Core Competencies AND Jail Leadership

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What skills, knowledge, and abilities do jail leaders need in order to be credible and successful? Having started with the July/August 2015 issue of *American Jails*, we are exploring the 22 core competencies as identified by jail administrators across the country. Welcome to the 19th installment on core competencies and jail leadership.

In this issue of *American Jails,* we take a closer look at the seventh core competency, "Develop and maintain a positive organizational culture that promotes respect for diverse staff," and recommend several valuable resources related to leadership.

POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Develop and Maintain a Positive Organizational Culture that Promotes Respect for Diverse Staff

Description: Assess the agency's internal culture to assure that it is aligned with the mission, vision, and values; work to change the internal culture as necessary; support an internal culture that works toward identified organizational goals.

Rationale: The management of a diverse workforce (and inmate population) requires considerable effort to create "one out of many." This includes identifying, developing, and maintaining an organizational culture that

- Values diversity.
- Embraces change.
- Promotes a positive approach.
- Fulfills the organization's vision, mission, and values.

Knowledge of:

- The components of an organization's internal culture.
- The jail's current internal organizational culture.
- How to change organizational culture.

Skills to:

- Assess the jail's current organizational culture.
- Mentor subordinates and peers regarding elements of internal culture.
- Help subordinates and peers understand their roles and contributions to the internal jail culture.
- Determine the elements of the internal culture that are in conflict with the jail's mission, vision, and values.
- Recognize the attributes that contribute to the jail's positive organizational culture.
- Identify any gaps between the jail's desired and current internal culture.
- Understand the diverse interests and motivations of jail staff.

- Encourage staff to set aside differences and unite in pursuit of common goals.
- Promote teamwork.
- Identify benchmarks to assess the impact of culture initiatives.
- Reinforce, operationalize, and keep organization aligned with the agency's vision, mission, and values.

Abilities to:

- Analyze the internal culture accurately.
- Maintain objectivity in assessing the culture.
- Maintain tenacity in addressing how changes, if needed, are pursued.
- Be respectful of the views of others, even if they disagree with you.
- Demonstrate courage in facing culture challenges.
- Be a role model.

Leadership and Internal Culture: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The internal culture in each one of America's 3,000-plus jails is different and unique. Defined as the values, assumptions, and beliefs that people in an organization hold, the internal culture drives the way people think and behave within the organization (Flaherty-Zonis, 2007). The leader's ability to correctly identify and address their jail's internal culture ultimately impacts the success of their organization. In addition, proficiency in managing the jail's internal culture is necessary to be effective in using the other 21 core competencies. If you don't get this competency right, you imperil the others.

One of the primary responsibilities of a jail administrator is to assess the internal culture, address the negatives, and celebrate the positives. This is not a one-time-and-done project, but an everyday obligation to be shared by the jail's command staff and the formal and informal leaders. The effort to change a jail's culture is

a long-term undertaking, often with many twists and turns.

The internal culture supports change and innovation or it works to defeat any new ideas. Internal culture can envelope and support employees or it can fuel destructive practices and gossip. Negative culture, without effective leadership intervention, will fuel itself. Leaving the culture unattended—or just hoping that good intentions will create positive change—allows the default culture to run the jail. A default culture is what emerges to fill the vacuum that is created when there is not sufficient attention to the internal culture (Flaherty-Zonis, 2007).

An agency with a positive organizational culture contains such hallmarks as high morale, retention of quality employees, routine operational alignment to policies and procedures, and consistent professionalism—even during adverse times. Conversely, a jail with a negative internal culture may struggle to retain staff, suffer from absenteeism issues, and lack operational accountability and professionalism. A jail's internal cultures are many—not just agency-wide—as different cultures exist on different shifts, as well as in discrete divisions or sections of the organization.

This article about the seventh core competency addresses:

- The nexus between culture and the jail's mission.
- Vision and values.
- Creation of the shared view of the agency' goals and expectations.
- Resources to begin assessing culture.
- Steps to address what the assessment identifies.
- The role of leadership and capitalizing on teamwork.

