

An intimate look at women working in the field of corrections

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Historically, leadership roles have been held by men with women confined to supportive roles within the organizational infrastructure. While much progress has been made, women are still not consistently considered viable candidates for leadership roles in many industries. The field of corrections has made strides in acknowledging the value women from all cultural backgrounds bring to the table. Still, women fight to be recognized as viable leadership candidates for a variety of reasons. Forward thinking leaders seek the best person for the job. “The hallmark of a forward thinker is that he or she is somehow different — thinks differently, works differently and responds differently to common life situations. This is why someone who thinks completely outside of the box often breaks ranks with the herd of his time or culture. To be a forward thinker, necessarily implies that you are free to move outside conventional thinking and consensual rules of behavior. You can see beyond the moment and time-bubble of your culture and question all that is taken for granted” (G. Ross 2016.) Whether you are a front-line officer or a leader, you must be a forward thinker if you are seeking to excel. This article, (which highlights testimonials submitted in 2022 from women in corrections) aims to encourage women pursuing advancement, address the importance of fostering a supportive dialogue amongst women currently in the field and concludes with suggestions to confront current barriers. The testimonials are all presented with permission; with the promise of anonymity.

Hobbling half its talent pool

Women entered correctional systems in the 1960s when female employees were not welcomed into the profession. 60 years later, women still face challenges and at times doubt their own competency to lead in a historically male dominated industry. “Entering the corrections profession will present multiple barriers regardless of your gender. However, there are higher hurdles for women to jump as they enter the male-dominated field due to discriminatory stereotypes” (Kenzie Koch 2021). In 2007, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor said: “Women still face barriers on the path to leadership. And just as clearly, this matters for the society we want to create.

We will all be better off if women’s life experiences, needs, and values are fully reflected in decision-making positions. The presence of women in those positions is also essential to encourage aspirations among the next generation, and to counter reservations about women’s capacity for leadership roles. In an increasingly competitive global environment, no society can afford to hobble half its talent pool” (Greer 2008.) This statement still rings true almost 20 years later. Women are unique and wonderfully made. We have an innate ability to wear multiple hats and to bring diverse perspectives to the table. We’ve worked our way from the bottom to the top in spite of experiencing overt and covert discrimination based on our gender, ethnicity, race, physicality and other factors.

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A subordinate observing a Captain issuing directives in a crisis situation offered his critique of her effectiveness after the crisis was averted. He confidently uttered to her: “You are a lovely version of a man.” She heard: “lovely” and “man.” She didn’t know whether to take offense or to say “thank you.” When asked to share a few stories about her time in correctional leadership, a jail administrator said: “I have been in a position of leadership for over 20 years. The tatters in my soul still remain and to open up about them would only deepen my wounds.” She couldn’t speak of her experiences without exposing vulnerabilities and opening wounds. A male subordinate asked his sergeant if she wanted to see a picture of his new born baby. Of course, she wanted to see a picture of a lovely newborn baby! Who wouldn’t? He pulled out his phone as if he were searching for a picture of his baby. Across the first screen flashed a picture of his penis. He apologized and scrolled to another picture as if still looking for the picture of his cute little baby. He flashed yet another

picture of his penis. He leered at her, almost salivating in anticipation of her reaction. She walked away. She didn't report him because she did not want to be perceived as 'whiney.' Another leader shared that a male approached her and offered to help her understand how she was selected to be in a leadership position saying: "the only reason you were promoted is because you are black." Women likely remain silent about incidents like these more often than they report them.

Fighting the good fight

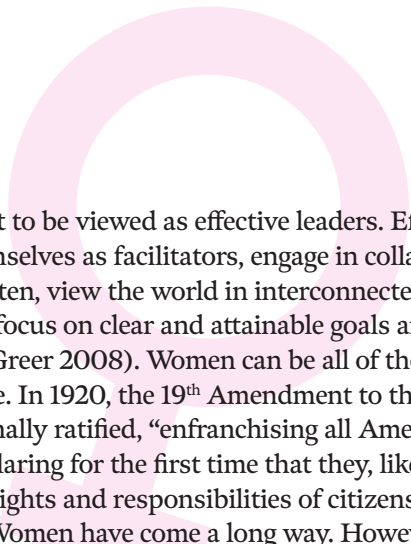
We have come a long way since the Suffrage Movement. Women can vote. We can be mothers. We can be entrepreneurs. We can be stay-at-home mothers. We can be any or all of these things at the same time. All women are barrier breakers in our own way. However, despite the many positive changes that have occurred there is still so much work to do. The reality may be that there will always be work to do. The struggle may never end. One woman shared that her mother told her: "I don't care how far up the ladder you go, you will always be a black girl." What a sentiment to have always echoing in the forefront of your mind! Some women are so impacted by their experiences that they elect to turn in

their keys and find another more acceptable professions. Some women begin to question their own capabilities asking themselves: "Am I really qualified?" The jail administrator who did not want to talk about her experiences because she did not want to deepen her wounds is likely not alone. Her sentiments represent many who enter the workplace every day in suits, heels and neatly pressed uniforms. These women do not look like what they have been through or what they are currently going through. When the disparaging messages become ingrained in our psyche, we don't have to wait for the profession to 'hobble half of its talent pool' as Justice O'Conner posited. We hobble ourselves. We stop speaking up because we fear being labeled "whiney." We soften our tone to avoid being called "aggressive" despite the fact our messages mirror the messages delivered by our male counterparts. Some expressed that although they have a seat at the table, they are made to feel as if they have no voice — just a seat at the table. They are expected to be seen — show up for the meetings on time — but also to expect to go unheard. The woman at the table fades into obscurity with no one being the wiser.

If women want to be leaders in the field of corrections, they must set their sights on the associated goals and ready themselves for the challenge — unapologetically.



