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You Can Create a Better Work Experience for Correctional Staff Using this One Weird Trick (It's Treating People Positively)

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Some people know from an early age what they want to be when they grow up, as if their destiny is calling; I was never one of those people. I never imagined being a college professor or researching correctional workplace issues. After earning my master's degree in criminal justice in the 1980s, I was looking for a job to pay off student loans and save up some money. The Federal Bureau of Prisons was hiring, and I accepted a job as a correctional officer at a maximum security prison that housed approximately 1700 inmates. It was an interesting learning experience, but it was also trying at times because of the nature of the work—some inmates were angry and/or manipulative, and they could make life

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difficult for staff as well as other inmates who were just trying to do their time (or even trying to improve themselves). Sometimes, more challenging than dealing with inmates was dealing with workplace issues and the differing quality of the supervision and management across the various units of the prison and among different shifts. I was surprised at how poorly a few staff members treated not only inmates but other staff. Fellow staff advised me which posts to seek out because the supervisors in these areas were the best. I also heard horror stories from some staff, including some who had transferred in from other institutions, of how staff were ignored or mistreated. One story involved a custody deputy warden who used to tell officers their job was not to think but to do and that he was paid to think. This administrator was described as being horrible at his job and making the lives of inmates and staff miserable. Years later, a friend gleefully told me that this administrator had finally been demoted. I was a little saddened that someone could take such pleasure in another's misfortune; however, what saddened me the most was the completely avoidable negative work experiences that occurred during the deputy warden's tenure.

After being a correctional officer long enough to pay off debts, I planned to quit my job. Before I could resign, I was approached by "Mr. Great" and asked if I would join his unit management team (i.e., counseling and case management). I had heard he was a great supervisor and it was a promotion, so I said yes. Mr. Great always pushed staff to do better but balanced it with the human relation needs of his team. For example, after he learned that I had not been home for more than a year to visit my

family for the holidays, he arranged for me to have three consecutive days off. He had called a travel agency, and there was a red-eye flight on Christmas Eve that could get me home on Christmas morning. The only drawback was that when I returned, I would arrive at an airport (in the same city) different from my departure airport, but he told me that he had already checked, and there was a shuttle service that could take me back to the first airport. Mr. Great would often do things to help those on his team. The interesting thing was he pushed us to always do things correctly, and often we were labeled the best team not only in the prison but the region. I experienced quality management and that has made a difference in my life. Furthermore, during this time, there was an outstanding warden and other administrators who pushed for productivity and a positive work environment. Under their approach, the safety and functioning of the prison was high and so was staff morale. This outstanding warden was rotated out to another institution, and his replacement seemed to believe/acted as if staff were cogs in the machine to be used and replaced when needed. Staff morale dropped, attendance declined (i.e., the use of sick leave increased), turnover rose (with staff transferring or quitting), and, most important, the safety of the prison declined for both inmates and staff. I and many of my fellow staff began to dread going to work, and prison operations were affected.

Out of the blue, I received a letter from a faculty member I worked with when earning my master's degree. I had been his graduate student and assistant, and "Dr. Wonderful" was a great person and an even better boss. He also pushed people to do better and supported them. He had

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excellent people skills. Dr. Wonderful reminded me I had promised him that I would complete my Ph.D. before he retired and that he would be retiring soon. It was a difficult decision because by this time I had been promoted to unit management, and going back to graduate school would mean a large drop in income, but I wanted to keep my word, so I headed back to school. After completing my comprehensive examination, I needed to select a dissertation topic. I had originally thought about focusing on leadership, but instead I decided on a path model that examined how workplace factors were associated with work attitudes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment and, in turn, how these concepts were associated with the turnover intent of correctional staff. About a year after leaving school, while working as an ABD assistant professor at my first university, I completed the dissertation. I had read a great deal of material on supervision and management in general, and also correctional supervision and management, for the dissertation. I began to apply this knowledge to my past experiences working in corrections.

