Core Competencies AND Jail Leadership

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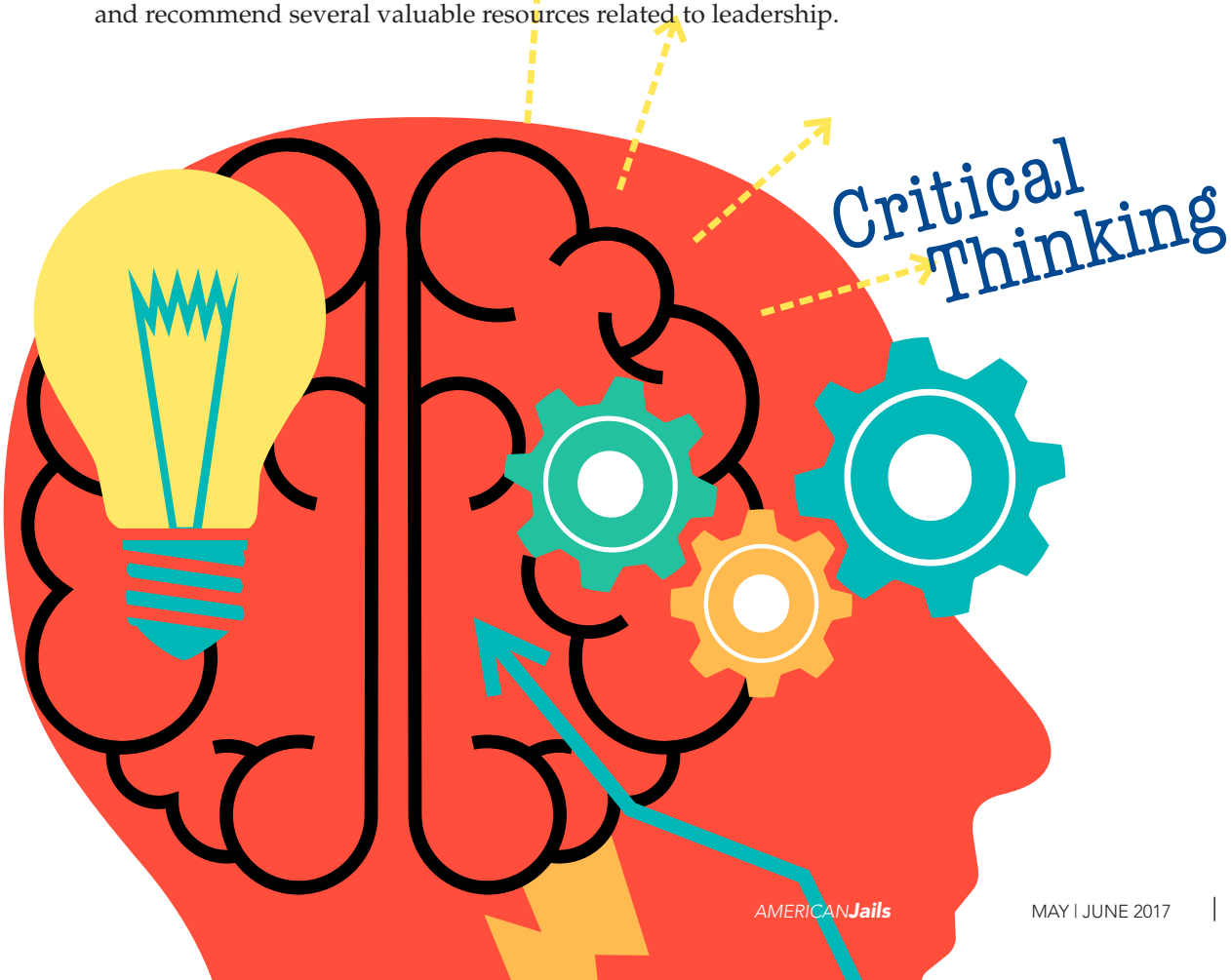
What skills, knowledge, and abilities do jail leaders need in order to be credible and successful? Beginning with the July/August 2015 issue of *American Jails*, we are exploring the 22 core competencies as identified by jail administrators across the country. Welcome to the 12th installment on core competencies and jail leadership.

