

CSC's Corporate Culture is The Fundamental Problem

George Fraser

As an organization, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) not only fails to correct but, in many cases, actively makes it extremely difficult for correction to occur. Like any large organization, CSC has cultures and sub-cultures that have developed organically when human beings gather and particularly when individuals with common purpose begin working together. The 'Blue Wall' correctional culture dominates all others, because it runs in the veins of this hierarchical bureaucratic organization. The 'Blue Wall' culture has no start and no end – it is endemic and it is in-bred.

From personal experience, observations, and what I have read in watchdog reports, as well as recent published books, it is apparent that CSC's 'Blue Wall' culture is at the heart of everything that is wrong. The 'Blue Wall' culture is the lowest common denominator reason as to why CSC is failing to meet its obligations to federally sentenced prisoners, including its obligations to uphold their human rights.

This is not just my opinion, but also the expert opinion of a retired CSC Deputy Warden with 30 years experience in the trenches. He asserts, "the culture is largely responsible for most of the problems that occur within our prisons!" (Clark, 2017, p. 16). There exists "a culture of collective indifference towards both the prisoners and CSC's stated higher goals" (ibid). 'Goals' is in reference to *Correctional and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA) sections 3(a) and 3(b) mandate, and nothing is going to change until there is a seismic organization shift at the top.

One only has to read the February 2019 *Interim Report – Study on the Human Rights of Federally Sentence Persons* by the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights to understand the depth and scope of the challenges faced by prisoners because CSC is failing to meet its obligations to them. Everything indicates that CSC has been an abject failure to perform their CCRA section 3(a) "safe and humane custody" and section 3(b) "rehabilitation of offenders ... through the provision of programs" objectives.

The following are just some of the issues identified by that Senate Committee on Human Rights Interim Report: inadequate access to health care; inadequate health and dental care; insufficient admission to gradual and structured release; deficient correctional programs, the one-size-fits-all programs are inadequate; poor conditions of confinement; poor access to remedial measures; substandard quantity and quality of food; CSC policies often discriminate against Indigeneity, race, gender, disability, mental health,

ethnicity, religion, age, language, sexual orientation, and gender identity in violation of section 3 of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*; pervasive anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination; Indigenous and Black persons have difficulty accessing culturally relevant programming; poor living conditions; prisoners are being charged exorbitant prices for personal purchases; failure to prepare prisoners for release in a timely manner; no systemic access to palliative care; a static security focused approach to mental health rather than therapeutic interventions; lack of post-secondary educational opportunities represent lost opportunities; as well as failure to recognize international human rights standards related to the Nelson Mandela Rules and the Bangkok Rules.

Key to everything that is wrong can be directly attributed to “an organizational culture that sees ... support and services for prisoners as privileges instead of rights” (RIDR, 2019, p. 22).¹ Therein lies the fundamental premise of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights study, which asserts “the rights of all human beings must be respected, regardless of who they are. A rights based approach to corrections is vital to ensure that our criminal justice system is fair, equal and effective” (ibid, p. 10).

The Correctional Investigator reports that: a) The ‘Blue Wall’ “culture remains highly insular”, where “learning and critical self-reflection do not come easily” (Zinger, 2018, p. 30); b) Mistreatment of prisoners and human rights abuses result when “problematic elements of organizational culture generates adverse impacts for those under CSC’s care and custody” (Zinger, 2017, p. 4); c) “Rehabilitation and reintegration cannot be accomplished in a workplace that tolerates a culture of indifference or impunity” (ibid, p. 4); d) “Openness and transparency are not well ingrained in the CSC organizational culture” (ibid, p. 43); and e) “The culture and infrastructure of corrections has hardened – there have not been progressive changes in the profession” (ibid, p. 5).

Another significant cultural insight for me came after reading the article, “What makes CSC employees happy at work?” in the CSC *Let’s Talk Express* publication dated 16 April 2018. My most significant take away from this article concerning CSC employee happiness was that the majority of CSC respondents from across the country derived their employment happiness and satisfaction from their social interaction with their colleagues on the job. While there were a few laudable exceptions, by far and away the majority did not equate and derive happiness and job satisfaction from their actual job assignment or their job performance – their primary reason

for being an employee of CSC. The following are some representative and noteworthy happiness and satisfaction samples from respondents that have a direct correlation to their immersion in the 'Blue Wall' culture:

“The key to having a happy professional life isn't the work you do but the people you work with”; “Lunch with co-workers, spending an hour away from your desk to talk about each other (not work) and learn from each other's backgrounds, likes, dislikes and sharing laughs and dreams etc” (it does not get more dysfunctional than this when the high point of this CSC employees day is lunch); “It's the support and care that fellow employees show each other”; “ I have one constant source of happiness, and that is my colleagues”; “We are family”; “Happiness is a group of great co-workers”; “Everyone has each other's back!” (this mentality is at the heart of the 'Blue Wall' culture's Code of Silence).

