



Corrections professionals can seize this economic crisis as an opportunity to sharpen the focus on our work and to shed the extraneous agendas that encumber our ability to do what we are really supposed to do: make our communities safer.

The Value of Our Work

Roger Werholtz

Secretary of Corrections

Kansas Department of Corrections

“**W**hen the purpose of the work is unclear, the work becomes more important than the outcome.” I came across this phrase quite a few years ago, and it caught my attention. I wish I knew who first said it, but a quick search on Google produced no results. In Malcolm Gladwell’s terms, it has a certain “stickiness” to it. Now, more than ever, this principle may become critical to our business.

Even as we read the hopeful assessments by some economists that the recession has ended and that we can expect to experience growth in the economy once again, there are also frequent references to “the new normal.” What does that mean? My sense is that the new normal refers to a change in expectations about how our economy functions, about what we can expect in terms of lifestyle, about what we should anticipate in services delivered by government, and about what government is even capable of doing.

The most optimistic predictions still call for a slow recovery, which means, I think, that those of us in corrections must anticipate that resources will be very slow to return to our operations, and that we must be extremely careful how we direct the expenditure of those resources. So, ACA brings you the Money Issue so

you can glimpse at how other agencies are conserving and spending within this context. As corrections professionals, how should we guide the direction of our industry in a time of radically reduced resources unlikely to expand any time soon? I would suggest we return to the purpose of our work. It sounds logical. It sounds simple. In my experience, identifying the purpose of our efforts is often neither.

In my home state, we talk about our vision of a safer Kansas through effective correctional services. That seems pretty straightforward. Everyone wants a safer community, state and country. Where the confusion starts is in the discussion about what constitutes effective correctional services. Are the attributes of effective correctional services found in more prisons or fewer prisons, longer or shorter sentences, treatment and education, case management, surveillance, improved interpersonal skills, emerging technologies, or more partnerships with organizations external to corrections? The debate engaged in so often by the public, policymakers, the media, and correctional professionals themselves focuses primarily on the method or the work and not on the outcome. We need to settle on the outcome.

Another way to think about this issue is to think about those things for which we are most frequently criticized: how much corrections costs (not a safety-based outcome), escapes (may be a safety-based outcome), and what offenders do after they are released from prison or while they are under supervision (definitely a safety-based outcome). I have debated with some of my peers whether it is fair for corrections to be held accountable for what offenders do while under supervision or after they are released from prison. After all, most of these individuals failed in school, failed in their communities, failed in their families. Is it fair to hold corrections alone accountable for their failures under our supervision? Unfortunately, fairness is irrelevant. We are already held accountable. What I think has been too often lost, is that we can, and do, have some impact on reducing the frequency with which offenders violate their conditions of supervision and, more important, the frequency with which they commit new crimes. Doing that makes us all safer.

When the purpose of the work is unclear, the work becomes more important than the outcome. Corrections professionals can seize this economic crisis as an opportunity to sharpen the focus on our work and to shed the extraneous agendas that

encumber our ability to do what we are really supposed to do: make our communities safer. Does a new prison that can prop up the economy of a declining town really make us safer by reducing the frequency with which offenders commit new crimes? Do residency restrictions on sex offenders make us safer by reducing the frequency with which offenders commit new crimes? Do marginally performing programs make us safer by reducing the frequency with which offenders commit new crimes? Do longer sentences for ... well, you get the picture.

Whether we are in operations, administration, treatment or research, as the experts in this business, we have an obligation to ask ourselves and the policymakers in our respective jurisdictions the purpose questions. Will this prison, program, policy or proposal make us safer? How will it accomplish that? What is the evidence to believe it will work? By what measurement will we know it has accomplished its purpose? If those questions cannot be answered satisfactorily, can we afford to expend limited resources on it when there may be another alternative that will deliver quantifiable public safety results?

We are in the midst of the worst economic crisis most of us have experienced in our lifetimes. Clarity of purpose is more important than ever. The value of our work in corrections is not intrinsic. Our work has value only when it produces something of worth. When the public safety purpose of our work is clear, when the methods are proven, then our work becomes important only *because* of the outcome. ♦