

# Prisoners

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It is the mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prison and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens.

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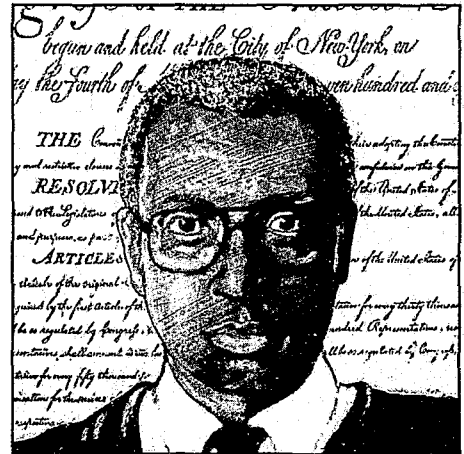
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# Prison Leadership

## A strategy for success in the 1990's

Kevin N. Wright

*Leaders know they cannot do it alone. It takes partners to get extraordinary things done in organizations.*

*Leaders build teams with spirit and cohesion, teams that feel like family. They actively involve others in planning and give them discretion to make their own decisions. Leaders make others feel like owners, not hired hands.*

—Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*<sup>1</sup>

Federal prison administrators of the 1990's face an unprecedented challenge. While confronting the unrelenting need to maintain stable, coherent, and predictable organizations, administrators must also respond to numerous external pressures for change. The central quest has become how to maintain the Bureau's high standard of excellence in the face of such diverse pressures for change.

For me, the words of Kouzes and Posner hold some of the answers. Leaders cannot do it alone. They must challenge others and bring them together to work cohesively to find solutions to the weighty problems facing the Bureau.

*Author's note: I appreciate and acknowledge the efforts of Kathy Hawk, Chris Erlewine, Bill Muth, and Judy Gordon, through their readings of earlier drafts and suggestions, to keep this "ivory tower" academic on track with his comments about prison leadership.*

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**"Leadership  
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John Gardner, past Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and advisor to six U.S. presidents, tells us that "leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers."<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I attempt to explore how leaders working in prisons can better *induce* their followers to pursue shared objectives. I begin by examining what contextual changes leaders can expect to occur within this decade in the external environments within which prisons operate. In the second section, I review research conducted within and outside corrections, which shows that followers who believe they have a say in formulating policy are more likely to be committed to the organization and to work toward excellence. From this perspective, I then explore how leaders working in prisons can "enable" others by encouraging trust, cooperation, and enthusiasm.

### The turbulent environment of the 1990's

At the heart of the dramatic changes facing corrections in this decade is the greatest overall expansion of prison capacity in American history. On the surface, simply finding sufficient space for the burgeoning population is challenge enough. However, housing is just the tip of the iceberg. As the number of inmates increases, so must the number of staff, creating substantial recruitment and training demands on the system. The accelerated processes associated with rapid growth render ineffective the old ways of socializing and mentoring new employees to help them assimilate the values, traditions, and proven methods that have promoted a high level of performance within the Federal prison system. Numbers are too great, and time is too short.

Rapid growth increases the need not only for entry-level personnel but for mid- and upper-level administrators. Here too, old ways of identifying, nurturing, and ultimately promoting qualified individuals are no longer sufficient. Time spent in a position has been greatly compressed. Whereas a decade ago officers waited (and learned and developed) an average of about 8 years before being promoted to lieutenant, promotions today often occur within 2 years of joining Federal prison service. In a system where everyone no longer knows everyone else, it is no longer possible for senior administrators to have the personal knowledge of promotion candidates they once had.

The challenges facing the Federal prison administrator in the 1990's extend far beyond this absolute growth in the population and staff. To begin with, the composition of the inmate population is changing. Due to the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1988 and the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, inmates admitted to prison are younger than in the past (primarily due to the increasing number of drug offenders)—yet with increased lengths of sentences, their average age is actually growing older.

Due to the system's growth and the fact that the Bureau's budget has increased to the point of being the largest among all Department of Justice agencies, greater visibility and public scrutiny has occurred. Senior-level administrators will need to devote more time to dealing with externalities—other agencies and organizations, the press, and members of the community.

The workforce is also changing. Traditionally, prisons have been a bastion of white males; however, in recent years the numbers of minorities and women entering prison service have steadily increased. Predictions for the 1990's are that white males will compose an increasingly smaller fraction of the available workers to be recruited.

