



**JSM GUIDANCE GROUP**

# **JUVENILE JUSTICE**

Leadership in Juvenile Justice

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In collaboration with: Jumpstart Mastery Group, LLC – [jumpstartmastery.org](http://jumpstartmastery.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

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***Leadership in Juvenile Justice*** is one of five companion papers in the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group Series, created to inform juvenile justice system practices and decision-making through practitioner insights and systems-level reflection.

This paper examines what it means to lead effectively in the juvenile justice system, not from a theoretical distance, but from the perspective of people who have managed crises, navigated organizational dysfunction, and worked to build something better from within these systems. It focuses on the leadership practices most likely to improve youth rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes, strengthen workplace safety, and reduce the reactive, crisis-driven patterns that drain organizational energy without addressing root causes.

The content draws on more than twenty weeks of candid, ongoing dialogue among members of the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group: experienced professionals whose work spans crisis de-escalation, psychiatric care, behavioral health, reentry services, confinement prevention, military leadership, and direct youth services. Their conversations, open and rooted in hard-won experience, revealed recurring patterns across roles and settings: communication that stays within professional lanes rather than bridging them; punitive norms that persist despite reform rhetoric; crises that consume leadership attention that should be directed toward prevention; and the personal courage it takes to challenge all of this while still getting the day's work done.

Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, led by conflict resolution specialist, mediator, and researcher Beth Myers, reviewed the full body of recorded sessions and dialogue, identified the themes that emerged most consistently, and shaped them into this paper and the series it belongs to.

This paper is designed for anyone who leads or works in the juvenile justice system, whether in a detention or residential facility, a community-based program, a court, a behavioral health agency, or a reentry organization. It is also relevant to those in adjacent systems: education, law enforcement, and social services, whose work regularly intersects with youth justice. The goal is not sweeping organizational reform but practical, sustained improvement: providing leaders with the frameworks, language, and specific guidance they need to shift from reacting to crises to preventing them, and from managing dysfunction to building something that actually works for youth, staff, and service providers alike.

Each paper in this series is presented in two formats: a concise executive briefing for decision-makers seeking a high-level overview, and a detailed companion paper for practitioners, cross-sector collaborators, and others seeking deeper context. Together, they provide a coherent framework for understanding and improving the juvenile justice system from the inside out.

*Note on language: Throughout this paper, references to bias refer to unexamined assumptions, inherited norms, and the decision-making patterns they shape; patterns that can lead to or justify overly punitive or harmful approaches, often framed as necessary for control, discipline, or safety. Readers are encouraged to apply this framing throughout the sections that follow.*

# LEADERSHIP IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## Executive Briefing

This brief summarizes a paper that grew out of more than twenty weeks of candid dialogue among practitioners who have worked inside the systems described here. It offers field-grounded guidance shaped by people who have navigated the pressures, turning points, and possibilities that leaders in these systems face every day.

## PURPOSE

This paper outlines key leadership actions to improve rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes, enhance workplace safety, and increase coordination across the juvenile justice system. Persistent challenges, including high recidivism rates, racial disparities in system involvement and service access, fragmented and disjointed communication, strict organizational silos, punitive cultural norms, and crisis-driven operations, continue to hinder system effectiveness and strain staff, youth, service providers, and community supports. Addressing these issues requires leadership to establish clear communication standards across agencies and provider networks, enforce accountability within organizations, strengthen cross-sector coordination, and train and hold staff accountable for applying conflict-prevention and de-escalation skills. Consistent leadership focus in these areas promotes safer environments, improves rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes, and strengthens the system's ability to operate proactively.

## KEY CHALLENGES

Leadership across the juvenile justice system must address structural and operational barriers that impede rehabilitation outcomes and undermine system effectiveness. The most significant challenges include:

### **High Recidivism Rates:**

- Fragmented services, inconsistent communication, and insufficient reintegration planning decrease the chances that rehabilitation gains will be sustained.
- Limited training and skill development among leadership, staff, and service providers in conflict prevention, management, and de-escalation further weakens long-term outcomes.

### **Disproportionate Representation of Youth of Color:**

- Structural inequities, inconsistent engagement with communities and families, and unexamined assumptions continue to contribute to disparities in system involvement and service access, partly due to decision-making influenced by historical patterns, assumptions, and inequities related to race, culture, and socioeconomic status.
- Addressing these assumptions requires cultural competence training, community partnerships, and input from youth and families.

### **Fragmented Communication Practices:**

- Communication across the system is often disjointed, unclear, and inconsistent, causing confusion, misunderstanding, and tension.
- Variations in terminology and a lack of shared understanding impede collaboration.