Something is wrong in the CSC corporate culture where the majority happiness job satisfaction quotient is social and collegial. The “We're all in this together” and “Everyone has each other's back!” mentality is opposed to a job description that is 'functional'. These happiness survey responses show that “too few prison employees care about the prisoners under their care”.

My understanding of the 'Blue Wall' culture comes from first and foremost my firsthand experience as a prisoner in Canada's prison system in which prisoner human rights abuse is rampant. While the examples are many, I will mention only a few that are significant to the CSC culture that places a low value on prisoners.

The first is a case of geriatric human rights abuse. Where I am located, at Bath Institution, 50 percent of the prisoner population is about 50 years old. Bath is the epicentre and prima facie of CSC's failure to both recognize and accommodate the senior prisoner demography. Consider that CSC “still has no national strategy to address the health concerns of ¼ of the total inmate population that is now age 50 or older” (Sapers, 2016, p. 12). On a daily basis at Bath Institution, I see prisoners with wheelchairs, walkers, and canes waiting in a medication queue for up to 40 minutes outside on a sidewalk and roadway with no protection from the elements. This winter there have been days with wind chill factors of -40°C. By any civility measure, requiring seniors to wait outside in the elements for up to 40 minutes is a human rights violation that would never be tolerated in any Canadian community. CSC gets away with it because there are no

external eyes watching. Bath Institution's health care professionals are complicit bystanders to this human rights injustice and some exacerbate the queue time wait with unnecessary policy enforcement. It is all about the correctional culture's value judgement of prisoners, that they 'lack value' as human beings, and nobody cares if they wait outside in freezing temperatures with no protection from the elements.

A second example stems from 30 August 2019 while I was on an Escorted Temporary Absence (ETA) to the Hotel Dieu Hospital in Kingston for a colonoscopy. Both my escorting officers had their cell phones out and in use while I was laying on a bed, stripped down to hospital garb, in the Gastroenterology intake department, as well as in the operating room while I was undergoing my colonoscopy surgical procedure. Not only did the CSC escorting officers use of their cell phones a breach on my medical confidentiality and privacy, but it is also a breach of hospital policy, because cell phone use is not permitted in patient care areas and around medical equipment. So, that question begs, why would my escorting correctional officers think that having their cell phone camera lens pointed in my direction while I was being prepped for surgery, and then pointed at my sphincter while the colonoscopy procedure was being performed in the operating room, is acceptable behaviour? Easy answer: It is the 'Blue Wall' correctional culture and the value the 'Blue Wall' culture places on prisoners! Blue wall culture transcends individual officer's personal values.

Beyond firsthand experience, I also draw knowledge from what I read in public watch dog reports by both the Correctional Investigator and the Auditor General of Canada. The Correctional Investigator's annual reports continue to report ongoing CSC budget cuts for short-term gain in every sector from Health Care, Food Services, Library Services, and on and on. The recent series of sweeping business transformation decisions to reduce costs by centralizing services that would include: amalgamation / clustering of institutional services; realignment of case management activity; and realignment of resources within treatment centres. These changes were done in many cases "without support by evidence and no demonstrable link to increased public safety" (Sapers, 2015, p. 4). Year after year, the Correctional Investigator's Annual Report can be summed up as such: "There appears to be no end to the issues that quite properly belong with or have been created by CSC maladministration" (Zinger, 2017, p. 7) due to "problematic elements of organizational culture that generates adverse impacts for those under CSC's care and custody" (ibid, p. 4).

In Auditor General reports (Auditor General of Canada, 2003), I read that the office considers parole officers and their managers to be not trained well enough to do their job properly and this skill deficit, critical to a prisoner's rehabilitation and re-entry, has resulted in people being held behind bars longer than they otherwise would be. It does not get more dysfunctional than this! Warehousing prisoners represents job protection for the 'Blue Wall' culture. Parole officers coming from a correctional background are bad news for any prisoner assigned to them due to their 'Blue Wall' indoctrination that prisoners lack human value. Their mentality is to keep prisoners in at the highest security level. Their 'Blue Wall' low enthusiasm and low expectations for prisoners is psychologically damaging to any prisoner to whom they are assigned. I know this from personal experience!

