

Great Wardens Leadership Summit Series

Building Great Wardens: Fundamentals of Leadership and Management

Introduction

On October 21, 2021, the Great Wardens held its first-ever Leadership Summit. Titled “Building Great Wardens: Fundamentals of Leadership and Management,” the Summit explored the differences between a corrections leader and a corrections manager. The need for a greater understanding of these two distinct roles was a dominant theme in the Great Wardens Project’s survey of corrections administrators nationwide.¹ This document gathers key points from the Summit for people who could not attend.² It looks at the challenges many leaders face with respect to balancing management and operations with leadership — and offers tips on how to overcome them.

The Summit was moderated by Jessica Serrano Seipel, Senior Program Director at Just Detention International, and the featured Great Wardens Task Force Members Eric Aldridge Warden, Beaumont Correctional Center, Virginia Department of Corrections; Michael Capra, Supervising Superintendent of the New York City Hub, New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision; Dawn Davison, Warden (retired), California Institution for Women, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Joe Page, Warden, Pine Bluff Complex, Arkansas Department of Corrections; and Mel Williams, Executive Director, North American Association of Wardens & Superintendents.

Why Some Prison Leaders Act as Managers

“We were taught to be managers. I think that when we are appointed and become executive-level, we are never asked, ‘Hey, what is your vision? How do you make your facility a better place? How do you make a positive impact on the staff and what is the vision that you have for incarcerated people?’” — Supervising Superintendent Michael Capra


¹ Nearly three quarters of the 155 correctional administrators who participated in survey expressed a strong interest in learning about the differences between leading a facility and managing one.

² The full Summit can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EbqPoLxzqo

One of the Great Warden Project's guiding principles is that strong leaders can create a facility culture where everyone feels safe and respected. But to reach their full potential as leaders, wardens and superintendents must avoid the common trap of getting bogged down in day-to-day operations.

At the Summit, the Task Force members discussed the tendency among many corrections administrators to manage rather than lead — to focus on the day-to-day operations instead of the long-term, visionary thinking that is necessary for culture change. They offered two reasons for this trend. One is a tendency to micromanage. As Warden Davison explained, "You have to let go of minutiae, such as signing post orders and making sure locks are working. When you let go of that, you can concentrate on the vision — and that's where the real leadership comes in." A second factor is the lack of institutional training on leadership. Virtually all wardens and superintendents are trained as managers and have years, if not decades, of being fully immersed in facility operations. Without proper guidance on how to allocate managerial tasks, it is understandable that many wardens and superintendents would continue doing them.

What Makes a Strong Manager — and How to Support One



"Let your managers deal with day to day. That's what they're there for." — Warden (ret.) Dawn Davison

An effective manager is skilled at running day-to-day operations; executing a vision; implementing policies and procedures; and supervising and supporting staff.³ Wardens and superintendents have a vital role to play in building effective managers, and the Summit speakers offered tips on how the people who work for them can reach their potential.

- **Delegate appropriately.** It can be hard to let go of operations, especially for people who have lived and breathed them. Warden Davison recommends a "trust but verify" approach, which entails giving staff responsibility over day-to-day tasks and making rounds to ensure it all gets done.
- **Ensure staff have the tools they need.** Many prisons are strapped for resources, and there is often a tension between what a warden or superintendent needs and what the head office is prepared to give them. But fighting for your staff can go a long way to building morale. "Staff in your facility have to know that

³ This list is adapted from "Understanding the Differences: Leadership vs. Management," go2Hr.org, accessed September 2021 at www.go2hr.ca/retention-engagement/understanding-the-differences-leadership-vs-management

you're trying to look out for the operation and trying to look out for their welfare,” said Executive Director Mel Williams. “You need to have the courage to do that,” he added.

- **Build trust.** As with any professional relationship, it is essential for corrections leaders to have the trust of the managers on the team. As Warden Page explained, “If you don’t establish trust, somebody else is going to. That will change the narrative. And it probably won’t be the narrative you want.”
- **Create space for feedback and new ideas.** Any good leader builds in time to get input from their staff. The spaces for feedback can be formal or informal — or both. “I cut out the time in my schedule to make rounds and talk with staff,” explained Warden Davison, who added that it was precisely because she delegated appropriately that she was able to prioritize doing rounds.

