

CASE STUDY - State of Chaos

Integrating Professional Staff into a Bureaucratic Structure

In a recent federal decision, the court ordered the Department of Corrections in the State of Chaos to add a large number of mental health professionals to its present prison staff. The judges reasoned that mentally ill inmates in the Chaos Department of Corrections (CDC) were suffering what was tantamount to "cruel and unusual punishment" due to the lack of reasonable and adequate treatment for their medical/mental health conditions.

To rectify the Eighth Amendment violation, the court ordered the prison system to hire 450 professional mental health workers as a crucial aspect of providing adequate treatment to the mentally ill inmates. The CDC had to resolve a number of issues in order to comply with the court order.

First, a budget had to be provided to hire, train, and pay the new mental health staff. Most likely, this budget would be from new state monies as the correctional officers are under the protection of a strong union, the Chaos Correctional Officers Association. As a result, the funds would not likely be transferred from the custody budget into the medical budget. Therefore, the real problem would be to fully integrate the 450 new mental health workers into the system. This integration was especially problematic as there was a long-standing conflict between custodial staff and treatment staff. The 450 new mental health workers would more than triple the number of mental health employees in the system. Hence, organizational structure issues had to be considered in order to integrate the newly expanded mental health complement into the organization.

Budget was only one issue. There were others.

To best integrate the new staff, the director of Corrections called for a warden's roundtable discussion to map out a plan. The director was well aware of the interwoven issues behind the treatment-custody conflict. A key issue was authority. In the past, treatment personnel conflicted with correctional officers over decisions on issues of inmate management, such as classification of punishment. In this regard, correctional officers assumed that they would ultimately be held responsible for the overall control of inmates and that treatment staff usually rated the care function of corrections above the need to keep order.

Second, there was always an undertone of social class difference between educated treatment staff and correctional officers, who often had a community college degree or less. Third, the long-standing tradition of conflict between custody and treatment personnel made it difficult for the two groups to compromise and to develop working relationships.

These crucial issues notwithstanding, the director reasoned that the first step was to reconsider and redesign if necessary, the system's organizational structure. The director of Corrections decided to lay out an agenda for the meeting to keep it from becoming a free-for-all and to keep it focused on the organizational structure.