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The Trials and Tribulations of Implementing What Works: Training Rarely Trumps Values

What a program is, research tells us consistently,
matters less to program outcomes than how it is carried out.

McLaughlin et al. 1975.

Abstract: The article analyzes the professional situation of employees dealing with professional tasks in the field of resocialization, starting from various stages of professional development. According to the author, there are many rehabilitation people who excellently perform their duties and are concerned about the broader structural issues that prevent curatorial supervision and conditional release as appropriate forms of work with charges and should be generally recognized components ensuring public safety and justice within the system orchard-penitentiary. Working in this profession requires commitment and great responsibility and sensitivity, if we actually assume an offer of assistance, while among employees there are people who do not work in this type of professional tasks. It is important that individual values are consistent with practices based on responsible actions aimed at reducing recidivism, and compulsory training for staff can help to educate competent specialists. Too often, however, core values are ignored when making decisions about employment and assessing the effectiveness of employees related to social rehabilitation institutions.

Key words: Organizational capital, recidivism rates, professional experience, professional career.

Let me state up front that I make no attempt in this article to couch my observations and conclusions under the cloak of peer-reviewed scholarly writings, although there will be some reference to them throughout. Instead, I will share some personal experiences that I believe to be representative of many--not all--probation, parole, and community corrections jurisdictions. It is my hope that some of the professional skeletons in the organizational closets of corrections, in particular community corrections, will be better understood as the “last frontier” to be explored and targeted in order to effectively implement evidence-based practices that reduce recidivism.

We have learned a great deal about what works with regard to programs associated with offender recidivism reduction. Far too little attention has been paid to the impact of staff and organizational factors--organizational capital--on recidivism rates (Paparozzi, Schlager 2009). Yet, any right-thinking professional is, in all likelihood, acutely aware of the fact that implementation of good programs requires good people--people who passionately value the purposes of their work and who possess the skills and competencies necessary to carry it out. In fact, acknowledgement of staff and organizational factors as potential factors that influence recidivism rates has been well documented over the years (Petersilia 1990; Gendreau, Andrews 2001; Paparozzi, Gendreau 2005; Andrews, Bonta 2006; Gendreau et al. 2009). It might be that more attention to programs and less to organizational capital occurs because it is easier, if not safer, to talk about shortcomings of programs rather than ourselves. That being said, some will likely feel a bit defensive because they do not see themselves as fitting within the professional issues that impede the implementation of evidence-based programs as I have laid them out herein.

To be sure, there are many corrections professionals who are doing excellent work but who, like me, are concerned about larger structural issues that prevent probation and parole from being all that they can be as viable and broadly valued public safety and justice components of the criminal justice system. If you are a corrections professional possessing the values and competencies required by our business, be assured that my concerns are not addressed to you. In fact, my guess is that you will share my concerns about why the plethora of what works research evidence has difficulty negotiating certain headwinds that stunt professional growth and development.

Background Information

Some background is essential if what is said in this article is to have any credibility with its readers.

It has been 40 years since I entered into the corrections profession. Thirty of those years were spent as a practitioner, working my way up the organiza-

tional ladder from parole officer trainee to assistant corrections commissioner and ultimately state parole board chairman, overseeing all aspects of community corrections programs and parole. In addition to my work on the streets, my professional involvement includes the following: 1) founder of a labor union representing community corrections line staff and managers; b) mid-level manager and administrator; c) chief executive officer; d) leadership roles in several professional associations related to corrections; and e) countless conference talks, training workshops, consulting services, and technical assistance to practitioner agencies in 44 states and 8 foreign nations.

My professional activities have provided me with opportunities to understand my beloved profession from a perspective that would have been impossible from a more parochial vantage point. Moreover, such an expansive perspective has revealed to me that social forces produce similar staff behaviors and organizational dynamics in most correctional jurisdictions, whether in North America or abroad--the differences are only in the matter of degree. Among these is a reverberating echo of the critical importance of values and attitudes of leaders and line staff.

