

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?

Having started 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 20th installment on core competencies and jail leadership.

In this issue of *American Jails*, we take a closer look at the fifth core competency, “Communicate effectively, internally, and externally,” and recommend several valuable resources related to leadership.

Communicate Effectively: Internally and Externally

Description: Engage in written and oral communication that is clear, unambiguous, transparent, and consistent with the organizational vision, mission, and values.

Rationale: This competency is a fundamental component of each of the other 21 competencies. It includes effectively using all available means of communication (e.g., oral, written, electronic) to manage people, make decisions, and collect and disseminate information in a way that is appropriate, unambiguous, and mutually beneficial.

Knowledge of:

- The form of communication most appropriate for the circumstances.
- How communication can improve (or detract from) decision-making and organizational internal culture.
- The power of communication and the impact of its absence.
- The mechanics of professional oral and written communication.

Skills to:

- Analyze situations accurately.
- Know your audience.
- Establish effective two-way communication with employees, inmates, and external stakeholders.
- Possess and demonstrate effective interpersonal communication (both verbal and nonverbal).
- Use professional language and etiquette in e-mails, text messages, memoranda, and on the telephone.
- Write in a clear, concise manner.
- Critique reports, policies, etc. to help assure subordinates communicate effectively.
- Serve as a role model for effective written and oral communication and body language.
- Stimulate two-way dialogue.

Abilities to:

- Write and orally communicate professionally.
- Lead by example.
- Be flexible in personal communications styles.

- Encourage and use constructive feedback with subordinates.
- Analyze the impact and effectiveness of personal communications.
- Listen without interrupting or judging.
- Demonstrate impartiality in personal communications.

All About the Ability to Effectively Communicate

The ability of jail leaders to communicate effectively both orally and in writing is essential to their professional success and the jail's positive future. When asked what makes an exemplary leader, the ability to effectively communicate is frequently cited. This article explores assessing your communication skills and connecting with your audiences. It also provides suggestions to improve your positive impact. Finally, we ask you to consider using the power of social media as a critical tool to further your organization's objectives.

What constitutes *effective* written and oral communication? Your communication may be considered effective if it is:

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.

- Consistent with the jail’s mission, vision, and values.
- Transparent, clear, succinct, and not open to interpretation.
- Tailored to the audience and reflective of context and environment.
- Promoting the exchange of ideas and problem-solving, innovation, collaboration, and cooperation.
- Generationally relevant.
- Technologically in sync.
- Facilitating sustainable change.
- Professional (grammar, spelling, word usage, tone, organization).
- Frequent and consistent.

The days of distributing written memoranda and policies from “on-high” down to employees are long past. The newest generations in the workforce want (and demand) instant communication—both from the boss and to the boss. Employees expect communication that recognizes them as stakeholders, and provides the most current and accurate information about how they do their work.

How the leader conveys the message internally and externally is more than about good grammar, spelling, and diction. Communication brings to life the organization’s vision, mission, and values. The leader’s role is not only to model the expected behavior for peers and subordinates, but also to establish the jail’s place in the community and the justice system. The anchors of the leader’s communications are the jail’s vision and mission, including a respectful, honest, and clear tone. If communications and the mission, vision, and values are disconnected, the message and the messenger will have little credibility. (For more on missions, vision, and values, visit www.cipp.org/uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/8_mission_vision.pdf.)

A leader should consider each opportunity to communicate—whether internally or externally—as unique and important. Whatever the message, you need to consider the audience, context, current environment, and the generation. In addition,

“Effective communication involves both input and output. The input comes from reading: the output from the ‘riting’ and rhetoric (oral communication).”

— JAMES D. SEWELL

tion, you need to be knowledgeable, technologically savvy, and know the objective of communication. Asking these questions before any communication—written or oral—will improve your effectiveness.

