

Understanding job commitment may lead to better correctional employees

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Commitment to the job by correctional staff members cannot be bought but must be earned by an organization, a Wayne State University researcher believes.

A study by Eric Lambert, Ph.D., professor and chair of criminal justice in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, describes three types of commitment and the effects of three organizational concepts on them, based on a survey of 450 staff members at a maximum-security correctional institution in Michigan.

"Loyalty, Love, and Investments: The Impact of Job Outcomes on the [Organizational Commitment](#) of Correctional Staff," published recently in the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, shows that understanding the nature of [employee commitment](#) is important in a field that costs more than \$50 billion a year to maintain, Lambert said.

High employee turnover rates contribute to that cost, fueled by much higher levels of [substance abuse](#) and disability retirement than other fields, he said, noting that it costs \$20,000 to \$40,000 to hire a new employee.

Continuance commitment refers to [employees'](#) investment of themselves in an organization because of salary and benefits, as well as because of [social relationships](#) on the job or lost opportunities if an employee leaves.

Normative commitment is when an employee internalizes the standards of an organization and acts on that [predisposition](#) rather than consideration of the actions' consequences.

Affective commitment—considered the most desirable of the three types—occurs when an employee is loyal to an organization, identifies with it, takes pride in it and internalizes its goals.

The organizational concept of job stress refers to

damaging stimuli or the immediate or long-range results of those stimuli. Job involvement is described as the degree of employee identification with a job and its place within a person's life's interest. Job satisfaction is defined generally as the degree to which people like their [jobs](#).

Lambert found that correctional officers generally expressed higher levels of continuance commitment than their noncustody counterparts. Increased job stress levels and decreased job involvement were associated with higher continuance commitment. Job satisfaction did not significantly predict continuance commitment.

Correctional officers reported lower levels of normative commitment than their noncustody colleagues. All three organizational concepts were significantly related to affective commitment, Lambert found, with job satisfaction having the largest effect.

Researchers were somewhat surprised; however, that job stress didn't impact affective commitment as much as hypothesized.

"[Job satisfaction](#) matters most for that," Lambert said. "If you treat people right, they'll deal with negative [stimuli](#)."

The study also examined the effects of personal characteristics on the types of commitment, and found that race and employee position impacted the normative kind. White employees expressed higher levels of organization [loyalty](#) than nonwhite colleagues, and correction officers expressed less normative commitment than staff employees who didn't have daily contact with inmates.

That finding is relevant, Lambert said, because of the generally hypermasculine environment found in most correctional facilities, often marked by employees with over-the-top macho attitudes and attracting men and whites more than people of

color. Conversely, Hispanics and African-Americans comprise the majority of prison inmates.

Affective and continuance commitment were not significantly associated with any of the personal characteristics studied, which included race, gender, age, position, tenure and educational level.

Lambert said the study can be useful to correctional organizations that choose to take note of its findings.

"There's more than one way to build commitment, and it's important to understand the type you're looking at," he said. "It's not just a matter of hiring the right employee."

Lambert said his study affirms past research showing the benefits of affective commitment. It also highlights the down side of continuance commitment, which tends to lead to employees who stay in their jobs too long not because they like them, but because the cost of leaving is too high.

"Offering benefits may attract people, but it doesn't cause them to bond to the organization and be good employees," he said.

Similarly, normative commitments born of duty and belonging—though preferable to continuance commitments—don't necessarily make for good employees, Lambert said. Affective [commitment](#) can be cultivated by keeping stress low and making jobs interesting and rewarding, he said, noting that some organizations keep turnover low by listening to employees' concerns and rotating front-line workers into other positions so they're not constantly stressed by daily contact with inmates.

While a few organizations currently are doing those things, Lambert said there's no easy solution in a [criminal justice](#) field that often casts employees as cogs in a machine.

"It takes time to do the right thing," he said. "It boils down to being fair and honest and treating people right. So far, it's been rare, but it can be done."

Provided by Wayne State University

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