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The journey will be more eventful for some than others. Regardless, the quest is not for the faint of heart. Too masculine. Too feminine. Too heavy. Too light. Too dark. Not educated enough. Not pretty enough. Not eloquent enough in speech. Sometimes, these messages are overtly spoken and received. Sometimes the messages are unspoken in word but loudly heard in deed. Other times, women find themselves second guessing their value as professionals in the industry. Due to being treated differently and the expectations being different, women begin to develop what is referred to as “imposter syndrome.” Imposter syndrome is also known as perceived fraudulence (Frothingham 2023). This phenomenon manifests itself as self-doubt. Despite education, credentials and relevant work experiences, she begins to believe she is not competent enough to do the job. These feelings are impactful and have the potential to stagnate personal and professional growth. In an attempt to overcome these feelings or to drown out the noise, women turn the pressure up. We hold ourselves to a higher standard, work harder, come in earlier and often stay later than our male counterparts to prove to ourselves and the naysayers that we’re capable and belong. Anything worth having is worth working hard for — a premise that should be genderless.

Adapting to a leadership role

Balancing work and family despite all odds is another factor that warrants mention. One woman working in the jails shared a portion of her story: “I have been in a position of leadership for over 10 years. The self-imposed pressure to prove that I was deserving of the job and promotion, required that I cross every ‘T’ and dot every ‘I’. I felt that I had to be on the job early and stay late to be sure everything went the way it was supposed go to on my shift. My life off the clock was negatively impacted by my life on the clock. I would walk in the house after work and receive the negative vibe or worse because I came in after dinner should have been served. It was hard to explain to my relationship partner why I had to answer late night calls or why I didn’t have a 9-5 schedule like most other women. My adequacy as a mother and partner were called into question. Sadly, the partnership relationship ended. My children had some negative take-a-ways as well.”

Women want to be viewed as effective leaders. Effective leaders see themselves as facilitators, engage in collaboration, actively listen, view the world in interconnected ways, are passionate, focus on clear and attainable goals and are multi-taskers (Greer 2008). Women can be all of those things and more. In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified, “enfranchising all American women and declaring for the first time that they, like men, deserve all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Pruitt 2020.) Women have come a long way. However, mindsets have not been fully converted in terms of preconceived notions that relate to ideas about what women should be permitted to do. Gaining full acceptance may not ever occur. However, the fight for full acceptance must continue. ‘Never give up’ must be the mantra amongst women committed to pursuing their goals or committed to forging paths that lead to where they want to be.

“Becoming a leader involves much more than being put in a leadership role, acquiring new skills and adapting one’s style to the requirements of that role. It involves a fundamental identity shift. Organizations inadvertently undermine this process when they advise women to proactively seek leadership roles without also addressing policies and practices that communicate a mismatch between how women are seen and the qualities and experiences people tend to associate with leaders” (Ibarra et al. 2013.) Where do women begin who want to be valued in the workplace? Here are a few suggestions. Be yourself — the first person you need to accept you is — YOU. Recognize your strengths and work to improve in the areas you know you need improvement. Other people’s perceptions or characterizations of who they think you are is theirs — not yours. Quiet their noise in your head and keep moving. Be driven — know your locus of control. Motivate yourself when it seems there are few outside of yourself doing so. Be resilient — get back up when you get knocked down. Actively succession plan — help others identify their strengths and pour into their aspirations despite the fact that few poured into you. Doing so will be your contribution toward ending the oppressive cycle. Be a good listener — there is always something to learn if you search and listen for it. Some of the lessons offered can be filed under “*not applicable.*” Other lessons can be life changing. Know what YOU bring to the table — don’t allow your confidence to be shaken. Respond vs. react-be well informed — reserve the emotion and listen to all of

the facts. Be a good communicator — being well prepared and well put together heightens confidence. Know what you need to say and how you need to say it. Look good—whether it be in a uniform or in a suit, look good — all the time. Don't be afraid to speak — they may attack you but ... they can't kill you. Stand firm. Have a support network — find opportunities to attend conferences and affiliate yourself with other women aspiring to become leaders in the field of corrections. One of the strongest messages you will walk away with is: I am not alone in the struggle. I'm here to stay.

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Be that value and make no
apologies for being the woman
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Acknowledge your value

Forward thinking leaders seek the best person for the job. Women should always be considered to be among the best for the job — if we meet all the objective criteria. Women share gender in common; however, their personal experiences in the industry may differ. Women of color experience through a filter that Caucasian women may not be able to relate to. What is it really like for an African American woman to hear: “you don't sound like the rest of them?” The rest of them? What should her response be? There may be no immediate response. She packs it away with all of the other microaggressions and shows up the next day as if yesterday never happened. How women respond or if they respond at all need not be critiqued. Each woman has to do what she determines to be in the best interest of her emotional and mental wellbeing and in the best interest of her professional survival. Not responding should not be equated with a sign of weakness. Our experiences may not be identical but the struggle is real for the person going through it. Just because you haven't experienced that component of her story doesn't mean it could not have

happened or that the story has little or no value. Offering support sometimes means just being a safe person to talk to. It is important to establish safe circles to decompress in. The pressure in the industry is daunting enough by itself. The additional pressure we put on ourselves can be powerful enough to tip the scale. The push to arrive early and to stay late is an impulse that should lessen over time. Eventually, women just come to believe that they have nothing to prove to naysayers. A woman in the audience of a recent ACA conference about women leaders in corrections ended the session with a few words of wisdom. She said: “Take vacations. Leave on time. Get plenty of rest. Pamper yourself. If something happens to you today to keep you from getting to that job tomorrow, the position will be filled. Take care of yourself while you can.” Acknowledge your own value. Be that value and make no apologies for being the woman that you were created to be. **CT**

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