

# Effective Communication and Decision-Making for Corrections Basic Recruit Training



Florida Criminal Justice Standards & Training Commission

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## Introduction

The Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission (CJSTC) requested that staff form a workgroup to create a report aimed at identifying any gaps or oversights in the current corrections curriculum. The purpose of the report is to support the upcoming rewrite of the corrections basic recruit training (BRT) program with input from subject matter experts (SMEs). The workgroup was specifically tasked with identifying the soft skills that effective correctional officers use on the job but that may not necessarily show up on a job task analysis (JTA). The group was also asked to make recommendations on how to incorporate training of those skills into the BRT program.

In 2015, the CJSTC created a workgroup to provide recommendations for improving the Commission's law enforcement training programs with a specific focus on improving relationships between law enforcement agencies and the public. The workgroup's report was published in May 2017 and it included several training recommendations aimed at fostering positive relationships between law enforcement and the public. Based on these recommendations, significant changes were made to the law enforcement BRT program to expand students' practice with interpersonal communication through interactive scenarios and the teaching of the soft skills necessary for successful interactions. Due to the success of the changes that came out of this report, the CJSTC requested that similar reports be created for each of the criminal justice disciplines' BRT programs.

Staff organized an Effective Communication and Decision-Making Workshop to initiate this project. The workgroup was made up of SMEs who are officers and supervisors at state and local agencies, instructors, and researchers from universities across Florida. The SMEs represented the Florida Department of Corrections, Brevard County Sheriff's Office, Escambia County Sheriff's Office, Orange County Corrections, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, Polk County Sheriff's Office, Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Florida Atlantic University, University of Central Florida, and the University of West Florida.

Based on input during the workshop, notes from the Advisory Committee, the 2018 JTA, and research, the SMEs identified several key skills that should be included in the BRT program to better prepare BRT students for the unique challenges of a correctional career. The goal is to improve the overall safety of the correctional facility and officers by enhancing students' soft skills. Officers who can communicate effectively and make clear decisions can prevent safety issues from occurring and escalating. The most important soft skills in the areas of communication and decision-making will be discussed below.

When considering the soft skills BRT students need in order to be successful, it is important to first identify the challenges many students have in the areas of communication and decision-making. Some specific challenges that were identified relate to students lacking soft skills and life experience. Many students are young; 40% of the students who attended corrections basic recruit training over the past five years were under the age of 25. Workgroup participants, supervisors, and instructors report that

younger students find interactions and communication with supervisors, peers, and inmates challenging. Some of these issues may stem from increased reliance on online communication over in-person communication. The most recent groups of high school graduates experienced several months of remote learning, which has had an impact on their ability to communicate face-to-face and may have also limited their opportunities to solve problems and make decisions since they simply did not have as much exposure to day-to-day interactions while in lockdown or during extended periods of social distancing. They may also struggle with emotional regulation and lack leadership skills, which, combined with inexperience, can create dangerous situations for them as new officers as well as for staff and inmates. In some cases, this is their first job; they lack life experiences and have not had many opportunities to make important decisions or use communication skills to resolve conflicts, foster collaboration, or relay important information to others. Many students go into training without fully understanding how challenging the environment can be, which contributes to officer turnover and difficult working conditions (overtime, shortages, stress). The students need more specialized training since they will be working in a high-tension, inherently dangerous setting where soft skills in communication and decision-making are needed to avoid problems and keep themselves, the staff, and the inmates safe.

## Communication

Building successful communication skills is vital for correctional officers (COs). This includes developing rapport with supervisors, fellow officers, visitors, and inmates, understanding body language, honing de-escalation and conflict resolution skills, and learning how to be fair and consistent in interactions. All of these skills are essential to a CO's success.

Communication is a key skill, and many students lack essential verbal and non-verbal communication in addition to writing skills that are crucial for their future job performance. New officers often struggle with communicating effectively with supervisors and presenting their questions in a professional and respectful manner. COs will interact with inmates daily, and they need to have a variety of communication tools to help them avoid potential conflicts and de-escalate situations while keeping everyone's safety in mind.

### Developing Rapport

New officers need to understand that inmates often have traumatic backgrounds, and they should learn to build rapport and communicate with them through the lens of empathy and fairness while maintaining situational awareness and safety. Most inmates have experienced trauma in the past, and even if they have not, being incarcerated is a traumatic experience in itself. According to Tripodi and colleagues (2020), up to 95% of incarcerated people have experienced trauma at least once. Officers need to know the basics of trauma-informed care to better interact with those in their custody and understand the issues that may arise from having trauma. Using principles of trauma-informed care (safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment) will help COs approach inmates with empathy. When a CO displays empathy, they attempt to understand an inmate's feelings and perspective despite not having shared their life experiences; empathy should be demonstrated regardless of whether the person is likable. Officers who are able to show empathy often have a better understanding of inmates

and their behavior. This allows officers to better assess possible reasons for tense situations and use de-escalation techniques to defuse them, thus keeping both officers and the facility safe.