Aligning Culture with Mission, Vision, and Values

The jail's internal culture must align with the organization's mission, vision, and values as these

"If one misreads or ignores the culture, one may never recover."

serve as the foundation for all jail operations. Recruitment, hiring, employee training, leadership development, inmate program, jail operations, budgeting, and accountability are all affected and influenced by internal culture (McCampbell, 2016). A jail without an articulated vision, mission, and values (or with ones that are outdated) and developed without participation of the stakeholders does not need to ask why the jail's internal culture is problematic. Determining this is part of the review of culture as well as creating the action plan to work to resolve any presenting issues.

For the jail to have a credible presence in the community, the mission, vision, and values statements must honestly include the transparency needed to gain the public's trust and support. Jails cannot complain that there is insufficient public knowledge about the jail or a lack of support, while at the same time fail to publicly articulate the jail's goals and objectives.

In external reviews of negative events occurring in correctional facilities, the organization's internal culture has been cited as a contributor to the incidents (Mastroianni, 2013; The Police Foundation, 2017). Without aligning the mission, vision, and values with the jail's internal culture, there is much to lose and little to gain. When thinking about your own experiences with negative events in the jail, most likely you can recall how the internal culture contributed to either a positive or negative outcome.

A jail leader who fails to adhere to the mission, vision, and values of the facility undermines the organization. No matter how good the mission, an environment of nepotism and favoritism will create the cynicism in which the default culture needs to flourish. A value of honoring staff diversity, but permitting discriminatory behaviors and disrespect, invites discouragement and erosion of morale. A vision of staff involvement in strategic planning while the leaders make pronouncements reached behind closed doors thwarts any future staff engagement.

Setting and Enforcing Agency Standards

A symptom of poor internal culture is the absence of staff compliance with written directives, and little or uneven accountability for such behaviors. Often this disconnect is fueled by the absence of reasonable, articulated work standards. This is not about employee performance appraisals; it is about accountability-based management. The metrics that guide performance are not only determined in the leader's office, but also through a collaborative process of being clear about what are acceptable behaviors and what are not.

22 Core Competencies for Jail Leaders

- Anticipate, analyze, and resolve organizational challenges and conflicts.

- Assure organizational accountability.

- Build and maintain positive relationships with external stakeholders.

- Build and maintain teamwork; mentor and coach others.

- Communicate effectively, internally and externally.

- Comprehend, obtain, and manage fiscal resources.

- **Develop and maintain a positive organizational culture that promotes respect for diverse staff.**

- Develop and sustain organizational vision/mission.

- Engage in strategic planning.

- Enhance self-awareness; maintain proactive professional commitment.

- Establish organizational authority, roles, and responsibilities.

- Leverage the role of the jail in the criminal justice system.

- Make sound decisions.

- Manage change.

- Manage labor relations.

- Manage power and influence.

- Manage time.

- Obtain and manage human resources.

- Oversee inmate and facility management.

- Oversee physical plant management.

- Reduce jail-related liability risks.

- Understand and manage emerging technology.

Following that are clear and consistently applied rewards and acknowledgments for staff who excel, and corrections for staff who consistently don't meet expectations. This is about the second core competency of organizational accountability—directing the process for collecting ongoing feedback and assessing long-term outcomes. (For more information and strategies, visit *https://cipp.weebly.com/ uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/2_organiza tional_accountability.pdf*.)

Beginning the Change Process

Before a jail leader can shape, correct, and encourage the internal culture, the leader must first acknowledge the existence and impact of the culture and then begin the process to accurately assess the jail's internal culture. Whatever challenges confront the jail—sick-leave abuse, employee retention, allegations of staff misconduct—are all intertwined with the internal culture.

The steps in the culture change process are:

- Identifying the challenges and opportunities presented by the internal culture.

- Establishing a commitment to change.

- Developing specific strategies to address gaps between what you find and what is the optimal culture.

- Assuring your team is on board with both the findings and the needed actions.

It is axiomatic that internal culture change is a 5- to 10-year process with highs and lows along the way. Anything less than an accurate assessment of the culture and a long-term commitment is not likely to bring the changes needed.

This should not discourage leaders from beginning the journey, and serve as a caution that focuses the leader on sustainable incremental change. Culture change is really never "done." Culture is an organism that without continual attention

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A Dynamic Process

An agency's cultural development is a dynamic process that continuously evolves as interactions take place throughout the workplace such as:

- How leaders communicate.
- What leaders pay attention to and react to.
- What leaders elect to measure.
- How leaders respond to crises.
- What nonverbal message leaders send by their role modeling.
- What criteria leaders use to allocate rewards and status.
- What criteria leaders use to recruit, select and terminate employees.

