

**EFFECTIVE HANDLING  
OF  
MANIPULATIVE PERSONS**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

John D. Lentz, D. Min. is the Chief Chaplain at the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women. He is also an Adjunct Professor in Pastoral Care and Counseling at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary where he earned both his M. Div. and D. Min. degrees. John earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Louisville. He is a member of or holds credentials from the following organizations: American Correctional Association, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapists, American Association of Pastoral Counselors, Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, the National Association for Clergy Hypnotherapists, the Kentucky Association for Specialists in Group Work, and the Louisville Union Presbytery.

John and his wife Debra live, along with their two children Seth and Stacey, in the log cabin they built together.

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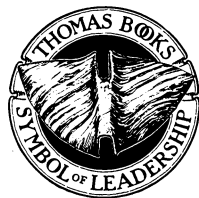
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*By*

**JOHN D. LENTZ**



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*This book is dedicated to the work of Clarence Y. Barton, David A. Steere, and the late George F. Bennett whose brilliance in working with people is only matched by their genuineness.*



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## Introduction

# **EFFECTIVE HANDLING OF MANIPULATIVE PERSONS**

**T**HIS PROJECT AROSE from seeing the difficulties that people who were beginning work in corrections were having in coping with the manipulative behavior of inmates. Most people seemed to experience manipulation as a personal act against them. As a consequence, they felt betrayed and hurt that people whom they had come to trust had violated their trust intentionally.

People who work in corrections are assaulted with a barrage of manipulative ploys from inmates. The manipulative and self-destructive behaviors of inmates tend to elicit similar responses which are neither helpful to inmates nor employees. The most frequently asked questions from staff members, inmates' volunteer visitors and students which involve manipulation are: "How do I deal with my own feelings?" In an informal survey of correctional officers all were asked, "What has been the most difficult situation for you to deal with in corrections?" All respondents cited situations in which they were or felt manipulated. Eleven of the twelve were manipulated by inmates, one by staff. These difficult situations involved repetitive and self-destructive behaviors and statements by inmates. Yet good officers, even those with experience, appeared to feel the effects of the subtle and not so subtle manipulative gestures of inmates. Frequently, talented officers left corrections, giving the impression they believed they could no longer cope with the stress and abuse. Volunteers appeared to be even more vulnerable to being manipulated, and there seemed to be few ways of equipping them short of the "sink or swim" method, in spite of compulsory training for all volunteers. What I believed would help was for everyone to have access to information about manipulation and more options for effectively dealing with manipulation.

The intention of this book is to provide useful tools. That is, to provide information about manipulation and to offer principles and techniques that are effective in handling manipulation. Effectiveness is

thought of as being both therapeutic for inmates and protective of the officer's emotional self. The therapeutic value of the options offered is that they do not contribute to the cycle of self-destructive behavior of the manipulators. The options are intended to be emotionally safeguarding of the officer's feelings by a variety of methods. The book is written for the use of staff members, volunteers, and anyone interested in manipulation. Furthermore, it is intended to stimulate the reader's creativity and to help him or her recognize the effective methods she/he already uses. Although some of the information may be new, the techniques are ones we all use while relating to people we like. What is different is applying these same methods of relating to people who, at times, try our patience. All of the options are intended to be easily applied and usable by people without training in psychology. Substance abuse counselors and management personnel will especially find the techniques helpful. In fact, most people find that the options are useful in a variety of settings.

The material presented is based upon the Bible, a variety of counseling approaches, and personal experience. It is written to illustrate some ways in which theology and psychology can be integrated. In doing so, the first Appendix illustrates the theological basis for understanding manipulation and the methods of intervention that are included in the book itself. In a similar fashion, Appendix Two reflects the theoretical and psychological methods that are applications of the theological stance and are used in the book.

Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:160).<sup>1</sup>

Effective dealing with manipulative persons means just what Jesus said, being as wise as the manipulators and yet not doing any harm. Sheep in the midst of wolves are vulnerable and so are we.<sup>2</sup> What follows is designed to help us in dealing with the manipulative and abusive situations in which we have chosen to work. In other words, it is designed to help us be able to remain as sheep in the midst of wolves.

Working inside a prison is not easy. We constantly deal with role conflict and stress.<sup>3</sup> We also have to deal with the element of fear.<sup>4</sup> Most of us are wary of being conned by inmates continuously.<sup>5</sup> Our jobs are more than knowing how to keep the inmates from breaking the rules or from beating the system. Although our primary purpose is to keep incarcerated persons incarcerated, our main jobs are to work with inmates in order that change may take place.<sup>6</sup> The welfare of ourselves, the other officers, inmates, and the community are all dependent upon change

happening as people are incarcerated. The institution and all those involved are counting on the orderly and safe running of the institution.

If prison personnel are able to de-escalate possible inflammatory situations, then the safety of all is increased. Furthermore, the safer the institution, both emotionally and physically, the better chance of inmates deciding to change destructive behaviors toward oneself and others. Psychotherapists are often heard to say about therapy, "Our task is to create a safe place in which to change." The same applies to corrections. We need to create an atmosphere that is safe physically and emotionally. The best way for us to do that is by feeling safe ourselves. Emotions can be passed on like footballs, or hot potatoes. Anyone who has witnessed the emotional tone of an institution change within a matter of hours knows how volatile tension and fear can be inside a prison. Furthermore, staff are vulnerable to the wave of emotion and tension and can often contribute unwittingly. It is common knowledge that one danger in working with depressed persons is becoming depressed oneself. However, the depression, fear, or general uneasiness can be passed back and forth between inmates and staff. We would all do well to take note from recent findings in the supervision of student psychotherapists. Studies indicated that supervisors of therapists greatly effected the patient's behavior even though they had little or no contact. The reason is that supervised folks tend to treat the people they supervise or work with in either the same or the opposite of the way they are treated.<sup>7</sup> In other words supervision works a lot like a combination shot in pool. The first ball strikes the second which in turn strikes the third into the pocket. In prison we frequently see this phenomenon when there are shift changes and administrative personnel changes. Often the entire mood of the institution changes as key administrative personnel are replaced. On a daily basis the mood of particular areas is altered by who the officer is in charge. Captains regularly place calm officers in tense areas to help calm the inmates. If we accept this premise then we must also recognize that the constant razzing and hurtful things that are said, build in security problems for inmates and staff. We react to some of the put-downs, implied slurs, and emotional abuse that goes on inside and is directed toward us.

Of course, we develop ways to deal with manipulation, abuse, and its emotional toll, or do we? Anyone who has worked in corrections for any length of time has had inmates say hurtful things to them, and often we like to act as if it doesn't hurt or that it doesn't bother us. We often tell