My goal as an organizational humanist is to improve the workplace experiences of correctional staff. They work in a field that is already demanding, and it should not be made more demanding by the correctional organization. In addition to simply making work more pleasant, there are other good reasons for correctional organizations to improve the work environment. Correctional staff are both a valuable and expensive resource for correctional agencies. They are responsible for the myriad tasks necessary to achieve a safe, secure, and humane correctional facility. Personnel costs comprise about 70% to 80% of the operating budget of most correctional

institutions (Camp & Gaes, 2002; Tewksbury & Higgins, 2006).

Theoretical Foundations

Although there are different models and theories to explain why workplace variables would affect correctional staff, I have recently come to favor the job demands–resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). The model basically divides workplace variables into demands and resources. Job demands are negative forces that place strain on a person at work, often resulting in negative outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Conversely, workplace resources help people do their jobs, allow them to be more successful, and lead them to feel valued and respected (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Not unexpectedly, job resources generally result in positive outcomes. Furthermore, a perceived lack of resources can become a job demand in itself, resulting in psychological strain (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2006). There is no universal set of job demands or resources that apply across all occupations (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). The effects of job demands and resources are predicted to be contextual and situational and vary not only across occupations but also across different correctional settings. As such, research needs to be conducted not only for the occupation of corrections as a whole but across different types of correctional organizations.

There is a growing body of research that supports the contention that workplace factors affect correctional staff. Although there are numerous salient findings, I feel that understanding the possible antecedents and

and consequences of job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment is vital.

Job Stress

Job stress refers to psychological strain and tension resulting from the job (Matteson & Ivancevich, 1987). Little positive can be said of long-term exposure to job stress. Reduced satisfaction from work, a lower positive connection to the organization, lower life satisfaction, less frequent engagement in prosocial behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship behaviors – going above and beyond what is expected), greater turnover and turnover intent, more frequent work absences, increased physical and mental health problems, and elevated substance use/abuse have been tied to high levels of job stress for correctional staff (Byrd, Cochran, Silverman, & Blount, 2000; Cheek & Howard, 1984; Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Finn, 2000; Hogan, Lambert, & Griffin, 2013; Lambert, Edwards, Camp, & Saylor, 2005; Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2008; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Baker, 2005; Slate & Vogel, 1997). Furthermore, job stress likely leads to job burnout (Keinan & Maslach-Pines, 2007; Whitehead, 1989). Keinan and Maslach-Pines (2007) reported that Israeli correctional staff had higher levels of burnout compared to the general population, even higher than that of Israeli police officers. In the end, stress may reduce the life expectancy of staff either by natural causes or by suicide (Woodruff, 1993). For example, research indicates that the suicide risk for correctional staff is higher than in other occupations (Stack & Tsoudis, 1997). In light of the negative outcomes, reducing excessive job stress for correctional staff is of great consequence.

Although the nature of the job can be stressful, research suggests that a significant cause

of this stress can be controlled by the correctional organization. The research to date supports that job demands, such as role conflict (i.e., balancing competing roles of enforcer/rehabilitator or being given conflicting directions, guidance, and orders), role ambiguity (i.e., unclear expectations, directions, or orders), role overload (i.e., being asked to do too much in a limited period of time or without proper equipment/resources), and lack of control can raise correctional staff job stress (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Finn, 2000; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Clarke, 2005; Triplett, Mullings, & Scarborough, 1996). Work-family conflict (i.e., when the domains of home and work spill over into one another), including the subtypes of time-based conflict (i.e., work and home schedules incompatible), behavior-based conflict (i.e., work and home behavioral roles incompatible), and strain-based conflict (i.e., conflicts, such as arguments, in one domain result in problems in the other), have been reported to result in stress (Armstrong, Atkin-Plunk, & Wells, 2015). The unique nature of corrections, such as operating around the clock, every day of the year, controlling work roles, and experiencing direct or vicarious threats and victimization, can result in work-family conflict being a demand.

On the other hand, various types of job resources, such as instrumental communication (i.e., providing salient information to assist staff in completing their jobs), organizational justice (i.e., having fair processes and outcomes), input into both the job and organizational decision making, and integration (i.e., having groups work together on organizational goals and objectives) have been found to be negatively associated with stress (Dowden & Tellier, 2004; Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2007; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Stevenson, 2008; Slate & Vogel, 1997). Another

resource that appears to play a critical role in the work lives of staff are supervisors. Views that supervisors are positive, considerate, supportive, and trustworthy has been negatively associated with stress (Lambert, Hogan, Altheimer, & Wareham, 2010; Van Voorhis, Cullen, Link, & Wolfe, 1991).