In this issue of *American Jails*, we take a closer look at the core competency identified as "Anticipate, analyze, and resolve organizational challenges and conflicts" and recommend several valuable resources related to leadership.



Critical Thinking: Solving the Real Problem

Description: Use critical thinking skills, evidence-based practices, and information analysis to inform decision-making and address organizational problems; proactively identify pending crises or opportunities.

Rationale: Jail leaders must be able to not only chart their organization's future course, but also to navigate the present. Dealing with current organizational challenges must be predicated on a sound knowledge of the past and a clear vision of the future, including strategies for preventing organizational conflicts.

Knowledge of:
- Elements of critical thinking.
- Organization's vision, mission, and values.
- Existing and potential organizational conflicts.
- Organization's internal culture.

Skills in:
- Accurately identifying the jail's emerging organizational conflicts.
- Gather information to analyze the conflicts.
- Anticipate potential challenges and conflicts.
- Effectively overcome challenges and resolve conflicts.
- Understand and manage the agency's internal culture.
- Mentor subordinates to engage in critical thinking and organizational self-analysis.

Abilities to:
- Think critically to identify challenges and conflicts.
- Maintain the confidence of the employees.
- Instill a positive attitude within the organization.
- Possess the courage to lead change.
- Be guided by an ethical moral compass.
- Think logically and creatively.
- Be proactive.
- Involve internal stakeholders in problem-solving.
- Cultivate patience and persistence.
- Avoid procrastination in addressing controversial issues.

A jail leader makes hundreds of decisions in a week; some critical, others not. Yet how often do we find that our decision didn't resolve the problem? In our haste to make decisions, we often don't seek or assess relevant information. The result: the problem was not fixed, resources were wasted, and there exists the possibility of staff and inmates' safety being jeopardized. In an earlier discussion of the 13th core competency (McCampbell, 2015), three steps were suggested for the decision-making process: preparation, the "call" phase, and execution. This article discusses the first core competency on critical thinking, which requires the administrator to focus on the *preparation* phase of the 13th core competency.

22 Core Competencies for Jail Leaders

- **Anticipate, analyze, and resolve organizational challenges and conflicts.**
- Assure organizational accountability.
- Build and maintain positive relationships with external stakeholders.
- Build and maintain teamwork; mentor and coach others.
- Communicate effectively, internally and externally.
- Comprehend, obtain, and manage fiscal resources.
- Develop and maintain a positive organizational culture that promotes respect for diverse staff.
- Develop and sustain organizational vision/mission.
- Engage in strategic planning.
- Enhance self-awareness; maintain proactive professional commitment.
- Establish organizational authority, roles, and responsibilities.
- Leverage the role of the jail in the criminal justice system.
- Make sound decisions.
- Manage change.
- Manage labor relations.
- Manage power and influence.
- Manage time.
- Obtain and manage human resources.
- Oversee inmate and facility management.
- Oversee physical plant management.
- Reduce jail-related liability risks.
- Understand and manage emerging technology.

Critical-Thinking Skills

Preparation involves asking questions and assessing the information to form the basis for a better decision. Educational experts report that critical-thinking skills are not part of most school's curriculum, as preparing students to pass high stakes tests has become the priority rather than teaching them how to critically evaluate material (Goodwin, 2013). So often we, and our staff, arrive at leadership positions without the benefit of critical-thinking skills.

Critical thinking requires leaders to:

- Identify the root cause, not just find the "symptoms."
- Define the extent and nature of the issue.
- Evaluate the accuracy and completeness of the information.
- Identify the motives and agenda of those providing the information.
- Examine other options, data, approaches, or solutions that may be new or nontraditional.
- Weigh the information by applying expertise and experience.
- Assess your biases regarding the issue.
- Make a decision and communicate a course of action.