How to Communicate

You communicate constantly, even without intending to do so. Your body language, eye contact, and how you choose to convey the message (e-mail, text, memorandum, orally) establishes how important you consider the matter. If you are frustrated by continually hearing from staff that there are no good communications in the jail, or if you assess critical incidents as having their roots in poor communication, perhaps you should start by looking at your own style, inclusiveness, and clarity. You have the ability to self-assess your communications.

Aligning what you say and what you do is essential. “That is why you and your management team are expected to serve as role models for operationalizing value statements by ‘walking the talk’ in everything from the decisions you make and the priorities you establish to the manner in which you communicate *with others and conduct yourself*” (Stinchcomb & McCampbell, 2017).

Leaders must be knowledgeable to help ensure professional success. Publications such as *American Jails*, *Corrections Managers’ Report*, *Correctional Law Reporter*, and *Corrections Today* provide information on national corrections-related trends, case law, technological advances, and professional development opportunities. Additionally, executives must be current on the pulse of their profession within their own State. Joining executive organizations, such as associations of police chiefs, sheriffs, and the chamber of commerce, can also help to keep leaders informed on emerging issues. (For more about self-awareness and professional development, visit www.cipp.org/uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/10_self-awarenessprofessional.pdf.)

Focusing on Internal Communication

Good internal communication is fundamental for every organization. Poor internal communication—or the perception of poor communication—decimates employee morale, disconnects operation and mission, and feeds internal dissent. Is the written communication in your agency a two-way street where staff are encouraged to communicate their feedback, ideas, or concerns up the chain of command? If your jail’s staff were surveyed, how would they “grade” your facility’s internal communication? When you ask for feedback, do you get participation or is there silence?

You can influence your legacy and your jail’s mission, vision, and values with these types of internal communication:

- Written communication.
- E-mail.
- Policies, procedures, and training plans.
- Inmate handbook.
- Personal communication.

Written communication. Written communication is a direct way to provide timely information to staff,

contract personnel, inmates, and volunteers. How successful this type of communication is varies from one facility to the next. Your written communication must be tailored to its audience—true for both internal and external communications. Importantly, communication (whether oral or written) loaded with acronyms, jargon, and presumed prior knowledge of the subject by readers invites misinterpretation.

E-mail. E-mail is currently the most common form of organizational communication due to its ease of use, staff access to electronics at their workstations, and the ability to quickly reach the entire organization. E-mail is a way to share important information; however, it is not the most appropriate medium for some types of organizational communication.

Everyone has the experience of wishing they had waited a few seconds longer before sending an e-mail. Consider this a warning: There is no going back after you hit “send” and e-mail lives forever. Knowing relevant statutes about retention of e-mail and assuring this information is in your agency’s policy is essential to a professional organization.

Here are some ideas to improve your and your agency’s use of e-mail:

- Shorter e-mails are more effective. The longer the e-mail, the less likely the reader is to discern the essential points.
- The newest generations are not likely to read long e-mails. They want their electronic information provided in a concise manner.
- Avoid using e-mail to convey confidential information. In most States, e-mails are public records. In addition, staff may not be logging out of their e-mail before leaving their workstation.
- Check your emotions. Do not send e-mails (or any communications for that matter) when you

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

are angry or frustrated. If you want to vent, write down your thoughts then review it in an hour or two. Decide at that time if sending is appropriate.

- Don’t send or allow staff to send jokes, cartoons, pictures, or other personal information (invitations, etc.) that you would not want the public to see.
- Hold your colleagues and peers accountable for their e-mails. If you see an inappropriate e-mail, inform the sender and immediately act upon it. Failing to do so infers that you approve.

Internal intranets provide training opportunities and communication options, and require clear policy direction. Critique your agency’s internal communications. If there is not a directive governing written communication, consider developing one. While that might seem unnecessary, it is still important to outline what the guidelines are and who has the authority to issue, amend, or rescind directives.

Policies, procedures, and training plans. Communication in the form of written policies, procedures, and training plans is vital to ensuring a facility is operating with the best corrections practices and agency directives. Jail executives must take time to ensure that policies are routinely reviewed and updated, ensuring alignment with the jail’s mission and furthering the goals and objectives of the agency.