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is the second salient workplace concept that should be the focus of correctional administrators and scholars. Job satisfaction is an affective assessment of the job, and basically boils down to whether a person likes his or her job (Locke, 1976; Spector, 1997). Job satisfaction among correctional staff has been reported to result in reduced absenteeism, lower turnover intent/turnover, decreased burnout, greater satisfaction with life, greater psychological connection to the organization, and greater involvement in organizational citizenship behaviors (Byrd et al., 2000; Griffin, Hogan, Lambert, Tucker-Gail, & Baker, 2010; Lambert, 2004; Lambert, Edwards, et al., 2005; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Baker, 2005; Leip & Stinchcomb, 2013; Whitehead, 1989; Wright, 1993). Similar to the literature on job stress, empirical research on the antecedents of job satisfaction supports the job demands–resources model. Job demands, such as role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload, fear of workplace victimization, and work-family conflict have been reported to result in lower job satisfaction (Armstrong et al., 2015; Blevins, Cullen, Frank, Sundt, & Holmes, 2006; Hepburn & Knepper, 1993; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, & Clarke, 2005; Triplett et al., 1996). Conversely, job resources, such as job variety, quality job training, job autonomy, integration, formalization (i.e., written rules and procedures), instrumental

communication, organizational justice, and input into organizational decision making may result in greater satisfaction from work among correctional staff (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Griffin, 2001; Lambert, 2003; Lambert, Hogan, Paoline, et al., 2008; Lambert, Paoline, & Hogan, 2006; Wright, Saylor, Gilman, & Camp, 1997). Various aspects of supervision, such as quality, consideration, structure, supportive, and trust, appear to play an important role in shaping job satisfaction (Blevins et al., 2006; Castle, 2008; Griffin, 2001).

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is the third salient workplace concept, and it deals with the bond between a person and the employing organization (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Although there are different types of organizational commitment, continuance and affective commitment are generally regarded as the most important (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Lambert, Kelley, & Hogan, 2013). Continuance commitment's bond occurs due to organizational investments, such as nontransferable job skills, salary, benefits, retirement plans, and social relationships (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Employees commit to the organization in order to protect their investments (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Griffin & Hepburn, 2005). Affective commitment is a psychological bond to the organization, including identification with the organization (i.e., internalization of organizational goals and values), involvement in the organization (i.e., personal effort made for the sake of the organization), and pride in the organization (Mowday et al., 1982). Affective commitment tends to form because of positive and rewarding workplace experiences (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Lambert, Kelley, et al., 2013; Mowday et al.,

1982). For continuance commitment, the bond occurs because the person feels he or she must be committed. For affective commitment, the bond occurs because the person chooses to be committed (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Of the two forms, affective commitment is the one correctional organizations should focus on building. Affective commitment tends to have more sought after outcomes, such as lower work absenteeism, lower desire to quit, reduced actual turnover, raised job performance, more involvement in organizational citizenship behaviors, and greater satisfaction with life (Camp, 1994; Culliver, Sigler, & McNeely, 1991; Lambert, Edwards, et al., 2005; Lambert, Hogan, & Griffin, 2008; Stohr, Self, & Lovrich, 1992). Continuance commitment may result in some correctional staff feeling trapped because the job is too “costly” to leave. As such, continuance commitment may result in negative outcomes, such as burnout (Lambert, Kelley, et al., 2013). I remember a fellow correctional staff member joking that he had 5 years, 7 months, 2 weeks, 3 days, and 4 hours to retirement. I joked back that I would become concerned when he started calculating the number of minutes and seconds. The pension plan required a minimum of 20 years to receive retirement benefits. This person did not wish to stay with the correctional agency, but had too much time invested in the pension plan to leave. He felt that he had no option but to stay and struggle through the remaining years. Griffin and Hepburn (2005) argued that “understanding and promoting commitment to the organization is essential to the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization” (p. 612). I strongly feel that they are correct in their assessment, at least for affective commitment.

