



Communications in Corrections

- Supplement -

National Institute of Corrections

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over a three-year period, 13 different departments of corrections participated in the various NIC project activities designed to improve both internal and external communications practices. This multiyear effort included departments in the states of Alabama, California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The NIC project team wishes to acknowledge the encouragement and support offered by the agency heads in each of these departments. In addition, a special word of thanks goes to the staff contacts in each department who facilitated the work of the project team and helped to encourage involvement by other departmental staff in the project activities.

Dan Russell served as the project manager on behalf of the NIC Prisons Division. His assistance was invaluable in developing project objectives, refining project work plans, and securing the consulting personnel who could provide the expertise required to meet the needs of each individual department.

FOREWORD

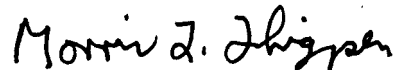
In recent years, the National Institute of Corrections received numerous requests for information and assistance in dealing with the communications challenges facing corrections professionals. Much of this interest centered around the problems of dealing with multiple constituencies with differing perspectives regarding corrections' mission and role in the states and localities. In addition, many corrections officials and staff have been concerned about their ability to articulate their initiatives and proposals to the legislature, governor, media, and general public.

In response to these concerns, NIC funded a multiyear effort to examine the issues surrounding the corrections community's communications needs and to develop strategies and methodologies to improve the quality and impact of communications activities. The first year consisted of communications audits in three state departments of corrections (Alabama, California, and Rhode Island). Beginning in the second year, NIC funded small grants and technical assistance to almost a dozen departments of corrections to work on targeted initiatives for communications improvements. During the third year, the NIC project team refined its audit methodology and helped conduct communications audits in three more DOCs (Georgia, Ohio, and Wisconsin).

At the conclusion of the first year of project activity, NIC published a monograph, *A Communications Audit: Promoting Public Understanding of Corrections*, that summarized the communications audits in the first three DOCs and described the steps to be followed in conducting a communications audit. State departments of corrections that are interested in undertaking an audit of their own communications policies and practices can obtain copies of that monograph from the NIC Information Center (800-877-1461).

This publication is a supplement to the original monograph. It has two objectives. First, it describes the communications audits, technical assistance, and small grant projects supported by the Institute during the second and third years of project activity. Second, it summarizes what was learned about communications and corrections over the entire three-year period and how NIC's efforts shifted over time to focus more on the challenges relating to internal communications.

It is hoped that the original monograph as well as this supplement will assist state departments of corrections in evaluating their own communications processes and developing more effective communications practices.



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I. INTRODUCTION

In the early years of this decade, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) made a commitment to assist state departments of corrections in addressing their communications needs and to develop strategies and methods to improve the quality of the corrections profession's communications practices. This chapter recounts the context within which NIC defined the original goals and objectives for its communications program.

What are described here as "communications" cover a wide range of interactions that take place daily inside departments of corrections, and between those departments and the external world. These include a variety of prepared materials and events, as well as unplanned exchanges of opinion and information. Such communications have always played a critical role in determining how the corrections profession is perceived, both by the public and by its own members. But never has that role been as critical as it is today.

The unprecedented growth experienced by the criminal justice system during the last decade and a half has posed a myriad of problems and challenges to departments of corrections throughout the country. One of the most visible manifestations of this trend -- aside from the constantly rising numbers of inmates -- has been the steady increase in demand for public dollars. Over the past decade, billions of dollars have been expended each year to build new prison facilities. The annual expenditure for corrections in the United States now exceeds \$20 billion dollars, an amount larger than the combined budgets of 10 of the 50 states.

As corrections has grown in size and public visibility, the profession has been confronted with conflicting demands from multiple constituencies. The public, driven by fear of crime and violence, has pushed for increasingly harsher penalties for criminal offenders. Elected officials, mindful of the public's concerns, seek to demonstrate that they are "tough on crime" by enacting stronger sentencing laws and sending more criminals to prison for longer stays.

At the same time, budgetary constraints have limited the willingness of state officials to finance the increased prison capacity required by expanded incarceration policies. As overcrowding has spread and the conditions of confinement have deteriorated, prisoner-rights groups have sought redress through the courts. This in turn has led to attempts by the legislatures to restrict the courts' authority.

