

# Got Training?

## Training as a Strategic Management Tool for Performance Enhancement

*Connie Clem interviewed Dr. Tom Reid, NIC Correctional Program Specialist, on training as a tool for strategic management. Tom is on the staff of the NIC Academy and a former Director of the Minnesota Jail Resource Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. Connie is the Senior Communications Specialist at the NIC Information Center and managing editor for the LJN-E. Tom will be briefly talking with the Large Jail Network on this topic at its July meeting in Longmont, Colorado, to discuss his ideas and hear the perspectives of LJN members.*

**(Connie Clem):** What problem most concerns you with jail and corrections training today?

**(Tom Reid):** My sense is that training is not being used as effectively as it could be. Agencies devote substantial resources to training but may not be getting true benefit from it. Training departments are very good at technically meeting requirements and delivering hours, but they often are less effective at addressing operational issues. Training, by its very nature, is a problem-solving device. It's simply not being used that way.

The same curriculum and same topics keep being delivered year after year for line staff in-service training. This happens for a variety of reasons. Often, it's just a chase for the hours; the success of training is measured by the volume of hours it yields. As a result, staff don't look forward to training, and sometimes they attend training that's not directly relevant to their jobs.

**So, what does that boil down to?**

Often the administration views training as an "hours machine" that's separate from the operation of the jail. Training has become isolated and disconnected. People go to training and then resume their old behaviors back on the job. But

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training should be part of the daily operation and management of the facility. We need to bring training back into the fold.

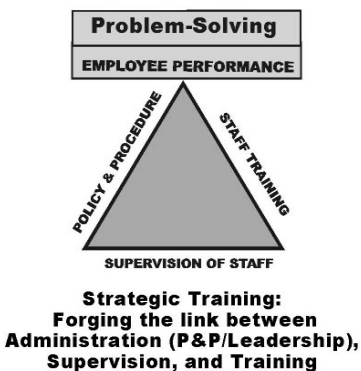
### Why should CEOs be concerned?

True performance enhancement requires a partnership between administrative leaders, the chain of command supervisors, and training staff. You know there is a disconnect any time you hear: “Forget what you learned in training; this is how we do it here . . .” Not only does that show the disconnect, but it raises the specter of a liability risk.

We want to change the typical CEO viewpoint to one of recognizing and using training as part of their management strategy for the organization. To help with this, we’ve coined a new slogan: “Training as a strategic management tool.”

CEOs need to be able to tell whether their training department is contributing to true performance management and enhancement or is just getting bogged down in meeting requirements. They need some ideas for assessing their agency’s situation.

I’ve been thinking about making bumper stickers to hand out at AJA: “Strategic Training: Forging the Link Between Administration, Supervision, and Training.” That would be a good reminder.



### Is this a pervasive problem, or just an issue in a few agencies?

The message I hear is consistent. Folks coming through my training mostly report they have to deliver so many “mandatory” or refresher training topics each year that they never get to the prescriptive or problem-based training. Meanwhile, the CEOs tell us they can’t see much return on their investment. Well, logically, if the training department can provide only the mandatory or refresher topics, and they do that every year, they may find it difficult to report any true investment return to the boss.

You have to question why training is being done: for outside entities or to truly enhance the organization?

### How do training standards relate to all this?

It’s a complex issue. Everybody has external sources that place training requirements on the agency. Requirements come from state jail standards, ACA accreditation, regulatory agencies, POST boards, etc. When your agency is primarily doing training for external rather than internal purposes, the goal of the training is to satisfy someone else’s need.

CEOs need to ask: are we training staff for our own purposes, to meet our own needs, or are we training primarily to meet outside mandates? Of course, training standards reflect some important principles. But when we allow them to dominate—for example, in terms of time, resources, and topics—we lose the true usefulness of our training. We let the standards define what we train in too narrow a way.

I talked about this with the state DOC training directors recently at a network meeting NIC hosted. There was a lot of interest in shaking loose from the training machine that focuses on the same topics, grinds out hours, and in reality turns off when the staff have reached their hourly requirement. The group is actually recommending changes to ACA's training standards this summer to help foster this change, and it will be interesting to see how that goes.

**What about needs assessment? Is every facility problem a training problem?**

We tend to saddle ourselves with inappropriate training topics. For example, when a significant incident occurs in the jail, there may be a push to “re-train everybody in X” before first looking to see whether the incident was actually due to factors like lack of supervision or unclear policy and procedure instead. If staff know what to do, and know how to do it, it is doubtful that re-training them on what they already know will prevent future incidents. It might, however, make them reluctant to attend training!

As far as training needs assessments, many agencies' assessments are flawed. Too often, trainers send out a list of topics and ask the staff which they need or want for next year. This is like a medical doctor asking you what pills you want before assessing your symptoms. The needs assessment should ask what the problems are. Then, the training department, along with the management team, can determine if training can play a role.