Inmate handbook. Written communication to the inmate population is vital to ensuring the safety and security of your facility. The inmate handbook is one of the most important documents as it clarifies what is expected from the inmate. The handbook should be well-organized, concise, and written in a manner that all individuals can understand—including inmates with developmental disabilities, lower education attainment, and those who have limited English proficiency.

Personal communication. Because electronic instruments are always at our fingertips, many people have forgotten the power of the handwritten word. Personal communication from jail executives can and should still occur. People might remember a congratulatory e-mail, but they are not likely to forget a handwritten letter of thanks, condolence, congratulations, or recognition. Consider keeping a box of thank-you cards or personal stationery to connect with people in a different way than we have become accustomed. Taking the time to genuinely recognize your employees through a written note is something that employees of all generations will appreciate.

External Communication

How a jail leader communicates externally varies with the message and the audience. Written communication is a means to collaborate and strengthen relations with external partners. As with internal communication, the message must be tailored to the audience, reflective of context, and with the jail’s future goals and objectives always in mind.

Your community likely has limited knowledge about your jail. External communications (including budget messages, announcements of new programs, and staff promotions) are ways to increase information for citizens and to gather support. Correctional employees are some of the most caring and compassionate people, who do many good things for the community, and

this professionalism needs to be routinely celebrated and recognized.

Some ideas for your consideration:

- **Website and social media presence**—The use of social media to reach employees, potential employees, volunteers, stakeholders, funders, and the community is no longer optional—it is a necessity. If your agency is not using these communication mediums to educate the community about your jail’s work, you are missing opportunities to connect on your terms. Social media is often internally unregulated and requires clear policy guidance to staff. Assure that your organization has an officially sanctioned social media presence, and your staff are trained regarding their obligations. Absent good policy and oversight, social media options have risks that could cause embarrassment for your agency. (For more information, check out the social media policy listed in the Leader’s Library.)
- **Media releases**—These inform the community about newsworthy issues and matters of community concern. The content needs to be professional and clear. Keeping the media informed in nonemergency situations can lead to follow-up pieces, therefore it is imperative that your agency ensures that all media releases are well-written. It is also important to clearly establish who has the responsibility and authority to issue media releases. Does your agency have just one person who communicates externally for your entire agency? If so, consider implementing a team, across your agency, as part of your communications strategy. In this age of fast-paced information and the need to always be in front of situations, your agency should develop a cadre of staff who can support your mission through various communication methods.
- **Written correspondence**—This type of communication from jail

leadership is often serious in nature, whether it is sent to heads of other local law enforcement agencies, or citizens following complaints, or employees who are navigating the disciplinary process. This communication can open doors for your agency and solve problems. As mentioned previously, this written correspondence must be consistent with the agency mission, vision, and values, and you need to evaluate the tone, message, and intent before sending.

- **Budget justifications**—These documents are developed on behalf of an organization for funders. They explain how costs are estimated and provide justification. Budgets include staffing, supply, and service consumption patterns, along with the methods used to make the estimations within them. These documents often contain mathematical calculations, tables, and charts within the text and need to be formatted in a consistent manner. This communication, asking for and describing why your department requires resources, is one of the most important types of written communication that you develop as a jail executive because it illustrates your jail’s current status and future vision. Your jail is relying on you to be able to articulate, defend, and hopefully procure the needs as outlined in this type of document.

Consider how you and your agency need to communicate, in addition to what improvements and opportunities there are to enhance your community’s knowledge and trust in the jail.

