



Unit Management

During the 1970s, the U.S. Bureau of **Prisons** (BOP) revolutionized **prison** administration by developing the practice known as *unit management*. Unit **management** has at its heart the notion that a decentralized organization is better able than a centralized one to respond quickly to changes in the environment. At the time, the BOP had three primary goals: to reduce tension and violence in many institutions, to protect weaker inmates who were vulnerable to more predatory inmates, and to deal with substance abusers.

Under the auspices of the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act of 1966 (NARA), the BOP opened many units to treat and provide programs for inmates with a history of heroin abuse. When many of these began to prove to be successful, the units were broadened to include inmates not sentenced under NARA. Thus, beginning around 1970, various institutions began to implement programs that followed the pattern of the NARA units. From that beginning, the subsequent development of unit **management** has proven to be one of the more successful policy implementation stories in the history of corrections. It is a concept that has changed corrections (Houston, 1999; Levinson, 1999).

UNIT MANAGEMENT DEFINED

There may be as many definitions of unit **management** as there are agencies that have implemented it. However, most definitions speak to the tasks of unit **management** rather than provide any explicit descriptions (see, e.g., Pierson, 1991; Webster, 1991). According to the Bureau of **Prisons**, a *unit* is a small, self-contained, inmate living and staff office area that operates semiautonomously within the larger institution. The essential components of a unit are as follows:

- A small number of inmates (50–120) who are permanently assigned together
- A multidisciplinary staff (unit manager, case manager(s), correctional counselor(s), full or part-time psychologist, clerk-typist, and correctional officers) whose offices are located within or adjacent to the inmate housing unit and are permanently assigned to work with the inmates of that unit
- A unit manager who has administrative authority and supervisory responsibility for the unit staff
- A unit staff that has administrative authority for all within-unit aspects of inmate living and programming
- Inmates who are assigned to a unit because of age, prior record, specific behavior typologies, need for a specific type of correctional program (such as drug abuse counseling), or random assignment

According to Levinson (1999), the following guidelines are critical to a unit's success: An effective unit must have the support of top **management**; there must be a unit plan; the unit manager must be on the same level as other department heads on the organization chart; and the unit manager must have administrative and supervisory authority over staff working in the unit. As Levinson points out, the primary objective of correctional **management** is to decrease the likelihood of disturbances. Unit **management** is the most effective tool to accomplish that objective. The key to a tranquil institution is unit staff's ability to supervise inmates effectively and to play the primary role in inmate classification and reclassification.

ADVANTAGES

There are many advantages to unit **management**. It allows unit staff to take as much responsibility as they wish or are able to handle. It makes staff achievements visible, enabling the unit manager to recognize subordinates' good work. Further, the work itself is considered more satisfying than that associated with other

kinds of **management** strategies. Shared decision making and participation in the policy process are also advantages. In short, staff feel that they are involved in the total workings of the institution. In addition, surveillance of inmates is increased due to staff being in the unit from 8:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. on weekdays and on weekend day shift in addition to regular unit officers, and inmates have easier access to staff.

The multidisciplinary nature of unit **management** improves communication between staff and inmates and allows for discussion during staff decision making regarding both classification and organizational issues. According to a 1975 BOP report, other advantages include the following:

- Unit **management** divides the inmate population into small, well-defined, and manageable groups whose members develop a common identity and close association with each other and with their unit staff.
- Unit **management** increases the frequency of contacts between staff and inmates and thus the intensity of their relationships, resulting in (1) better communication and understanding between individuals; (2) more individualized classification and program planning; (3) more valuable program reviews and program adjustments; (4) better observation of inmates, enabling early detection of problems before they reach critical proportions; (5) development of common goals that encourage positive unit cohesiveness; and (6) generally a more positive living and working environment for inmates and staff.
- Decisions are made by the unit staff who are closely associated with the inmates, which increases the quality and swiftness of decision making.
- Program flexibility is increased because staff can develop special areas of emphasis to meet the needs of the inmates in each unit, and programs in a unit may be changed without affecting the total institution.

