

Warden Peer Interaction Develops New Vision in Correctional Leadership

By Joseph D. Serio

The real art of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.

— Marcel Proust

During a six-year period, from 1987 to 1993, 23 heart surgeons in New England participated in a study to determine whether an organized program of information-sharing, training in improved techniques, and site visits to other medical centers could decrease hospital mortality rates. As a result of engaging in this peer-interaction form of learning, the doctors succeeded in driving down the hospital mortality rate associated with certain heart surgeries by 25 percent. The surgeons did not access new equipment or invent new technologies to realize the outcome. They talked to each other. They observed each other in action. And they visited each other's hospitals.

Researchers concluded that this model may have applications in other settings, as well.¹ Using this strategy as a model, the Correctional Management Institute of Texas with the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University has held the biannual Wardens Peer Interaction Training Program for more than a decade.

Learning as a Highly Social Activity

For many years, psychologists have theorized that social interaction is one of the cornerstones of the learning process. Peer learning in particular has been demonstrated through empirical studies to provide the kind of motivation in the classroom that propels student learning.²

In business, researchers conducted hundreds of interviews with executives who engaged in peer interaction through conversations rather than in traditional instructor-led classes and found that method to be successful in developing new approaches to problem-solving. Participant responses exhibited fundamental elements of motivation and learning. For example:

- “There was a sense of mutual respect between us.”
- “We took the time to really talk together and reflect about what we each thought was important.”
- “We listened to each other, even if there were differences.”
- “We explored questions that mattered.”
- “I learned something new and important.”³

The peer-interaction environment fostered a clear commitment to listening to one another as well as to expressing one’s experience and opinion in an emotionally safe setting. As scholars have noted, “Learning is characterized by the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and feelings among people, resulting in new ways of viewing the world or ways of acting.”⁴

It would be wrong to think of peer-interaction programs as simply conversations for the purpose of exchanging information. While this is an important component, the framework of the interaction is critical to creating the desired effect. In highly functioning peer-interaction programs, the facilitators oversee the presentation of information to constructively challenge the observations and opinions of the participants. The use of a skilled facilitator is meant to generate what is called high-level cognitive processing, the primary mechanism that will engender new vision in the participants.

High-level cognitive processing involves making inferences, drawing conclusions, synthesizing ideas, generating hypotheses, comparing and contrasting, finding and articulating problems, and analyzing and evaluating alternatives. In other words, it is far more than simply having a conversation. The facilitator maintains a high-level discourse through guided questions and illuminating commentary, essentially forcing the participants to look inward, question their own assumptions and examine their own organizations from a new perspective. This process makes possible serious reflection by the participants.

Reflection

Reflection may not be a word much used in corrections circles. The pressures of performing one’s task, frequently within the context of severe time and budgetary constraints, make it seem that reflection is a luxury, an add-on that is ancillary to the job rather than an integral part of it. One of the valuable aspects of peer-interaction trainings is the participants’ ability to get away from the office for a few days, exchange ideas with colleagues and reacquaint themselves with the value of reflection.

As the writer Aldous Huxley noted, “Experience is not so much what happens to us as what we make of what happens to us.” That is, there must be a conscious, intentional consideration — reflection — of one’s experience: What really happened? Were personal assumptions faulty? How can our execution be improved? Where did we fall short of our goals? Edmund Duffy, warden of the George Motchan Detention Center in East Elmhurst, N.Y. and one of the participants of the Wardens Peer Interaction Program, said that “to step back and gain alternative perspective on emerging correctional issues is an invaluable resource.”

Wardens Peer Interaction Program

The program hosts 30 wardens from 15 to 20 states for the three-day event in Huntsville, Texas. The initial program announcement takes the form of a letter of invitation to the directors of departments of corrections (or their equivalents) from across the country. The directors appoint one or two wardens to represent their agency in Huntsville. Orientation material and forms are then sent to participants.

