



## Leadership Lessons from Hard Core Prisoners

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Early in the start of my career, after some exciting leadership roles, I needed to find deeper meaning in my work. This insight led to me to volunteer and then teach life skills to inmates in medium and maximum security federal penitentiaries. Surprisingly, it was one of the most positive, educational and life changing events.

I learned a number of leadership lessons after walking through the gates of the penitentiary and working with prisoners throughout those years:

### **1. Everyone has a choice.**

There are consequences in life from the choices we make. The consequences of illegal actions can lead to jail time, as these prisoners found out! Everyone does have a choice. Be prepared for the consequences of that choice. Your colleague can choose not to get that report completed on time. Your staff member may choose to not show up at work on time. We can't control others, however, we can endeavour to put the pieces in place for them to choose appropriately. Choices=Consequences.

### **2. Separate the action from the person.**

Some of the prisoners were bad people. Period. That being said, I worked with a number of individuals who had done bad things but who had a core of goodness in them – which sometimes took some time to come out! At work, it's very easy to label people and get tied into bad behaviour. When having a coaching or performance discussion, it's essential to separate the person from the behaviour. You learn to do that working with prisoners!

### **3. People can show up and do their best, regardless of what circumstances are going on around them.**

We often have no control over our work environment. Where we work or live is the way it is. However, we can contribute to the environment and either make it a better place, or a worse place to be. Whether they were big or small, young or old, tattooed or not, many inmates I worked with will be in prison for most of their lives. Yet they could make the best of it. Some volunteered at fixing computers, others took care of stray animals, others learned how to care for elderly inmates. It may sound trite, but regardless of your position, if you try to do your best in that role, you can affect change.

### **4. Changes happen around us that most of us don't have control over.**

While we may not be able to control the changes around us, we can control our reaction to them. It's our reaction to the changes around us that determines how we are going to respond. We can get stuck in "ain't it awful" thinking – and sometimes it is. Eventually, you have to get unstuck and figure out how to work within the system.

### **5. Always be polite and courteous to others.**

Sounds simple right? It's not easy, yet it's one of the most powerful traits as a leader. I noticed while working with prisoners that if you treated them as human beings (albeit who had done bad things), and didn't talk down to them, they were more likely to treat others that way – including their guards! If we treat others with respect and courtesy – and I do know that's hard sometimes in high stress work situations, we can have a smoother work life. In prison, it's not easy to be respectful. In our day to day lives it's not easy either. However, it's worth a try! If prisoners can do it. We can too.