The pressures that have been brought to bear on corrections are part of a broader set of forces affecting the entire criminal justice system. The workload for members of law enforcement, prosecution and defense teams, and the judiciary has grown alongside that of corrections, and it has

become more difficult for each segment of the criminal justice system to provide the mutual support and understanding characteristic of earlier, more stable times.

Another challenge confronting corrections is its relationship to the human service delivery system with which it increasingly shares client responsibility. In many ways, corrections institutions throughout the United States have become the social agencies of last resort. A variety of factors have contributed to this situation. Policy reforms designed to deinstitutionalize persons with mental health problems have benefited many but left others in life circumstances that frequently lead to socially dysfunctional and/or criminal behavior, in turn resulting in incarceration.

The social dislocations associated with drugs, lack of education, insufficient job skills, and chronic unemployment have broadened both the scope and size of the "at-risk" population beyond the traditional definition of males between the ages of 17 to 29. At the same time, the constant retrenchment of social program budgets over the past decade has shrunk and tattered the proverbial "safety net" to the point where thousands of persons are falling through the gaps -- and into corrections systems.

Offenders are not the only human face of corrections. Just as relevant are the thousands of men and women who manage and operate the hundreds of correctional facilities and programs all across the United States. As pressures have mounted and operating budgets have become increasingly strained, it has become harder and harder to recruit and retain qualified personnel to sustain the mission and operations of corrections.

Frequently, managers and staff must struggle simply to maintain the most basic levels of morale and performance. With opportunities for in-service training being reduced or eliminated altogether, many agencies find themselves falling further and further behind in attaining goals for the professional enhancement of their most valuable resource -- their staffs.

Added to this is lack of understanding on the part of the general public. Most Americans have little knowledge of or sympathy for the complexities of corrections. The ordinary "law-abiding citizen" simply has no idea of the difficulties involved in safely managing and sustaining a community of individuals -- in many ways equivalent to a small town -- in a place where they do not want to be. The prevailing public sentiment toward inmates can be paraphrased as "tough, but that's what they deserve." Correspondingly, there appears to be little public interest in funding the improvement of corrections systems.

Not surprisingly, the cumulative effect of these problems has led to a less than favorable image for many departments of corrections. This poor image is the inevitable result of an institutional posture that is reactive rather than proactive. In terms of communications, many departments of corrections have fallen into the habit of responding to problems only after they have occurred.

The reactive dissemination of information does not create problems, but it does magnify them. It invites the public to speculate on the causes and significance of events after they take place. It compounds confusion and the possibility of negative interpretations by requiring the public to guess at the motives that led to the event. Furthermore, it can sustain the image that corrections is an unplanned and unmanaged enterprise.

But this is by no means inevitable. Effective communications management, at the very least, can help to minimize problems. It can also help to avert them. With planning and persistence, communications can be used as a tool to improve morale and performance within a department, and to gain awareness and support of its mission externally.

The original goal of NIC's communications program was expressed in the title of the first year project description, "A Communications Audit: Promoting Public Understanding of Corrections." The initial focus was external, and the primary objective of the audit process was to enhance a DOC's ability to disseminate public information to external constituencies. The improvement of external communications practices was based on developing and implementing a proactive communication strategy that addressed the following:

- the department's mission, priorities, and concerns,
- a perspective on agency actions,
- the opportunity for involvement in the department's affairs, and
- matching the leadership's words with concrete actions.

Chapter II of this document summarizes the various project activities sponsored by NIC over the three-year period, while **Chapter III** describes the key issues in communications that were identified in the various departments of corrections that participated in these projects. Both chapters describe how and why the focus of the communications effort evolved, reflecting the experience gained with the participating departments.

This shift in focus led to more emphasis on the quality of internal communications and the steps that could be taken to strengthen this foundation of the organization's external communications. **Chapter IV** summarizes the key steps in evaluating a department's internal and external, communications and the challenges to more effective communications practices in the correctional arena.

