

People Can Change and We Can Make a Difference

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I AM GRATEFUL to federal probation and pretrial services for embracing the idea that “people can change and we can make a difference,” which is enshrined in “The Charter for Excellence,” that serves as the system’s vision statement.¹ These simple but elegant words give voice to the underlying philosophy of the vast majority of federal probation and pretrial services officers I have met during my career in the federal judiciary.

What makes this philosophy or vision so noteworthy is that it is no longer popular, or even defensible, in the eyes of many of our fellow citizens and political leaders. For many in our country, cynicism has descended into the practice of criminal justice, as reflected in the stirring words of Robert Martinson in 1974 that “nothing works” in the rehabilitation of criminals.²

If we follow “nothing works” to its logical conclusion, we are likely to end up with a highly punitive system costing society billions of dollars for prisons and jails and imposing long criminal sentences with little chance of relief for offenders. Has anyone noticed our overcrowded prisons and state budgets that devote more money to prison construction and maintenance than they do to higher education?

The dedicated professionals who lead federal probation and pretrial services believe that rehabilitation is still possible; they are not cynical and are willing to experiment with programs and policies to prove it. The pages of this journal are filled with wonderful examples

of system improvement projects that work. We have seen chiefs and their colleagues develop effective initiatives in cognitive re-structuring, employment preparation, education, reentry training, and so much more. The programs are premised on the hopeful approach that “people can change and we can make a difference.” Program managers are dedicated, caring professionals with very high levels of integrity and a strong commitment to the public service.

For the past 20 years, I have had the great pleasure and honor of directing the Federal Judicial Center’s Leadership Development Program (LDP) for Federal Probation and Pretrial Services. Over 800 officers, specialists, and managers from almost every federal district have completed the program. Several have been promoted to leadership positions within the system.

One of the requirements of the Leadership Development Program is for each participant to complete an in-district project, where they take a program, policy, or product in their district and seek to improve it. In short, we ask the participant to become a change agent in the system. Time after time, the participants delight and astound us with the daring projects they pursue. Consider representative projects for the LDP XII Class 2013-2015:

- Evaluation of a Veterans’ Treatment Program
- Evaluation of Financial Literacy and Employment Programs
- Development of an Intervention Program for Female Offenders
- Development of a Family Orientation Program for Offenders
- Expansion of the District’s Reentry Program in the Pretrial and Presentence Stages

- Development of a Sex Offender Management Team
- Implementation of a Rating System for Offenders

The completed district improvement projects have led to increased efficiencies in program administration and even, in some cases, in cost savings to the districts. The experience also changes the participants, as they become more familiar with the difficulties of translating vision into reality.

We also ask each Leadership Development participant to complete a “temporary tour of duty” (TDY) in an office other than their own for a period of 5-10 working days, to participate in the work of that office, and to observe the multitude of leadership approaches and styles in the public and private sectors. Some of the recent TDYs completed include:

- Nebraska State Senator Colby Coash’s Office (Lincoln, NE)
- Cleveland High School (Rio Rancho, NM)
- Veterans’ Health Administration System (St. Louis, MO)
- Missouri Attorney General’s Office (Jefferson City, MO)
- U.S. Coast Guard Maritime & Security Team (Atlanta, GA)
- Environmental Protection Agency—Criminal Investigation Division (Washington, DC)
- Boys & Girls Club (Porter County, IN)
- The Pew Charitable Trust (Washington, DC)
- North Carolina Governor’s Office (Raleigh, NC)

In their TDY placements, the leadership development participants glean new ideas about the use of technology for leadership purposes, powerful approaches to employee motivation, and creative budgeting options.

¹ “The Charter for Excellence” was developed at the 2000 and 2002 National Chiefs Conferences.

² Robert Martinson. “What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform.” *Public Interest* 35 (Spring 1974).

They complete reports emphasizing the ideas that can be reasonably successful in probation and pretrial, and those that will not work.

So the federal probation and pretrial services system has demonstrated a capacity to bring about change, not only in its clients—the offenders—but in its own staff. The leadership development participants have completed the substantial amount of program work—including conducting research and writing papers—in addition to their ongoing job responsibilities. I am in awe of their accomplishments.

Probation and pretrial services officers, managers, and specialists have demonstrated a belief in lifelong learning and in the transformational power of professional development.

They have modelled the idea of the “reflective practitioner” described many years ago by Edgar Schon in his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, management problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the

problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose.³

By choosing to confront Schon’s “messy, confusing problem,” the probation and pretrial services chiefs and their colleagues have illuminated for the system areas of tremendous opportunity for the successful rehabilitation of offenders and for the attainment of justice in our society.

I applaud federal probation and pretrial services for its belief that “people can change and we can make a difference,” applied not only to the offenders with whom they work, but also to their own professional growth and development.

³ Edgar Schon. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. SF: Jossey-Bass, 1987, p. 3.