Finally, technology is changing. The Federal system has aggressively entered the Information Age. Computers are becoming commonplace and, with implementation of the Key Indicators/Strategic Support System, SENTRY, JUNIPER, and other data retrieval systems, decision-makers are beginning to rely on fast and readily available information.

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With large organizations comes the potential for fragmentation, divergence from shared purposes, and breakdowns in communication. The chain of command may become excessively long and difficult to comprehend, so that decision-making is slowed and innovative ideas are stifled by organizational insecurities found throughout the hierarchy. Large organizations tend to become impersonal, leaving employees feeling anonymous, powerless, and alienated. Workers lack a sense of the "wholeness" of the enterprise and do not feel they have "ownership" of any of its activities.

Research in prisons and in other fields strongly supports the position taken by Kouzes and Posner. In the following sections, I review this research and then explore how leaders can involve others in meeting the challenges of the 1990's.

### **Organizational influence and control**

In seeking to determine why corrections is plagued with such a high turnover of workers (averaging 16 percent in the States, and reaching 40 percent in some settings), Jurik and Winn administered a questionnaire to 179 correctional officers at a minimum/medium-security State prison in the western United States. Nine months later, 37 individuals had either been dismissed or had voluntarily left prison service (a turnover rate of 21 percent). The researchers found two related issues important in determining who continued as opposed to who terminated: satisfaction with the work environment and opportunities to influence institutional policy.

Regarding the work environment, perceptions of the intrinsic working conditions—perceived variety, autonomy, authority, and learning opportunities—were the strongest predictors of turnover. In other words, the extent to which individuals saw themselves as having some control and influence over their daily activities determined whether they would remain in correctional service. Furthermore, actually *having* some say about policy decisions extended satisfaction even further.<sup>3</sup> Other researchers have linked input into decisions to lower levels of job-related stress among prison workers.<sup>4</sup>

In our own research, analyses of more than 3,000 responses of staff at all levels and all facilities throughout the Bureau to the Prison Social Climate Survey revealed that staff who have input into decisions have more positive opinions

about the prison in which they work and the Bureau as a whole. And, importantly, they express greater overall levels of satisfaction with their job, their facility, and the Bureau and feel that they are more effective in doing their jobs.<sup>5</sup>

This as-yet-limited amount of research conducted in the prison setting is consistent with studies conducted in other organizational settings. Arnold Tannenbaum of the University of Michigan, in an extensive survey of organizational power and influence in hospitals, banks, unions, factories, and insurance companies, found that the more people believe they can influence organizational operations, the higher job satisfaction and performance will be throughout the organization.<sup>6</sup> Daniel Yankelovich found that fewer than 25 percent of workers today report that they work at full potential, 60 percent indicate that they do not work as hard as they did in the past, and 75 percent say they could be significantly more effective than they currently are.<sup>7</sup> Why? According to John Gardner:

Most people in most organizations most of the time are more stale than they know, more bored than they care to admit. All too often it is because they have not been encouraged to use their own initiative and powers of decision. And if they are not expected to use their decision-making power, they are off the hook of responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

In his latest book, *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution*, Tom Peters asserts that "truly involved people can do anything." He backs up his claim with examples from a sausage manufacturing company, the warehouse of a manufacturing company in Belgium, the operations department of a video

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products firm, and a coal mine, where worker participation solved significant organizational problems, saved money, and increased productivity.<sup>9</sup>

Why might this be? Research by Berlew<sup>10</sup> that was later confirmed by Renwick and Lawler<sup>11</sup> indicates that what truly motivates people, excites them, and provides meaning to their lives are:

- A chance to be tested, to make it on one's own.
- A chance to take part in a social experiment.
- A chance to do something well.
- A chance to do something good.
- A chance to change the way things are.<sup>12</sup>

The amount of pay ranked far below these values and far down the list.

So what motivates people? What lights their fires? Clearly, a sense of control is important, but also challenge and opportunity to take a risk. Commitment is vital—belonging and having a sense that one is making a difference. Essentially it boils down to a sense of *ownership*. The more people believe that they can control or at least influence the destiny of whatever it is that affects their lives, the greater their commitment, satisfaction, and performance will be.