These steps in the process are not meant to delay or obfuscate a decision, but rather can be part of any quick assessment when the decision is not urgent or important. Ask yourself these two questions: Do I know what will be a good decision in this situation? Am I relying on persons who may not have the agency's mission, vision, and values in their decision-making equation? While relying on subordinate staff or peers to help in decision-making, critical thinkers are responsible for assuring that the decision is the "right" one, given what is known and the possible impacts.

Before exploring the steps in the process, let us briefly consider two programs operating in many criminal justice agencies and how critical thinkers might assess them: DARE and correctional boot camps. Why are these two programs relevant to a discussion of critical thinking in jails? The research and data for these programs clearly indicate that both are relatively *ineffective*, yet agencies cling to the programs because… why? Because they are popular with the public or are politically expedient? Critical thinkers could decide to retain these programs, based on their public support even as they recognize the shortcomings and limitations of these programs (West & O'Neal, 2004; Parent, 2003). Do we challenge the status quo about our jail's operations and ask if we should continue, expand, or end initiatives and programs? Or is it just less chaotic and personally careful to continue without asking questions and avoid irritating someone higher in the organization or the community?

Most jails hold onto practices and programs that would wilt under the scrutiny of critical thinking. Yet we continue to hold onto them—whether these are hiring practices, inmate management initiatives, inmate programming, or staff training. We won't change the current practice because that's how *we've always done it*. Or we find that the energy and will to change just isn't there. Those who ask critical questions are sometimes seen as "rocking the boat," rather than seeking a better way to operate. How can we do better? With the use of critical-thinking skills.

Improving Your Critical-Thinking Skills: Steps in the Process

Identify the Root Cause, Not Just the Find the "Symptoms"

A jail manager recently reported that his facility had multiple uses of force involving inmates on the mental health caseload. The reason: these inmates just didn't "listen" to staff. Although this may be an extreme example of ignorance and failing to determine the root cause of a jail's problem, sadly this is reflective of the desire to find quick solutions to vexing problems. Jail leaders may find themselves operating in systems that were most likely implemented before their arrival, and therefore based on the "history" and traditions of the jail. Seeking the root cause is the first step in critical thinking. This may be a painful process as it may overturn commonly held—but erroneous—agency beliefs.

For example, a high turnover rate or the low morale of staff may be attributed to the nature of Generations X or Y; however, the causes are actually deficits in the leadership of the jail. To discover the root of the problem, you need to keep asking the "why" questions, peeling back the proverbial layers of an onion to get to the center. Understand also during the "why" phase that your staff may find this very uncomfortable, and even believe you are questioning their integrity. This is yet another opportunity to model the behavior you want in your employees—no matter their rank. Continue to ask why.

Consider the five most difficult issues you have worked on in the last six months. In retrospect, did you identify the root cause or were you simply address-

ing the symptom? (For an in-depth discussion of conducting root cause analysis and critical incident reviews, see the core competency discussion on "Organizational Accountability" in *American Jails*, July/August 2016.)

Define the Extent and Nature of the Issue

There are plenty of jail staff who represent the "chicken littles" in our world. They are good at exploding an issue, then generalizing it to the entire jail operation—yet they never take a closer look. For example, as agencies seek to fill vacant positions, it is easy to attribute staff attrition to lack of pay or the tough jail work environment. After all, why would staff leave one agency just to go to another if not for more pay or a better work environment?

The issue of staff retention must be viewed from a 360-degree perspective, absent the uninformed opinions, and with the data. Throwing money at the problem does not effectively address or define the issues that may hinder retention. However, a closer look at demographics of departing staff may assist in developing a comprehensive plan. When was the last time supervisors received training on how to work with employees, instead of how to fill out forms? How about instituting "stay interviews" to find out what's on the mind of staff *before* they quit? What does your staff think about the employee recognition program? The issue is more complex than just giving everyone a 5% raise, no matter how welcome.