### **Organizational Silos and Inconsistent Coordination:**

- Organizational silos and disconnected service streams result in inconsistent, disconnected, and sometimes insufficient support for youth.
- Effective collaboration requires building reliable partnerships and a unified, connected vision throughout the system.

### **Punitive Cultural Norms:**

- Despite reform rhetoric, punitive philosophies and practices still dominate, prioritizing coercive control over guided growth.
- Leaders must challenge these norms by promoting language and practices that focus on positive rehabilitation.

### **Crisis-Driven Operations:**

- Leadership attention is often focused on immediate incidents, limiting opportunities for prevention, system improvement, and long-term planning.
- Moving from reaction to prevention requires a focus on strategic thinking and on staff training in conflict prevention, management, and de-escalation.

These challenges are not isolated problems. They are interconnected and compounding: disjointed communication hardens into structural silos; punitive norms reinforce reactive crisis management; and reactive management leaves no room to address root causes. Leaders who recognize these connections are better positioned to intervene strategically rather than symptom-by-symptom.

## FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH

Effective leaders adopt a proactive, strategic, and collaborative mindset to move beyond reactive management. Key components include:

- **Leadership Mindset:** Shift from crisis-driven responses to strategic, long-term thinking, with an emphasis on accountability, transparent communication, and conflict-prevention practices.
- **Collaborative Networks:** Establish partnerships within the justice system and with community stakeholders to build cohesive support systems.
- **Standardized Communication:** Implement clear, consistent communication practices across organizations to reduce confusion and improve collaboration.
- **Culture of Growth, Safety, and Accountability:** Reinforce professional standards that prioritize physical and psychological safety, rehabilitation, and responsible leadership oversight; challenge coercive norms; and foster environments where youth and staff can thrive. Fostering growth requires both accountability and support. When harmful behaviors — including coercion, intimidation, or misuse of authority — persist despite training and guidance, leaders must take corrective action rather than transferring the issue elsewhere. Leadership avoidance in these situations does not produce neutrality; it transfers risk directly to youth and frontline staff.
- **Data-informed Reflection and Continuous Improvement:** Transform crisis responses into proactive leadership strategies by embedding structured reflection and data analysis into routine operations.
- **Accountability Frameworks:** Set clear expectations for both leadership and staff, reinforcing a commitment to safety and professional growth.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address these challenges, the following practical and strategic recommendations are proposed:

### **Leadership Development and Self-Awareness:**

- Prioritize training in collaborative communication, conflict prevention and management, and implicit bias awareness.
- Include targeted training on managing supervisors and staff who engage in coercive, threatening, manipulative, or intimidating behavior.

### **Structured Reflection and Debriefing:**

- Implement standardized debriefing and data-gathering protocols to capture lessons learned from crisis events.
- Integrate staff and youth feedback to develop long-term preventive and success strategies.

### **Enhance Staff Training:**

- Focus on practical skills, such as de-escalation and conflict management.
- Engage in continuous professional development to maintain competency in these areas.

### **Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration:**

- Develop working partnerships between detention and residential facilities, social services, schools, law enforcement, and community organizations.
- Engage youth and families in planning and decision-making.

### **Foster a Safe and Inclusive Environment:**

- Implement regular pulse surveys to assess experiences with physical and emotional safety and identify emerging concerns.
- Facilitate confidential peer-group discussion protocols, ensuring that staff can discuss successes and challenges with colleagues and that youth have independent, structured environments to express and explore their experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

Leadership practices directly shape system stability, staff safety, and youth outcomes. A more proactive, collaborative, and purpose-driven juvenile justice system requires deliberate, ongoing effort, prioritizing safety, establishing clear communication norms, and fostering growth at both the individual and organizational levels. The recommendations here provide specific guidance for that work. When consistently applied, they promote a shift from reactive management to leadership rooted in prevention, learning, and shared responsibility.

Sustained progress depends not on one-time training or rhetorical reform, but on leaders' ongoing willingness to reflect, seek feedback, and adapt. Consistent application of these practices improves rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes, strengthens workplace stability, and supports the juvenile justice system's core purposes of reducing harm and investing in positive youth development. That work is rarely linear and never finished, but for leaders with the commitment and humility to persist, it is among the most consequential in public service.