The Principles of Strong Leadership



“We are in the business of helping people to be better.” — Warden Eric Aldridge

Determining what makes a leader effective can seem subjective. A leadership style that works for some people may not work for others. But the Task Force offered up five principles that stand as the foundation for effective leadership in a correctional setting:⁴

- **Establish good communication.** Strong leadership depends on strong communication. Formal communication (e.g., written policies, training curricula, memorandums, or staff meetings) and informal communication (e.g., phone calls, emails, impromptu discussions, check-ins during rounds, holiday gatherings) are both essential in a corrections setting. “I call my staff regularly to check in if they are out sick, to ask if they need anything,” explained Warden Page.
- **Set a vision.** A vision is a statement expressing what an organization or institution sets out to achieve. Vision statements are commonly found in nonprofits and the private sector, but they can be a powerful tool in corrections. An example of a vision statement for a prison could be, “This facility aims to ensure that everyone — staff and incarcerated people alike — are respected and kept safe.”

⁴ Adapted from “Understanding the Differences: Leadership vs. Management,” www.go2hr.ca/retention-engagement/understanding-the-differences-leadership-vs-management

- **Inspire staff.** Several leadership strategies inspire staff, but one simple — and often underappreciated — method is treating people with kindness. Warden Page noted that he builds up an “emotional bank” with his staff. He always greets staff and makes sure to go the extra mile for them. “I can’t control what they think about me, but I can control what I put out there and make sure it’s positive,” he said.
- **Promote the values of honesty and integrity.** Corrections leaders prioritize the importance of honesty and integrity for the obvious reason that people who work for you — and who serve time in your custody — deserve nothing less. But leaders who practice these values are also more likely to get people to embrace their vision. “When we show staff that we care and we want their input, it becomes infectious, and you get buy-in,” explained Supervising Superintendent Capra.
- **Challenge the status quo.** The best leaders defy conventional wisdom, not for its own sake but when it’s necessary. As Warden Davison put it, “As a warden, you have to be willing to stand up for what is best for your population, even though it might not follow common knowledge and policy.”

Summit attendees were invited to name the attributes that, in their experience, were essential for strong leadership. They listed objectivity, honesty, transparency, wisdom, humility, willingness to listen, authenticity, caring, being a visionary, and loyalty to staff.

“Handshake Harold”

At the Summit, Executive Director Mel Williams shared a leadership anecdote about Harold Smith, the first Superintendent he worked for.

“I started as an officer the year after a riot where many people died. As you can imagine, it was a pretty rough place to start out. Every day the Superintendent, Harold Smith, would come around to shake the hands of all the staff, and then he’d go around and shake the hands of every inmate. So we called him ‘Handshake Harold.’ At the time, I really had no appreciation of what he was up to. I figured that, as a Superintendent, he should be up in the front. What was he doing shaking hands? It seemed crazy.

It wasn’t until later in my career that I realized how important this gesture was and that he was a great leader. We had so much trouble at that place — so many people had died and were assaulted. He helped smooth the whole thing out with his leadership style.

Every single day he would go out on the yard and talk with staff and inmates as much as possible. There's something very simple yet profound about sitting down in the cell block and talking with people. He said staff can't be afraid to shake the hands of inmates, to put our hands on their shoulder. To show empathy."

Leaders = Visionaries

"Sometimes we forget when we're in that chair, dealing with all sorts of fires, that we can have a really positive impact on people and inspire them." — Executive Director Mel Williams

A recurring theme of the Summit was that leaders must be visionaries — that they must think beyond daily operations to create and implement a vision that is at once pragmatic and ambitious. The speakers acknowledged that taking the long view is not without risks. "I think we get caught up in the day-to-day or don't feel like our central office counterparts want us to do anything," said Supervising Superintendent Capra. "But I can tell you from my experience is that once you do something that is above and beyond, the response is, 'Wow, we didn't think you could do that.'"

Since most corrections leaders are not trained on how to create a vision, the GWP is committed to providing training on developing and implementing a vision by sharing resources and offering support on vision-building. For more information, please click on the resources below.

More Resources

Nancy Cebula, et al, *Achieving Performance Excellence: The Influence of Leadership on Organizational Performance* (National Institute of Corrections, June 2012), available at <https://info.nicic.gov/nicrp/system/files/025338.pdf>

Susan W. McCampbell, CJM, "Core Competencies and Jail Leadership," *AmericanJails* (March/April 2016), available at https://www.americanjail.org/files/Core%20Competencies/2016_MA_Core%20Competencies%20Vision%20Organization%20Mission_McCampbell.pdf

Susan W. McCampbell, Jeanne B. Stinchcomb, *Focused Leadership: Resource Guide for Newly Appointed Wardens* (National Institute of Corrections, 2017), available at <http://www.cipp.org/resource-guide-for-newly-appointed-wardens.html>

The National Reentry Resource Center, *Strengthening Correctional Culture: Eight Ways Corrections Leaders Can Support Their Staff to Reduce Recidivism* (July 2018), available at https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/July_2018_strengthening-correctional-culture.pdf