

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.



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A multifaceted approach was used to determine these core competencies that incorporated a comprehensive literature review, input and feedback from a national advisory committee, and several focus group sessions conducted at national conferences. Including these various components ensured that all perspectives were accommodated. The knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with these competencies were also enumerated. Not surprisingly, representatives from small, large, rural, tribal, and mega-jails easily arrived at the same conclusions (Stinchcomb, Smith, McCampbell, & Mancini, 2011).

These core competencies now provide the basis of the curriculum for the National Jail Leadership Command Academy (www.nationaljailacademy.org) and the Southwest Florida Jail Leadership Initiative (*American Jails*, July / August 2013). In addition, the Jail Executive Development Program (JEDP), which plans to hold its inaugural class in 2016, will be anchored in the 22 core competencies.

In this issue of *American Jails*, we take a closer look at the competency identified as “Make Sound Decisions” and recommend several valuable resources related to leadership.

Make Sound Decisions

Just like using “common sense,” making sound decisions seems a straightforward concept. But how often do you struggle when making a decision, or worse, handling the aftermath of a decision that did not work? Jail

The ability to exercise good judgment is...the “essence of leadership.”

leaders often face decisions that are sometimes complex, such as doing more with less fiscal resources. Or sometimes they struggle with decisions that seem less stressful, such as recognizing exemplary employees. Yet, each decision has its land mines—some are hidden, some are not. Some decisions must be made in a split second; others can languish for months and the outcomes are not affected. Let’s explore how to make sound decisions.

Description. Establish a decision-making style that is firm, fair, data-driven, and consistent. Your decision-making style needs to align with your organization’s mission/vision/values and understand the impact of those decisions on those inside and outside of your facility.

Rationale. Be responsible for your decisions, as well as for the decisions made by your subordinates. This includes a decision style that ensures organizational accountability, as well as consistency with policies, procedures, and effective leadership practices.

Knowledge. Understand your organization’s vision/mission and be thoroughly familiar with its policies, procedures, and accountability measures. Be cognizant of laws and legal guidelines, accreditation standards, relevant State standards, and administrative regulations. Keep current on decision-making theories and techniques and on positive trends in jail management.

Skills. Assure that decisions are transparent and within the parameters of your agency’s policies and procedures. Use them to reinforce accountability, provide positive examples, and complement the vision/mission. Assure that decisions are made legally, in a manner that reinforces relevant operating and administrative standards. In addition, recognize when to use various decision-making techniques (e.g., consultation, delegation, unilateral, etc.). Gather sufficient information to make an informed decision. Proactively anticipate reactions to and impact of decisions, and justify potentially unpopular decisions.

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For Your Leadership Library

Watch upcoming issues of *American Jails* for suggested publications to add to your leadership library. If you can recommend a publication that helped you become a better leader, e-mail Susan McCampbell at susanmccampbell@cipp.org.

Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls

Noel M. Tichy and Warren G. Bennis, 2009, The Penguin Group.

This book provides examples of how you can make better decisions. Although the authors draw from the corporate world, the examples and strategies have a place in public sector work.

A Leader's Legacy

James M. Kouzes and Barry A. Posner, 2006, Jossey-Bass.

The message of this book has been an integral part of the instruction of the National Jail Leadership Command Academy from its inception. The authors offer a compelling journey of discovery about what the reader will leave as his or her legacy on the job and in their world.

The Leadership Challenge

James M. Kouzes and Barry A. Posner, 2012, Jossey-Bass.

This book is an essential part of any leader's library and a staple in leadership programs worldwide. Explore clarifying your values, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. There is a reason this book is now in its fifth edition and has been a best seller for 25 years.

Abilities. Select the appropriate decision-making technique for the situation. Analyze complex material and think logically. Appreciate the effect of your decisions on others. Be empathetic and a good role model.

Decision Making Theory and Practice

Leadership literature is replete with books and articles about the various processes that a leader can use to make a sound decision. For this article, the work of Noel M. Tichy and Warren G. Bennis (2009) provides a model for sound decision-making. Although clearly jail leaders need to make sound decisions, all employees—from line officer through first-line supervisors—must also have sound decision-making skills.

The ability to exercise good judgment is, according to Tichy and Bennis (2009), the “essence of leadership.” How individuals move forward or fail in their career is almost always related to their decisions. “Good judgment is not one terrific a-ha moment after another. In the

real world, good judgment, at least on the big issues that make a difference, is usually an incremental process.”