# LEADERSHIP IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## Detailed Paper

### OVERVIEW AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is widely understood that leading an organization or team in the juvenile justice system requires managing persistent, complex challenges despite ongoing reform efforts. High recidivism rates, the disproportionate representation of youth of color, disjointed communication practices, and inconsistent, unreliable collaboration across organizations remain among the most pressing issues. Leaders are often stretched thin, addressing immediate crises rather than proactively identifying the root causes of dysfunction or implementing innovative solutions. Additionally, punitive cultural norms and unexamined assumptions that favor coercive control over growth-oriented rehabilitation continue to influence interactions throughout the system, reinforcing adversarial dynamics. This reactive approach hinders progress, sustains cycles of confusion, mistrust, and tension, and ultimately undermines opportunities for youth rehabilitation and reintegration, while also affecting staff and service provider morale.

Leaders who actively address these challenges represent the turning point between dysfunction and meaningful progress across the juvenile justice system. By focusing on the interconnected areas covered in this series of papers: Trauma and Dignity: Everyday Influence, Lasting Impact; Aligning Practice with Purpose; and Communication for Collaboration, leaders position themselves to build a cohesive, high-functioning juvenile justice system. Addressing these areas, both within individual organizations and across the network, will shift juvenile justice practices from reactive to proactive, equipping providers to achieve youth rehabilitation and reintegration goals while improving workplace safety and staff morale.

To better understand how leadership can effectively address these challenges, it is crucial to examine the specific areas where strategic improvements will make a positive difference. The following sections first outline the key challenges leaders must confront to achieve meaningful progress. By identifying the root causes of confusion, conflict, and resistance to change, and by understanding how they are interconnected, leaders can adopt practices that promote transparent, consistent collaboration, evidence-based programming, system-wide integration, and trauma-responsive, dignity-based approaches that benefit both youth and providers.

*Note: This paper reflects themes raised in recorded discussions, informed by participating experts' professional roles and on-the-ground experience. Because these perspectives varied in proximity to detention settings, not all risk categories associated with juvenile detention environments emerged in the conversations reviewed. Their absence here should not be interpreted as irrelevance but as an example of how dialogue, perspective, and group comfort shape which risks are surfaced and explored. This pattern shows that leadership intent alone isn't enough; without deliberate attention to what remains unspoken, opportunities to address complex risks can be missed.*

## KEY CHALLENGES

Leadership across the juvenile justice system continues to face persistent challenges that limit the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts and compromise youth outcomes. Despite ongoing reform efforts, some obstacles remain deeply rooted in the system's structure and culture. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive understanding of their underlying causes and how they intersect, along with strategic leadership dedicated to long-term change. The following are the most important challenges that leaders must address:

### 1. High Recidivism Rates

One of the most important signs of systemic failure in juvenile justice is the persistently high recidivism rate. Although interventions and rehabilitation programs aim to prevent reoffending, the lack of coordinated, lasting support systems often leads youth to cycle back into the system. Contributing factors include fragmented or overlapping services; inconsistent and unclear language across roles and organizations; unexamined decision-making patterns embedded in organizational norms; limited post-release support; inadequate community reintegration efforts; and gaps in staff training related to conflict prevention, management, resolution, and de-escalation. When these interconnected issues are not addressed, the progress made during a youth's time in the system is unlikely to endure.

### 2. Disproportionate Representation of Youth of Color

Racial disparities within the juvenile justice system persist, with youth of color continuing to be overrepresented. These disparities reflect a complex interaction of factors, including unexamined cultural differences that are often minimized or overlooked, socioeconomic conditions, and long-standing perceptions of acceptable behavior and social norms across communities. Assumptions and stereotypes embedded in organizational practices and professional training further influence decision-making, contributing to inequitable treatment and outcomes that are not consistently examined or understood.

Addressing these patterns requires leadership commitment to engage in difficult, at times uncomfortable, conversations about how culture, bias, and structural conditions shape system function and responses. This includes investing in staff development that strengthens cultural awareness and reflective practice; building sustained partnerships with community stakeholders, including law enforcement, legal professionals, and the judiciary; and incorporating meaningful input from youth and families into program design and intervention strategies.

### 3. Disjointed Communication Practices

Communication throughout the juvenile justice system is not merely prone to breakdowns; it is often fundamentally disjointed. Rather than connecting perspectives across roles, communication frequently remains within professional "lanes." While this role-bound approach is often well-intentioned, it can limit information sharing and contribute to confusion, inefficiency, and tension. Variations in role-based terminology, differing interpretations, and the absence of shared language further amplify these challenges, resulting in fragmented, overlapping, or insufficient service delivery. Addressing this challenge requires leadership commitment to communication practices that extend beyond individual roles and foster shared understanding and coordinated outcomes.