The orientation material clearly indicates that the program is an opportunity to present best practices or to outline a particularly vexing challenge the agency is experiencing, for consideration by the entire group. The material helps guide the participants in the selection of their topics and maximizes the usefulness of the presentations. As wardens submit their presentation topics in advance, the facilitators review them for appropriateness and consult with the participants, if necessary, in an effort to maintain a high-quality program. This attention to the substance of the program in the planning stage has been recognized by participants as beneficial. “Having the participants present ‘what works’ information from their home departments ensures that new and creative ideas are shared,” said Warden Karen Rohling of the Larned Correctional Mental Health Facility in Kansas.



Amanda Garcia

Doug Dretke, Natalie Payne and Jerry Gasko facilitate the Wardens Peer Interaction Program at Sam Houston State University.



Wardens visiting a Texas prison as part of the Wardens Peer Interaction Program.

The Facilitators

The choice of facilitators is a key element in the Wardens Peer Interaction Program, given their central role in conducting a high-level cognitive process throughout the program. In this light, facilitators who have experience in corrections, systems management, curriculum development and at least a general understanding of teaching methods and learning theories are ideal. The two primary facilitators currently used in the program meet all of these qualifications and have a total of more than 70 years of experience in corrections between them. They came up through their respective systems, served as wardens and state directors, are experienced trainers, and also have experience in military correctional settings.

As in any program, a good facilitator monitors the flow of the presentations with an eye toward time management to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to present their topics without sacrificing discussion time. But far more than simply a time manager, the facilitator keys in on important conceptual and operational points raised in the presentation, challenging the participants to step outside their comfort zones. Asking provocative questions that may not have clear, easy answers is one approach in developing the high-level cognitive program. Texas Warden Robert Shaw alluded to the function of the facilitators when he noted: "The format of the program is such that not only did we share ideas but it allowed for constructive open debate on the issues. It is this combination that helped open my mind to new ways of approaching various issues."

The Presentations

The program presentations each run from 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the number of representatives from a single state. Nearly all participants prepare PowerPoint presentations using both text and photographs. In some cases, such as the behind-the-scenes look at the impact of Hurricane Katrina on Louisiana corrections, video footage is used to great effect.

As the choice of presentation topics is largely left to the participants, the program has an eclectic feel to it, showcasing a wide range of subjects. In recent years wardens

have raised issues pertaining to staff retention, employee recognition, visitation, volunteer programs, lockdown procedures, female offenders, reentry programs, the Prison Rape Elimination Act, aging inmate populations, staff-offender relationships and much more.

Every participant is required to stand before his or her colleagues to present the particular topic area. Even though the setting is purposely informal and as relaxed as possible, the prospects of public speaking haunts even the most seasoned corrections professionals. For many, this is the first opportunity to speak before a group of their peers from around the country. Peter St. Amand, superintendent at MCI-Cedar Junction in Massachusetts said, "Just learning to talk in front of a group of peers helped me a lot." Such an effect was not anticipated prior to launching the program, but it has become a welcome benefit to which participants have responded well.

Participants also have opportunities to discuss issues during informal exchanges. Warden John Wolfe at the Jessup Correctional Institution in Maryland describes a typical example of the mutual support that the wardens lend one another throughout the program. "I came with a particular issue in starting up a step-down unit for my segregation housing and left with ideas and examples from others, including policy and procedure. I was able to offer initiatives from my state in cell phone K-9 dog training that proved useful to others. The exchange of not just problems but ideas and solutions to them is invaluable."

Virtually all participants have agreed that it is impossible not to derive great benefit from the variety of presentations, particularly since they are given under the guidance of experienced facilitators. Warden Jeff Marton of Texas summed it up well when he referred to the program as a "gathering of opportunities." He said: "It is a far greater challenge to attend the program and not bring something back or discover a new method or approach, given all of the participants and the vast amount of correctional knowledge and experience that defines the program."

Facility Tours

An integral part of the program includes tours of local prison facilities. Like the heart surgeons in New England who observed each other at work, participants spend several hours observing various local prisons, meeting with the facility wardens and applying what they have heard in the classroom. The visits provide the context for further conversation with peers, to reflect on how things are done at home, to get new ideas, and to reflect on practice and find meaning in it. Invariably, subsequent discussions integrate the tour experiences with the information shared in the classroom to create a more beneficial experience.