Training can't fix every problem. Training can only provide knowledge and/or skills. If a problem is at least partially due to a true lack of knowledge and skills on the part of staff, training can contribute to the solution. Listen to the symptoms, identify the core problem, and determine whether training can play a role. That's the only way to figure out how to attack the disease.

**What kind of process can help agencies address their real training needs?**

I don't think any large jail CEO out there is lacking in operational problems. These are routinely surfaced and discussed. To try out the concept of training as a strategic management tool, select one or two issues as a pilot and apply the “training as problem-solving” model with your training department.

Start thinking of training as a management intervention to address a problem. The first step is to analyze the problem and write a comprehensive problem statement for it. You probably will find several different causes for the problem, generally revolving around policy and procedure, staff supervision, and training. Next, form a problem-solving team with people from each of those functions, and have them develop a solution plan.

The plan should be comprehensive—remember, training can only address a lack of knowledge and/or skill. In the real world, the problems are complex and interwoven. It probably won't fix anything if you just do training without combining it with other strategies. The solution has to be a joint effort with leadership, policy, and supervision interventions as well. And, of course, you need to track and measure your impact on the original problem.

### **Are the issues the same for both new and experienced staff?**

New staff present a different problem than existing staff. They report to work with life skills but really don't know the specifics of our business. They need training in the knowledge and skills for successfully performing the core tasks of the job.

The problem analysis for new staff is to study the job and identify the core tasks they need to accomplish: this is job task analysis. The solution becomes a realistic, basic training curriculum that includes classroom content—the “what” and “why” of the job—with a hands-on FTO program: the “how” of the job.

We've often seen a heavy emphasis on classroom or academy training for new employees. That strategy needs to be balanced with an effective FTO program, particularly given the tendency in law enforcement and corrections to hire “hands-on” learners. A formal FTO program really teaches new staff the specific behaviors needed for a post. It's the same thing as ground school and flight school—it gets your new employees ready to fly.

On the other hand, an in-service curriculum for existing staff doesn't come from job analysis. Veteran staff become rusty, take short cuts, or perhaps have developed their own, unique ways of doing things. As a result, operational issues arise. You might see a pattern in your incident reports, or low sanitation scores, or too much contraband getting in. Maybe the staff need better skills or to get more reinforcement of certain skills.

Good in-service training topics for veteran employees are problem-based and come from a written problem statement. Real-world problems have interlinked causes, so in-service training needs to be linked with other kinds of interventions. Your problem-solving team can enhance policy or supervision, too, so your solution represents more than just training. Remember the theme of strategic training: forging the link between administration, supervision, and training.

Not only should in-service training be problem-based, but it should also be more individualized. Staff don't all develop the same bad habits, preferences, or shortcuts. Ideally, a supervisor, in collaboration with training staff, should write an individualized training prescription for each subordinate each year as part of the annual performance appraisal. The agency itself gets “well” as individuals fill their training prescriptions! Then, you can watch your indicators getting better over time.

### **What can jail administrators do to look at how this is playing out in their facilities?**

I would recommend that CEOs first look at the training function and ask a few leading questions:

- Does the goal and measurement of training appear to be hours?
- Are the same in-service topics being delivered for 40 hours every year?
- Are staff required to attend training, even if it's documented that they already possess the knowledge and skills being covered?
- Do staff attend training not directly related to their job function?
- Do mandatory or refresher topics dominate the in-service training plan?

- Do your needs assessments ask staff to choose from a list of training topics?
- Is training defined as only classroom delivery?
- For new employees, is there a balance between classroom/academy and FTO delivery?
- Do supervisors know and support the training objectives with their subordinates?
- Does your agency measure the impact of training on the organization?

Then, perform a more formal programmatic audit based on the answers. Are you getting what you're paying for from the training department? Are there barriers to using training as a strategic management tool?

**What should a jail CEO do if he or she thinks training isn't meeting the strategic needs of the agency?**

NIC has a program, "Training for Agency Training Coordinators/Directors," that can help jails take back control of their training. We're trying to shift the paradigm of training away from the "hours/mandated topics" paralysis to the "training as a strategic management tool" concept with that curriculum.

However, simply training the training staff won't effect the change. We need to reach upper level management with this message and educate the management team. Ideally, the agency's top people should always be part of the process. At some point, the CEO simply needs to say, "We can't do business this way any longer." The change in training impact will flow from that, and the training staff will appreciate your leadership.

**Do you have any "assignments" or suggestions for LJNI members before the July meeting?**

No, not at all. Come with an open mind about what is possible in training, and let's start challenging ourselves to use it effectively as a strategic management tool. We can all learn together. ■

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