DISADVANTAGES

Unit **management** has at least three disadvantages that may account for the hesitancy to adopt this strategy that some states and institutions have shown:

- Unit **management** is expensive, at least in the short term. Some agencies perceive the need to increase staffing at the unit level as an expense they do not wish to bear. However, once unit **management** is implemented, substantial savings are realized through reductions in vandalism and savings on overtime, to name just two positive outcomes.
- Implementing unit **management** takes time and resources. It is not an idea that an administrator can implement simply by writing a memorandum or through wishful thinking.
- Unit **management** threatens the established order. Many correctional institution executives and supervisors do not want their position of authority challenged or changed, and they view unit **management** as a threat to their current status.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Reasons for the success of unit **management** can be found in the literature on business and public **management**. Attempts to improve the performance of organizations and workers can be traced to the movement known as *scientific management*, originated by Frederick Taylor (1960 [1947]). Taylor's approach, which was intended to improve the performance of workers, was basically a "shop-level" orientation. That is, Taylor believed that scientific **management** required a change in thinking on the part of workers, who needed to pay attention to details in order to bring "science and the workman together." Taylor's contribution was that he was able to use scientific methods to improve the performance of the average worker.

Scientific **management** gave way to the *classical school of management*, in which the focus changed from the shop to the structure of the organization. Henri Fayol (1984) made the most important contribution to this school of thinking when he identified his general principles of **management**:

- Division of work
- Authority and responsibility
- Discipline
- Unity of command
- Subordination of individual interests to the general interests

- Remuneration of personnel
- Centralization
- Scalar chain (chain of command)
- Order
- Equity
- Stability of tenure for personnel
- Initiative
- Esprit de corps

Shortly after World War II, the *human relations school of management* arose, which focused on concern for the people in the organization. In the 1950s, the classical school and the human relations school came together to forge an approach to **management** that recognized both the need for structure and a concern for people. Decentralization and unit **management** are the culmination of the joining of these two approaches.

Another innovation that prepared the way for unit **management** was the BOP's development and implementation of the use of treatment teams. Paul Keve (1991) notes that the Bureau of **Prisons** was slow in developing anything other than rudimentary classification procedures, and it was not until the early 1930s that the classification committee was developed. In the early 1960s, the BOP, based on the research of Glaser (1964), created a new position termed *correctional counselor*; the correctional counselor was assigned to a team that included a case manager, a teacher, and a psychologist (if available). This was an exciting and groundbreaking innovation in that it pushed decision making down to the lowest possible level, paving the way for unit **management**.

The beginnings of correctional unit **management** can be found at the National Training School for Boys in Washington, D.C., and FCI Englewood, Colorado, where each boy was assigned to a certain living unit and to work with a specific team made up of a case manager and a psychologist. Both efforts were deemed to be successful, but with a change in administration, the idea was dropped. Finally, with the opening of the Kennedy Youth Center at Morgantown, West Virginia, in 1969, an entire institution was devoted to unit **management**. In the meantime, the NARA units were proving to be successful, and gradually more and more institutions were converted to unit **management**, with the penitentiaries being the last to be converted.

As the BOP opened new institutions, they were designed with unit **management** in mind, and older institutions were retrofitted to accommodate unit **management**. In nearly all instances, unit staff offices were located in the unit, along with the unit secretary. In the meantime, many states were beginning to pay attention to this new approach to managing **prisons**. The concept grew slowly at first, but it eventually gained speed, and by 1996, 27 U.S. states reported in a survey that they had implemented unit **management** in some, if not all, institutions (Houston, 1999). Unit **management** has also gained prominence abroad, and to date Australia, Denmark, Germany, and South Africa have implemented unit **management**, in addition to the private corrections companies of Security Group 4 and Corrections Corporation of America.

UNIT MANAGEMENT IS EFFECTIVE PRISON MANAGEMENT

Rensis Likert (1967) found that participants in his study said they would like to work for organizations with the following three characteristics: supportive relationships, group decision making and group methods of supervision, and high performance goals.

Supportive Relationships

In **prison management**, the elements of danger and authority cause staff to look to each other for support on the job, and working in proximity to one another brings mutual interests to light. Some unit managers are very good at nurturing these relationships through staff meetings and other formal unit meetings. Unit **management** is also an excellent vehicle for resolving conflict among staff and for bringing group pressure to bear on any staff members who may not be carrying a full share of the workload. However, the need for such pressure is rare.

Group Decision Making and Group Methods of Supervision

As relatively small, autonomous entities, units are excellent vehicles for shared decision making. The treatment team makes case **management** decisions on an almost daily basis, and unit staff make some organizational decisions as well. All staff should contribute to deliberations, and a unit **management** approach provides the vehicle for effective group decision making.

High Performance Goals

Unit staff members constitute a preexisting work group that naturally focuses on problems and the quality of service in the unit. All the unit manager has to do is listen. The power of unit staff to accomplish tasks within the unit is so great that with effective leadership, they automatically establish high performance goals and relentlessly pursue those goals.