#### 4. **Inconsistent and Unreliable Collaboration**

When lane-based communication patterns persist, they often solidify into structural silos. Silos within and between organizations, and across process stages from arrest and adjudication through rehabilitation and reintegration, remain a persistent challenge. When communication and responsibility are divided this way, gaps in service appear, leading to fragmented, inconsistent, and often inadequate support for youth. These structural disconnects also undermine workplace safety and staff morale, as poorly coordinated efforts and disjointed practices create stressful, unpredictable working conditions.

Collaboration efforts are often inconsistent, with organizations prioritizing individual mandates rather than working toward a shared vision for the well-being of both youth and staff. Building reliable, sustained partnerships is essential for a holistic approach to rehabilitation and reintegration. This requires leadership to actively foster a culture of collaboration that transcends organizational boundaries and aligns roles, responsibilities, and resources toward common goals.

#### 5. **Punitive Cultural Norms**

Despite rhetoric promoting rehabilitation and reintegration, many practices in the juvenile justice system remain rooted in punitive approaches. Cultural norms that favor coercive control over growth-focused rehabilitation continue to influence interactions among staff, youth, and other stakeholders. These norms reinforce adversarial relationships and maintain a constant "tug of war" characterized by mistrust and resistance.

Addressing this challenge requires leaders to critically examine underlying assumptions, actively promote growth-oriented practices, and intentionally disrupt punitive mindsets that undermine rehabilitation. One way to achieve this is through structured reflective practices and training that help staff explore how unexamined assumptions — such as those related to race, socioeconomic status, youth identity, or prior justice involvement — and ingrained habits affect their daily interactions. This approach lays the foundation for a more balanced, developmentally aligned approach to safety, accountability, and engagement.

#### 6. **Reactive Crisis Management**

Leadership in the juvenile justice system often — out of necessity — prioritizes responding to immediate crises over creating and implementing strategies to prevent tension and conflict. This long-standing reactive approach leaves little room for proactive planning and innovation. Constantly operating in a state of crisis can diminish leadership capacity and the willingness to address systemic problems, leading to short-term, process-driven responses rather than lasting, system-wide solutions.

More effective leadership redefines this approach by emphasizing strategic planning and root-cause analysis, allowing organizations to shift from reacting to proactively preventing issues. This transition fosters a culture based on competence rather than mere compliance and enhances collaboration across the juvenile justice network. At the core of this change is equipping staff with the skills and awareness needed to manage tension constructively and prevent conflict from escalating. Training in de-escalation, conflict management, integrative communication, and implicit bias boosts adaptive capacity and promotes proactive problem-solving as a common practice.

When these practices are consistently implemented, leaders cultivate a culture that emphasizes purposeful collaboration and growth rather than control and coercive compliance. For instance, structured debriefing and data collection after crisis events help identify underlying patterns and systemic factors. Over time, these insights guide more thoughtful long-term strategies and conflict-preventive measures, shifting the organizational focus from merely managing crises to learning from them and enhancing collaborative, supportive staff development.

Addressing these six interconnected challenges requires motivated, forward-thinking leaders committed to an organization-specific and network-wide shift from reactive, crisis-driven management to proactive, strategic, and collaborative leadership. This shift depends on leaders' willingness to intentionally reframe and personally engage in organizational practices that prioritize collaboration, clear communication, growth-oriented rehabilitation, and meaningful stakeholder engagement. The following section outlines the foundational approaches needed to operationalize this shift and align leadership practices with the goals of rehabilitation and reintegration. The approaches that follow reframe these challenges not as fixed conditions to be managed but as entry points for deliberate, system-wide change.

## FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH

To move beyond reactive management and promote lasting change, leaders across the juvenile justice system must adopt a proactive, strategic, and collaborative approach. This shift requires directly confronting the deep-rooted challenges identified earlier and cultivating a foundational leadership mindset that emphasizes growth-oriented rehabilitation, clear communication, and system-wide integration. The approaches outlined in this section provide practical guidance for advancing a shared vision for rehabilitation and reintegration while strengthening safety and support for youth, staff, and service providers.

### 1. Leadership Mindset: From Crisis Management to Strategic Vision

Effective leadership begins with a shift from reactive crisis response to deliberate, long-term strategy. Leaders must model the mindset they seek to cultivate by demonstrating thoughtful conflict prevention and intervention, collaborative problem-solving, and ongoing, transparent reflection on decisions, processes, and outcomes. This transition starts with leaders acknowledging their own biases and fostering environments where others can do the same, thereby establishing self-awareness as the foundation for practical, strategic thinking.