II. NIC PROJECT APPROACH

NIC's communications program was organized in three annual phases. The first and third phases focused on strategic communications audits in three state departments of corrections. These involved the examination and evaluation of each department's current communications policies and procedures, followed by development of a strategy for improved communications. The second phase involved small grants and technical assistance targeted to specific communications concerns.

Phase I: Communications Audits

The objective of Phase I was to conduct a strategic communications audit in three departments of corrections. More than two dozen departments expressed interest in participating in the audit project.

The selection process for the first year audits was heavily weighted toward objective criteria, including system size (numbers of inmates and institutions); staffing and organization; rates of incarceration; and region of the country. In the end, system size and region became the primary screening criteria, leading to selection of the Alabama, California, and Rhode Island Departments of Corrections.

In each department, a member of the NIC project team worked with a steering group of departmental staff, selected by the head of the department, to execute the three basic steps in the audit process:

- a review of current communications practices through interviews and documentary research, including sources both within and outside the department;
- development of a communications goal statement and a set of strategic messages addressing key communications objectives; and
- translating the strategic messages into a set of communications improvement tasks with responsibility for implementation assigned.

A strategic communications plan was drafted for each of the three departments to document the results of the audit process and set forth a series of action steps to improve both internal and external communications. In the case of Rhode Island, the steering committee began development of action plans to implement several of the identified communications improvement tasks. Additional information on the results of these audits can be found in the original communications monograph.

There were two principal findings from the first-year communications audits. First, despite the wide diversity in size and regional location among the three participating departments, there was essentially no difference in the communications issues and challenges facing them. Second, in each case it was apparent that internal communications were as important -- if not more important -- than the external communications problems facing the department.

Phase II: Strategies for Effective Communications

During the second year of the communications program, the NIC Prisons Division supported special emphasis initiatives. These included small grants and technical assistance targeted to specific communications problems confronting departments of corrections. During this phase of the program, which was carried out over a two-year period, NIC assisted 10 departments of corrections.

The following are examples of the special emphasis initiatives undertaken during this phase of the NIC communications program:

- One of the institutions in the Delaware Department of Corrections sought assistance in developing a community outreach strategy that could serve as a prototype for the entire department. The objective of this strategy was to assist the department in building partnerships with community-based organizations to support implementation of the alternative sentencing options enacted by the legislature.
- In the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, NIC supported a workshop on media relations for superintendents of the Commonwealth's correctional facilities. The objectives of this workshop were to gain a better understanding of how the media functions; to improve the participants' speaking skills for interviews and press conferences; and to build confidence in responding to media inquiries on the telephone, on sound (i.e. microphone), or on camera.
- As a result of fiscal constraints, many departments of corrections have either terminated publication of their internal newsletters or have never been able to initiate publication in the first place. To facilitate implementation of one of the action plans developed out of the Phase I communications audit, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections received technical assistance for a group of employees who had volunteered to begin production of an employee newsletter. Topics covered in this technical assistance included developing story budgets, writing and editing newsletter copy, final layout and production, and distribution procedures.
- In 1991, the South Dakota legislature enacted a community corrections act, and within less than a year the first 50-bed facility was in operation. Subsequent efforts to site additional facilities, however, proved problematic. The South Dakota Department of Corrections secured technical assistance from NIC to evaluate efforts to site additional facilities, to assess the perspectives of local community members, and to define a communications strategy for facilitating local siting efforts.
- The Oklahoma Department of Corrections initiated an internal reorganization designed to achieve two separate but related objectives: decentralization and regionalization. This 1991 reorganization built upon an earlier shift toward unit management within the department's institutions. NIC provided technical assistance to the department for evaluating the impact of

the reorganization process on internal communications and identifying steps to improve internal communications consistent with the department's reorganization goals.

- Like many departments of corrections, Pennsylvania's DOC has been buffeted by change both from within and without. External factors included expanded sentencing laws, a tripling of the inmate population since 1980, and a major class-action lawsuit regarding conditions of confinement. At the same time, the department was introducing a series of internal changes to meet the challenges of the 1990's and beyond. The Secretary requested NIC support to evaluate the impact of these various changes on internal communications patterns and to identify measures to improve internal communications within the department.