Of course there are many other correctional insiders who are just as involved, if not more so, than I have been over the years. And, in the multitude of backstage conversations that I have had with the overwhelming majority of them over the years, common themes arise about staff characteristics of correctional practitioners at all organizational levels. Some of the major themes are captured in recurring comments made to me during my interactions with practitioners. In fact, I have a record of many, but the following seem most apropos to the topic at hand and go beyond being merely anecdotal. They are that many practitioners:

- Possess personal values that are antithetical to the goals and objectives of the correctional enterprise--"Most offenders can never be changed, and even if they could be, they are not worth the effort" (a statement to me by a correctional agency head).
- Believe that punishment--not rehabilitation--should be the primary philosophical underpinning of correctional programs and practices--"Community service is not a teaching moment; it is better thought of as a cheap and public form of punishment. That is why I required a probationer to clean the front doors of the courthouse with a toothbrush" (a statement made to me by a judge responsible for overseeing and making policy for a probation department).
- Are convinced that they have little or no influence in reducing individual offender recidivism by making use of evidence-based practices--"These latest flavor-of-the-month programs are nothing new. The administration really doesn't believe in them either; they just make us do them so that we don't appear to be professional Neanderthals" (a statement made to me by a line staff probation officer on the job for eight years).
- Do not see training as a pathway to professional development: "We are required to have 40 hours of staff training each year. When we hand out

paychecks every month, we have a brief meeting to discuss new policies; this qualifies as staff training” (a statement made to me by a mid-level manager of a probation/parole agency); “It does not matter what programs we get trained on. All the agency cares about is how many contacts we make, and if we are making them as required by policy. We don’t get bad performance ratings if the offenders that we supervise become recidivists, but we do if we miss a contact or are late with a report” (a statement made to me by a parole officer on the job for two years); “Training is not my responsibility. If my agency does not pay for it, then I am not going to participate” (a statement made to me by a probation officer about why more line staff do not hold membership in professional associations or attend professional conferences).

Now, while drawing conclusions based on personal generalizations can range from banal to damaging to individuals and organizations, some credibility should be conferred upon them when they are shared by many and also supported by scholarly writings (Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, & Paparozzi, 2002; Latessa, Cullen, & Gendreau, 2002). In my interactions with practitioner colleagues, I find many who share my views—some publicly, but most quietly. In any case, my purpose here is to constructively advance the profession, and the primary point is that the elephant in the living room is very often us!

There are some among us who, from the start, were never a good fit with the vision, mission, goals, and objectives of corrections. Many, as I have heard countless times over the years, desired careers in law enforcement upon graduation from college, but for one reason or another were unable to achieve their personal career goal and begrudgingly fell back on careers in probation and parole. Others were looking for careers in which they could help people in need and who wanted to be helped. Some simply wanted a job with a decent income, benefits, and job security. And, lest we forget the unsavory role of politics in our profession, many are the result of “must hire”² political patronage jobs (see also for example Estes, Allen 2011). There are, as well, some individuals who intentionally sought careers in probation, parole, and community corrections because they were passionate about its value to public safety and justice for all; my impression is that they are in the minority either in number or in the supremacy of their voice. In any case, their actual numbers and their influence within agencies in many instances are, in my view, often insufficient to establish and maintain organizational cultures deserving of the name “professional”.

Indeed, I came to the profession quite haphazardly, and my own story is an excellent example of the kind of thing that I wish to highlight. I understand that not everyone’s story mirrors mine, but in my experience, too many do. That being said, even if only 10 to 20 percent of new hires into the profession share a similar story, there would be a significant downward drag on mission accomplishment.

I was a college senior applying for just about any civil service job for which my degree in sociology would qualify me. My career goal was to get a job that

was not shoveling asphalt or working in a factory for minimum wage. I had virtually no knowledge of the criminal justice system, let alone any aspect of community corrections, except through my association with a few acquaintances who had served time in juvenile detention, adult jails, and prisons and then on probation or parole. I passed a civil service exam for parole officer trainee—there were no questions related to the career that I was about to embark upon, a fact unknown to me at the time. I remember one multiple-choice question on the exam that asked for the definition of the word ovoid. (I later found out that ovoid means elliptical. After all of these years, I still wonder why someone thought this word important enough to include on a screening exam for a community corrections job applicant.) I passed the exam, and one year later, when my rank-ordered exam grade queued up, I was called for an in-person interview.