## Body Language

Subject matter experts have emphasized the importance of teaching students how to use verbal and non-verbal communication in a variety of situations. Students need to understand that inmates closely watch COs, and an officer's body language can communicate a lot about their confidence and professionalism before the officer ever speaks. When used properly, eye contact, command presence, and tone of voice can defuse a situation and protect all parties from harm. Officers should consider verbal and non-verbal communication as well as cultural differences when implementing conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques. In addition, they must also be mindful of how their posture and gestures may be misunderstood and potentially escalate a situation.

## Fairness and Consistency of Action

Students need to understand that, when they become officers, they must supervise in a fair, consistent, and impartial manner without showing any favoritism towards any group or individual. Any show of favoritism can create an unsafe situation and put officers in a compromising position where they could be vulnerable to inmate manipulation. Officers must learn to regulate their own emotions and not allow personal judgments and beliefs to influence how they treat inmates.

Officers can create a more manageable work environment by being consistent with their interactions, following policy, and clearly explaining any actions or decisions. Officers need to be aware that inmates are always watching and judging an officer's actions both with other inmates and other officers. It is crucial for COs to remain vigilant at all times to prevent inmate manipulation. Understanding a facility's policies and rules for inmates is an essential way to keep everyone safe as is avoiding putting oneself into a position where an officer is vulnerable to being manipulated.

Using procedural justice principles can help COs be more effective in their role and avoid potential conflicts. Procedural justice is an approach that focuses on carrying out justice in a fair and equitable manner. The four pillars of procedural justice include fairness and consistency of rule application, voice and representation in the process, transparency and openness of the process, and impartial decision-making. Applying a procedural justice approach when addressing issues ensures that all parties feel heard and treated with fairness, even when one party does not get the outcome they desire.

## Decision-Making

Another vital component for success as a CO is to have clear decision-making abilities. Improving the following soft skills will help BRT students be more confident in their capacity to make good decisions and help them succeed in their roles. These skills include the ability to assess situations, demonstrate leadership, collaborate with a team, solve problems, and explain the reasoning behind decisions. SMEs and Advisory Committee members report that a large number of new officers have difficulty making decisions quickly, especially when confronted with rapidly changing situations. In order for officers to feel empowered to make good decisions, they must understand their role as an individual, as part of the

team, and within the facility at large. This is needed to align professional behavior with the mission of the facility and to facilitate the proper supervision, care, custody, and control required in correctional facilities.

Good decision-making is a critical skill for all officers. It requires understanding of their role within a team, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, heightened awareness of the environment, and knowing when to act. During their shifts, new officers often have to make quick decisions while being able to explain their rationale both verbally and in writing. Developing quick decision-making skills can be achieved through repetition, knowledge of facility rules, and experience. Additionally, officers must justify their decisions in their reports and demonstrate their understanding of relevant policies, procedures, and possible legal ramifications.

## The Officer's Role

As members of the team, COs are line staff responsible for performing routine tasks within the facility. They work alongside their peers and management to maintain order. Additionally, there is a clear chain of command in place that provides leadership and coordinates the various functions required to run a safe correctional facility. Following the chain of command is important as it provides order in what could easily become a chaotic environment. Complying with directives from the chain of command is essential; however, officers need to know that they have a duty to speak up and intervene if they witness anything unlawful or unsafe. New COs need to learn how and when to make a decision; they also need to learn how to speak up when an issue arises.

Considering that most facilities are short-staffed, COs often have to switch between roles during their shifts. It is crucial for officers to understand how the facility operates and know the different functions of each team. This will aid officers in being able to adapt quickly and stay alert as well as make decisions that are supported by policy.

BRT students need to learn that they will be held accountable for their actions as officers, and they need to understand the impact that those actions can have on the team as a whole. A team treating each other with respect can solve problems by collaborating and coming up with ideas to enhance safety or mitigate threats. Mutual respect and professional rapport go a long way toward building trust within the team and garnering the respect of the inmates.

## Leadership Skills

Students must understand the inherent power structure in a correctional facility. Officers will interact with their supervisors on a daily basis and should, therefore, learn to work with leadership in a professional manner. Officers need to know that making decisions is essential to their duties, and most supervisors encourage and expect them to make decisions, ask questions, and intervene within the scope of their employment. All officers must be conscious of their dual role as both line officers reporting to command staff and inmate supervisors.