In the Florida and Oklahoma departments of corrections, NIC special emphasis initiatives supported development of videotapes for the departments' public information programs. In California and Illinois, the departments conducted media relations workshops for department staff with NIC support

While each of these Phase II projects targeted a specific area of concern with respect to communications, several common themes emerged. It became evident that many corrections professionals lack the basic skills required for communicating with external entities such as the media. Furthermore, there is frequently either a lack of agreement internally on departmental priorities or lack of consensus on the methods of achieving objectives that are agreed upon by staff.

As a result, most departments of corrections do not have a proactive communications strategy that involves all of the relevant internal actors. This condition makes it difficult for many departments to present a consistent message to external audiences.

Phase III Communications Audits

During the third phase of NIC's communications program, the Prisons Division returned to the audit process employed in Phase I. The audit approach used in Phase III, however, was modified to reflect experience gained during the first two phases of the program, with a stronger emphasis on internal communications. The work plan for Phase III called for the adoption of a communications strategy and the development of specific action plans as part of the audit process.

In order to achieve these objectives within the time frame of the audit process, NIC included among its selection criteria a request for a written statement from department heads defining specific areas of communications concern for his/her department. Department heads were also asked to define the goals and objectives they wished to achieve through the communications audit process. In addition, the Institute requested extensive information regarding existing communication plans and practices.

More than a dozen requests for participation were submitted. From these submissions, NIC selected the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and the Georgia and Wisconsin Departments of Correction for the Phase III communications audits. Each of these departments had previously initiated a department-wide strategic planning process and, in each department, a communications action team had previously been established.

Given this background, the first step in the Phase III audit process was to review what had already been accomplished in each department and to determine what was required to complete development

of a communications strategy. Based on the strategy statement drafted for each department, NIC project team members worked with each departmental steering committee to develop action plans designed to achieve specific communications improvements. The following summarizes the results of the audit effort in these three states.

Georgia Department of Corrections

The issues and concerns identified for the Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) involved a negative public image, the changes in management style brought about by a new Commissioner, poor communications with employees, and the lack of adequate funding for the department. The communications goal, established by the GDC steering committee, called for a communications system that promotes collaboration among employees, branches of government, and the community in accomplishing GDC's mission and vision.

In order to achieve this goal, the GDC strategy statement identified four priorities for improved communications: increased two-way communications among all employees; systems to get appropriate information to employees when they need it; increased information sharing with all branches of government; and improved working relationships, trust, and collaboration among all branches of government.

Target audiences were identified internally within the Department and among external stakeholders. A set of strategic messages was drafted relating to safety and security, reputation for excellence, alternative programs, treatment and rehabilitation, value of each employee, and partnership with the community. Finally, work groups were established to develop two action plans. One action plan generated an inventory and assessment of current communications practices, while the other action plan established a program for educating staff about legislative issues affecting the Department.

Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (DRC) communications strategy statement began with a discussion of issues and concerns that affect the mission and operations of the Department. The external issues included public perceptions, the adequacy of budgets and resources, sentencing reform, and the cumulative impact these have had on chronic overcrowding. Internal issues included the Department's commitment to the Governor's quality improvement process and the need to address the Department's institutional legacy of a hierarchical organization that relies on "chain-of-command" communications styles.

Based on these issues, the Department's communications team defined a goal for the Department to rebuild and re-energize DRC's internal communications channels and to lay a foundation upon which to build improvements in external communications. The strategy statement also identified target audiences. These included senior staff, middle management, and line staff at the institutions, the regions (probation and parole), and the central office.

Strategic messages were defined to guide future communications improvements. They were grouped along two dimensions: those that involve the leadership function (i.e., articulating the vision of DRC's role in society) and those that relate to the organizational aspects of how staff do business with each other on a day-to-day basis.

The communications team also developed an inventory of existing communications within DRC, covering both formal channels and informal patterns of communications. The inventory was organized according to the internal and external dimensions of current communications practices. A roster of action items was developed, and the team began development of action plans for three items on the roster: volunteering the team as an advisory board for *The Communicator* (the DRC newsletter), developing electronic technology options to enhance communications, and enhancing training throughout the department.

