

**Peer Interaction Training
for Correctional Administrators
Part 5**

by

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Peer Interaction Training for Correctional Administrators, Part 5

Traditional training for criminal justice professionals often involves bringing outside experts into classroom settings to educate workers about various issues. Classroom participation usually is limited, and most information is delivered by the instructor to the participants. Practitioners have criticized these sessions, noting that the information provided sometimes has little relevancy, isn't timely or is too far removed from operational realities to be of much use.

The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) recently developed a peer interaction training model as an alternative to traditional training methods. The peer interaction training model offers professional development specifically for wardens - a group often neglected when it comes to training and education programs. The primary goal of the model is to provide a forum for wardens from different jurisdictions to identify and discuss critical issues affecting the management and direction of prison operations. Wardens assume direct responsibility for their own training by exchanging information with credible peers who understand firsthand the problems being discussed.

Participating in these sessions allows many wardens to discover that most of their peers are grappling with the same issues they are. This simple realization can have a profound effect. Following the sessions, some wardens report that they no longer feel isolated in facing problems they had considered unique to their own operations. Others say the peer sessions have reaffirmed their personal commitments to their occupations.

History of Peer Interaction Training

The peer interaction training model is rooted in a National Institute of Corrections (NIC) training program designed several years ago for state deputy directors of corrections. When NIC began hosting the program, staff experimented with a variety of training techniques, bringing in prominent management authorities, motivational speakers, celebrated athletes and actors to speak to the group. In some instances, deputy directors of corrections also made presentations to their peers.

In evaluations of these programs, NIC staff observed that presentations made by deputy directors consistently received higher ratings than seminars conducted by "outsiders." Based on these observations, NIC developed a training program that

enabled deputy directors to meet collectively to identify and discuss pressing problems in administering correctional operations. NIC asked two or three deputy directors to give brief presentations on current issues. Panel sessions then were opened for commentary and suggestions from other deputy directors. Participants in these "peer interaction" sessions remarked in formal evaluations that the program offered some of the most valuable training they had experienced in their careers.

The peer interaction model was subsequently adopted to train prison wardens in at least two locations in the United States. Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, home of a corrections training institute, continues to use peer interaction training to educate prison wardens, in cooperation with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Institutional Division. And the Missouri Department of Corrections and the Criminal Justice Department at Central Missouri State University have begun co-hosting similar programs for wardens throughout the Midwestern United States.

Implementing Peer Interaction Training

At the most basic level, peer interaction training is training for wardens by wardens. Wardens not only select topics and make presentations, but also are responsible for contributing to the dynamic exchanges that occur in the panel sessions. The best place to set up a peer interaction training session is a college or university campus. Because of their unique environments, most colleges and universities provide prime settings for peer interaction training programs. Institutions of higher education have facilities and staff available to help create these types of programs. Removed from the hectic pace of pressing administrative responsibilities, wardens are placed in an environment conducive to learning.

The selection of topics for individual programs in peer interaction training is guided by prison administrators, since they are most familiar with problems in the correctional environment. Because interaction training relies on full and active exchange between participants, sessions typically are limited to about 30 persons.

Panel sessions in peer interaction each begin with a 10- to 15-minute presentation by wardens with expertise in the problem area. Session participants then are invited to contribute information and ideas in a seminar setting. Through this process, wardens learn and develop alternative solutions to problems commonly experienced in the operation of correctional institutions.

In the initial program hosted in Missouri, 20 wardens from 12 states attended. Together, these professionals had a total of 393 years of experience in

corrections and were responsible for managing more than 21,000 inmates. One NIC administrator attended the session, as did a few others interested in potential applications of the training model. The cumulative mix of correctional expertise was impressive.

At the planning session, participants were acquainted with the nature and purpose of peer interaction training. Wardens identified and selected panel topics, set training dates and scheduled 10 program panels that would take place over a four-day period. Panel topics for the Missouri program included both employee and inmate issues, such as screening and selection; fees for inmate services; innovative responses to crowding; correctional leadership; minimizing litigation; and addressing gender issues in the correctional environment. Wardens participated in panel discussions with university students, while also speaking with media representatives, apprising them of correctional challenges and issues.

Wardens' evaluations of the Missouri program have been enthusiastic. One warden noted that being able to discuss issues and problems "with people who know what you're talking about" was a rare treat for him. "I have seven or eight ideas that will be implemented when I return to the institution," he said. Another participant wrote: "The training was excellent. I have experienced good training in the past, but the interaction I've been involved with here is the best I've encountered. It's in a relaxed environment." Added another warden, newly appointed: "During the past year, I've had the opportunity to attend several training sessions on various topics. I can honestly say that the most rewarding and informative was the peer interaction training program I attended at Central Missouri State."

Benefits of Peer Interaction Training

- * Participants learn about alternative approaches to problem-solving. Many attendees have implemented ideas learned in the sessions in their own operations.
- * Participants develop a network of professional contacts. Participants in the Missouri program have visited one another's institutions and shared policies, procedures and other written materials. They consult each other for ideas, suggestions and moral support when confronted with particularly difficult issues in their own institutions. The program provides wardens with a ready-made pool of professional resources.
- * The program is cost-effective. Since wardens are responsible for program panels, there are no fees to pay consultants, trainers or speakers, as is the case with traditional training programs. The initial program held in Missouri was

supported by an NIC grant. The total costs for travel, lodging, meals and training materials came to slightly more than \$10,000 for the 25 program participants.

* Students and faculty are afforded the rare opportunity to meet with prison administrators from across the country. When the program is held on a college or university campus, students can be given the opportunity to meet with the wardens, exposing them to the realities of correctional administration. In the process, many of their preconceived notions about prisons and those who work in them are dispelled. By the same token, faculty can develop ties and strengthen working relationships with the practitioner community.

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