Improving Written Communication

Ready to improve your writing skills? Here are some ideas:

- Assess your writing using the effectiveness benchmarks noted at the beginning of this article. Consider if any organizational dysfunction can be tied

The Leader’s Library

Constructing Effective Criticism

Randy Garner
Prescient Publishing (2011)

IACP Center for Social Media

International Association of Chiefs of Police, (2010, August)

www.iacpsocialmedia.org/getting-started/policy-development/

Key Leadership Strategies to Enhance Communications

Major Cities Chiefs Association

U.S. Department of Justice,
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
(2010, September)

www.hsdl.org/?view&did=15023

“The Four R’s for Police Executives”

James D. Sewell, PhD

FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin,
65(7). (1996, July)

<https://leb.fbi.gov/file-repository/archives/july-1996.pdf/view>

Strategic Communication Practices: A Toolkit for Police Executives

Darrel W. Stephens, Julia Hill,
and Sheldon Greenberg,

U.S. Department of Justice,
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
(2011, September)

<https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p222-pub.pdf>

Focused Leadership: Resource Guide for Newly Appointed Wardens, Second Edition

Jeanne B. Stinchcomb, and
Susan W. McCampbell

U.S. Department of Justice,
National Institute of Corrections (2017)

www.cipp.org/uploads/3/7/5/7/37578255/nicresourceguide2017.pdf

to ineffective written or oral communications.

- Every time you write, ensure that you give yourself the needed time to create a good product. Effective writing takes time, consideration, and patience.
- Consider the audience of your communication.
- Find a mentor and an editor. This requires developing a thick skin; if you are struggling and genuinely ask for help, the feedback could bruise your ego. You won't improve if you don't have a person who will help edit your work.
- Seek help if you struggle with the basic elements of writing. There is no substitute for practice—writing improves *only* with practice. There are internet sites that can help with basic grammar and editing.
- Continue your education to further develop your writing skill set. For example, register for a writing class at your local community college. If writing is a challenge for your staff, consider bringing a course to the agency.

Improving Oral Communication

To improve your oral communication, focus on becoming a better listener. Attentive listening demon-

strates you are engaged and often fosters trust. By listening intently, you are more likely to understand the other person's point of view and connect with them in a manner to elicit positive communication. Step out of your office to walk, talk, and listen. You can't effectively communicate if you do not shift your attention from phones or keyboard to engage face to face with the people to whom you are speaking.

Just as with writing, successful oral communication (regardless of the size of the audience) requires preparation, identifying the audience, assessing the environment, and defining the message you want to deliver. An overreliance on PowerPoint detracts from the message and your delivery.

If you struggle with oral communication and are an introvert, your skills can best be improved through immersive experiences. If you are well read and current on your topic, you are far more likely to be successful. There are books, YouTube® videos, TED Talks, and other internet resources to help you improve your oral communication skills. One strategy is to use your cellphone to record yourself delivering practice speeches so that you can critique yourself.

Consider putting yourself out there. Take a public speaking class or join a group, such as Toastmasters International (www.toastmasters.org). As with writing, find yourself a supportive critic and mentor. Practice and accept evaluation by others in a safe, learning environment to help you assess your body language and appear confident while conveying a clear message.

Next Steps

If you struggle to effectively communicate in writing or orally, you will be challenged to be a successful leader. Honestly assessing yourself, finding a mentor, and identifying supportive critics should be part of your plan. And there is absolutely no substitute for practicing written and oral communication.

Examine how your ability to communicate impacts the achievement of your jail's vision, mission and values. Fix any perceptions that the communication in your organization is inadequate, unclear, or infrequent. Consider developing a communications strategy.

On a final note, as you are improving your skills, include your subordinates and peers on the journey. You are the role model; you are in charge of mentoring those around you as the organization's next leaders. ■

A Jail's Communication Strategy

A communications strategy is more than a policy on media and communication relations. This option is advocated for law enforcement agencies to reach the community and to assure transparency. There are internal and external stakeholders identified, such as elected officials, community leaders, neighborhood leaders, public interest groups, including non-English speaking communities, faith communities, and employees.

The need for transparency has never been greater as jails manage issues with housing inmates with mental illness, budget stresses, allegations of misconduct, and the need for innovation. Additional resources are included in the Leader's Library to give you information about a communications strategy.

Source: Stephens, D. W., Hill, J., & Greenberg, S. (2011). *Strategic communication practices: A toolkit for police executives*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Retrieved from <https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p222-pub.pdf>

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