Wisconsin Department of Corrections

The audit process in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WI-DOC) included a stakeholder survey to identify areas of concern among Departmental staff and external constituencies. The need for improved communications was identified as the priority concern among Department employees. This included changing the emphasis from “one-way,” “top-down” communications based on the traditional hierarchical model of management and operation; emphasizing diversity in recruiting and promoting Departmental staff; and conveying an awareness by the central office of the impact that overcrowding has on the institutions and field offices.

While they were less specific in their responses, the external stakeholders indicated that WI-DOC must work harder to communicate its goals, objectives, and activities with those outside the Department. Based on these issues and concerns, the WI-DOC work group defined goal statements for both internal and external communications. Internally, WI-DOC values and supports the contributions of its employees and operates in an innovative, open, safe, and accessible environment that emphasizes two-way communications. Externally, the Department is effective in reducing the risk to public safety by the structured and efficient supervision of offenders in custody or in the community.

The WI-DOC strategy statement identified internal and external audiences and documented the formal channels and informal practices that are used to communicate with these audiences. A series of strategic messages was drafted and used as the basis for defining a list of action steps for improving WI-DOC communications. Action plans were prepared for a legislative information program and a media relations strategy. With the refinement of these first two plans, the audit steering committee began development of additional action plans to improve internal communications through better use of information technology.

The Department’s communication strategy called for the establishment of ad-hoc work groups to continue the development and implementation of specific action plans. The steering committee, established during the audit process, is to meet periodically to review progress in achieving the Department’s goals for improved communications.

Summary of Phase III

The pattern that first emerged in the Phase I audit process was seen even more clearly in Phase III. In every department, the primary concern of the department head and the steering committee was the need to improve internal communications. In each case, this was seen as a prerequisite for developing the departmental capacity to make needed improvements in external communications. The next section of this monograph describes in more detail the principal findings and the common areas of concern that emerged from this three-year effort to improve communications in corrections.

III. COMMUNICATIONS CONCERNS

Several common themes emerged from the audits and other project activities supported by the NIC communications program. Some of these themes relate to the initial focus of the NIC effort to improve external communications, while others involve the challenges relating to internal communications that emerged from the departmental audits and special initiative projects.

This chapter summarizes these issues and concerns and describes their implications for developing effective strategies to improve communications in corrections.

External Communications Concerns

Building Local Support for Programs

Corrections systems are connected in various ways to local communities, and it is at the local level that a state corrections system must build support for its programs. The criminal justice system, of which corrections is one component, functions for the most part at the local community level. Virtually all the inmates in a corrections system come from somewhere in that state, and they will return to their local communities when their sentences are completed.

The profile of most convicted offenders in the 1990's encompasses a broad array of needs: medical, mental health, psychosocial, substance abuse, educational, and job and life skill-training. Addressing these needs has become a crucial element in preparing offenders for successful (i.e., crime- and drug-free) re-entry into the community, and this requires coordination with the human service delivery system throughout the state.

In recent years, siting new prisons has become an economic development incentive for some areas, as small, rural communities seeking a stable source of jobs and incomes compete for the new prison facilities. Local support for community corrections facilities and programs remains weak, however, since they offer neither the large-scale job benefits nor the image of security and control that are associated with a prison.

Volunteers can serve as a powerful channel for two-way communications between the state DOC and the community. In order to recruit volunteers successfully, a department of corrections must be able to articulate its image of corrections and the role the department plays in the state. Once recruited, volunteers will want to explain their involvement to others. Reverse volunteerism can also be an

effective communications channel. The DOC can build on the example of public utility companies and other organizations that encourage employee involvement in community affairs.

The resources needed to fund the work of corrections must be weighed against other public needs across the state, and the legislators who make final resource allocation decisions come from communities across the state. Thus, the development of public understanding and legislative support are inseparable objectives since each involves grass-roots efforts at the community level.

Working with the Media

Historically, corrections in this country maintained a distance between itself and the press. Consistent with the quasi-military orientation and emphasis on security, prison officials usually made little effort to provide information and made every effort to control that which was given out. With the emergence of large-scale corrections systems and the large expenditure of public dollars to finance these systems, it was inevitable that the nature of this relationship would change.

