



PHASE 3 — PRACTICUM

Week 30 of 36

Working with Staff

Sessions 88–90

Tuesday • Wednesday • Thursday

FORGE — Facilitating Opportunities for Reentry, Growth & Empowerment

Dooly State Prison

FORGE Curriculum

Phase 3: Practicum — "Lead and Serve"

Week 30: Working with Staff

Week 30 Overview

Purpose: FORGE mentors operate inside a system they don't control. Their effectiveness depends not only on their skills with peers but on their ability to navigate relationships with correctional officers and other staff. This week confronts that reality head-on — how to build credibility with staff, how to be helpful without overstepping, and what to do when staff are skeptical, hostile, or indifferent toward FORGE. By the end of this week, participants should be able to work within the institutional structure rather than against it, even when that structure is frustrating.

Sessions This Week: - Session 88 (Tuesday): Working with Staff — Building Bridges in an Imperfect System - Session 89 (Wednesday): Field work — full facilitation, full mentoring caseload (3-5 mentees) - Session 90 (Thursday): Field work — mentoring meetings + community circles

Materials Needed: - Easel paper or whiteboard (if available) - Journals/notebooks - Talking piece for circle process

SESSION 88: Working with Staff — Building Bridges in an Imperfect System

Day: Tuesday **Duration:** 2 hours **Facilitator(s):** Program Lead or Senior Mentor

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to: 1. Describe the FORGE stance toward staff authority — respect the role, even when you disagree with the person 2. Identify at least 3 strategies for building credibility with COs and staff 3. Explain how to be helpful to staff without overstepping mentor boundaries 4. Respond appropriately when staff are skeptical or dismissive of FORGE 5. Navigate situations where staff behavior creates tension in the dorm

Session Plan

Opening Circle (10 minutes)

Facilitator:

*"Check-in. Today we're talking about working with staff — COs, counselors, administrators. Before we get into it, I want to hear from you. Talking piece question: **What has your experience been like so far with staff in your role as a FORGE mentor? One honest sentence.**"*

Send the talking piece. Don't react to negative answers. Don't defend staff. Just listen. This is temperature-taking.

Review and Reflection (10 minutes)

Facilitator:

"How did last week's field work go? Specifically — did anyone try something different in their group facilitation or one-on-one mentoring based on what we discussed? What happened?"

Hear from 3-4 participants. Brief updates. Connect what they share to the skills from Week 29 when possible.

Instruction: The Reality of Working Inside a System (30 minutes)

Purpose: Establish FORGE's position on staff relationships — clear-eyed, practical, and honest about the complexity.

Facilitator:

"Let me be straight with you about something. This might be the hardest topic in the entire program — not because the skills are difficult, but because the emotions are complicated.

You are doing transformative work inside a system that wasn't designed for transformation. You are building peace in a dorm while wearing the same uniform as everyone else. And the people who hold the keys, who control your movement, who can write you up or help you out — those are the staff. COs, counselors, unit managers, administrators.

Some of them will support FORGE. They'll see what you're doing and respect it. They'll give you space to work. They might even ask you for help with a situation.

Some of them won't care. FORGE is just another program to them. They're neutral — not hostile, not helpful. Just doing their shift.

And some of them will be skeptical. They'll think FORGE is soft. They'll think you're playing a game. They'll test you. They'll dismiss you. Some might actively make your work harder.

All three of those are real. And you have to be able to work with all three."

Pause.

Facilitator:

"Here's the FORGE position on staff, and I need you to hear this clearly:

We respect the role, even when we disagree with the person.

A CO's authority is not up for debate. That's the reality of the environment you're in. FORGE does not challenge staff authority. FORGE does not undermine staff. FORGE does not position mentors as alternatives to staff authority. If a CO gives a directive, you follow it — even if you think it's wrong. If staff behavior is genuinely unjust, there are grievance procedures for that. FORGE mentors don't become activists in the moment. That's not your role, and it will destroy your credibility and your program.

I know that's hard to hear. Some of you have stories about staff who've treated you unfairly. Those stories are real. I'm not dismissing them. But FORGE exists inside this institution with the cooperation of the administration. If we lose that cooperation, we lose the program. Every man you're mentoring, every circle you're running, every session you're facilitating — all of it depends on institutional support. That's not ideal. It's real."

Building Credibility with Staff (15 minutes)

Facilitator:

"Now let's talk about what actually works. How do you build a relationship with a CO or a counselor who doesn't know you, doesn't trust you, and assumes you're running a game?"

*It's the same way you build trust with anyone: **consistently, over time, through your actions.**"*

Strategy 1: Be Low-Maintenance

"The fastest way to build credibility with staff is to not be a problem. Show up where you're supposed to be. Don't create paperwork. Don't be the guy they have to deal with. When a CO sees that the FORGE mentors are the ones who aren't causing issues — that registers. It might take weeks. It might take months. But it registers."

