn into their games. As a result, they must manage a tension of respect versus suspect.

Also, while most correctional officers agree that they are not coun-

selors, officers and administrators alike embrace the idea that officers should listen to, interact with and nurture inmates. However, they are also expected to be tough and detached. Officers are told in no uncertain terms that they should not “get personal” with inmates. Through physical training sessions and other activities, officers are taught how to be physically and mentally tough. Officers reiterate the importance of toughness in their informal talk, saying things such as a good officer is “hard” and “not a chocolate heart.” These norms thus construct the tension of nurture versus discipline.

In addition, officers are expected to follow rules and procedures, a norm epitomized by the mantra that good officers should be firm, fair and consistent. In other words, officers should treat all inmates the same and not make exceptions for favorites. At the same time, officers who strictly follow the rules are often labeled “badge-happy” and denigrated by other officers and administrators. Indeed, many officers indicate they prefer laid-back officers who know how to use their judgment and make exceptions in the gray areas. While some officers are able to creatively and flexibly follow the rules, others have difficulty managing the tension of consistency versus flexibility.

Finally, officers are encouraged to rely on their co-workers for backup, yet both formal and informal organizational messages tell officers that they should not be too needy. Officers themselves indicate they prefer to work with colleagues who do not complain about the job or their personal problems. Similarly, while officers are largely encouraged to handle

problems themselves before running to the boss, they are simultaneously instructed that they have the responsibility to inform administrators about any wrongdoing among their peers. Therefore, officers must carefully walk a tightrope in balancing the tension of solidarity versus autonomy.

These four organizational tensions — respect versus suspect, nurture versus discipline, flexibility versus consistency and solidarity versus autonomy — serve as the mortar of correctional officer life. An attempt to resolve them or weigh in on just one side of the tension would be as practically futile as it would be philosophically unsound. However, correctional administrators should consider how these contradictions play a role in constructing officer stress and burnout. When confronted by contradiction, people usually respond with a combination of confusion, displeasure and anxiety.² And people who hear dilemmas as “double binds” are susceptible to even more debilitating emotional reactions.³

Debilitating Emotional Reactions

A double bind is a paradoxical injunction, such as “ignore this sentence,” that to obey is to disobey and to disobey is to obey. This is contrasted from a simple contradiction, such as “go and stop.” While recipients of contradictory commands can alternate between or just focus upon one or the other of the contradiction poles, research indicates that receivers of double binds become psychologically paralyzed, overanalyzing what they are to do and typical-

Table 1. Contradictory Tensions That Mark the Correctional Officer Job

Organizational Norms In Tension	Contradictory Tension	
Respect inmates	Suspect inmates	Respect vs. Suspect
Nurture inmates	Be tough Maintain detachment	Nurture vs. Discipline
Follow rules and procedures	Be flexible	Consistency vs. Flexibility
Rely on others Handle problems among officers	Do not be needy Inform supervisors about fellow officers	Solidarity vs. Autonomy

ly demonstrate feeling states of paranoia, literalism and withdrawal. Indeed, interviews and participant observation with officers indicated that these reactions are common among correctional employees.

This study revealed that many officers possess a literalistic “just tell me what to do” attitude. Some officers felt as though organizational administrators actually desired unthinking, robot-like employees saying things such as, “Thinking too much in this job can get you into trouble.” Administrators stated that too many officers thought in black and white and avoided making complex decisions.

A withdrawn and detached demeanor also marked how officers approached their jobs. Many refrained from asking questions or discussing problematic issues with superiors. Some officers believed their actions had no impact on the

organization, and in turn, they became hardened, withdrawn and, in some cases, complacent.

During the study, officers described themselves as suspicious and paranoid. As one officer explained, “You’re constantly on the lookout. You’re constantly wondering whether the inmates are going to have a bad day, react and jump on you.” Officers also illustrated mistrust of colleagues and organizational administrators, saying things like, “I trust the inmates more than the officers sometimes.” Officers’ distrust, paranoia and suspicion stayed with them even when they left the facilities to go home. One officer explained, “I’m always aware of where I’m sitting, where my back is. And that’s something I’ve kept with me.”

Analysis of officers’ detachment, withdrawal, paranoia and literalism,

coupled with the understanding that the life of a correctional officer is largely contradictory in nature, suggests that officers’ challenges with burnout are very likely associated with hearing organizational tensions as double binds. Understanding this connection is important because it suggests a path for dealing with correctional officer burnout as a structural, collective issue. Namely, this finding lays the groundwork for understanding ways that organizations can encourage officers to view correctional tensions in potentially more satisfying, less debilitating ways.