My interview consisted of being asked to name the top three of nine locations where I would like to be assigned. The three that I named were known to me to be very nice areas. After hearing my choices, my interviewer (the chief of the agency) said that he could not hire me because the areas that I named were highly desirable, and that many in-house people with lots of seniority wanted transfers to those locations. He added that had I mentioned one particular city – one well known for being plagued by social and economic ills and with high staff turnover – I would have been hired immediately. I responded by telling my interviewer that I was born in that city, and I had always wanted to return to my roots. I was hired. He made no inquiries about my personal values or beliefs about helping criminals versus punishing them, nor was I queried about my knowledge base regarding the criminal justice system in general. At the time, none of this mattered to me. In retrospect, I am convinced that it should have mattered to both of us.

The Relevance of Staff Attitudes and Values – Who Are We Anyway?

People end up in community corrections careers for a panoply of reasons. If one spends an appreciable amount of time in the business, all are likely to be countenanced. With such an array of individuals, very often possessing contradictory values, the skill and competency levels vary widely. As such, the task of developing a competency-based staff-training program that could reach such a fractured audience would be daunting, if not impossible. Even if such a program could be developed, there still would remain the matter of addressing individual values and psycho-social attributes that may be inconsistent with effectively performing the social casework, community advocacy, and law enforcement functions of the profession.

When individual values are congruent with evidence-based practices for offender recidivism reduction, rigorous training may produce competent profession-

als. Too often, however, core values are overlooked in hiring decisions and staff performance evaluations related to correctional practitioners (Paparozzi, Caplan 2009). Inappropriate values, for example, filter new information and impede their objective assessment. This may be why some practitioners (and political policymakers) have lukewarm feelings about the efficacy of academic research and scholarly theories about crime and criminal behavior (Gendreau et al. 2009). Moreover, because they are deeply ingrained, values are extremely difficult to change through training and education.

The personal characteristics of probation and parole officers and the effete potential of training to correct deficits in values were noted as far back as 1941, and they are still relevant today:

- “Let me disclaim immediately..., that training can work any special miracles. Sending a poor officer [to training before or on the job] is no guarantee that he will be better when he returns...”
- Individuals “...may be brilliant intellectually...yet fail...because they lack... [sensitivity]..., quick perception, fundamental respect for [offenders], and flexibility” (Witte 1941).

The fact is that professional values and competencies that support the implementation of an evidence-based “what works” agenda are too often lacking (Anonymous 1911; Layne 1937; Lawes 1937; Witte 1941; Butler 2009; Conrad 1979; Fonger 2009; Goldmacher 2008; Martin 1954; Petersilia 1990; Fulton et al. 1997; Paparozzi, Caplan 2009; Lowenkamp et al. 2012). Paparozzi and Guy (2009) note that individual values serve to predispose correctional practitioners toward attitudes that facilitate or impede professional goals. Similarly, Gendreau, Goggin, Cullen, and Paparozzi (2002) note that failure to give due diligence to the qualifications and personal commitment of individuals charged with the administration of correctional programs can often lead to the development of policies and practices that may seem to derive from common sense but in reality are more akin to professional quackery.

Probation and Parole Officers Are Social Workers and Law Enforcers

For decades, probation and parole practitioners have been debating whether they are primarily social workers or law enforcers. (My view is that probation and parole officers must be both.) Sadly, this debate seems no closer to resolution today than when I entered the profession 40 years ago. Arguments have been made over the years about whether one individual can be both a helper and an enforcer (Clear, Latessa 1993; Paparozzi, Gendreau 2005; Whetzel et al. 2011). I believe that individuals with appropriate values and skills can be both – I have met many over the years. Likewise, I believe that there are individuals with po-

larized values and that their effective crossover into one or the other domains is not possible – I have met many of these too.

Academically speaking, the community corrections component of the criminal justice system is expected to enhance public safety by managing offender risk in the short term and changing offender behavior in the long term (Cullen, Gendreau 2000; Wodahl, Garland 2009). However, many “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980) primarily define their jobs as:

- Unreservedly enforcing conditions of probation and/or parole--whatever they are.
- Making and documenting the required number of office, home, and community contacts.
- Writing reports for the court and/or paroling authority. Incarcerating technical violators.