Strategy 2: Be Useful Without Being Asked

"If there's tension building in the dorm and you see it before staff does — handle it. De-escalate the situation. When the CO comes by and everything is calm, he may not even know what you did. That's fine. You didn't do it for credit. You did it because that's what a stakeholder does."

Over time, some staff will start to notice that the dorm runs smoother when FORGE mentors are active. That's the most powerful endorsement you can get — and you can't ask for it. You can only earn it."

Strategy 3: Communicate Respectfully and Briefly

"When you do need to interact with staff, keep it short, clear, and respectful. 'Officer, I'm about to run a group session in the dayroom — just wanted you to know.' Not asking permission you don't need, not making a big deal of it, just keeping them informed. That's professional. That's how people who are taken seriously operate."

If a CO asks what FORGE is, you've got the elevator speech. Deliver it calmly and confidently. Don't oversell it. Don't get defensive. Just tell them what it is."

Strategy 4: Never Put Staff on the Spot

"Don't ask a CO to do something for FORGE in front of other inmates. Don't put them in a position where saying yes looks like they're doing you a favor, or saying no makes them look bad. If you need something from staff, ask privately, respectfully, and with low stakes. Make it easy for them to say yes."

Strategy 5: When Staff Support You, Acknowledge It

"If a CO gives you space to run your circle, or a counselor refers someone to FORGE, or a unit manager says something positive about the program — acknowledge it. Not with flattery. Just genuine recognition: 'Appreciate you, Officer. That space helped us get some real work done.' People respond to being seen, including staff."

When Staff Are Skeptical (10 minutes)

Facilitator:

"Let's talk about the hard part. What do you do when a CO thinks FORGE is a joke? Or thinks you're manipulating the system? Or says something dismissive in front of your mentees?"

First — don't take it personally. Their skepticism probably isn't about you. They've seen a hundred programs come and go. They've seen inmates claim to be reformed and then do the same thing the next week. Their skepticism is earned. Respect that.

Second — don't argue. You will never win an argument with a CO, and you shouldn't try. The moment you become adversarial with staff, you've lost. Not just the argument — your credibility, your mentees' trust in your composure, and potentially the program's standing.

Third — let your work speak. The most skeptical COs I've seen come around did so not because someone convinced them with words. They came around because they watched. They watched the dorm get calmer. They watched a conflict get handled without anyone getting hurt. They watched a man who used to be a problem become a solution. That's the argument FORGE makes — not with words, with results.

*Fourth — and this is important — **some staff will never come around.** Accept that. Not everyone has to support FORGE for FORGE to work. You don't need every CO to believe in what you're doing. You need to do your work regardless of whether they believe in it."*

Group Exercise: Real Scenarios (25 minutes)

Purpose: Work through actual staff-related situations from participants' field experience.

Facilitator:

"Now I want to hear from you. What situations have you actually faced involving staff? Not hypotheticals — real situations. Who's got one?"

Facilitate discussion of 3-4 real scenarios. For each one: 1. Participant describes the situation (2-3 minutes) 2. Ask: "What did you do?" (1 minute) 3. Ask the group: "What else could he have done?" (3-4 minutes) 4. Facilitator adds coaching if needed

Common scenarios that may come up (and key coaching points):

"A CO told me to stop holding my session."

Coaching: Comply immediately and without attitude. Follow up later — privately, respectfully — to understand why. If it's a misunderstanding about FORGE's authorization, connect the CO with the program lead or whoever granted the program space. Don't try to resolve institutional issues yourself.

"A CO made a comment about FORGE in front of my mentees — called it a 'feel-good group' or something dismissive."

Coaching: Don't react in the moment. Your mentees are watching how you handle it. If you stay composed and unbothered, that teaches them more about emotional regulation than any lesson you could deliver. Later, privately, you can address it with the CO if you have that kind of relationship. If not, let it go. Your program's results will speak louder than any comeback.

"My mentee got written up and I think the DR was unfair."

Coaching: Your opinion about whether a disciplinary report was fair is not the issue. Your job is to help your mentee process what happened, take accountability for whatever his part was, and move forward. Even if the DR was unjust, reacting to injustice with anger or acting out will only make things worse. Help him understand what he can control and what he can't.

"A CO asked me to 'handle' a situation in the dorm."

Coaching: This is actually a compliment — staff trust you enough to ask for help. But be careful. Don't become an unpaid CO. If the situation is within your scope — de-escalating a conflict, checking on someone who seems off, facilitating a conversation — do it. If it's enforcement — disciplining someone, searching, anything that involves staff authority — decline respectfully: "I can try to talk to him, but I can't do anything beyond that."

"I saw a CO do something I think was wrong — too aggressive, disrespectful, maybe worse."

