

CORRECTIONAL OASIS

BECAUSE ALL ROADS GO BACK TO STAFF WELLNESS

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FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Greetings,

In this issue of the Correctional Oasis, we continue our exploration of effective supervision within the correctional environment. We are excited to introduce and dive deep into **"Retention Intelligence"**—a concept and term originated by Stephanie Rawlings. While this framework builds upon the foundational skill sets of **Emotional Intelligence (EI)**, it encompasses a significantly broader sphere of leadership competencies tailored specifically to the unique demands of correctional work.

To bring these concepts to life, we also feature insights from seasoned staff, who describe their real-world experiences with supportive, "retention-intelligent" supervisors.

Two Critical Missions

It is vital to remember: **Correctional Officers serve as the frontline guarantors of both agency safety and humane treatment**, yet they remain a chronically under-resourced population. Because of this, supervisors occupy a critical vantage point and carry out a dual mission:

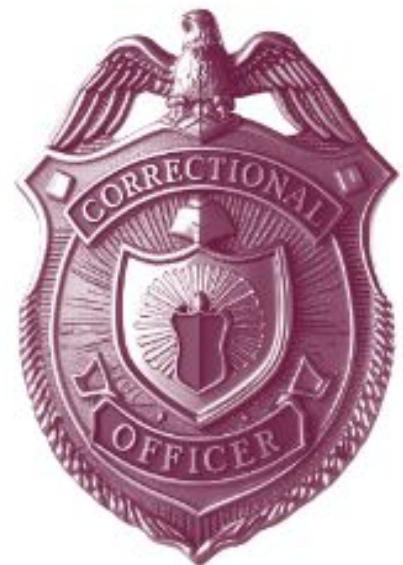
1. Operational Excellence

Maintaining the high standards of safety and humanity required by the agency.

2. Strategic Advocacy

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Caterina Spinaris



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“If you build it, more will stay.”

Retention Intelligence: The Supervisor Advantage

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

As we continue our 2026 focus on building a positive corrections culture through leadership, supervisor support, and daily behaviors, I want to formally introduce a concept I originated about 3 years ago: **Retention Intelligence**.

At first glance, some may assume this is simply a rebranded version of emotional intelligence. It is not. Retention Intelligence goes deeper—and in today's corrections environment, it is anything but a “soft skill.”

Our industry is facing unprecedented staffing shortages and turnover rates. Departments are losing millions of dollars to recruitment, overtime, training cycles, and preventable liability. Remaining staff are losing work-life balance. Risk is increasing. The mission of corrections and rehabilitation is compromised. **In this climate, Retention Intelligence is not optional. It is operationally critical.**

Beyond Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence matters. Communication matters. De-escalation matters. Crucial conversations matter. Leadership development is trending across every industry.

But here is the uncomfortable truth we all know: **The newest, shiniest corporate leadership model cannot simply be dropped into a prison or jail environment, or a probation or parole office, and expected to work.**

Corrections is different. We don't even fit neatly into the broader public safety category. The complexity, scrutiny, danger, hierarchy, and political pressures unique to our systems require leadership training grounded in corrections research, not corporate America.

That is where Retention Intelligence comes in.

The “Big 7” and the Foundation of Retention

If you are familiar with our foundational course, From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™ (CF2F), you may have heard of what we call “**The Big 7.**”

These are seven key psychological dimensions that, when unmet, frustrate positive workplace culture and quietly drive turnover. You won’t necessarily find them listed explicitly on exit interviews. They are not trendy generational demands. They are not “nice-to-haves.”

They are human **needs**. When consistently unmet, they contribute to declining mental health among staff, increasing Corrections Fatigue, disengagement, and even rising suicide rates within our profession.

The Big 7 dimensions are about:

Physical safety

Psychological safety

Trust

Power

Respect

Connection

Meaning

These are not abstract concepts. In 2026, they are as important as a paycheck. CF2F spends significant time defining these dimensions, exploring how they show up in corrections culture, and helping staff identify what they can influence within their sphere of control to strengthen them.

But here is the critical point: Individual effort matters.

Supervisor behavior matters more.

The Supervisor Effect

How supervisors interact with these seven dimensions is the definition of whether they possess Retention Intelligence.

Every shift, supervisors either reinforce or erode:

- A sense of safety
- A climate of trust
- A culture of genuine empowerment and respect
- Feelings of healthy connection and meaningful purpose

These are not abstract morale boosters. They directly impact:

- Turnover rates
- Outcomes of the incarcerated
- Budget stability
- Organizational culture
- Liability exposure
- Staff wellness

Supervisors sit at the pressure point of the entire system—caught between frontline staff and shifting administrative directives, political realities, public scrutiny, and operational demands. They manage performance, stress, conflict, emotions, safety, and compliance simultaneously.