In the 1990's, the DOCs that enjoy a positive relationship with the media and news organizations in their states have earned that relationship by being open and proactive in their dealings with the media. By maintaining regular contact with the media, these departments find that it is easier to explain their side of the story when issues or controversies arise.

Much of the progress in this area has resulted from the efforts of the individual department head and the department's public information officer. While these two persons will always bear a major responsibility in this area, it is important that other senior administrators, wardens, and institutional press officers become more actively involved in media relations.

Senior staff should not only be able to communicate effectively with working reporters, they should also make themselves available to and seek time with editors, news director, publishers, and radio talk show hosts. These activities must be seen as an integral part of a corrections professional's job performance. There is a need for training and awareness building to assist those senior staff who are reluctant or unsure of how to work effectively with the media.

Debate on Corrections Policy

Undoubtedly the biggest challenge in external communications is how the men and women who do the work of corrections in this nation can become more effective participants in the debate over the public policy that guides their profession. For the most part, corrections professionals see their role as operating programs and facilities based on some type of offender management system.

While specific approaches may vary, the goals of any prison's offender management system are to maintain safety and security for staff and offenders during the period the person is incarcerated and to contribute to long-term public safety by increasing the probability that the offender will make a successful (i.e., crime-free) return to the community at the completion of incarceration. Achieving these goals requires a policy framework that enables administrators and staff to match appropriate resources and responses to individual offenders.

For the past two decades, the public and its elected representatives have supported a policy framework that results primarily in maximizing incarceration rates. Through determinate sentencing laws based on categories of crime and criminal behavior, legislatures have sharply restricted the ability of judges, correctional authorities, and parole officials to assign sanctions based on individual criteria.

The overcrowding of facilities and the straining of resources that characterize most state corrections systems further impede the ability of DOC officials and staff to use effective offender management approaches. The focus on incarceration in secure facilities has also limited the public's interest in and support of community-based facilities and other alternative sanctions.

The corrections community is only too aware of the public demand for an expanded responsibility in sanctioning and managing offenders, but with more narrowly restricted means. What the corrections profession has not been able to achieve is public understanding of the need for a higher level of resources in order to succeed in its societal mission. This will require persuading the public and its elected representatives that "big corrections," like "big government," is not effective public policy and that the scope and expectations of corrections' responsibility must be defined in relation to available public resources.

Internal Communications Concerns

Internal communications are not only equal in importance to the external variety, they are in many ways inseparable. The most important connection is the fact that a strong fabric of internal communications is an essential foundation for building strength in external communications.

Types of Internal Communications

In examining communications in an organizational environment, it is important to distinguish between two major types of internal communications. One dimension of organizational communications involves leadership: this is the ability of the head of the organization to articulate to his or her staff a vision of that organization's role in society. Effective leaders use strategic messages to indicate direction, set goals and objectives, and focus on desired outcomes.

Strategic messages should be simple and to the point. They should be repeated frequently to facilitate comprehension by diverse elements within the organization. Leaders emphasize the use of open channels of communications in order to disseminate their strategic messages as broadly as possible. This aspect of organizational communication has become increasingly important as many organizations, in both the private and the public sectors, have found it necessary to reexamine their vision in order to remain viable in light of contemporary social and economic conditions.

Many corrections leaders find strong sympathy and support for their vision from within their own departments. However, the impact of this support is often constrained by the realization that the vision does not always enjoy widespread political support outside the department. In corrections, as in other fields, it is not uncommon for the leadership to be better at "preaching to the converted" than convincing outsiders of the merits of their ideas.

The second major dimension of organizational communications consists of how the members of the organization do business with each other. Communications on this dimension focus more on tactical

information; this includes the facts or knowledge required to make a decision, perform a function, or carry out an operation.

Historically, most public and private sector organizations in this country have been structured on the hierarchical, pyramid model (at least on paper). In this organizational environment, tactical information is supposed to travel through the chain of command in a formal, prescribed manner, usually from the top down. Staff members are expected to do business with each other through normal channels.