Source: Schein, E. H. (2016). *Organizational culture and leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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will evolve—and in a positive direction with the leader's attention.

If you have been part of this environment throughout your career, it is often difficult to gauge if a jail's internal culture is off balance. If you have been promoted through the ranks to a leadership position, you may have additional "blinders" on your evaluation of internal culture, because the culture has become second nature to you. There are surveys and instruments that can formally assess internal agency culture. However, before considering those, review the basics of your jail's internal culture (Stinchcomb & McCampbell, 2017).

To begin, mentally remove yourself to make these observations:

- Observe daily operations with a critical eye (e.g., verbal communications, body language, dress, demeanor, and behavior). Your observations should not only include interactions between employees, but also between the staff and inmates. What messages are being communicated?

- Assess whether operational practices are following written procedures. If not, then why? Perhaps some of the older policies or procedures need updating, or it is time to address supervisory accountability. Or take a fresh look at your training.

- Consider the history of the jail in the community—with both staff and inmates. How has the jail's history shaped current operations?

- Renew your knowledge about the staff and inmate population. Learn their interests, concerns, and needs. Discover if they are generally supportive or suspicious of a leader's vision. Will they welcome new ideas or new ways for performing their jobs?

- Identify the informal and formal leaders. Determine who are the negative and positive influencers, and if they are participants in the life of the jail or if they stand back and toss grenades at the leadership without offering to help.

- Review the outcome of past efforts to initiate reform or organizational changes. Note why these efforts succeeded or failed.

- Critically review communications. Recognize which supervisors and managers are sharing accurate and timely information with line staff. Learn if information is flowing both up and down the chain of command, and if employees are consulted before major decisions are made. Are formal and informal communications generally positive, negative, supportive, or blaming?

- Listen more and talk less to really "hear" what's happening. Ask questions. Suspend judgment.
- Determine if operations align with the mission, vision, and values of the jail. Identify the shared beliefs and values in the jail culture. Are these positive or negative shared beliefs?

Your initial review of the culture is just the first step toward change. Your findings may be either uplifting or discouraging. Fortunately, there are processes and instruments developed for jails that are easily accessible, such as the National Institute of Corrections "APEX" Project–Achieving Performance Excellence (Cebula & Ritter, 2013). These resources may help to guide the jail's leadership's conversations about the available options for assessing the jail's culture. (See the Leader's Library for more resources.)

Options to conduct assessments include staff surveys and focus groups, or a combination of these two strategies. These can be done either by the agency or by hiring a qualified and experienced consultant to help. No matter which strategy is selected, it must be:

- Continually communicated.
- Credible.
- Transparent.
- Inclusive.
- Driven by a timeline.

Starting this initiative and letting it falter or die only helps the internal/default culture prevail, and can potentially doom any future initiatives.

Inputs and Outputs

You may already suspect what issues will be articulated in your jail's assessment of culture. The challenge is to sift through the "symptoms" to the actual core issues.

The Inmates' Internal Culture

The primary mission of the jail is to operate consistently with Constitutional and professional standards. Develop structured ways to communicate as appropriate with the inmate population about the culture change initiatives. How staff treat inmates is one of the inputs into the cultural equation.

In addition, calculate into your work the culture, attitudes, and beliefs of the inmate population. Even though their average length of stay may be relatively short, inmates also have an internal culture that informs their behavior in the jail. Staff often discuss what's happening in the facility, including new initiatives, in the presence of inmates.

The Leader's Library

"Diagnosing Organizational Culture: Case Studies"
Tom Campbell (2007, Winter)
Proceedings of the Large Jail Network
U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections
https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/022298.pdf

Building Culture Strategically: A Team Approach for Corrections
Carol Flaherty-Zonis (2007, February)
U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections
https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/021749.pdf

"Diagnosing Organizational Culture"
Carol Flaherty-Zonis (2007, Winter)
Proceedings of the Large Jail Network
U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections
https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/022298.pdf

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference
Malcolm Gladwell (2002)
Little Brown & Company

Sheriff's Guide to Effective Jail Operations
Mark D. Martin & Paul Katsampes (2007)
U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections
https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/021925.pdf

National Institute of Corrections–APEX Project
https://nicic.gov/series/achieving-performance-excellence-apex-guidebook-series

Organizational Culture and Leadership
Edgar H. Schein (2016)
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Focused Leadership: Resource Guide for Newly Appointed Wardens, Second Edition
Jeanne B. Stinchcomb & Susan W. McCampbell (2017)
U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections
http://www.cipp.org/uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/nicresourceguide2017.pdf

Be aware that flagging individual symptoms doesn't always reveal the root cause. Part of your efforts should include encouraging your team to look beyond what was previously the "answers" to the problems. If you misjudge and focus on the symptoms, any success will be fleeting and non-sustainable.