As was the case with job stress and job satisfaction, the research to date supports the job demands–resources model in how workplace variables help shape affective commitment among correctional staff. Again, job demands, such as fear of workplace victimization, role conflict, role ambiguity, work-family conflict, and repetitive work tend to result in lower affective organizational commitment (Lambert, Kelley, et al., 2013). Job resources, such as job variety, job autonomy, equitable treatment, formalization, instrumental communication, input into decision making, organizational support, quality of training, open and supportive supervision, organizational justice, and trust in supervisors and management tend to be associated with higher affective commitment (Garland, McCarty, & Zhao, 2009; Griffin & Hepburn, 2005; Lambert, 2003, 2004; Lambert, Paoline, et al., 2006; Robinson, Porporino, & Simourd, 1997; Stohr, Lovrich, Monke, & Zupan, 1994; Wright et al., 1997).

Future Research and Conclusion

There are more workplace factors associated with job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment than those reported above. This brief review of findings was to illustrate why these three concepts are important and how workplace variables play a role in shaping them. In the end, there are many things within the control of correctional administrators, managers, and supervisors to reduce job demands and increase job resources; however, in order to institute effective changes, administrators need information on the effects of a wide array of workplace variables and their effects. As such, there is a need for far greater research on how the work environment affects correctional staff.

First, replication is critical. In an era of “replication crises,” there is no longer such a thing as a definitive study. Multiple studies on the same topic minimize the chances of making either a Type I (i.e., false positive) or Type II (i.e., false negative) error due to random chance.

Additionally, the jobs demands–resources model predicts that findings may be contextual and vary by type of correctional facility, region, or time. For example, what matters in the workplace may be generational (e.g., differs among Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials), and as such, the results could vary over time (Cheeseman & Downey, 2012). Alternatively (or possibly concurrently), results could vary by career stage, depending on whether the respondent was in early, mid, or late career. As such, I advocate publishing studies that reexamine the effects of workplace variables previously studied. I think it is critical such studies be published to determine whether similar results are found or whether results vary across studies.

Second, there are many areas that have not been researched or fully researched. The work environment has many dimensions. There has been little research on both the antecedents and consequences of job involvement (i.e., cognitive identification with the job/type of work being done) among correctional staff (Kanungo, 1982). Past studies have indicated that role strain (i.e., role ambiguity and role conflict) is positively associated with correctional staff job stress; however, the factors that either raise or lower role strain among correctional staff are not clear. Likewise, perceptions of organizational justice are linked with higher job satisfaction and higher affective organizational commitment; however, studies identifying relevant variables that can raise perceptions of workplace fairness are lacking. For theoretical and practical reasons, identifying the

antecedents of significant predictors of job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment is important.

Toxic workers are another area that needs to be researched. Jonason, Slomski, and Partyka (2012) contend that toxic employees tend to be high on indexes measuring narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, which they termed the *dark triad*; other researchers have included the trait of sadism, terming the four traits the *dark tetrad* (Paulhus, 2014). Toxic employees, including both line staff and those in management positions, can have an inflated sense of their importance, be overly concerned with their career and personal success, overly sensitive to criticism, disregard the feelings of others, and lack empathy for those who they see as beneath them. They may bully others, micromanage others, distort things to fit their views and needs, be poor listeners, tear others down while building themselves up, fail to seek input from others (because they feel that are the only ones with the answers to problems), and tend to feel that the ends justify the means. There is no single attitude or behavior that makes a person a toxic worker, but rather is a combination. Moreover, toxic employees do not always act in a toxic manner, and there are likely varying degrees of toxicity (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007; Doty & Fenlason, 2013; Jonason et al., 2012; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). In both corrections and in academia, I have witnessed toxic employees both directly or indirectly, including some in administrative roles, and the harm they do to others and the organization in the long run. Although it may appear stupefying how management can turn a blind eye to them, somewhat paradoxically, toxic workers can be competent and productive employees. Although toxic workers can help organizations reach their

short-term goals, such individuals are detrimental to the long-term health and viability of an organization because they often create a climate where employees, particularly good ones, want to leave. Toxic persons can be charming, assertive, and goal oriented. As a hiring process tends to occur over a short period of time, it can be difficult to discover the toxic attitudes and behaviors before the person is hired (Jonason et al., 2012). In addition, many organizations lack suitable metrics to evaluate employee toxicity, whether in line staff, supervisors, managers, or administrators (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007).