Sadly, the antithesis of this position characterizes the work situation of many Americans. They are directed by unknown managers and controlled by impersonal policies and rules over which they have little or no say. Consequently, they often harbor deep resentment and feel considerable alienation toward the organizations in which they spend most of their waking hours. They feel powerless. They want control of their lives—to contribute and be challenged. The job for contemporary leaders of the 1990's is to help them do exactly that.

### **Leadership...not democratic management**

At this point in the essay, it is important for me to make clear exactly what I am talking about (or, more importantly, what I am *not* talking about) in suggesting that leaders involve others, foster a sense of ownership among them, and enable them to take charge of their jobs. I am not advocating democratic management styles that were popular in the 1970's. While my suggestions should lead to greater participation and more democratic decision-making, they do not absolve leaders from being leaders,

which is the tacit outcome of democratic styles. If everyone is responsible for decision-making, then no one is responsible for decision-making.

People clearly like to be consulted, to have their say about issues that directly affect their lives, and to have opportunities to solve problems and try new ways of doing things. Research indicates that participation increases commitment. But, in addition, people often desire, even expect, decisiveness from their leaders. For many day-to-day decisions that have to be made, which way the decision goes does not really matter; someone simply has to decide. A requirement of full participation would bog the organization down in trivia. In many activities, someone has to move things along, divide up the task, and follow up on progress. In crises, quick, unequivocal decisions are absolutely necessary. Effective leaders can juggle these conflicting decision-making styles, involving others in determining the direction of the organization but assuming sole responsibility and authority for issues requiring decisiveness.<sup>13</sup>

What I am advocating is that leaders remain leaders, but that they extend themselves and involve others in their search for solutions to the complex problems facing prisons in the 90's. What I am proposing will be, for some, a new view of the leadership role. Perhaps Peters has best articulated the appropriate act of leadership as I see it:

Leaders exercise "control" by means of a worthy and inspiring vision of what might be, arrived at jointly with their people; and understand that empowering people by expanding their authority

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rather than standardizing them by shrinking their authority is the only course to sustained relevance and vitality.<sup>14</sup>

### **Enabling others**

Getting started as a leader who enables others involves considering the power one possesses simply from being in a position of leadership. One view sees power as "power over." With a position comes the authority to do the job and the responsibility to see that it gets done. Power is used to control the behavior of subordinates to ensure a high degree of predictability. In this case, power is viewed as a fixed quantity. If I give some of my power to you, I will have less.

An alternative view of power, and the one I advocate, is one of "power to." Power is viewed as energy, potential, and competence for oneself rather than

"power over" others. The more people within an organization feel they have power and can influence operations, the greater their sense of ownership and commitment to the organization will be. They feel vested in the organization and will be more likely to stay with it. In this case, power is not viewed as a fixed quantity but as an expandable one.

Leaders will be more successful if they make others feel strong, capable, and committed. In most cases, leaders are stuck with their followers and have three choices. The first two stem directly from a distrust of the capabilities of others. The leader can attempt to do the entire job, which is likely to be physically impossible and is probably doomed to fail. Alternatively, the leader can be extremely controlling; as we have seen, this tends to result in low commitment and productivity. This latter possibility is relevant to the situation the Federal Bureau of Prisons currently faces.

Some may think that, with the influx of new staff and the shortened periods before promotion, administrators should be extremely controlling, limit decision-making, and retain authority. It may seem that the hierarchical structure should be strengthened and rigidified in order to routinize activities, decrease uncertainty, and centralize functions and controls. This practice would prevent mistakes and ensure predictability. One drawback to this practice lies in the fact that new employees will soon be given administrative responsibilities and new managers will have additional responsibility. Thus, it is imperative that they have the opportunity to make decisions and use discretion from the start as preparation

for their next advancement and to provide an opportunity for others to observe and judge their performance.

There is an even more fundamental and—for leaders who aspire to further advancement—self-interested reason for expanding the influence of others. Researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, found that among executives moving up the ladders of their organizations, those who “derailed,” or failed to reach the uppermost levels, most often were unsuccessful because of their insensitivity to others, intimidating style, arrogance, betrayal of trust, and failure to delegate (micromanaging) and build a team. Successful executives exhibited total integrity regarding their organization, their superiors, and their followers, as well as an understanding of other people and their perspectives.<sup>15</sup>

The third possibility, then, is to strengthen followers, help them find in what areas they can be at their best, and help them discover their potential and their strengths. To do this, one must share power by transferring authority, responsibility, and, most importantly, initiative. Let others be creative and put their energies and talents to work.