In the real world, not all tactical communications follow these pathways. In some cases, an individual has internalized certain facts or knowledge to the point where he or she relies upon his or her own experience rather than departmental channels. In all organizations, there are “good ol’ boy” networks designed to facilitate access to information or to assist a trusted colleague who acted first and then sought information second.

With the widespread availability of information technology, some organizations now believe it is feasible to process tactical information in an open, organization-wide network environment. What the heads of these organizations have discovered is that an open, network approach to tactical communications requires far more than computers, modems, and message-switching centers.

This type of open communications approach is, in effect, taking the “good ol’ boy” network out of the closet and inviting everyone in the organization to join. To be successful, this style of internal communications must be supported by new ways of management, recruitment and training, task execution, and job performance evaluation. In other words, it requires new ways of doing business with each other within the organization.

Organizational Structure and Organizational Culture

In recent years, many DOCs have reorganized internally with significant consequences for the ways in which people within the organization do business with each other. Some of these changes have been in response to the dramatic growth described earlier. A common pattern has been to institute some form of regionalization to transform what had become a large, impersonal, statewide system into an environment reflecting a more human scale of activity.

At the same time, many departments have launched strategic planning processes and quality improvement initiatives as part of the “reinventing government” movement that emerged within the states in the early 1990’s. This type of organizational change exhibits the following characteristics:

- The traditional pyramid structure is replaced, eliminating layers of management and support functions by creating a flat, radial organization in which the central office functions are at the center of a circle, not “on the top.” This type of organization is inconsistent with the quasi-military structure that characterized many DOCs.
- Responsibility and authority are delegated to supervisors and staff out in the field so that more decisions are made at the point where the service is performed. This type of change is often difficult for managers who feel they are giving something up and for the staff in the field who are hesitant to take on more responsibility.

- In order to fulfill its mission, a state DOC must recruit and retain staff skilled in a variety of disciplines, including constitutional law, interpersonal communications, facility maintenance, the proper use of force, job training and job placement, financial management, cultural awareness, first aid and CPR, religious orientation, communicable diseases, inmate/parolee rights, and due process requirements. This requires an organizational structure and climate that values diversity in the background, talents, and roles of the staff.
- Work must offer some intrinsic value that goes beyond the monetary compensation and fringe benefits associated with a particular job position. This leads to a reexamination of the criteria for job performance and altering the methods by which supervisors conduct those evaluations.
- The focus is shifted to core processes: doing what the organization does best and being customer-oriented, rather than management-oriented, when making decisions and taking actions. This type of change has helped to clarify the conflict between the corrections community's desire to maximize the principles of offender management and public policy that maximizes incarceration.
- In this environment, the leader's role is to articulate the organization's vision, to recruit and retain staff who can reflect the vision in their job performance, and to build alliances with partners in the community who can help the department achieve its mission.

These changes in structure and organizational culture have not been easy for any state DOC that has undertaken them, but such challenges are not unique to corrections. Indeed, many organizations in the public and private sectors have struggled with structural and cultural renewal over the past decade and more. Only those that have faced up to the challenge have been able to make improvements in their internal communications.

Other Aspects of Internal Communications

There are several other factors that can have an important impact on the quality of internal communications practices within state DOCs:

- A department can often improve the quality of internal communications by making more effective use of informal channels, colloquially referred to as "the grapevine." There is a perception in many departments that participating in the grapevine is unprofessional, that it is nothing more than rumor-mongering. In fact, the grapevine is indigenous to any organization because people have a natural tendency to want to talk about their work and the issues that affect it.

Positive messages on the grapevine reflect high levels of job satisfaction. When information on the grapevine is distorted or negative in tone, it is normally the result of confusion over the department's mission, poor coordination among departmental units, and/or low morale. In other words, a negative rumor usually indicates more about the organization than it does about the person transmitting it.

Senior staff and other supervisory personnel should learn how to assess informal communications as a means of identifying and responding to underlying problems. In

addition, they should learn how to use informal communications (e.g., “walk-and-talk” management, multiple channels, etc.) to promote dialogue with their line staff.