The deputy warden I mentioned earlier was likely a toxic administrator based on what he said, how he treated individuals, and how he appeared to be more concerned about himself than the inmates and other staff. In a meeting, he reportedly opposed a recommended change intended to make the institution more humane and safer because he feared the change might hurt his chances for a promotion. I feel that toxic staff, supervisors, managers, and administrators cause great harm to correctional organizations over time; however, I cannot point to any empirical research to support my position. Research is needed to determine the extent of toxic correctional employees, regardless of rank, the impact of these individuals have on their fellow staff, if the toxic employees even know they are toxic, if their toxic attitudes and behaviors are intentional or unintentional, and, assuming there is harm, what can be done to stop this type of organizational behavior. A last important question is whether the person was toxic before joining the organization or whether a toxic culture or climate created the person.

Third, there is a need to evaluate changes to the workplace and interventions to reduce job stress and/or raise job satisfaction and

organizational commitment. There is little research on the effectiveness of particular interventions or what specific changes should be instituted. For example, various forms of social support (e.g., peer support, supervisor support, management support, organizational support, community support, and family and friends support) have been mentioned as a possible means for dealing with correctional staff job stress and job burnout (Neveu, 2007), but which type(s) of social support matter is not clear. In addition, how specific type(s) of social support either buffer the effects of stressors (i.e., forces that result in job stress) or help staff deal effectively with the stress is also unclear. For example, in theory, peer support could be positive or negative. Coworkers could provide ideas of how to avoid or deal with stressors, as well as providing a sympathetic ear for venting. On the other hand, coworkers could provide poor strategies for dealing with stress, such as drinking or keeping it bottled up. Far more research is needed on how the workplace affects correctional staff and how to realistically improve the work environment.

Before closing, I would like to advocate for organizational justice. I feel it is a powerful concept that can not only improve the quality of life in organizations, including correctional ones, but also guide people in their interactions with others. During the course of my research, I realized that fairness was what I wanted most from my employing organization. If this is what I wanted, I felt I needed to adopt organizational justice as a guiding principle of my actions, particularly at work. I believe the most important role of any supervisor is to provide his or her supervisees with the skills and resources needed for them to do their jobs to the best of their ability and to create as fair and pleasant a work experience as possible. Organizational justice

improves the workplace. Although organizational justice has different dimensions, there are three that I think are critical: distributive justice, procedural justice, and transactional justice. Distributive justice basically deals with the perception that there is fairness in outcomes, such as job assignment, performance evaluation, pay, and promotion (Greenberg, 1990, Griffin & Hepburn, 2005; Lambert, 2003). Procedural justice deals with perceptions that the processes used to arrive at organizational outcomes is fair and transparent (Greenberg, 1987; Lambert et al., 2007). Transactional justice deals with treating people with dignity and respect, even when delivering bad news or dealing with work problems (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2005). Making changes to distributive justice can sometimes be out of the control of administrators or involve financial resources that are simply not available. Fortunately, empirical research to date indicates that procedural justice is more important to employees. Practicing procedural and transactional justice involves few resources. Procedural justice can be accomplished by explaining the processes used and allowing people a voice in the process (Greenberg, 1987; Lambert et al., 2007). I wish to emphasize that allowing staff a voice in the process does not bind administrators to institute staff's suggestions; it means allowing people meaningful input and explaining to them why decisions that affected them were made. Both procedural and transactional justice cost little, if anything, to implement but can pay off handsomely.

In closing, I had several motivations in writing this article. First was to explain how I became interested in how workplace variables affect correctional staff. Second was to provide

a brief overview of some of the key findings to date. Third and most importantly was to encourage more people to become involved in this line of research with the goal of improving the workplace for correctional staff. Moreover, there is a need to investigate the effects of workplace factors on staff in a wide array of criminal justice organization, such as the police, probation/parole, the courts, private criminal justice organizations, and even within criminal justice programs and academic departments. People are the most valuable resource for the vast majority of criminal justice organizations. Fourth and finally, I hope that people will challenge poor workplace practices in order to make work a better place for all.

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