Communication: A Double-Bind Escape Route

Indeed, hearing and framing organizational tensions as double binds is not inevitable. As previewed above,

Table 2. Possible Ways to Frame Organizational Tensions

(This table provides a sampling of possible tension-framing techniques among correctional officers. This sampling is not exhaustive — officers could frame each injunction as contradictory, complementary or paradoxical in a number of different ways.)

Framing Technique

Tension	Framing the tension as a double bind: To obey is to disobey and to disobey is to obey (most potentially debilitating).	Framing the tension as a contradiction: The two actions cannot be done at once, but can alternate or one or the other can be chosen.	Framing the tension as complementary: Viewing the tension not as a tension (most potentially satisfying).
Respect vs. Suspect	Be respectful to inmates by treating them as liars.	Sometimes respect inmates, sometimes suspect inmates, or just choose one side of the tension or the other.	Treating inmates with respect provides better informants, which makes it easier to maintain suspicion and security.
Nurture vs. Discipline	Be empathetic by not caring.	Sometimes listen and interact, sometimes be detached and tough, or just choose one side of the tension or the other.	Disciplining inmates is one way to show inmates you care.
Consistency vs. Flexibility	Do not do what we tell you to do.	Some cases call for following the rules, others require flexibility, or just choose one side of the tension or the other.	The spirit of the rules can be followed by being flexible and viewing issues on a case-by-case basis.
Solidarity vs. Autonomy	Be self-reliant because you want to, not because you know you will be stigmatized if you are needy.	Sometimes one must rely on fellow officers, and sometimes one must be wary of them, or just choose one side of the tension or the other.	One does not have to be friends or like the other officers to trust them to back one up.

people can alternately frame tensions as contradictions. Contradictions add to the bewilderment of a job, but they do not yield paralyzing emotional reactions. Viewing tensions as contradictions, however, is still not ideal, as it can lead people to engage in abrupt, sometimes arbitrary behavior. Rather, a third, potentially most satisfying technique for framing tensions is to perceptually transform the poles so they are no longer regarded as opposites. This perceptual shift, called reframing, is a cognitively complex exercise.⁴ Indeed, few people are able to reframe tensions into complementary edicts on their own. However, organizations can engage in steps that can encourage perceptual reframing of structural dilemmas or at least discourage framing tensions as double binds.

In order to help correctional officers frame organizational tensions in emotionally healthy ways, administrators should know that double binds are particularly debilitating when recipients feel unable to physically or psychologically step outside the problematic frame set by this message, either by physically escaping the message or by communicating about the tensions themselves. Because of the "total institution" nature of prisons and jails, correctional officers are not offered the same opportunities to step outside of the organizational box and comment about their work. While officers can physically escape the workplace, they regularly face public misunderstanding and denigration. As such, many officers find it difficult to talk meaningfully about their work with friends, family and others outside the field of corrections.

Unfortunately, officers also face barriers to communicating about organizational contradictions within the confines of the corrections atmosphere. Most employee training sessions are designed to present organizational norms as straightforward, complementary edicts. Indeed, through the course of this research, neither supervisors nor trainers acknowledged how correctional norms are largely contradictory. As one officer said, "None of this [contradiction] is brought up in training so it's all a total surprise when you

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start work." Further, organizational superiors effectively discouraged officer questions in a number of ways, including always having the "right" answer themselves, meeting questions with bureaucratic answers, and sometimes even reprimanding officers who asked questions.

While correctional organizations may have little control over the public's misunderstanding and denigration of correctional officers and, thus, officers' difficulty in making sense of their work with outsiders, organizational leaders certainly can encourage increased understanding within

the correctional atmosphere. Individuals can free themselves from the discursive prisons created by double binds through "metacommunication," or commenting about the message and contradiction process itself. By metacommunicating, a person steps outside the double-bind frame and describes the dilemma.

One way correctional administrators might approach the inclusion of such metacommunication would be to introduce into training sessions the role-play of dilemmatic scenarios (i.e., wherein an officer must be respectful yet still watchful). Together,

er, trainers and officers could discuss several different ways these dilemmas might be handled. To encourage questioning and an acknowledgment of the complexities inherent to the job, scenarios should not have a right answer, but rather, illustrate the range of ways officers can address similar situations effectively. This approach would also encourage a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of different paths of actions.