They supervise the population.
They manage staff stress and morale.
They absorb administrative decisions.
They navigate changing priorities.

It is no surprise we find ourselves where we are today.

And yet, **for decades, we have relied on management of the incarcerated as the informal “leadership apprenticeship program” for correctional supervisors.** We promote based on tactical excellence and hope leadership ability develops along the way.

Hope is not a strategy.

The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™

We need supervisor development built on research conducted **inside corrections culture.**

We need training that acknowledges:

- The psychological weight of the job
- The complexity of the chain of command
- The chronic exposure to trauma
- The cumulative fatigue
- The operational realities unique to secure facilities

At Desert Waters, we have spent many years listening, researching, and engaging with dozens of corrections systems nationwide. When we ask what most impacts the mission of corrections, the answer consistently circles back to supervisor support.

That is why 2026 is the “Year of the Supervisor” for our agency.

Yes, we continue to provide high-quality training for staff wellness, families, and peer support teams. But the depth and sustainability of impact from all other programming ultimately hinge on one variable: Supervisor behavior.

Retention Intelligence must become a hard skill—invested in system wide.

The Supportive Corrections Supervisor™ is not about lowering standards or avoiding accountability. It is about **leading in a way that protects the mission by protecting the people who carry it out.**

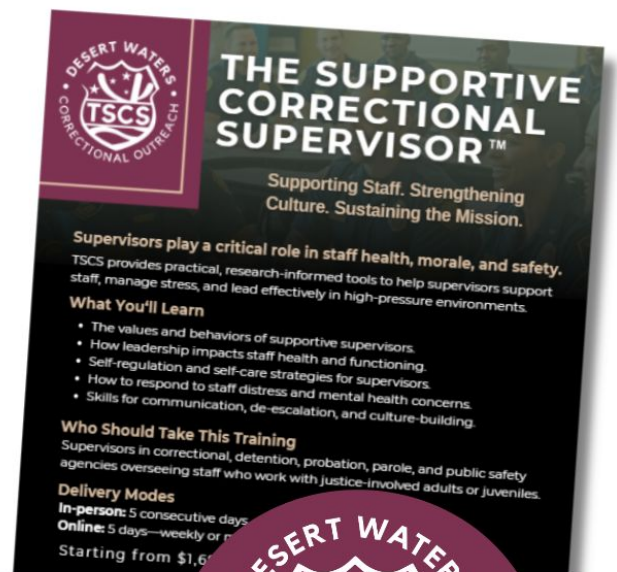
A Call Forward

Corrections culture will not change through slogans, one-time trainings, or borrowed corporate frameworks. It will change when we **intentionally equip supervisors with the awareness, tools, and support to meet the fundamental human needs of their staff** within the realities of this profession.

Retention Intelligence is not a trend.
It is not a soft skill.
It is not optional in 2026.
It is the new IQ for corrections leadership.

Desert Waters has heard the need.
We are here.
Let us help.

Contact us about our direct delivery online or in person of our 16-hour course **From Corrections Fatigue to Fulfillment™** (Administrator & Supervisor version) and the 40-hour, in-depth course **The Supportive Correctional Supervisor™**.



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Course Topics: Corrections Work Realities | When Work Comes Home | What Loved Ones May Face at Work | Help for the Family | Basics of Self-Care | Family Scenarios

For Staff (CFW-S) 6-hour course

Designed for new and seasoned correctional employees, this course addresses how corrections work can affect family life and relationships. Participants learn strategies to manage work-to-home stress, support their families, and maintain emotional closeness.

Course Topics: When Family Members Enter Our Corrections World | Work-to-Home Stressors | Family Impact of Job Requirements | Help for Families | Understanding Staff Behavioral Changes | Family Care Practices



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The Anatomy of Supportive Leadership

Source Data: Correctional Employee Testimonials & Feedback

The following statements were gathered from seasoned correctional staff in response to the question: **“How would you describe your experience with a supportive supervisor?”** These insights are shared here with their permission.

These statements are categorized into five key pillars of supportive leadership:

- 1. Empowerment and Autonomy**
- 2. Communication and Active Listening**
- 3. Empathy and Personal Connection**
- 4. Professional Development and Accountability**
- 5. Integrity and Team Collaboration**

Executive Summary

The feedback provided below by staff highlights a clear shift away from traditional “command and control” management toward **supportive, relationally-based leadership**. Employees do not just want a manager; they want—and, in fact, need—a **mentor** who balances **high accountability** with **deep empathy**.