A few years back, I wrote that in order for probation, parole, and community corrections to effectively accomplish its goals and objectives, it is necessary to understand the importance of Treatment + Surveillance + Enforcement – in that temporal ordering (Paparozzi, DeMichele 2008). Failure to ground community correctional practice in this paradigm misses the point of what is expected from us as a profession and is also a misunderstanding of the nature of our involuntary and potentially dangerous clientele.

To breathe life into each aspect of the paradigm requires different operational considerations:

Treatment requirements:

- Ground risk assessments criminogenically.
- Provide appropriate services to offenders.
- Provide proactive case management and planning.

Surveillance requirements:

- Monitor the quality and delivery of services.
- Assure the offender’s active engagement and progress in treatment and services.

Enforcement requirements:

- Hold offenders accountable at all times.
- Protect the public from harm by ratcheting up community, and if needed, custodial controls.

My observation is that the surveillance and enforcement functions are frequently misunderstood and given disproportionate emphasis.

Surveillance is too often understood to mean the following: curfew checks, electronic monitoring, increased offender reporting, and home contacts for the purpose of expediting the violation of offenders under supervision. Surveillance does indeed play an important role in the work of community corrections, and at certain times, bed checks are justified. Their central objective, however, should not be punitive. The primary import of surveillance derives from the need to monitor

the delivery of quality services and the offender's progress during the course of supervision--a point that is often given less attention by individuals and agencies that possess a skewed law enforcement bent and a penchant for violating offenders. Only through surveillance activities that are understood within the context of changing offender behavior as well as risk management (e.g., targeting dynamic criminogenic needs, modifying case plans, etc.) can the full potential of probation and parole be realized.

The enforcement component, intentionally last in the temporal ordering, speaks to the need to hold offenders accountable at all times and to protect the public from imminent harm. Typically, the enforcement continuum spans from holding offenders accountable through graduated sanctions to incarceration. Graduated sanctions reached a zenith in the 1990s (Cronin 1994; Petersilia 1998), and many policies developed to implement them seem to make sense. Less obvious, however, are the quantitative and qualitative variations in the use of graduated sanctions. Some line staff are quick to pull the trigger while others are too late on the draw (Clear, Hardyman 1990; Lurigio, Petersilia 1992; Paternoster et al. 1997). The critical importance of whether probation/parole officers are social workers or law enforcement officers, or both, is paramount to how the enforcement function of probation and parole is carried out.

There has been increased attention to the law enforcement functions of community corrections over the past three decades (Wodahl, Garland 2009). Concerns for staff safety, the belief that today's probationers and parolees are far more dangerous than those in the past (a belief that I personally do not agree with--they were always dangerous), and public calls for offender accountability and punishment have all contributed to a distorted emphasis on the enforcement component of probation, parole, and community corrections.

Andrews and Bonta (2010), Trotter (2006), and Skeem, Eno Loudon, Polaschek, and Camp (2007) all note that when the enforcement function is highly valued by line staff, establishing a positive working relationship with the offender and effectively implementing evidence-based programs for offender rehabilitation are obstructed. The question for the profession is this: Can the enforcement function of probation and parole be performed without degrading efforts to accomplish offender rehabilitation? My belief is that it can. The offender rehabilitation and public safety expectations of probation and parole are inextricably intertwined: The former (offender rehabilitation) is the best evidence-based strategy for accomplishing the latter (public safety). Offender rehabilitation is not a goal: It is a strategy for achieving the goal.

In fact, I have long been a proponent of arming probation and parole officers (Paparozzi 1990) and providing these officers with the ability to make arrests and execute fugitive warrants. The basis for my advocacy in arming probation and parole officers is twofold. First, line staff need to feel safe at all hours of the day and night working in the communities where offenders reside. The work of com-

munity corrections cannot be accomplished by working bankers' hours in an office (Corbett 1999). Second, when community corrections agencies rely on outside agencies to enforce fugitive and/or violation warrants, their warrants often receive a low priority. When this happens, probation and parole warrants filed with outside agencies are, for the most part, enforced after the offender commits a new crime, or to a much lesser extent, when records are checked by a police agency. This kind of reactive scenario for warrant execution jeopardizes public safety and places probation and parole in the vulnerable position of having to account to the general public and politicians for why its fugitives were often missing in plain view until they committed a new crime.