THE SUCCESS OF UNIT MANAGEMENT

The primary advantage of unit **management** is that it enables staff members to follow each inmate closely, as they physically see him or her on a daily basis and interact on a more equal level as individual human beings. In addition, decisions are made on the unit, inmates have a say in many of those decisions, and there is an added element of flexibility in programming. Thus a proactive approach has, in many instances, brought institutions with formerly unruly and mutinous inmates under control. Roy Gerard (1991) has developed what he calls the "Ten Commandments of Unit **Management**," which closely follow the essential components listed previously. The most important of these "commandments" is the one that directs the warden to place the unit manager on the same level as other department heads on the organization chart. If the warden does so, Gerard asserts, the institution will be able to implement unit **management** successfully.

Much of the research on unit **management** has been somewhat discreet, but clearly unit **management** is an effective strategy through which to manage a **prison**. Initially, the Bureau of **Prisons** conducted many research projects that found that unit **management** is successful in controlling the behavior of inmates and in attending to issues that staff find important. In one of the earliest inquiries into the effectiveness of unit **management**, Rowe et al. (1977) found that inmate assaults on other inmates in intermediate adult BOP institutions decreased after implementation of unit **management**. On the other hand, assault rates appeared to increase in institutions where unit **management** was used in units housing younger, more violent offenders. The researchers surmised that assaults are more likely to be reported or observed in functional units because there is better surveillance and better inmate-staff rapport.

Another indication of institutional tension is overtime pay, not only during disturbances but also during more tranquil periods. Overtime pay and abuse of sick days can also be used as an indicator of staff morale. Rowe and his colleagues found that young adult institutions showed a significant reduction in overtime pay after unit **management** was implemented. In intermediate adult institutions, when the relationship of unit **management** to overtime pay was adjusted for the impact of density, the relationship was reduced to near zero. Overall, overtime pay decreased from \$11.55 per 100 inmate-man days before unit **management** to \$2.21 per 100 inmate-man days after bureauwide implementation of unit **management**.

Further research conducted by the BOP using Rudolf Moos's Correctional Institutions Environment Scale found that unit **management** was successful. For example, at the FCI Milan, Michigan, the proportion of staff who felt they were involved in decision making rose from 31% to 42%. The proportion of staff who perceived increased order rose from 48% to 65%, and the proportion who felt they served as role models for inmates rose from 23% to 37%. Inmates also perceive that unit **management** is a better way to manage an institution. In the FCI Milan study, the proportion of inmates reporting increased staff contact rose from 40% to 67%, and whereas pre-event data indicate that only 26% of inmates believed that staff contact was important, postevent data indicate that 45% stated that staff contact is important. Inmates also reported that living conditions improved under unit

management, and an increased number saw the value of counseling programs. Escapes also declined after the implementation of unit **management**, and at the same time furlough guidelines were liberalized.

To date, however, the most recent and complete evaluation of unit **management** was conducted by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections in 1991. In that study, the central office staff completed interviews and on-site reviews at 20 of the department's 22 institutions. The report concludes that, with few exceptions,

*we have found [unit **management**] to be both an effective and efficient means of addressing the concerns of managing an expanding inmate population, while remaining sensitive to community expectations and the responsibilities we share with our legal system. Since the transition to unit **management**, we have observed a marked improvement in the overall operation of our institutions.*

Overall, the Ohio study found that there was improvement in a variety of areas. Specifically, escapes decreased, inmate accountability increased, noncustody staff became more involved in custody procedures, inmate assaults decreased, and inmate needs were addressed more quickly. Clearly, unit **management** made a difference in Ohio.

A more recent evaluation of unit **management** was conducted in North Carolina's Division of **Prisons** (Houston, 1999). In 1985, North Carolina began to implement unit **management** in several new institutions that were to go online in the next few years. Since that time, about half of the institutions within the state's Division of **Prisons** have implemented unit **management**. Although not all of them conform to the definition of unit **management** as advanced by Gerard (1991) and Levinson (1999), they do have a form of unit **management** that has served the division well. The North Carolina evaluation concluded that the unitized institutions are able to deal effectively with a tougher population, promote a more tranquil institutional environment, and simultaneously promote prisoner program completion.

CONCLUSION

Unit **management** allows **prison** administrators to place more staff in inmate living areas, allows for greater recognition of inmate accomplishments, and encourages increased dialogue between staff and inmates. In a unit **management** system, prisoners feel they are a part of the **management** process, not victims of it, and the result is a workforce that is committed and willing to take additional responsibility. In the end a safer, more tranquil institution is realized, thus better serving taxpayers, staff, and inmates.

—James G. Houston

Further Reading

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Entry Citation:

Houston, James G. "Unit Management." *Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2004. 981-86. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 1 Aug. 2012.



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