By prioritizing planning, analysis, violence prevention, and the cultural competence needed for equitable and defensible decision-making, rather than reacting solely to individual crises, leaders create environments where strategic and collaborative thinking becomes routine across the organization and the broader juvenile justice network. Embedding these principles into daily operations strengthens stability, transparency, and predictability, all of which are critical to reducing the frequency and severity of crises.

Leaders who consistently model self-awareness and reflective practice foster trust and accountability throughout their organizations. This approach strengthens cohesion, supports effective collaboration, and aligns leadership practices with the goals of rehabilitation, reintegration, and the creation of safe, supportive environments for youth, staff, and service providers.

## 2. Building Collaborative Networks

System-wide progress cannot be achieved in isolation. Effective collaboration across organizational and community boundaries is vital to creating cohesive support systems for youth. This requires leaders to actively cultivate partnerships both within the juvenile justice system and with community stakeholders, including law enforcement, social services, educators, religious and community organizations, families, and youth themselves. Leaders play a key role in developing and maintaining these networks to foster shared understanding and aligned expectations around youth accountability, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Establishing clear communication norms and shared goals among stakeholders reduces fragmentation and strengthens coordinated, consistent support across the system.

## 3. Standardizing Communication Practices

Disjointed communication within and between organizations is not merely a technical challenge; it is a structural and relational issue that directly shapes youth outcomes, staff safety, and system effectiveness. When communication practices are inconsistent, unclear, or unenforced, they contribute to fragmented, overlapping, or insufficient support for youth and undermine coordinated decision-making across the juvenile justice continuum.

Addressing this challenge requires leadership to establish clear, standardized communication protocols that connect stakeholders from the initial system contact through rehabilitation and reintegration. This includes developing shared language practices that clarify intent and expectations across roles and settings, recognizing that common terms may carry different meanings in different contexts. Without deliberate verification of shared understanding, misalignment persists even when communication is frequent.

Standardization must be reinforced through leadership modeling and ongoing professional development, not isolated training. Integrating role-specific instruction in communication under stress, de-escalation, conflict prevention and management, and reflective practice strengthens staff capacity for consistent, growth-oriented service delivery and reduces the risk that communication reforms remain symbolic rather than operational.

*Note: These principles are examined in greater depth in the companion paper, [Communication for Collaboration](#), which explores how everyday communication choices shape system-wide outcomes.*

## 4. Fostering a Culture of Growth and Safety

Moving away from punitive philosophies requires leaders to intentionally create and sustain environments where emotional and physical safety, growth, and rehabilitation are core priorities. This begins with a critical examination of organizational cultural norms — particularly deeply embedded mindsets that prioritize coercive control over structured development. Often rooted in long-standing practices and shaped by broader societal biases, these mindsets are frequently well-intentioned. However, they can reinforce adversarial dynamics that undermine rehabilitation and contribute to systemic dysfunction, higher recidivism rates, and persistent inequities in service delivery and outcomes.

Addressing these patterns requires a thoughtful, initially non-confrontational approach that focuses on everyday practices, not just stated values. Rather than assigning blame or criticizing individual belief systems, leaders can foster a culture of continuous learning through reflective practices, open cross-sector dialogue, and professional development that examines how everyday practices shape long-term outcomes. Guided discussion and structured reflection can help staff recognize how routine actions may unintentionally perpetuate cycles of mistrust, resistance, and escalating conflict, ultimately compromising the safety of both youth and staff.

Fostering a culture of growth, however, also requires accountability. While leaders should support staff in developing the skills and awareness necessary for growth-oriented practice, they must also address situations where coercive manipulation, intimidation, or other counterproductive behaviors persist despite training and guidance. In such cases, leadership responsibility includes taking appropriate corrective action rather than transferring the issue elsewhere to uphold organizational standards and protect the safety and integrity of the environment.

A culture of safety requires more than response protocols; it requires leadership's willingness to engage with risks that are uncomfortable, minimized, or left unnamed. When serious safety concerns are difficult to discuss openly, whether because of discomfort, fear of liability, or organizational norms, the result is not neutrality but increased vulnerability. Leadership avoidance actively transfers risk to youth and frontline staff who lack decision-making authority, reinforcing harm rather than preventing it.

By framing mindset shifts as a collective responsibility rather than an individual failing, leaders create space for honest reflection while upholding clear expectations. This balance of support and accountability lays the groundwork for safer environments, more effective rehabilitation, and a more sustainable, rewarding workplace for staff.