Unfortunately, many community supervision agencies have improperly and prodigiously latched onto the law enforcement component of the community supervision function. The result is a serious diminution of the long-standing and basic human service delivery function of probation and parole, which is fundamental to evidence-based offender rehabilitation programs. I have observed several examples of this organizational dynamic in probation and parole jurisdictions across the nation. One agency, for example, expanded its line-staff training to include underwater rescue and traffic stops. Another changed the titles of its community corrections supervisory staff to police-like titles such as captain, lieutenant, and sergeant. Still another that I encountered was having difficulty settling a debate about whether or not line staff should be required to wear pants with a stripe similar to that of corrections officers.

Agency line staff, managers, and department heads that favor law enforcement activities over social casework generally cannot effectively do the work of community corrections; the reverse is also true. My personal view is that treatment, surveillance, and enforcement should be done in-house, whenever possible. My personal views aside, it is the function that is important, not who performs it. Therefore, if any or all of the three functions can be effectively executed through brokerage to outside agencies, the integrity of the model stands. What is important is that each of the three components, and their temporal ordering, are valued by leaders and line staff and that those performing them possess the values and competencies necessary to perform each of them in ways that comport with the philosophy and practice of community corrections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the dominions of prisons, jails, probation, parole, and community corrections, a major organizational objective is offender recidivism reduction. To the extent that recidivism is reduced, there will be fewer victims of crime and reduced criminal justice system costs (Morris & Tonry, 1990). A wealth of knowledge regarding how to best accomplish offender recidivism reduction has been produced and

widely disseminated over the past 40 years (Cullen, Gendreau 2000). This comprehensive knowledge base, which continues to grow with each passing year, is quite specific about effective and ineffective principles for enhancing public safety through offender recidivism reduction.

Given the corporeality of “what works” knowledge related to effective and ineffective principles for offender recidivism reduction, it is fair to ask why practical applications of what is known have not been easily, broadly, and effectively transformed into practice. In fact, certain community corrections practitioners and academic scholars are increasingly perplexed by the fact that there remains individual and organizational resistance (Bonta et al. 2008; Bonta et al. 2011), not to mention external political aversion, to proactive implementation of offender rehabilitation programs that are built on a foundation grounded in research evidence.

As recently as 2008, it was reported that offenders under community supervision that purportedly used evidence-based practices versus offenders who received no such supervision experienced only 2 percent reduction in recidivism (Bonta et al. 2008). For violent offenders under supervision, no difference was found. Bonta et al. (2008) suggest that the reason for this poor result can be explained by poor program implementation. They found that: 1) risk, need, and responsivity principles – a staple of the principles for effective intervention--were not consistently applied; 2) a majority of relevant criminogenic need factors were ignored; and 3) no more than 25 percent of the staff made use of cognitive behavioral techniques. Bonta et al.’s (2008) findings mirror those of Andrews, Dowden, and Gendreau (1999), and my own personal experiences. Andrews et al. (1999) found that 87 percent of the correctional programs that they examined made no mention of evidence-based principles for offender recidivism reduction, and there was virtually no concern for the therapeutic integrity of program implementation. Not surprisingly, these programs had no effect on recidivism.

Equally on point is the fact that, depending upon the politics of the day, agency leaders with a variety of values and competencies are appointed to establish agendas and oversee operations. These leaders are often political appointees who serve at the pleasure of the elected officials to whom they owe their jobs; this too is a long-standing professional problem (Witte 1941; Tabor 1942). Such a politicized environment is very often antithetical to professional development. Therefore, the actualization of principles that are professionally sound but politically unpopular either is adulterated or fails to occur at all.

A few leadership examples drawn from my personal experiences with chief executive officers (CEOs) of community correctional agencies will help drive this point home. Among the community correctional CEOs I have met, one had work experience as an owner/operator of fast food restaurants, one was a lottery commissioner, one was a civil law attorney, one was an elected sheriff, one was a police officer, one was a public school teacher, and one was a social worker. Which value and skill set is best for probation and parole? What message is sent to line

staff when their leaders keep changing and possess such a broad range of values and skill sets? If leaders can come from such a broad array of backgrounds, then why can't all agency personnel too? It is extremely doubtful that more and better staff training can assure that evidence-based programs and practices will be implemented effectively in such organizational environments.