Not to be underestimated is the ride to the tours. Tour transportation allows for active conversation of a generally social, interpersonal nature on the way to the facility and discussion on the return trip about what they have just seen.

This exposure to prison facilities further develops the wardens' relationships with their classmates, continues to develop ideas and helps create new vision. Warden W.J. Sullivan from the California Correctional Institution noted the mixed environment of the program: "The academic set-

ting made a perfect learning environment, something we don't always have in the prison setting. The tours of the facilities were beneficial in that we were able to look at the physical plant differences and similarities to the institutions in our own states as well as the differences and similarities of our policies and procedures."

Network Building

One of the keys to a successful program is networking. Relationship-building begins the moment the wardens land in Texas, during the 45-minute ride to the university in vans provided by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. It continues on the first evening when the group gathers for an informal social hour and dinner. In the first minutes of their meeting, jokes are told, stories shared and the ice broken. Later at dinner, participants introduce themselves so that when the session convenes the next morning, all introductions have been made and work commences immediately.

Every program class concludes with several activities important to continuing the relationships. First, a contact sheet with each participant's information is distributed to the group. This simple tool aids in facilitating future discussion among the participants long after the formal program has ended. "It is good to know that I have others I can call upon for objective and innovative approaches to the correctional challenges I face daily," acknowledged Harris Diggs Jr., warden of the Buckingham Correctional Center in Virginia.

Next, participants present each other with mementos from their home states. This exchange further facilitates the goodwill that developed during the program and serves as a reminder of the experience each participant went through. The class also gathers for a group photo, another type of memento that serves to remind participants that learning is a highly social undertaking. Finally, the facilitators recognize each participant by calling his or her name and presenting each one with a certificate of completion for the 20-hour program.

The ideal continuation of relationships was noted by Gary Hetzel, warden at the Donaldson Correctional Facility in Alabama: "Colleagues from the program and I have shared administrative regulations, standard operating procedures and discussed several issues by telephone since attending the program. One colleague has already planned an extended trip to tour my institution and discuss management practices."

New Vision

There is a scene in the movie *Dead Poets Society* when the high school teacher, played by Robin Williams, encourages his students to step onto the teacher's desk in order to get a new view of the classroom, to look at the environment with a different set of eyes in an effort to foster new vision of a familiar setting. The Wardens Peer Interaction Program is much like this approach, creating new opportunities in a controlled environment. Peer-interaction learn-



Alaska Warden Craig Turnbull presents on his prison facility's programs to colleagues from around the country.

ing is meant to be "active, collaborative, relevant, and supportive of the learner" in an effort to create new vision of the surrounding environment.⁵ According to Warden Sheryl Lockwood, assistant deputy director of the Iowa Department of Corrections – Eastern Region, it is also powerful. "Powerful would be the word I would use to describe the training. It provided for me a barometer of where we are as a state and where we can go. ... To socialize and learn from other people in the same position is indescribable."

ENDNOTES

¹ Case cited in Barth, R. 2001. *Learning by heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

² Yanghee, K. and A. Baylor. 2006. A social-cognitive framework for pedagogical agents as learning companions. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 54(60):569-596.

³ Brown, J. and D. Isaacs. 1996. Conversation as a core business process. *The Systems Thinker*, 7(10):1-6.

⁴ Lauzon, A.C. 1992. Integrating computer-based instruction with computer conferencing: An evaluation of a model for designing online education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 6(2), cited in LaPointe, D. 2005. *Effects of peer interaction facilitated by computer-mediated conferencing on learning outcomes*. The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Retrieved from www.uwex.edu/disted/conference. See also Anderson, T., C. Howe, R. Soden, J. Halliday and J. Low. 2001. Peer interaction and the learning of critical thinking skills in further education students. *Instructional Science*, 29(1):1-32.

⁵ Thompson, J., B. Licklider and S. Jungst. 2003. Learner-centered teaching: Postsecondary strategies that promote "thinking like a professional." *Theory into Practice*, 42(2):133-141. Available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_into_practice/v042/42.2_thompson.html.

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