## **5. Implementing Data-Informed Reflection and Learning**

Transforming crisis responses into proactive strategies requires continuous, structured reflection and learning from experience. Leaders must implement consistent debriefing, reflection, and data collection practices, especially after crisis events, to identify patterns, root causes, and system-level contributors. When used effectively, these processes support the development of long-term strategies that prevent recurrence rather than focusing exclusively on managing individual incidents.

Encouraging a culture of strategic reflection and feedback requires leadership commitment to using information as a learning tool rather than merely a reporting mechanism. By integrating meaningful feedback from staff, youth, and stakeholders, organizations strengthen collective problem-solving capacity and reinforce shared responsibility for improvement. Over time, these practices contribute to safer, more predictable environments that support staff wellbeing and the healthy development of the youth they serve.

By adopting these fundamental approaches, leaders can move the juvenile justice system beyond fragmented, reactive practices toward more cohesive, proactive, and growth-oriented environments. The following section outlines specific strategies and recommendations that support the practical application of these concepts in daily operations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Leaders must adopt intentional practices, both individually and collectively, to promote a more proactive, strategic, and collaborative leadership approach throughout the juvenile justice system. These recommendations outline practical steps to address the systemic challenges mentioned earlier and to improve focus on youth rehabilitation, reintegration, staff and youth safety, and overall organizational effectiveness. While not exhaustive, they emphasize leadership's responsibility to create and sustain environments that support long-term outcomes rather than focus on short-term crisis management.

### 1. **Prioritize Leadership Development and Self-Awareness**

Leaders must model the mindset they seek to cultivate by prioritizing self-awareness, reflective practices, and accountability. A key part of this responsibility involves recognizing and addressing harmful internal dynamics, including taking decisive action when supervisors or staff misuse their authority to exert psychological or physical control, coercion, or intimidation over those they serve. Leaders should be trained to spot these behaviors and intervene quickly and appropriately; taking decisive, supportive, and corrective steps shows a commitment to maintaining a safe and respectful work environment.

Leadership development should include focused training in strategic thinking, conflict prevention and management, and de-escalation best practices, supported by role-play exercises. Organized reflection opportunities, such as confidential peer reflection sessions or leadership roundtables, can further benefit individual leaders. When leaders actively engage in self-reflection and are willing to examine their own assumptions, they set clear expectations for transparency, accountability, and ongoing growth throughout the organization, which directly influence staff attitudes, behaviors, and standards of accountability.

For example, a leader who openly acknowledges uncertainty during team debriefs rather than defaulting to authority demonstrates the reflective practice they expect from others and indicates that growth, not just performance, is the organizational standard.

### 2. **Implement Structured Reflection and Debriefing Practices**

Organizations should establish consistent, structured reflection and debriefing practices, especially after crises, to move beyond reactive responses. Standardized protocols for capturing insights, identifying patterns, and analyzing root causes, incorporating both quantitative data and qualitative feedback from staff and youth, support system-level learning rather than incident-focused response.

Embedding reflection into routine operations enables organizations to shift from managing crises to learning from them, informing preventive strategies, and strengthening long-term stability.

### 3. **Enhance Staff Training on Conflict Prevention, Management, De-escalation, Bias, and Collaborative Problem-Solving**

Ongoing professional development is crucial for equipping staff with practical skills to handle tension and prevent escalation. Training should emphasize de-escalation, integrative communication, conflict prevention and management, trauma-responsive and dignity-centered practices, and implicit bias. Each of these areas benefits from structured opportunities for self-assessment and skill reinforcement, not just initial instruction.

Embedding skill-building, self-assessment tools, and regular refreshers into daily practice reinforces collaboration, conflict prevention, and de-escalation as core professional competencies rather than supplemental training topics.

#### **4. Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration and Community Partnerships**

Sustainable collaboration among detention and residential facilities, community organizations, law enforcement, social services, schools, religious and community groups, and youth-serving stakeholders is crucial to providing cohesive support for youth. Leaders should actively build cross-sector relationships and consider formalizing framework agreements to establish shared goals, a common language, and coordinated communication practices.

Regular cross-sector meetings and joint training sessions foster alignment and break down silos. Meaningful inclusion of youth and family perspectives ensures collaboration remains grounded in lived experience and real-world needs.

#### **5. Create Accountability Frameworks to Support Growth**

Maintaining a culture of safety and growth requires clear accountability frameworks, including standards for leadership performance. These frameworks should set expectations and benchmarks for communication practices; conflict prevention, management, and resolution; the proper use of de-escalation skills; and rehabilitation-focused interactions, with leaders holding themselves to the same standards expected of staff.

