

Trust in management key to avoiding correctional staff burnout

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Correctional facility employees who trust supervisors and management are less likely to experience job burnout, a Wayne State University researcher has found.

"Trust builds commitment and involvement in the job," said Eric Lambert, Ph.D., professor and chair of [criminal justice](#) in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, "but lack of trust leads to burnout and stresses people out."

A correctional facility employee himself before becoming an academic, Lambert developed his study of staff members at a private Midwestern juvenile detention facility after learning that only two other researchers have tried to address the effects of trust in such a setting. Titled "Examining the Relationship Between Supervisor and Management Trust and Job Burnout Among Correctional Staff," the results were published recently in the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.

Lambert's team defined burnout as consisting of [emotional exhaustion](#), depersonalization and feelings of being ineffective at work. They surveyed 200 respondents, who ranged in age from 19 to 68 years old and had been on the job from one to 53 months, to find out if trust in supervisors and in higher management had any effect on each of those characteristics.

Researchers indeed found that higher trust levels almost across the board resulted in lower reported burnout characteristics in employees. The only

exception was the effect of trust in management, which seemed to have no bearing on how employees perceived their effectiveness on the job. Lambert said that might be because higher level managers are too far removed from day-to-day operations to have much interaction with employees.

Employees who trusted their supervisors, however, saw themselves as more effective at work. But the [disparity](#) in trust and perceived work effectiveness doesn't mean management should be ignored in the workplace, as it still is associated with dimensions of burnout, Lambert said.

"This suggests the need to increase both forms of trust in the correctional workplace, and not to ignore one or both," he said.

While trust is important in any work setting, Lambert said it's especially so in corrections because of the high level of personal contact.

"Prisons need human beings to operate," he said. "You cannot use machines; it's not like an assembly line. Everything you deal with involves interaction with inmates, co-workers and supervisors."

Lambert said his study opens the door for trust research at other types of correctional facilities, but believes the findings will translate and affirm the role of trust levels as a key factor in [burnout](#). The next step — which can be taken without costing a lot of money or resources — is for correctional facilities to develop ways to build trust.

Responsibility for that process, he said, lies with supervisors and higher level administrators, who can accomplish it by holding themselves to high ethical standards and being genuinely considerate and concerned for employees' welfare. Listening and allowing staff input into their jobs and organization is another way to build positive relationships.

Trust also can be built by focusing on organizational justice, which researchers say comprises two aspects, distributive justice and procedural justice. The first refers to perceptions of fair and just organizational outcomes, such as pay, promotions, evaluations, assignments, workload, rewards and punishments. The second refers to perceptions that processes and procedures used to reach those outcomes are fair, just and transparent.

If that sounds similar to other situations, Lambert said, it's because the principles are the same.

"Trust is a basic human need," he said. "It's part of the foundation of any good relationship, whether it's work, romantic or social."

Provided by Wayne State University

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