Evaluate the Accuracy and Completeness of the Information

Critical thinking means that information must be *accessed*. The leader needs to know:

- Is there information or data available?
- Is there enough data to identify a trend?
- Is there more data that is relevant?
- What is missing?

As noted above, the critical-thinking process is not meant to require a comprehensive data collection effort before a decision is made; however, too often we act with incomplete data or information.

For example, your staff are asserting that the jail's mental health provider is not seeing inmates in a timely manner. Before holding the medical provider accountable, look at the data on the corrections staff who deliver the inmates to their appointments. Is there sufficient space in which to conduct inmate assessments? If you act on the information that the providers weren't doing their job before looking at the entire picture, then the outcome would be unproductive and possibly destructive to an important relationship.

Identify the Motives and Agenda of Those Providing the Information

Another part of critical thinking is accurately identifying the motives and agenda of those who bring problems, provide data, and propose changes. If the employees' representatives provide data that the jail's potential change to 12-hour shifts will result in 30% of staff resigning, the leader needs to ask: what questions were asked to arrive at this conclusion? How was information gathered and how many staff participated?

This is a perhaps an obvious example of how data needs to be subject to scrutiny—less obvious circumstances present themselves to the jail leader every day. A local public health volunteer group may document the need to provide inmates with HIV/AIDS education in exchange for distributing condoms in the jail. The local funding authority may wish to eliminate overtime and instead authorize more staff, but then they fail to fund those positions. The day is replete with the opportunity to identify positive and negative motives. This approach is not meant to make cynics of jail leaders, but rather to equip them with the evaluative tools.

Examine Other Options, Data, Approaches or Solutions that May Be New or Nontraditional

When time is available, critical thinkers need to research for additional answers or better options. An increase in staff injuries could result in a proposal to purchase and deploy pepper spray or electroshock equipment. However, the leader needs to ask if crisis intervention training is just as effective. If staff are being injured, then there may be policy, supervision, or training issues that need to be evaluated.

A new idea in many of our organizations is often viewed with suspicion and sometimes as unfavorable—no changes please! This is where the leader's ability to involve staff in conducting research and expanding their horizons is invalu-

Leader's Library

Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting
Stephen D.Brookfield, 1987
Jossey-Bass Publishers

Asking the Right Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking, 5th edition
Neil M. Brown and Stuart M. Keeley, 1998
Prentice Hall

The Stay Interview: A Manager's Guide to Keeping the Best and the Brightest
Richard P. Finnegan, 2015
American Management Association

Thinking, Fast and Slow
Daniel Kahneman, 2011
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

able. Visiting other jails, attending conferences, and networking can help defray the stigma of a new approach.

Weigh the Information by Applying Expertise and Experience

The jail leader is paid to make tough decisions. Using experience, intuition, and knowledge to arrive at a decision is a part of finalizing the critical-thinking process. The administrator should, if time permits, ask subordinates and peers to provide their opinions, and then listen to their ideas. However, at the end of the day, a decision needs to be made and it is the leader who is ultimately held accountable. In other words, it is a journey to trust one's self. "Valid intuitions develop when experts have learned to recognize familiar elements in a new situation and to act in a manner that is appropriate to it" (Kahneman, 2011). Only the jail leader knows how their previous decisions have resulted in the positive or negative—and the political impact.

Assess Your Biases Regarding the Issue

At the end of the critical-thinking process, we often forget the need to ask *ourselves* on the objectiveness of our decision-making. We all hold innate beliefs which sometimes we can't fully name. We expect our staff—and those whom we ask for recommendations—to be honest and objective, and we should ask that of ourselves as well. If we are biased in favor of or against a concept, we need to recognize and filter that through our internal thought processes. We, ourselves, deep down inside may also resist change or unconsciously try to derail new ideas.