By enabling others to grow and develop, leaders form the basis for reciprocal relationships, based upon mutual trust and confidence. Under these circumstances, others are much more likely to feel respect and commitment toward their leaders and to be willing to make extraordinary efforts. In essence, by strengthening others' influence, leaders, in turn, strengthen their own influence.

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As team members begin to feel like family, share values, and gain a personal stake in the operations of the organization, the potential for extraordinary performance increases. The team can function as a cohesive, collaborative, and supportive working unit that relies on cooperation rather than competition, openness rather than secrecy, and strength rather than weakness.

Traditionally, managers have directed, planned, and coordinated; these are formal and often impersonal activities. Leaders may engage others informally, supporting and cooperating, nurturing and developing them. Functioning in this regard, leaders add two roles to their repertoire: *catalyst* and *facilitator*. As catalysts, leaders recognize that people have a stake in what happens and, if given the chance, will try to effect a

positive outcome. Catalysts help people understand that they can be creative and imaginative. They provide the spark by encouraging individuals and organizations to discover what they can be at their best.

Once that spark is ignited, the predominant activities of the leader should not be control and monitoring but facilitation. Leaders should constantly ask themselves what resources, knowledge, and technology others require to proceed and where those necessities can be obtained. Leaders facilitate by removing barriers, resolving conflicts, and building relationships and networks. Facilitators find sponsors and mentors to support the endeavors of others.

Exactly how do leaders do this? The following is not an exhaustive list, but a compilation of ideas from such experts as Gardner,<sup>16</sup> Kouzes and Posner,<sup>17</sup> and Rosabeth Kanter.<sup>18</sup> It is at least a start in the right direction:

- However difficult it may be, ignore limitations, faults, and inadequacies and focus on the skills and positive attributes of others. Help them discover at what pursuits they can be at their best. Focus on gains, not losses; on opportunities, not problems; and create winners, not losers.
- Encourage others to be creative, to be innovative problem solvers, to take risks. Reward successes rather than punish failures.
- Seek a shared vision by finding common ground, encouraging collaboration, and planning as a team.
- Build a climate of trust by sharing information, giving visibility to the efforts of others and having confidence in them, and being open and forthcoming.



■ Support the efforts of others by providing resources, technologies, knowledge; removing barriers; establishing networks; and resolving conflicts.

Focusing on the positive and creating a climate of trust is a difficult balance for prison managers to maintain, since errors can be deadly. There are times and circumstances in which mistakes, omissions, and overt acts cannot be ignored, and critical feedback is necessary. A leader would be remiss to ignore them. However, it is essential that leaders be aware of how they deliver feedback. A common response after observing a problem is to punish the individual supposedly responsible for the situation. "You did not do what you were supposed to do, therefore I am going to reprimand or penalize you." The idea here is that the "culprit," if punished, will never do it again or that others will not do what he or she did to avoid the admonition. The problem with using solely this approach is that it tends to alienate the recipient and chip away at the climate of trust.

An alternative, and I believe superior, technique would be to avoid personalizing the issue by setting blame. Rather, recognize the problem and work together toward its resolution. "There is a problem here, how can we solve it? What resources do I have that can help resolve the problem?" As a leader, your objective is to achieve a high level of performance by your followers. The second approach corrects the problem without the debilitating effects of blaming. The message will still get across that the individual should not let the problem develop, but the follower also receives the message

that you are there to support his or her efforts, that you work as a team. You will lead by example rather than by control.

### Conclusion

Harkening back to the quote presented at the start of this article, it is easy to recognize the fact that leaders need teams and teams need leaders. Neither can fulfill its role without the other. To make the most of the relationship, leaders need to elicit the trust, cooperation, and enthusiasm of the individuals composing their teams. By making the effort to create an open environment that encourages people to contribute and that rewards good service, leaders may find themselves more than duly rewarded by the good service and wholehearted efforts of their staff. As Gardner suggests, "leaders who strengthen their people may create a legacy that will last for a very long time."<sup>19</sup> ■

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