Recent book publications such as *Down Inside: Thirty Years in Canada's Prison Service* by Robert Clark (2017) also shed light on CSC's 'Blue Wall' culture. The author worked in seven different CSC institutions, ending his career as a Deputy Warden. The following are significant quotations germane to the 'Blue Wall' culture.

Too few prison employees care about the prisoners under their care, other than to make sure they are alive and behaving. Any interest in prisoner's well-being and their chances for becoming law-abiding citizens is almost non-existent (Clark, 2017, p. 16).

Some prison employees seem to regard the prisoners as less than human and feel it acceptable to mistreat them in myriad ways they would not even consider outside the prison and that they would be ashamed to have their family and friends see (ibid, p. 16).

Some employees engage in acts that would be a crime outside the prison walls. Many more of these acts are simply crimes of the conscience: racism, verbal and emotional abuse intimidation (ibid, p. 16).

The Senate Committee heard reports where correctional staff had counselled suicide, which is a criminal offence, by telling prisoners who told them that they were feeling suicidal, "Go ahead, commit suicide, it'll be one less person for us to look after" (RIDR, 2019, p. 57). Here at Bath Institution, one geriatric prisoner with stage-4 cancer was counselled to "take the needle" (in reference to MAID) by his doctor and parole officer, ostensibly as a cost

saving measure. “The ‘Blue Wall’ is an overdeveloped sense of solidarity, a level of cohesiveness that transcends one’s personal values” (Clark, 2017, p. 17). So-called good correctional officers regularly do bad things, such as engage in “racism, verbal, and emotional abuse, [and] intimidation” that they would never consider engaging in beyond the prison walls where their community, family, and friends could see them. They feel free to participate in “racism, verbal, and emotional abuse, [and] intimidation” within the insular prison walls because they know their secrets are protected by the ‘Blue Wall’ culture’s ‘Code of Silence’. “Once immersed in the correctional culture... many staff become loyal to the ‘Blue Wall’”, while “Many prison staff, no matter their job and no matter their background, begin to see the prisoners as something less than real people” (ibid).

I have seen firsthand what Clark (2017) reports, whereby new ‘contract’ support staff “start out eager to make a difference in prisoners’ lives, only to later fall in with... the ‘Blue Wall’ culture” that pulls them into the prevailing mindset that “prisoners are unworthy of their time and energy” (ibid). Psychological leveraging by the prevailing culture is a major consideration for any new employee in any organization, because the need for acceptance is basic human nature. New employees want to be accepted by their peers, while their ability to integrate into the corporate culture is also key to both their continued employment and potential consideration for future promotions.

Justice Louise Arbour encountered the ‘Blue Wall’ when she led the inquiry into the practices of the Prison for Women in 1996. Commenting on Justice Arbour’s inquiry, Clark (2017, p. 17), notes: “The deplorable defensive culture that manifested itself during the inquiry has old, established roots within the correctional service... It would seem they are simply entrenched in it”. I also watched CPAC rebroadcasts of the Senate’s Standing Committee on Human Rights, in which retired CSC Warden staff talked experiences within the CSC culture’s ‘Blue Wall’ code of silence involving bullying, racism, xenophobia, threats, and harassment including vehicle keying and tires flattened over perceived ‘Blue Wall’ Code of Silence violations.

In reflecting upon CSC cultural, I am reminded of Ashley Smith’s death in 2007 and the Coroner’s recommendations (114 in all) that came out in 2014. Most of those recommendations focused on the mental health of prisoners subject to federal corrections, yet “most of those recommendations have not been answered individually much less substantively” (Sapers, 2016, p. 17). Avoidance of the Coroner’s recommendations was to be expected when one

considers that then Commissioner, Don Head, did everything possible to avoid testifying at the Ashley Smith Coroner's Inquest. Consider this avoidance of "doing the right things for the right reasons" due to the correctional code of silence and be aware that this person was the Commissioner of CSC.

There are also lessons to be drawn from the preventable death of Matthew Hines on 26 May 2015. The circumstances and events that give rise to avoidable deaths in the Canadian prison system are not isolated, but rather are systemic and pervasive in nature. It is all about the Blue Wall culture in which "some prison employees seem to regard the prisoners as less than human and feel it acceptable to mistreat them in myriad ways" (Clark, 2017, p. 16).

In another case, "the body of a deceased inmate 21 was removed from his cell and left uncovered in the hallway for three and a half hours before the police and coroner arrived on the scene to investigate. Officers stood watch and walked over the body while conducting rounds" (ibid, p. 24).