Key Findings

The Trust Loop

Trust is described as a reciprocal relationship: when a supervisor trusts an employee's expertise, the employee feels confident and empowered to take initiative and grow.

Person-Centric Communication

Support is defined by “checking in” rather than “checking up.” Simple gestures, like asking about a family member or remembering a past conversation, are seen as high-value leadership traits.

Psychological Safety

A major theme is the “ability to fail.” Supportive leaders create an environment where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than grounds for punishment.

Leading from the Trenches

Respect is earned when supervisors are willing to “roll up their sleeves” and work alongside their team, regardless of rank or title.

Impact on Productivity

The data suggest that supportive leadership **directly reduces work-related dread and stress** while **increasing the motivation to “work harder”** to ensure **mutual success for both supervisor and employee**. This creates a **strategic “win-win” for the department**.

1. Empowerment and Autonomy

Focuses on trusting employees to make decisions, take risks, and grow through initiative.

What Staff Are Saying:

My current supervisor is extremely supportive. Her habit of empowering her people to work on their own and take initiative is fantastic. She is not a micromanager, but is appreciative of all work that is done and demonstrates that on a consistent basis. The effect that it has is to make me want to work harder and do a better job of my job in order to make us both look good.

They trusted me so that I could trust myself, allowing me to grow. When onboarding is thoughtful and methodical, trust comes easily.

I had a Director that was a true servant leader that entrusted and supported the expertise of his divisional directors to fulfill their duties and responsibilities.

Allowed me to make decisions on my own. Including the ability to fail. It gave me the power to make decisions.

2. Communication and Active Listening

Focuses on the quality of dialogue, being heard, and the transparency of information.

What Staff Are Saying:

A supportive supervisor listened to me. Could not always provide what I requested, but would explain why he could not provide something.

Listened and treated me like I mattered and was part of the team. It helped me realize none of us is as smart as all of us and it's about building relationship and trust.

The best supervisors I've had were great listeners, empathetic, and remembered details, things we've discussed in the past. Days/weeks later they circle back and ask about something we discussed.

Trusted me and supported me by being authentic and transparent.

Open, talkative and never impose his will.

The supportive supervisors will listen to your ideas and find ways to help your ideas come to life by sharing experience and giving support.

I've had a very supportive supervisor who would be open to different perspectives without letting their ego affect making the best decision for all parties involved.

3. Empathy and Personal Connection

Focuses on seeing the employee as a whole human being, showing care, and providing emotional support.

What Staff Are Saying:

She would ALWAYS come in and simply ASK how are you doing? How is your day going? How is your family? Do you need anything for me to do to help you?

Knowledgeable. Knowledge is imperative in this field which creates trust and great role modeling. Caring, this is imperative if I did not feel cared for I would not have survived my 25ish years.

It made me not dread going to work. It lessened my stress level. I feel like my back was covered on the job.

The most supportive supervisor I've had talked to me like a human being and treated me with value for my input and ability.

Empathy - for those that have it it's natural; others have NO clue what it is.

A most helpful Supervisor I've had was consistent and knowledgeable in all his "shop-talk", but knew the importance of sometimes just talking about life outside of DOC matters.

For me, one of the most supportive supervisors I ever had was kind, had a great sense of humor.

4. Professional Development and Accountability

Focuses on growth, honest feedback, mentorship, and maintaining high standards.

What Staff Are Saying:

They believe in you, encourage you...usually more than you believe in yourself. They open opportunities for you to explore and expand. Provided training and education to meet the goal with success.

He was honest to a fault. He wasn't emotional when making decisions, he held himself and everyone who worked for him accountable.

Shared things that made me better even if it meant that I could be competitive with them at a supervisor level.

Also pointed out to me areas where I missed an opportunity or could grow from. Those are lessons I have always kept with me.

Educated supervisors that understand that the essence of leading is trust and building sound relations is what really matters.

Made it a point to compliment the impact my work had on others and/or the project. I felt valued.

He could have had hard conversations without making you feel small and disposable.

5. Integrity and Team Collaboration

Focuses on fairness, "rolling up sleeves," and breaking down barriers to work as one unit.

What Staff Are Saying:

Fair and consistent.

They authentically cared about the work we were doing and never hesitated to stand beside any employee (above or below them in rank) to roll up their sleeves and get the work done! Truly a team player and led by example...with a servant leadership style!

He eliminated all silos between each of the divisions which improved communication, morale and efficiency.