Coaching: This is the hardest one. FORGE mentors are not in a position to confront staff about their behavior. But you're not powerless either. Document what you saw — date, time, what happened. If there's a grievance process, help the affected person access it. If it's a pattern, bring it to the program lead. Do not organize a group response. Do not confront the CO. Do not let your anger at an unjust system destroy the program that's your best tool for making things better.

Closing Circle (10 minutes)

Facilitator:

"This was a heavy one. Working with staff is complicated because it asks you to be patient with a system that doesn't always deserve your patience. But here's what I want you to hold onto: every time you handle a staff situation with composure and professionalism, you're proving — to yourself, to your mentees, to the staff, and to the administration — that FORGE produces men who can be trusted. That trust is the currency that keeps this program alive.

Closing round: What's one thing you're going to keep in mind this week when you interact with staff?"

Send the talking piece.

Facilitator (after the round):

"Wednesday and Thursday — full caseload. Three to five mentees. Community circles. You're in it. If something comes up with staff this week, handle it the way we discussed. And write about it. I want to hear about it next Tuesday.

Lead and Serve. See you out there."

Session 88 Checklist

- Room set up in circle
 - Opening circle completed — staff experience check-in
 - Field work review from previous week
 - Instruction delivered: FORGE's stance on staff authority
 - Five credibility-building strategies discussed
 - Skeptical staff — four-part response framework covered
 - Real scenarios from the field discussed (minimum 3)
 - Coaching provided on each scenario
 - Closing circle completed with specific commitments
 - Field work expectations set for Wednesday/Thursday
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SESSION 89: Field Work — Full Facilitation and Mentoring

Day: Wednesday **Duration:** 2 hours (in assigned area)

Field Work Plan

Participants facilitate sessions independently with full mentoring caseload (3-5 mentees). Periodic observation by Program Lead or Senior Mentor.

Observation Focus This Week: - How do participants interact with staff in the field? Are they respectful and professional? - Do they navigate staff presence during sessions smoothly? - If a staff interaction interrupts their session, how do they handle the transition?

Participant Expectations: - Facilitate planned session in assigned area - If there are staff interactions during the session, handle them per today's discussion - Self-reflection in journal: "How did I interact with staff today? What went well? What could I improve?"

SESSION 90: Field Work — Mentoring Meetings and Community Circles

Day: Thursday **Duration:** 2 hours (in assigned area)

Field Work Plan

Participants conduct one-on-one mentoring meetings with their full caseload and/or facilitate community circles.

Mentoring Meeting Guidance: - Full caseload contact this week — every mentee gets a meeting - Document all meetings in mentoring logs - If a mentee raises a staff-related concern, use this as a real-time opportunity to model the approach discussed in Session 88 - Continue using OARS in all mentoring conversations

Community Circle Guidance: - This week's suggested circle theme (optional — participants may choose their own): "How do we handle situations we can't control?" - Keep circles to 45-60 minutes - Document attendance, themes, energy level

Self-Reflection Prompt (journal): "This week I thought about my relationship with staff differently. One thing I realized about how I've been approaching staff interactions is..."

FACILITATOR NOTES FOR WEEK 30

What to Watch For

Staff relationship patterns. Pay attention to how each participant talks about staff during supervision. Some will default to resentment. Some will be too deferential. You're looking for participants who can be honest about the complexity — who can say "That CO was wrong, and I handled it by..." without either excusing the behavior or losing their composure.

Overcorrection. After this session, some participants may overcorrect — becoming too passive around staff, avoiding all interaction, or suppressing legitimate concerns. That's not the goal. The goal is confident, professional engagement. If you see someone becoming a doormat, address it: "Respecting authority doesn't mean disappearing. You can be respectful and still have a presence."

Undercorrection. Others may nod along in the session and then continue exactly as before — confrontational, dismissive, or avoidant with staff. Watch for this in field observations and address it directly.

Institutional dynamics. Be aware of any current tensions between inmates and staff at the facility level. If there's an ongoing issue — a lockdown, a policy change, a specific incident — acknowledge it. Pretending the institutional context doesn't exist will cost you credibility.

Common Challenges This Week

"**Why do we have to be the bigger person?**" This question will come up, maybe not in those words. The honest answer: "Because you're the one who's changed. Being the bigger person isn't weakness — it's the whole point of everything you've learned. And practically speaking, you have less power in this system than staff do. Using the power you do have — composure, credibility, skill — is how you create change from where you are."

"**FORGE should have more institutional support.**" Possibly true. But this session isn't about what FORGE should have — it's about working with what exists right now. If participants want to advocate for more institutional support, channel that energy productively: keep collecting data, keep producing results, keep building credibility.

Preparation for Week 31

- Prepare to discuss setbacks and failure with honesty and compassion
- Think about examples of mentees who struggled, relapsed, dropped out — and what happened afterward

- Review any current situations where a participant's mentee is struggling
- This is an emotionally heavy session. Be ready to hold space without rushing to reassurance