For example, the finding may be low staff morale. The leaders will need to learn how it is manifested in the organization and what are the inputs. Is it sick-leave abuse? Is it non-conformance to policy? Is it lack of trust of the leaders? Look at the quality of first-line supervision and the accessibility of the leadership.

Essentially, low morale is the output. What needs to be clearly identified are the inputs. Is it lack of training for supervisors? Poor recruitment resulting in mandatory overtime?

Another finding might be "poor communication." What does that mean? What are the inputs? Line staff may not be receiving the leader's message. Or they may not like the message they are receiving. Employees may not feel heard. Or perhaps you learn that there is favoritism. What are the inputs to that? Do they include lack of a clarified promotional process or shift assignment process?

These issues may be the most difficult. The work requires a no-quit attitude until the core issue is unearthed—however uncomfortable that process may be. It is likely that many of the core issues may come back to you and your leadership team. It will take a strong commitment to *not* get angry, *not* to dismiss the findings as caused by the usual malcontents, and to own what might be the real issues. The challenge is to also identify which of the culture issues are the most negative impactors to the jail, and to start the process on those first.

Acting on the Findings

What's next? Acting on the findings is the direction, but the volume, intensity, and scope of the work will likely be too overwhelming to be accomplished immediately and be sustainable. Here are some strategies to help break down the process:

1. Ensure the results and options are shared with staff and stakeholders, and invite comments. When the leader conducts a cursory or in-depth assessment of culture, not sharing the results fuels suspicion and conforms to the default culture's view that this is all window-dressing. Simultaneously providing information and an inclusive path forward can establish a sense that the leadership knows what needs to be done and is willing to do the work.

2. Bring together representatives of all stakeholders and determine the sequence and timing of the work to be done. Remember this is a long-term commitment:

- Break the work into doable pieces. Success at addressing the issues, along with communication, informs the staff what is the priority.
- Communicate.
- Invite participation.
- Develop action-planning formats.
- Establish timelines and check-ins.
- Assume that little will go as planned. Set the expectation that there will be mid-course corrections.

3. Identify the gaps of issues identified by the assessment and the mission, vision, and values of the jail. Work on updating and aligning. Examine the written-directive system. Also, determine how to hold people accountable for their jobs when the jobs are not clearly defined, and ask yourself if training is an issue.

4. Develop benchmarks. What does success look like? Define what are quantifiable measures. Work on improving morale as this may result in positive measures such as a decrease in sick-leave abuse. Be prepared always to answer the question: "How do we know this worked?" Focus on being sure you are defining the problem, not just the symptom of the problem.

This brief description is not meant to suggest this is a simple process. Along the way, the leader will need to convince the boss, the funding authority, union representatives, staff, and community stakeholders that the investment in improving culture is worth the time and resources. This will not be a one-time conversation. As the process rolls on, leaders can capitalize on telling the stories of the agency's successes, and also document and share their strategies, internally and externally.

> "The dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make one realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin."
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> —Edgar H. Schein

The work needs to be accomplished in partnership with the jail's staff in order to promote teamwork and to role model how future challenges will be met by the organization. Clearly, the more people involved, the more challenging it is to keep the process moving forward; hence deadlines, products, and process all need to be identified. Don't overestimate what you can do collectively. Be realistic, but keep on track. Be a cheerleader for the effort and genuinely motivational. Understand the stress that change brings with it. Take care of the team. Celebrate the victories. Document the progress and build on it.

Conclusion

Seeking to improve the jail's internal culture is the ongoing duty and responsibility of the jail leader. The stagnation that causes negative culture issues to emerge and flourish must be eradicated. This requires jail leaders and their staff to adjust their expectations. Instead of the attitude of "this is how things are always done," they need to continually search for ways to improve. ■

References

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