They were fair and consistent which allowed everyone to know that regardless of who you are, if you are in the right that will be supported, but if you are in the wrong it will be addressed.

Encouraged me to provide my input/ideas, and gave me credit for my contributions. Took a team approach.

Not threatened by new/different suggestions about how to do something...respecting that they may not have the only or even best idea!

He minimized power imbalance and fostered an environment of collaboration.

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Peer Support Perspectives

By Stephanie Rawlings, MSc

Q:

What are the signs of compassion fatigue in peer support team members—or even in myself?

A:

This is a very important question, and one that every peer support team should be talking about openly and often.

The inescapable fact is that if you do this work long enough, you'll realize that compassion fatigue is a normal occurrence. Not a failure. Not a weakness. A normal occupational reality of caring for people who are carrying heavy loads.

Listening to coworkers vent and process their personal struggles, professional frustrations, and sometimes significant trauma can be a heavy burden to carry, especially if you are naturally empathetic. Many peer supporters are the very people who feel deeply, care deeply, and show up consistently for others. That is a strength. But it also requires intentional maintenance.

Because of that, teams need to build support structures and provide awareness training regularly. Compassion fatigue should not be a surprise topic that only surfaces when someone is already overwhelmed.

What Does Compassion Fatigue Look Like?

Each team member may experience compassion fatigue differently. There is no single checklist that applies to everyone. That's why proactive conversation matters.

Common signs can include:

- Feeling annoyed at issues that normally wouldn't bother you
- Indifference during a peer support interaction
- Agitation or impatience while listening
- Emotional numbness
- Withdrawing or isolating from the team
- Being short with coworkers or family
- Dreading peer support calls
- Feeling unusually exhausted after interactions

One of the most concerning aspects of compassion fatigue is that **it doesn't just affect the team member—it can impact the peer support recipient.** If you are feeling irritated, detached, or overwhelmed during an interaction, that energy can shift the outcome. It may reduce trust, credibility, and ultimately the willingness of staff to use the team in the future.

That's why recognizing the signs early is so important.

Normalize It. Plan for It.

Compassion fatigue should be built into your team planning—not treated as an exception.

When training or adding new members to the team, educate them on what compassion fatigue is and then ask them to create a personal plan for what they will do if they experience it. Who will they call? How will they signal they need a break? What boundaries will they reinforce?

Have team members share a couple of signs others may notice if they are struggling—withdrawn behavior, isolation, agitation, irritability, being short with people. Giving teammates permission to gently say, “Hey, I’ve noticed you seem overwhelmed —do you need a breather?” creates psychological safety.

And that safety is critical.

Individual team members should be able to recognize signs in themselves and freely and comfortably ask team members or leads for support—or a temporary break—without fear that their reputation as a “good” peer supporter will be damaged. In fact, the opposite is true. The most effective peer supporters are those who understand their limits and respect them.

Build Structural Support into the Team

Compassion fatigue is not solved by telling people to “practice self-care.” It requires structure.

Consider:

- Developing rotations for peer support coverage so natural breaks are built into the team structure.
- Ensuring your team is adequately staffed to support the size of your agency.
- Holding regular team meetings with time to debrief difficult interactions (without violating confidentiality).
- Creating intentional team-building opportunities to strengthen the social health of the team.

Strong team cohesion acts as a buffer. When peer supporters feel supported by each other, they are more resilient in supporting others.

A Final Thought

If you are reading this and wondering whether you might be experiencing compassion fatigue, pause and reflect honestly. Irritation, numbness, and emotional exhaustion are signals, not character flaws.

Peer support work matters deeply. But so does the wellness of the people doing it. Taking a break, asking for help, or rotating coverage doesn't diminish your commitment. It protects it. Healthy peer supporters build healthy teams. And healthy teams build trust across the agency.

That's worth protecting.

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Peer Supporter Training™



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98th President

American Correctional Association

Kajayla Hill

Corporal

Arkansas Department of Corrections

QUOTE

of the month

“Our environment depends upon our personal reaction to circumstances.

‘Circumstances over which I have no control’ is a perfectly true phrase, but it must never be made to mean that we cannot control ourselves in those circumstances.”

-Oswald Chamber



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Mission

Improving the wellbeing of corrections and other public safety professionals through training, consulting, and other essential resources to foster resilience, mental health, and overall wellness in these challenging professions.

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Desert Waters Correctional Outreach is a non-profit corporation which helps correctional and other public safety agencies counter Corrections Fatigue in their staff by cultivating a healthier workplace climate and a more engaged workforce through targeted skill-based training and research.

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