For example, a new program aimed at reduced recidivism among protected populations of inmates is introduced for possible implementation at your facility. The program comes highly recommended and has been vetted in local and State facilities with proven success. Without leader objectivity, an internal bias has the potential to disrupt this project, which may otherwise prove to be a viable option.

Make a Decision and Communicate a Course of Action

At the end of the day, jail leaders must model the critical-thinking process for their peers and subordinates. When delegation is appropriate, delegate. When micro-managing can be avoided, avoid it. Making good decisions, no matter where in the chain-of-command, can be achieved in large measure by:

- Being transparent about the process.
- Communicating how decisions are made in this jail.
- Recognizing who is responsible.
- Highlighting the outcomes.

If the leader makes uninformed, biased, and untimely decisions, then those decisions become the script for the agency. This does not mean that the leader forgets or fails to acknowledge that the process didn't yield the desired result or that mid-course corrections aren't needed. When leaders make mistakes, they acknowledge their mistakes and move on. No one said it was easy. A process that involves critical-thinking skills to help decision-making can only improve the organization.

Using these steps helps the jail leader to make better decisions. Being critical does not translate into negativity, which is often the perception. By practicing critical-thinking, you are expanding the options for correct decisions and helping others to do the same in their careers.

Politics?

This discussion of the critical-thinking process does not naively ignore the impact of local politics or the beliefs and direction of the organization's leaders under whom the jail administrator works. For example, if the sheriff wants a boot camp, then it is most likely futile and counterproductive to discuss the research. If there is little hope for salary increases for corrections staff to keep pace with the local economy, then it is a waste of time and energy to continue raising the issue before the funding authority. If the leadership doesn't appreciate analytical questions, root cause analyses, or critical incident reviews, then why persist in providing this type of data?

These are the types of decisions that jail leaders must make themselves. Preserving credibility, performing the job professionally, and knowing when to be silent and when to act are traits of a mature leader. With critical-thinking skills, tough choices can be made less tough, and provide a better outcome of decision-making.

Conclusion

Critical thinking is an essential job requirement for jail administrators in the 21st century. Decisions that affect staff and inmate populations are sometimes made under hurried time constraints or with limited knowledge. These decisions require the skill set of a leader experienced in objective thinking. Administrators at all levels need to understand the steps associated with critical think-

Why Critical Thinking Is Important?

If you want to be good at:

- Strategic planning.
- Effective decision-making.
- Creative problem-solving.
- Situational leadership.
- Entrepreneurial risk taking.
- Research and development.
- Organizational team building.

You must be a critical thinker.

Source: Brookfield, S. D. (1987) *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

ing. And better yet, they need to see it modeled in their supervisors and managers. Critical-thinking skills represent the crucial building blocks needed to form a solid decision. When leaders follow the principles in their entirety, the building blocks become the foundation to aid in making a structurally sound decision and also in developing the organization's leadership.

Case in point: As veterans from all branches of the military return home from abroad, some have found themselves on the wrong side of the law. Burdened with the invisible scars earned from sustained combat, these men and women must now navigate the judicial system. A system (through no fault of its own) that is not designed to address the issues of our country's veterans.

Recognizing the population of veterans who were currently in custody in Orange County, Florida, an Armed Forces Dorm was implemented with the sole purpose of housing and assisting incarcerated veterans (Proudfit, 2014). Now in its fifth year, the program has exceeded expectations and serves as a templet for other correctional facilities looking to implement a veterans' program. If critical thinking about the problems faced by returning veterans hadn't resulted in this program, where would these veterans be when they left the jail?

As Albert Einstein said, "We can't solve problems using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." This modest quote illustrates the point that critical thinking combined with an objective and honest look at the issue at hand will often yield a better solution. As we look deeper into the eight steps of critical thinking, it's important to understand how our life experiences influence our personal decision-making processes. It's often been said that hindsight is always 20/20; however, as jail administrators we must constantly evaluate our decisions critically and objectively. The consequences of poor decisions are too expensive for our staff and for the inmates under our care, custody, and control. ■

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