A word about corporate culture is also in order to understand what the 'Blue Wall' is: the way things get done; the personality of the organization, the shared beliefs, values, norms, and behaviour of the group; and shared basic assumptions individuals have to succeed in an organization. "The only trustworthy predictor of on-the-job success, for an individual, is how closely an individual's work habits match the organizational culture" (Gilles, 2000). For any employee, their continued employment and happiness quotient in an organization depends on their ability to integrate into the corporate culture. Think of the Robert Clark (2017) statement, "The 'Blue Wall' is an overdeveloped sense of solidarity, a level of cohesiveness that transcends one's personal values" (Sapers, 2016, p. 17), and how it relates to the aforementioned response to that CSC happiness survey, "Everyone has each other's back!" These concepts are at the heart of the 'Blue Wall' culture's code of silence.

Within CSC, there is not a single culture but an integration of multiple cultures. While the 'Blue Wall' culture is the dominant culture that is pervasive throughout the organization, there are many sub-cultures that form the basis for silos in the organization. Sub-cultures may share certain characteristics, norms, values, and beliefs, or be totally different. Within CSC, these subcultures function cooperatively with the dominant 'Blue Wall' for the most part, because the 'Blue Wall' culture sets the organization tone and demeanour in 'the way things get done'. Any new prisoner policy initiative, whether coming from the institutional level or the Commissioner's

office, is always presented to the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers executive for their consideration and input before implementation into the prisoner population. In other words, the Blue Wall's support is necessary for CSC to achieve its strategic goals.

Corporate culture is not the ideals, vision, and mission laid out in the corporation's mission statement. Rather, it is expressed in the day-to-day practices, communications, and beliefs. Leadership does not create corporate culture, but it can shape it. Whenever human beings gather, and particularly when individuals with a common purpose begin working together, thinking processes will develop and an organizational culture will be created. While 'culture' is invisible, it is the dominant player in any organization's bottom line performance. Corporate culture creates 'shared values' by the group that are unseen and latent. However, they are deeply embedded in the organization's and individual's behaviour(s). Because corporate culture is not 'official', it functions as a hidden mechanism of coordination directing each individual toward the common goal. The mission of an organizational culture is not necessarily in the overall interests of the organization (e.g. the 'Blue Wall').

In many cases, the causes of problems in an organization (i.e. profitability, performance, responsiveness to issues, personality, and attitudes as well as, in CSC's case, the perception that prisoners have low value as justification for human rights violations) relate to an organization's structure, leadership, or the employees themselves, and are directly related to the culture and sub-cultures of an organization. Within CSC, the 'Blue Wall' transcends individual personal values at all levels of the organization, including the Commissioner's office. For any organization to attain its strategic 'official' objectives, it must understand if the dominant culture supports its strategic goals (Hagberg and Heifetz, 2000). "The forces of corporate culture" at the macro, the micro, and individual levels "are powerful because they operate outside our awareness" (Schein, 2013, p. 18). For any bureaucratic organization such as CSC, culture issues are especially difficult to address because of the lack of sophisticated leading edge human resource management, along with the fact that bottom line profitability and performance is always sloughed off as the result of some externality (i.e. government policy, other criminal justice system players etc.) that are beyond their control.

In what follows, I present a few instances when a corporate culture needs to be changed (think CSC). First, when an organization has been around

for so long its way of working becomes so entrenched that it is hindering the entity from adapting to changes. Second, when the staff believe their sole purpose for working is to collect a paycheque and a pension after 25 years. I have asked multiple staff (i.e. support staff, health care, correctional officers, and even a parole officer) “What possible job satisfaction do you get working in a prison?” and, inevitably, the answers is “A paycheque and a pension after 30 years!” I then follow-up with, “That’s no Quality of Work Life (QWL) ... After retiring, you will end up being a worse person than when you came in!” Third, when staff think “the key to having a happy professional life isn’t the work you do but the people you work with” and “lunch with co-workers” is the high point of the workday.