- Most state DOCs have a public information officer (PIO) as a senior staff member, normally reporting directly to the head of the department. The traditional role definition for the PIO emphasizes responsibility for external communications, particularly with the news media. In organizations with effective internal communications practices, this “top communicator” is involved in both internal and external communications.

In such an organizational environment, this person serves as a member of the department head’s senior advisory team. The top communicator participates in strategic planning and decisionmaking processes rather than simply wordsmithing messages to announce decisions that have been made by others.

In this way, the top communicator helps to maintain the vital link between internal and external communications. He or she can also advise the department head and senior staff on how available options and potential decisions can influence the ways in which strategic messages and tactical information can be transmitted.

- As is the case in many public sectors, there are significant gaps in the information technology networks in most state DOCs. This condition is made all the worse by continued growth within most state systems that expands the scope of the client database as well as the number and location of user stations.

Simply spending money on more hardware, software, and telecommunications links will not, in and of itself, create an enhanced environment for internal communications. Training -- an organized, sustained regime of hands-on hand-holding -- is essential in order to help most people learn how to use the new communications tools and to become comfortable with them.

Beyond that, there is the interplay between technology and organizational life.’ As noted earlier, those organizations that have attempted to embrace network communications while maintaining a traditional, pyramid-type chain of command have found themselves caught in the conflict between both worlds.

IV. SUMMARY

NIC's communications program identified areas of opportunity for improving the quality of communications in corrections. Externally, departments of corrections must build local support for their policies and programs, learn to work effectively with the media, and become involved in the public debate over the future of corrections.

Internally, corrections officials and staff must recognize the impact that organizational structure and organizational culture have on communications and identify ways to change structures and cultures that do not promote two-way communications within the organization. In addition, they must make more use of informal channels of communications, integrate the public information function more fully with internal communications, and learn how to make more effective use of information technology.

NIC's monograph, *A Communications Audit: Promoting Public Understanding of Corrections*, sets forth the guidelines for conducting a communications audit and developing a strategic communications plan. The following is a summary of the steps in this process.

- **Step One:** The first step is to define the problem and gather information to identify the concerns facing the department. What is the source of the concern? Who is involved or affected? How are they affected? Why does this issue or concern matter to the department and its publics?
- **Step Two:** The next step is to develop channels for feedback. It is critical that these channels be kept open, even after the plan has been developed. Develop and administer surveys of personnel, talk to members of key audiences, and read newspaper articles about the department. In other words, **stay in touch with the department's publics**. Using this feedback to update issues and concerns, goals and objectives can be woven together into a strategy for improved communications. This is the heart of the planning process, and it is the essential element in an effective strategic communications plan.

These first two steps describe the stage of development intended for a communications audit. The link between the first two steps and the last two steps is the adoption of the communications strategy by the agency head. The most important communications role for the department head is to give leadership and direction to the entire departmental team. An effective communications strategy must reflect the agency head's priorities and commitment to action.

- Step Three: The third step involves developing action plans to implement the communications objectives defined in the strategic plan. These action plans should be clear, detailed, and specific. Determine who is the audience and frame the message in terms that are relevant and meaningful to them. Specific duties should be assigned with timetables where appropriate. The success of the action plans depends upon clear lines of accountability and responsibility. Taken as a whole, these action plans represent the department's day-to-day calendar of communications activities.
- Step Four. The last step, and the one most often overlooked, is the evaluation phase. There is danger inherent in referring to this as the "last step," implying that this activity takes place in a designated, finite period of time and in some manner closes out the communications planning process. Nothing could be further from the truth. The department must look at its communications program on a regular basis to determine not only whether it is being carried out as planned, but also whether the stated objectives are still appropriate to the department's current conditions. Situations change and, to be effective, a communications strategy must evolve with changing circumstances. The results of the evaluation must be seen as opportunities for growth and improvement. And remember, it is possible to learn from successes as well as mistakes.

By emphasizing a proactive approach to communications, officials and staff can recognize and address many problems in their early stages, permitting corrective actions and responses. Eventually, communications will become an integral part of the process through which the leadership and staff of the department find more effective ways to work with each other and with external constituencies outside of the department.