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## WHY DO CRIMINALS DESIST?

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The Michigan-based Center for Strength-Based Strategies has acted as a clearinghouse of strength-based approaches for the justice field. The October 2011 issue of *The IACFP Newsletter* caught our eye as it posed the question, “Why Do Criminals Offend?” In an attempt to provide some strength-based contrast, this subsequent feature turns tables to ask, “Why Do Criminals Go Straight?” It is important to note there is an emerging group in our field who has moved their interests and examination from offense-related factors to desistance-focused issues. One is grounded in a deficit-based, problem-solving paradigm while the other inquiry takes a form that is strength-based and solution-focused. While both seek to reduce or eliminate risk, how one goes about this is truly the “difference that makes a difference.” Much is at stake, not the least to be the future of criminal justice research, policy and programming.



MIKE CLARK

Several interesting points are offered from those concerned with what it takes to “go straight” and how we can assist that process:

**Policy can impede practice.** It’s extremely difficult to motivate offenders by concentrating on eliminating or reducing risk factors. People don’t seek “less risk”

– they seek tangible goods and real-life benefits of desisting from crime. Risk-reduction is attractive to policy makers and the general public, yet it proves cumbersome at the micro-practice level. A sole-focus on only reducing risk-factors is unlikely to promote a full-range of elements needed to go straight. Treatment would be better served to ask “What do offenders want?” rather than ascertaining what they “need” – coming to these conclusions without offender input. We are mindful of the adage, “Stay close to the client’s views of the problems and possible routes to solutions, since it is he or she who will be asked to do the necessary changing.” In a thorough review of desistance theory, Ward and Maruna (2007) caution that simply seeking to increase the well-being of a prisoner or a probationer without regard for his or her level of risk may well result in a happy but dangerous individual. Yet these strength-based authors are just as quick to add that attempting to manage an individual’s risk without concern for increasing opportunities and well-being—that take into account their personal preferences—could lead to punitive practices and a defiant or disengaged person.

**The offender – and the environment they inhabit – are the true engines to change.** Over the past decade, a large volume of clinical research has determined the “zip code” of behavior change resides within and around the

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offender—not emanating from our treatment models (Duncan, Miller, Wampold, & Hubble, 2010). Models are important. They are the crucible-container, that is, they hold what we do, giving form and organization to what we deliver. They are influential if we believe in them—and more importantly—if we can get the offender to believe in them as well. Yet new meta-analyses find we over-emphasize the importance of our models while de-emphasizing or ignoring the offender’s contribution to change. Numerous studies find it’s the offender that “Works” and their contribution is large enough for a national call to have been made to rephrase “What Works?” to “Who Works?”

Treatment models have no power “on the shelf” – that is, they have no power in-and-of themselves that the offender does not imbue with power. Yet treatment models are not the problem—the problem is valuing our views over the views of those we work with. We need to access the offender and better gather and employ their views to find out what it might take for them to “go straight.” We had 5 decades of looking at crime from our point of view. A different and possibly a more helpful perspective would be to look at motivation to change from the offenders’ point of view. Consider an assignment to help a group of

electricians in organizing and improving their work at a large industrial job site. Common sense would dictate that one start with interviewing the electricians and valuing what they report and what ideas they proffer. Would not the same sensibilities prevail if we were speaking about how to help offenders improve?

**Desistance and “going straight” generally occurs away from the criminal justice professional.** Stephen Farrall, a UK criminologist has turned in one of the largest studies of probation services to date. Notable about Farrall’s (2002) study was a large sample size and the fact that rather than the customary one-sided perspective from the agency and/or officer’s viewpoint, the probationer’s perspectives were also sought and included in this study. How troubling for our field that the inclusion of probationer’s/parolee’s perspectives could be thought of as “innovative.” Farrall (2002) made the case that probationers or parolees only spend approximately half of 1% of their life with their supervising officers or treatment providers. With so low a figure, it’s not difficult to see that the “venue of change” does not reside in what the courts or professional extend to the offender. Farrall (2002) concluded that when people under court supervision were able to desist from crime and “go straight” it had much more to do with their own actions and their own circumstances rather than a result of the officer’s actions. Desistance-focused approaches are better-suited to help staff engage offenders and appreciate the importance of what goes on outside of their buildings.

**Relationships are the door – motivation is the key.** Engagement and positive relationships improve the odds. Over a thousand outcome studies have noted the importance of establishing a working alliance (Duncan, et al., 2010). A good relationship doesn’t ensure positive outcomes but success is near-impossible without it. Change is dependant on trust; otherwise no skills or lessons will be absorbed. While this repeated finding is not “news” to our field, it’s frustrating to find the amount of programming that can be implemented without a thought to alliance-building. Many believe responsivity, almost an afterthought or seemingly relegated to the back seat of the Risk, Need, and Responsivity (RNR) principles, will eventually catapult to the front for its influence towards positive outcomes.

The interest and spread of Motivational Interviewing across the corrections world (facilities, parole, probation)

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# IACFP

## IN CASE PEOPLE ASK

The International Association for Correctional  
& Forensic Psychology  
provides a forum for exchanging ideas, technology,  
and best practices among correctional  
mental health professionals and others  
in the international criminal and  
juvenile justice communities.

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raise hope that a sensibility has returned to our field (Clark, 2005). Many professionals realize that in order for programs to work and objectives to be reached, there has to be “buy in.” It would seem that our fields’ ability to rise above mediocrity would be found in the question, “To what extent can we empower versus compel?” To what extent can we encourage and enable (a) active acceptance, and (b) willing participation? There is a greater likelihood that increasing legitimate opportunities has more merit for changing offending behavior than increasing threat. People will change just as much for what they want to head towards as for what they want to avoid. Criminal justice has become so focused on lowering risk and increasing safety that it overlooks a basic truth, offenders want a better life—not merely a less harmful one.

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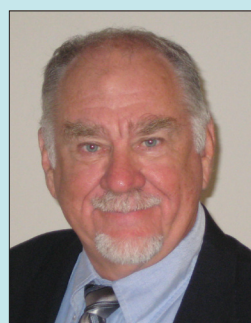
## ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

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“It ain’t what we don’t know that hurts; it’s what we believe to be true that ain’t so.”

—Will Rogers

Well, here we are at the beginning of another year of federal, state, and county corrections administrators, prison and jail officials, and correctional front line staff, wondering what they’ll be facing as a year of continuing budget cuts and resource reductions unfolds. Those planning



RICHARD ALTHOUSE

corrections-focused conferences and conventions are wondering what topics and speakers will attract the most corrections professionals, and will contribute most to their fields of interest. On the one hand, given that the economics of the rush to incarcerate has facilitated increased interest in the rush to

release, reentry programming, risk assessments to help decide who to release that pose minimal risk to public safety, and community assistance and monitoring programs, are likely hot topics. On the other, I’m wondering if anyone will talk much about how to think about and what to do with the elephants in the room. Elephants, as we know, can be very large and hard to move around if they don’t want to be. So what are these elephants? Here are a few.

**Elephant # 1: Incarceration is an effective and necessary crime management tool. Alternatively, tough on crime is the same as smart on crime.**

Any reasonably informed corrections professional knows that for years, criminology research has shown that state and federal legislation has resulted in the United States having the world’s highest incarceration and recidivism rates despite average crime rates when compared with those of other industrialized countries, that the threat

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