While COs are subject to the chain of command, they are also in a supervisory position within the inmate-officer relationship. All COs interact with inmates from a position of power, so they need to understand how this dynamic affects interactions with inmates as well as learn how to use this power to

keep everyone safe and improve the overall environment of the facility. In this role, they must use leadership skills when working with those in their care by interacting with inmates as a leader who is trustworthy, consistent, ethical, and fair. These skills include treating others with respect and setting a good example by modeling professional behavior.

## Emotional Intelligence

For COs to make quick and rational decisions, they must be sure to react to the facts of the situation and display emotional intelligence in their actions. Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, understand, and manage one's emotions as well as recognize and respond to the emotions of others. Officers must be able to recognize when they are having a physiological reaction to a situation (quick pulse, sweating, flushing, etc.) and may not be thinking rationally. If COs are practicing with sound emotional intelligence, they will be more successful in ensuring their own actions are not driven by ego, personal feelings, fear, or anxiety.

## Situational Awareness and Duty to Act

Another important decision-making ability for officers is knowing when they have a duty to act. Students need to learn to sense subtle changes in the environment and be aware when something does not seem “normal” and requires further inquiry or vigilance. For example, atypical behavior, unusual changes in attire (no shoes or shirts), or unexpected changes in noise levels could be signs of a potential disturbance requiring action. New officers will need to have the confidence to take action, even if it is as simple as reporting their observations to a supervisor. They will also need to be able to explain their decisions.

## Training Recommendations

During the Effective Communication and Decision-Making Workshop, the SMEs were asked to make specific recommendations for developing the soft skills for new officers that are outlined above. BRT students will naturally have opportunities to develop these skills during field training, but providing a better foundation for them throughout the academy will prepare them for success. The current curriculum has opportunities for role-plays, scenarios, and communication exercises, but the SMEs supported the Advisory Committee’s plan to incorporate more active learning techniques and improve the existing exercises to enhance the development of these soft skills in recruits. The workgroup of SMEs and the Advisory Committee both emphasized the need for more opportunities for students to learn through continuous practice in a variety of formats.

Specific recommendations are listed below:

1. Incorporate basic content about procedural justice principles, trauma-informed care, and leadership skills.
2. Utilize incremental training scenarios or exercises.
3. Introduce opportunities for self-assessment.

4. Provide opportunities for discussion and self-reflection after scenarios, role-plays, communication exercises, and other activities.
5. Suggest recording role plays and exercises as a tool for students to self-reflect.
6. Use case studies throughout training to give students real-world examples and identify current trends in corrections.
7. Provide table-top scenarios to talk through decision points, roles, practical solutions, and possible outcomes.
8. Incorporate more visual learning tools (videos, photos, slides, technology) to demonstrate non-verbal cues when communicating or making decisions.
9. Give leadership roles during group activities throughout training.
10. Create benchmarks for scenarios, exercises, and role-plays so that students and instructors can see the progression.

## Conclusion

The correctional officer profession is challenging but can be extremely rewarding. While the role does not get a lot of recognition from the public, it is a crucial one for society and public safety. To better prepare students for the challenges of a correctional career, they should leave the academy with the basic skills needed for communication and decision-making as this will be an essential part of their duties.

In basic recruit training, students must develop the skills to build rapport with fellow correctional staff and inmates, understand body language, be fair and consistent in every interaction, and de-escalate and resolve conflicts. Decision-making skills are equally important to a CO's daily duties; new officers must understand their role as an officer, develop leadership skills and emotional intelligence, and know when to act. These soft skills will enable new officers to communicate effectively and keep the facility safe.

Ultimately, the goal of effective BRT is to provide students with the foundational skills that all officers need to be successful, including the soft skills that will help them be more effective when interacting with inmates, staff, and supervisors. By better preparing BRT students to enter the field of corrections, we can create a safer environment for officers, inmates, and the public.

The purpose of this report is to identify the gaps in the current CO BRT program, highlight the importance of the critical skills that SMEs have identified, and provide actionable recommendations to incorporate these skills into the curriculum. Adult learners tend to retain knowledge and skills when they are given many opportunities to practice them in a safe, controlled environment. Ideally, they will be able to transfer the skills learned through practice into proficiency on the job. As the National Research Council (2000) describes problem-solving to proficiency, adult learners become "fluent at recognizing problem types" (44) with repeated practice, so they become more adept at finding solutions quickly based on their memories of solving similar problems.

The workgroup hopes that these recommendations will provide an additional framework for the competency-based portions of basic recruit training and bolster the content in both the textbook and instructor guide.

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