Targeted coaching and development should be offered when resistance to growth-oriented practice emerges. However, when harmful behaviors persist despite support, leaders must take corrective action, including disciplinary measures when necessary, to protect safety and uphold organizational integrity.

#### **6. Foster a Safe and Inclusive Environment**

Emotional and physical safety must be central to youth rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Leaders should regularly assess organizational climate by gathering feedback from staff and youth, supported by system-wide data collection and analysis. Tools such as periodic pulse surveys and confidential dialogue groups help identify emerging concerns early and enable timely, strategic responses.

By prioritizing confidentiality and psychological safety in these settings, leaders build trust, foster honest participation, and strengthen data quality and organizational learning.

By implementing these recommendations, leaders can strengthen the juvenile justice system's capacity to operate more proactively, reduce risk, and align with purpose. Consistent application of these practices supports improved youth outcomes while fostering safer, more cohesive, and more sustainable working environments for staff.

## CONCLUSION

A more proactive, strategically collaborative, and purpose-driven juvenile justice system requires deliberate, ongoing effort. This includes prioritizing emotional and physical safety, establishing clear, consistent communication norms, and fostering growth at the individual and organizational levels. Leaders play a key role by modeling self-awareness and creating environments where staff, youth, and community providers feel safe participating, learning, and applying practical strategies that directly address the systemic challenges discussed in this paper.

The recommendations here provide specific guidance to strengthen leadership skills, foster collaborative networks, improve communication, and reinforce accountability at all levels, including leadership itself. When consistently applied, these strategies promote a shift from reactive management to leadership practices rooted in prevention, learning, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

Sustained progress depends not on one-time training or rhetorical reform, but on leaders' ongoing willingness to reflect on practice, seek feedback, and adapt to new insights. Integrating these practices into daily routines enhances organizational capacity and reinforces a culture that values clarity, coordination, and continuous improvement.

The goal is to align everyday leadership decisions with the juvenile justice system's stated purposes, creating and investing in meaningful opportunities for youth rehabilitation and reintegration across the full continuum of system involvement. When purpose is clarified through action, juvenile justice systems are better able to reduce harm, support positive development, and foster safer, more stable environments for youth, staff, and their communities. That work is rarely linear and never finished, but for leaders with the commitment and humility to keep at it, it is among the most consequential work in public service.

# ABOUT THIS SERIES

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The juvenile justice system touches the lives of young people at their most vulnerable, and it depends on the collective judgment, skill, and commitment of an extraordinary range of professionals: law enforcement officers, prosecution and defense attorneys, judges, court staff, child advocates, case managers/social workers, educators, detention center staff, reentry specialists, and many others. These professionals rarely share a single table. Yet the challenges they face are deeply interconnected.

This paper is one of five in a practitioner-led series designed to bridge that gap. The series examines some of the most persistent and consequential issues in juvenile justice, from how trauma shapes behavior to how leadership shapes systems, and offers practical, field-grounded strategies to improve youth outcomes, strengthen cross-sector collaboration, and support the well-being of youth, families, and communities at the center of it all.

The series grew out of more than twenty weeks of candid, ongoing dialogue among the members of the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group (JSM-GG), a team of experienced professionals whose work spans crisis response, psychiatric care, behavioral health, reentry services, confinement prevention, military leadership, and direct youth services. Their conversations: open, extensive, and rooted in hard-won experience, revealed patterns that cut across roles and settings: fragmentation where there should be coordination, silence and disconnection where there should be clear communication and connection, and opportunities where many see only dysfunction.

Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, led by conflict resolution specialist, mediator, and researcher Beth Myers, reviewed the full body of recorded sessions and dialogue, identified the themes that resonated most strongly, and distilled them into this series of accessible, action-oriented briefs. Each paper reflects the group's authentic voice and professional judgment, not a consensus document or a formal research product, but something arguably more valuable: the distilled, practice-tested insight of people who have spent their careers inside these systems.

Each topic is presented in two formats: a concise executive briefing for decision-makers and a detailed paper for practitioners, cross-sector collaborators, and others seeking deeper context. Together, the five papers form a coherent framework for understanding and improving the juvenile justice system from the inside out.