Further, organizational leaders could allow officers to step outside double binds by encouraging questions and metacommunication throughout myriad interactions with correctional officers. For example, leaders should take a critical look at how they effectively (if unintentionally) discourage employee participation and questioning through bureaucratic responses and presenting organizational norms as straightforward and easy to follow. Another way to encourage increased participation is to simply set up training rooms differently. For instance, a recommendation adopted by Nouveau Jail was to change the seating arrangement for in-service training. By having officers sit in a circle, rather than behind long tables, they felt more like equal participants and less like schoolchildren waiting to be told the answer.

Conclusion

Stress and burnout among correctional officers — evidenced through manifestations of literalism, withdrawal and paranoia — are associated with tensions inherent in correctional officer work. Considering this, the organizational norms that structure correctional environments have as much to do with stress and burnout as do individual differences in officers. As such, it is not only foolish but also ineffective to treat correctional officer burnout solely as an individual pathology best addressed by measures such as relaxation techniques and employee assistance programs. Rather, administrators also must carefully consider how they address and present the unavoidable tensions in correctional work. While talk will not dissolve contradictions,

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communication can provide an escape route from the debilitating emotional reactions associated with double binds.

If administrators prefer officers who are complex thinkers, engaged in their work and not paranoid, they should acknowledge and encourage group discussions regarding the tensions of suspect versus respect, nurture versus discipline, consistency versus flexibility and solidarity versus autonomy. To address and mend problematic emotional constructions among officers, correctional leaders must go beyond providing individual stress management techniques that reactively attend to the symptoms of burnout to opening up windows for collective reflection and discussion regarding the organization itself.

ENDNOTES

¹ Newton, T. 1995. *"Managing" stress: Emotion and power at work*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.

² Putnam, L.L. 1986. Contradictions and paradoxes in organizations. In *Organization communication: Emerging perspectives* 1, ed. L. Thayer, 151-167. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

³ Watzlawick, P., J.H. Beavin and D.D. Jackson. 1967. *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

⁴ Baxter, L.A. 1990. Dialectical contradictions in relationship development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 7(1):69-88.

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Building Foundations

Continued from page 89

funds. In 1998, Western Judicial and the sheriff's office proposed an eight-week, in-jail program to the Domestic Violence Committee of the Public Safety Coordinating Council. The committee agreed to recommend funding to the full council, which was later approved. As a result, the program, utilizing the Duluth Curriculum, offers domestic violence intervention to offenders, who, in most cases, have never had counseling and would not access it were it not part of a jail program.

Life Skills and Community Case Management

In 1998, the sheriff's office partnered with the Child Abuse Council and the University of South Florida's School of Social Work to conduct a parenting program for incarcerated males. The project entailed administering the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory and a client satisfaction survey. A report by third-party evaluator Michael Rank indicated perceptible improvement in inmates' attitude toward parenting. Ninety-one percent of the participants agreed that the course gave them information that had or would improve their parenting skills.

In 2000, the sheriff's office applied for and was awarded a life skills grant through the Office of Correctional Education. The three-year, \$1.3 million grant project provides life skills classes for all inmates participating in the substance abuse treatment and domestic

violence intervention program, adding additional classes for inmates in vocational training programs.

Participants in all three core programs attend classes in employability skills; personal money management; Pathways to Change, a cognitive skills program on decision-making and goal-setting; parenting; and intensive case management. The parenting curriculum was written by staff at the Mental Health Institute for a prison setting and was modified by sheriff's office staff to apply to the shorter-term jail inmate.

In addition, the sheriff's office contracted with the Tampa Hillsborough Action Plan in March 2001 for three community case workers to provide transitional services to inmates after their release from jail. The organization has provided AIDS awareness classes in the jail system since 1989, and in 2000, the action plan agreed to expand the AIDS awareness classes to all three programs.

Rank is also the third-party evaluator for the life skills grant, and initial data show the program has had a positive impact on the inmate population. A comprehensive report, including three years worth of data, will be released in late 2004.

Conclusion

Community collaborations, partnerships, grant funding and volunteers have truly been the catalyst to strengthening and expanding programming in Hillsborough County. For further information about the Office of Correctional Education, contact its director, John Linton, at (202) 260-7007. For additional information about the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office programs visit www.hcso.tampa.fl.us.

Jan Bates is inmate programs manager for the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office in Tampa, Fla. Joel Pietsch is supervisor of the Substance Abuse Treatment Section for the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office.



A culinary program inmate prepares a cake for staff line.



