



Case Study: THE CORRECTIONAL SERGEANT'S DILEMMA

Correctional Sergeant Craig Rick was a seasoned veteran of the department of corrections. He had begun his career shortly after his discharge from the military. After spending his first ten years on the "line" and in various prisons as a correctional officer, he was promoted. Gone were the days of working back-to-back shifts as an officer and being forced to take overtime when other officers phoned in sick. His family was feeling the strain of him working as an officer, so he looked forward to the days when his shift schedule was more regular and predictable.

Sergeant Rick began his supervisory career on nights at the old Sampson Correctional Institution (SCI). SCI was one of the older prisons in the department of corrections. Sergeant Rick knew he was going to have to work nights for the first few years, given that he was a new sergeant in the institution. He didn't mind this; he was glad that he was not going to have to experience any more double shifts, and the routine was very predictable. What he didn't know was what the expectations of officers were on how he was to supervise them and what expectations his boss, the lieutenant, had for him as a supervisor.

In his first week on the job, he realized the difficulty of being a sergeant. He knew some of the officers from other prisons during his career as an officer. Some of these officers never got promoted and resented the fact that he got promoted, even though he had ten years of line experience in various prisons within the department. There were other officers who had fewer than five years as a correctional officer but were still promoted. Those officers caught more grief than other sergeants with more experience. The problem for the new sergeant was how to supervise someone he considered to be a friend.

This question became an issue for Sergeant Rick when he had to tell one of his close friends, Officer Johnson, that he could not have a day off outside the regular sequence of days off for officers. He tried to explain to his friend that the policy was there for a reason; if Rick violated it for Johnson, he opened himself up to criticisms of showing favoritism and would "catch shit" from his boss, Lieutenant Murray, with whom he'd had a difficult relationship in the short time he had been a sergeant. "But Craig, my kid is playing in the state baseball championship. How do I explain it to him that I can't make the game?" Sergeant Rick said if he could get someone to switch days with him, then there would be no problem. The fact was, however, that Officer Johnson had already made numerous requests to other officers for a switch in days off, even to the point of sweetening the pot by offering to pay \$100 extra to the officer who switched with him.

Despite all his attempts, no one was going to switch with him, so his final appeal rested with Sergeant Rick. For Sergeant Rick, the decision was tough, but he stood his ground, not allowing Johnson to take the day off. When Officer Johnson did not show up for work, it was assumed that he had taken a sick day, but department policy required that a visit be made to the homes of officers who had "abused" the sick leave policy. Johnson was categorized as a sick leave abuser based on his previous year's usage of sick leave. If he was not home during the visit, he faced disciplinary charges for not reporting to work and for filing a fraudulent sick leave request form.

Sergeant Rick knew that if he went to the officer's home he would not be there. What should he do? He empathized with the officer because he had experienced similar issues with his children when they were growing up. However, Rick knew that his integrity and ability to effectively supervise all officers was being called into question. He also knew that other officers were watching how he was going to react in this situation; his boss, Lieutenant Murray, could be brought into the situation. As Rick expected, Officer Johnson was not at home when he visited, so when he did show up for work on his next working day, Sergeant Rick confronted him.

He informed Johnson that he was going to recommend that disciplinary action be taken against him by Lieutenant Murray. The officer, upon hearing the news, was infuriated and filed a union grievance against Sergeant Rick, stating that his actions were to "single" him out and that it was common practice in the prison to give people days off for "special circumstances." The lieutenant got involved in the dispute only as the person who would have to formally react to the allegations and mete out discipline to Johnson if justified. The lieutenant decided in favor of Officer Johnson and recommended no action be taken against him. Sergeant Rick was dismayed by the decision; he approached Murray to determine why his recommendation for discipline of Johnson was overturned. Rick felt he was being undermined by his immediate supervisor. He also felt that he was being tugged by two different loyalties: one to his former officers and one to his new supervisor. The lieutenant ended the matter by stating to him in confidence, "If you knew how to supervise officers you would not have gotten into this trouble. Before you bring this type of bullshit case to me again and it blows up in your face, like this one did, think of the consequences you will pay."

This experience made Sergeant Rick consider whether or not being a supervisor was worth all the

CASE STUDY—continued

hassles. He had spent days documenting how his actions were correct and consistent with departmental policy, only to have it all fall apart when reviewed by the lieutenant. He learned from the experience that keeping a low profile is what needed to be done. Don't rock the boat and don't make the lieutenant look bad. Supervision was about "covering your ass" and not holding line officers accountable.

Sergeant Rick rose to the rank of correctional lieutenant and retired under a cloud after serving twenty years with the department. He never was able to resolve the dilemma of serving two sometimes-competing interests as a correctional supervisor. Other supervisors labeled him as "mushroom Rick." Similar to a mushroom, he wanted to be kept in the dark, especially regarding officer improprieties. This supervision style finally blew up on him when some officers were caught holding "gladiator games" among rival gangs in the prison and betting huge sums of money, all on his watch. An external investigation by the state's

watchdog group for prisons found that mismanagement and poor supervision were at the heart of problems in SCI prison. They recommended that all first-line supervisors be given more training on how to supervise and that accountability standards be implemented. Sergeant Rick's supervisory practices were offered as examples of how not to supervise correctional officers.

CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Was Sergeant Rick wrong in referring the correctional officer for discipline? How could he have handled it differently?
2. What type of training would have assisted Sergeant Rick in his supervision of the officer?
3. Is there such a thing as supervisor burnout? If so, what would you do to address it?

**Think like an Administrator**

There has been an appeal to more objective and performance-based evaluation of employees within criminal justice organizations since 2000. For criminal justice administrators, the task of employee evaluation is wrought with many challenges, especially the evaluation of a difficult employee. As noted in the Work Perspective in this chapter, consistency and fair applications of policies and procedures are critical to effective employee supervision. How does this play out with a difficult employee?

Take the following example of a correctional employee who works in a jail setting. This is an employee who is indifferent to being a correctional officer, transferred to the jail due to poor performance on the road as a deputy sheriff, has had disciplinary problems in the past, and has stated he dislikes working in the jail. As a jail administrator, this employee can be assessed based on his adherence or nonadherence to basic principles of "direct supervision," which is how all employees are evaluated in the jail. Direct supervision is based on the premise that the management of jail prisoners is best when there is an active participation of correctional officers within housing units. It is a management style that promotes greater interaction between the officer and prisoners to make the jail safe and secure. This means interacting with prisoners and being present in and around the inmate population during the shift. This also means getting to know the particulars and nuances of prisoners and being proactive with them. Yet, the officer under