With this in mind, Tichy and Bennis provide a three-step process to improve decision-making:

- Preparation Phase—Sensing and identifying the need for a judgment.
- Call Phase—Making the judgment call.
- Execution Phase—Making it happen.

Jail Application

Applying Tichy's and Bennis' model to a jail-based decision might look something like the following scenario. Specifically, how does a jail make sound decisions about mental healthcare for inmates?

A jail's daily concern about inmate suicide is a cold reality. As jails are now the Nation's 24-hour de facto mental health facilities, the in-custody prevalence of those with acute mental illness almost guarantees that some inmates will attempt self-harm during incarceration—not every inmate and not every time, but chances are high.

Jails are aware of the crisis in community mental health, but what are they prepared to do? How can they be proactive rather than reactive? What judgment calls and sound decisions are required to address the real threat of inmate self-harm? Although not meant to be an exhaustive list, this is what your facility must be prepared to do:

- Collaborate with arresting agencies and existing community mental health providers to safely divert arrestees with acute mental illness.
- During the booking process, accurately identify arriving inmates as to their specific risks.
- Ensure the presence of qualified mental health staff to assist with screening and/or train corrections staff to screen inmates.
- Treat inmates with acute mental illness upon their admission.
- Recognize an inmate who is in crisis and know what to do.
- Provide in-jail programming and pre-release referrals for inmates to hopefully prevent their return to jail.

To be able to make a sound decision in this example, you may know the facts, both globally and in your own jail—but what do you do?

What are the elements of making the judgment call? Collecting the data, identifying best practices, getting input from staff, and meeting with stakeholders are actions that do not necessarily bring you closer to an action that prevents inmate self-harm. We've all heard about conducting a “SWOT” review—identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats—as a prelude to making a decision. What strategies will you use? It is not overly dramatic, to say these judgments effect life and death. What are the resources the jail has?

The Best Leadership Advice I Ever Received

Here is some advice from your peers as they advanced into leadership roles. For more advice from your colleagues, check the next edition of *American Jails*.

- STOP talking...when you talk, your people can't. Because your success is largely dependent on their success, create an environment where staff and their ideas are valued.
- Never stop learning.
- Never forget where you come from. You are no better than the people you lead. Develop, mentor, and motivate your staff.
- Don't let the negative be the normal. Always find positivity and develop it to help people move in the right direction.
- Never do or say anything that you would not want on the front of the local newspaper.
- Accept constructive criticism; it builds character.
- Treat people how you want to be treated and work as hard as you want them to work.

Who can help you? What do you need to do to operationalize recommendations?

Your comprehensive analysis detailing the community's absence of mental healthcare, the shortfalls in the jail's resources and budget, overall lack of training, and/or minimal community support perhaps illuminate the relevant conditions, but doesn't necessarily bring you closer to a sound decision. What are the recommendations that can make the needed changes happen, and what can you do? The danger is that your initiative stops here. Perhaps you are overwhelmed by the daunting crisis and seemingly alone in the way forward.

Sound decision-making derives from making the needed changes happen. You will be remembered, and inmates and staff will be safer when you take action. What can you do to address the circumstances that have been imposed on your jail? While this short scenario isn't to suggest that these judgment calls are easy, or that the actions are optimal, *no* action is *not* sound decision-making. Doing what you can do, leveraging the resources that are available, involving stakeholders, and educating the community, elected officials, and the media are part of your sound decision-making process.

Where leadership often fails is in the lack of execution, follow-up, mid-course corrections, and evaluation of the impact of critical decisions. "Great leaders have a high percentage of good judgment calls; they are good

only if the execution is successful" (Tichy & Bennis, 2009). Resolve to consider that making sound decisions is a *process* as outlined above, one for which you need to be prepared by knowing your environment, by identifying the options, and then engaging in watchful oversight of your decisions.

Only the unprepared and the unaware are surprised by the need to make sound decisions in the jail world every day. ■

References

Stinchcomb, J. B., Smith, C. J., McCampbell, S. W., & Mancini, C. (2011, June 6). *Identifying core competencies and required knowledge, skills, and abilities for jail leaders: Methods and outcomes*. National Jail Success Planning and Leadership Development Project. Naples, Florida: Center for Innovative Public Policy. Retrieved from http://cipp.org/jail/Final%2006%2006%202011%20BJA-jails_mentoring-Core_competencies.pdf

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