Paper titles in this series:

- ***Aligning Practice with Purpose***
- ***Communication for Collaboration***
- ***Leadership in Juvenile Justice***
- ***Trauma and Dignity in Juvenile Justice: Everyday Practice, Lasting Impact***
- (forthcoming)

For assistance with implementing any recommendations in this series, contact Jumpstart Mastery at <https://www.jumpstartmastery.org>

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND ORGANIZATIONS

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***Leadership in Juvenile Justice*** is one of five companion papers in a practitioner-led series that offers insights and guidance from professionals whose expertise spans crisis response, behavioral health, public safety, leadership development, and systems innovation, as well as direct service within the juvenile justice system. Contributors include a Confinement Prevention Administrator leading statewide juvenile reform efforts; a reentry specialist supporting transitions from incarceration to community life; a clinical supervisor integrating crisis response with addiction treatment for vulnerable populations; and others whose work in psychiatric care, military preparedness, mobile crisis teams, and emergency response brings a rare depth of practical and strategic knowledge to this series. Together, their field-tested guidance offers actionable pathways to improve youth outcomes while addressing the juvenile justice system's broader social, systemic, organizational, and public safety impacts.

Developed through a collaborative effort between the Jumpstart Mastery Guidance Group (JSM-GG) and Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, each paper in the series is shaped by the lived experience, professional insight, and strategic reflection of JSM-GG's seven members whose diverse professional paths reflect both direct service and systems-level leadership within and beyond youth justice, contributing to how society as a whole ensures safety, fairness, accountability, and trust in its systems of care and response.

As the writing and facilitation lead for this series, Roundtable Group Consulting, LLC, guided by conflict resolution specialist, mediator, and researcher Beth Myers, brought expertise in systems thinking, deep listening, and analysis to the task of synthesizing dialogue, transcripts, and key insights. Complex ideas were transformed into actionable guidance, rooted in the group's lived experience and supported by foundational research in youth justice.

## Jumpstart Mastery – Guidance Group Member Bios

**Andy Prisco**, founder of Jumpstart Mastery, LLC (JSM), is a leading figure in crisis de-escalation education, emphasizing non-violent crisis management. His background in founding psychiatric emergency response programs and experience as a firefighter and EMT ground his work in practical, life-saving skills for public safety professionals. Prisco's innovative approach to training reflects his belief in continuous learning and community empowerment to address the urgent need for safer crisis interventions.

**Mike Delay**, a Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Clinical Supervisor, excels in integrating crisis intervention and addiction treatment for vulnerable populations. His work focuses on building community partnerships and leading mobile response teams, mainly supporting homeless individuals and those in the justice system. Delay's compassionate approach to crisis management and recovery is essential in addressing the complexities of addiction and mental health in today's social service landscape.

**Dan Gapsch** has over 40 years of psychiatric nursing experience and over a decade of leadership experience in safety and crisis intervention education within psychiatric care and services workforces. As the Training and Development Manager at one of the nation's largest psychiatric hospitals, he was pivotal in creating and implementing programs that promote safety and reduce violence. His expertise extends into security management, equal opportunity, and dispute resolution, demonstrating a broad commitment to fostering safer, more respectful environments in high-stress institutions.

**Candis Hannah**, a re-entry Program Director and Crisis and De-escalation Specialist, brings academic knowledge and practical insight to her work supporting individuals transitioning from incarceration to community life. Having managed the largest homeless shelter in Thurston County, Candis implemented effective crisis management and de-escalation strategies tailored to the unique needs of vulnerable populations. Candis' passion is serving youth and marginalized communities and empowering individuals during their reentry journey.

**Grace Icenogle** is a key advocate for justice system reform, specializing in youth development and confinement prevention. As a Confinement Prevention Administrator in a Juvenile Justice State System, Icenogle leads efforts to reduce youth confinement through evidence-based programs. Her research-driven approach and leadership in developing alternative support systems exemplify a forward-thinking, rehabilitative focus on justice reform.

**James Sporleder** brings a multifaceted approach to crisis response and leadership, blending military training with a philosophical focus on systems thinking. His extensive experience in survival training, repatriation, and workplace security positions him as a leader in developing specialized crisis prevention and intervention programs. Sporleder's dedication to human dignity and safety is reflected in his leadership roles across both military and corporate sectors.

**Mark Wisler**, a retired Lieutenant Colonel, offers a distinguished military career focused on joint combat operations, organizational behavior, leadership, and deliberate planning. As a highly decorated instructor pilot, Wisler has trained elite aircrews and shaped operational strategies across U.S. and NATO military theatres. His expertise in airpower, combined with a strong foundation in combat operations, continues to inspire teams as he now serves as a motivational speaker and consultant, sharing insights on leadership and personal development.

For assistance with implementing any recommendations in this series, contact Jumpstart Mastery at <https://www.jumpstartmastery.org>