Trying to salvage a broken dysfunctional system is both poorly conceived and wasteful. Here are the problems I see. First, CSC does not have a clear purpose. While they are mandated to and purport to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners, because of budgetary constraints and public pressure, those functions are often neglected and replaced by warehousing. Second, the Commissioner’s office desperately clings to the ‘status quo’ and pussy foots around the ‘Blue Wall’s’ correctional tribal culture. The performance of the current CSC management structure is totally unacceptable where recidivism is concerned. Third, CSC’s failure to perform their most important mandate to this level is simply cheating prisoners out of opportunities to successfully reintegrate. In fact, all criminal justice system stakeholders, including Canadian taxpayers, are being cheated by the ‘abject’ performance failure(s) of CSC. Fourth, there is no national strategy for senior prisoners. As the Office of the Correctional Investigator put it in 2019, “The conditions of confinement of older individuals in federal custody are lacking in terms of personal safety and dignity, and the prospect of these individuals returning to the community is often neglected and overlooked, all of which jeopardizes the protection of their human rights”. The findings of this investigative report show that CSC’s treatment of older offenders in federal custody does not respect their human rights, or “is not justified in terms of institutional security or public safety; is inconsistent with the administration of lawful sentences imposed by courts, and: is unnecessarily costly to Canadians” (OCI and CHRC, 2019, p. 2). Both the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Service Canada have been complicit bystanders to the “systemic discrimination” of aging and elderly prisoners in Canadian penitentiaries.

It is imperative that the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights recommend a CSC audit along the lines of the RCMP report conducted by the former Auditor General, Sheila Fraser. Such an audit would address the ‘cultural’ issues due to the remarkable similarities between both the RCMP and CSC. Statements made in that RCMP report would equally apply to CSC: “Lack of Ministry oversight”; “Hierarchical top down organization that has proven resistant to change”; “Expertise needed to modernize the administration”; “Leadership seems incapable of implementing change”; “Not capable of making the broad systemic changes of its own accord”; “Not a state unto itself”; “Leadership is not capable of making the necessary systemic changes of its own accord”; “Need for an overarching and radical change in governance”; “Need for ‘cultural’ change” (MacCharles, 2017). It is time for CSC shake up with a total 180-degree paradigm shift for 21st century relevancy.

As Senator Runciman once said, “the only way we’re going to see significant change is change in staffing at the senior levels in CSC”. This is echoed by Robert Clark when he says “many of the people at the top will not risk poor relations with staff or the unions in order to ensure every prisoners’ rights are respected” (Clark, 2017, p. 17).

What a Correctional Service Canada 180-degree paradigm shift requires is a Board of Management comprised of skilled professionals with a proven track record from academia and the private sector. This is the only organization model that has any chance of making the necessary changes for CSC to become 21st century relevant. A Board of Management would have no allegiance or ties to the existing tribal culture(s). They would have no parochial protectionism for heritage policy that has failed to deliver and they would be able to build an organizational framework that is open to innovation and driven by collaboration with experts and boards of advisors.

It should not be surprising that the best managed Canadian businesses would have something to teach CSC about Human Resource Management, starting with an expansion and strengthening the employment applicant pool. CSC needs to start attracting the best in their fields and not just people looking for a default career with a pension. This is especially important for correctional officers who end up within the service because they have been unsuccessful in obtaining employment in their first and second career choices. Additionally, nepotism is not serving CSC well, because it feeds into the ‘Blue Wall’ culture of entitlement and cronyism. The under-performers protected by the unions need to be fired.

While it may be a stretch for some, any new cultural paradigm must consider prisoners to be human. If prisoners can be seen as human beings with value, as potential law-abiding citizens, this would be a huge and necessary 21st century hurdles, to validate prisoner identity as other than ‘criminal’. Prisoners want to be respected for their potential value. They want to be collaboratively engaged in meaningful rehabilitation programs and re-training (OAG, 2015). They want to successfully reintegrate back into society. They want to live a life with purpose. None of this is possible with the current CSC Commissioner’s office administration. They have had their chance and they continue to trip, fall, and stumble because they are tainted by the ‘Blue Wall’ culture. Most Commissioner office staff have arrived at their present lofty position after successive promotions within the ranks, and they have been successful because individuals succeed in an organization by aligning themselves with the corporate culture. The Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, and Assistant Commissioners are all proof positive that “the only trustworthy predictor of on-the-job success, for an individual, is how closely an individual’s work habits match the organizational culture” (Gilles, 2000, n.p.). They are all tainted by the ‘Blue Wall’ culture, even if they do not recognize that fact because the forces of corporate culture at the macro, the micro, and individual levels operate outside our awareness. A Board of Management without the encumbrance of stale and inept recycled leadership failures provides the best management structure to execute and deliver transparency and accountability to deliver bottom line conformance to the CSC mandate under section 3(b) of the CCRA, which involves “assisting the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community – through the provision of programs” to 21st century relevancy. A Board of Management would have no allegiance to “the culture that is largely responsible for most of the problems that occur within our prisons” (Clark, 2017, p. 16). Everything contained in the foregoing is my “thoughts, beliefs and opinions” (Government of Canada, 1982) based on my personal experience and observations.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ Marie-Claude Landry, Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission as reported in the *Interim Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights*, p. 22.

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