The importance of the relationship between committed and competent leaders and successful program implementation cannot be overstated (Tabor 1942; Witte 1941; Petersilia 1990; Paparozzi, Gendreau 2005; Reinventing Probation Council 2000; Beto et al. 2000). This is a fact that is rarely stated publicly but is well-known by insiders. Is it any wonder then why many evidence-based programs experience implementation difficulties and have not produced expected results (Gendreau, Andrews 1979; Peeler, Latessa 2004)?

I hope that by now I have made the case that acquiring knowledge about how to accomplish organizational objectives is a necessary but insufficient basis for producing desired results. While it is true that not all knowledge is produced for some utilitarian purpose beyond intellectual, philosophical, or esoteric endeavors, knowledge related to best practices for making communities safer places to live should give birth to action (Guy 2011; Buroway 2005). Failure to do so is professionally negligent. To meet the demands and challenges of organizational objectives such as recidivism reduction, knowledge must be translated into action. And it is precisely this point that is, in the words of the now legendary Paul Harvey, "the rest of the story."

Bridging knowledge and practice has not been an easy task, especially in the corrections profession. I can recall countless correctional conferences, training sessions, and workshops dating back to the early 1970s that lamented the failure to build such a bridge. This story line, however, has a much deeper history in probation and parole, at least 70 years, as far as I can determine, as of the writing of this article. Witte (1941) noted that it "...appears that specific case-work principles are more accepted in theory than in actual practice in the field of probation and parole."

The failure to build the knowledge/practice bridge has public safety implications. In recent years, construction on such a bridge seems to be further underway than at any time previously. In spite of improvements with regard to the merging of knowledge and practice, too many correctional agency managers still struggle with getting staff to robustly embrace and implement cutting-edge evidence-based practices.

Turning to staff training is a common response for resolving the knowledge to practice conundrum. While staff training is certainly extremely important, its limitations are often poorly understood. Staff training, for example, does little to modify deeply-held values that run counter to the entire notion of rehabilitating offenders. It should come as no surprise to any experienced corrections practitioner, for example, that the continuum of staff and management values runs from

beliefs in retributive punishment and the notion that offenders cannot be changed-ever – to assumptions that offender rehabilitation enhances public safety and is humane – the right thing to do. This range of conflicting beliefs/values about the correctional enterprise has been well known to correctional insiders for many years. In fact, sometimes individual practitioners do lack the necessary skills to implement new programs. Staff training, however, when layered atop individual values and political environments that are philosophically contrary to the underpinnings of clearly articulated evidence-based practices, is ineffective. The values and belief systems of individual correctional practitioners and organizational cultures must be concerns of the first order.

Examples of some very basic values that are essential to the effective practice of our profession include the belief that: 1) risk levels can be actuarially determined through the identification of criminogenic factors; 2) providing services that target criminogenic need factors reduces the probability of recidivism; and 3) offenders should be afforded every opportunity to fully reintegrate into society. Many corrections professionals embrace these foundational values, but many do not. Others within the profession simply have no opinion. Regardless of whether these values are embraced, abhorred, or irrelevant to the holder, the corrections professional title is applied with impunity. Should we not be telling some of these emperors that they have no clothes on?

What seem to be the most pressing problems facing all facets of the corrections profession relate more to organizational capital than to a paucity of sound empirical research evidence and credible psychological and/or sociological theory about specific practices and programs that embrace principles for effective intervention--commonly referred to as the “what works” model. The time has come to gain a better understanding of these issues:

- organizational structures that stunt professional growth and development,
- the critical importance of leadership,
- professionalism, and
- politics.

The issues related to each of the foregoing components of organizational capital within the corrections profession are critical to the effective implementation of evidence-based practices, and they represent the last frontier for effective correctional policy (Paparozzi, Schlager 2009).

Some policy recommendations going forward are:

- Articulate specific core competency and credential requirements for hiring staff.
- Hire agency leaders who are properly credentialed and professionally – not politically – qualified.
- Give increased attention to individual values when making hiring decisions.
- Develop training and staff certification in offender treatment and community collaborations that balance offender rehabilitation and social services with enforcement functions.

- Establish management information systems and staff performance evaluations that reflect a commitment to short-term risk management and long-term behavioral reform as primary operational goals.

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