



# Managing labour relations in the correctional services: HR practitioner perspectives



## Authors:

Lene I. Graupner<sup>1</sup>   
Lesley I. Makau<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, WorkWell Research Unit, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Lene Graupner,  
lene.graupner@nwu.ac.za

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**Orientation:** Correctional services are high-stress, often violent environments marked by resource shortages, safety risks and deteriorating employee well-being. While much research focuses on the challenges faced by correctional officers, limited attention has been paid to human resource (HR) practitioners managing labour relations within this volatile context.

**Research purpose:** The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of HR practitioners working in labour relations management in the correctional services.

**Motivation for the study:** The study is motivated by the need to understand the impact of labour relations incidents as experienced by HR practitioners responsible for managing these practices in the correctional services.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative research approach was followed, implementing a qualitative descriptive design. A sample size of 21 participants was selected through purposive sampling. The data were gathered using semi-structured interviews; the recorded responses were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

**Main findings:** Three major themes emerged: frustration due to undervalued expertise and systemic constraints; emotional overload stemming from high job demands; and resistance to receiving constructive support.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The study recommends individual, group and organisational interventions as practical strategies to support HR practitioners in the DCS.

**Contribution/value-add:** The study emphasises the importance of providing support for HR practitioners managing taxing labour relations issues in the correctional services. Integrating mental health interventions into the context of labour relations management is essential for reducing the emotional toll on employees.

**Keywords:** labour relations; human resource management; correctional services; organisational culture; emotional well-being.

## Introduction

Correctional services represent a unique occupational context characterised by high-stress levels and demanding work conditions (Miller et al., 2024). Botha and Pienaar (2006) report that South African officials in the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) experience stressors such as insufficient resources, notably inadequate salaries, staffing shortages, limited recognition and motivation, and physical threats. Declining correctional officer well-being is a problem that transcends international borders, as numerous studies worldwide have reported declining health (Gist, 2020; Gist et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2024).

Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) suggest that organisations capable of effectively managing stress and enhancing employee resilience are defined as high-reliability organisations. These organisations create adaptive capacity and resilience among employees, enabling them to withstand and quickly recover from stressful experiences. Conversely, organisations that cannot cultivate these attributes may encounter significant negative outcomes, including burnout, exhaustion and a deteriorating organisational culture (Vltmer et al., 2018). Consequently, safeguarding employees' capacity to cope with and adapt to intensive job demands through sufficient job resources is key for organisations aiming to support employee well-being and maintain organisational effectiveness (Mazzetti et al., 2023). Human capital remains critical in all sectors (Gist et al., 2023), particularly in the DCS, where officials ensure security and manage inmates. Human resource (HR) professionals play a key role in an organisation while managing multiple functions

(Paauwe & Boon, 2018). Armstrong (2021) states that HR practitioners typically fulfil various roles, such as change agent and labour relations management. It is therefore imperative to examine how HR practitioners experience managing labour relations effectively and maintaining their well-being.

## Research purpose

The study's objective was to gain insights into how HR practitioners in the DCS experience managing labour relations incidents.

## Literature review

The essence of human resource management (HRM) is that organisational goals and human needs should be compatible (Kokt, 2023). Human resource management primarily focuses on implementing policies and systems to oversee employees in the workplace (Paauwe & Boon, 2018). Human resource management plays an important role in organisations by developing policies and programmes, stimulating growth, balancing individual and organisational needs, and contributing to long-term organisational performance (Kokt, 2023). By establishing a positive work culture and enhancing employee engagement, HRM drives productivity and positions the organisation to achieve long-term strategic goals (South African Board for People Practices [SABPP], 2024). The People Practices and Governance Standard (PPGS), introduced by the SABPP in 2023 as an update to its HR standards model (Kokt, 2023), depicts employment relations management in its architecture as a critical competency for HR professionals to excel in their roles (SABPP, 2024). Employee or labour relations, which focus on the ongoing relational processes between employers and employees, can incorporate interpersonal processes or broader interactions, including trade unions, legislative compliance and collective bargaining (Finnemore, 2013). Labour relations represent a specialised function within the broader domain of HRM, primarily concerned with preventing and resolving employee-related issues. For HR practitioners, a comprehensive understanding of labour relations is essential, given its significant impact on employee management practices and organisational climate (Muller, 2025). In larger organisations, such as the DCS, labour relations responsibilities are often delegated to dedicated specialists or entire teams within the HR function. Nhlapo (2020) identifies five significant roles of HR practitioners essential for effective functioning within the public service: strategic, administrative, change management, employee relations and learning and development. In the White Paper on HRM in the Public Service (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997), labour relations are recognised as an area requiring intensified engagement, which was a particular focus during the decentralisation of services. Subsequently, in the new Public Service Framework established on the 01 July 1999, government departments and provincial administrations were established as independent employers because an urgent need to strengthen labour relations

capacities through dedicated skilling initiatives had to be addressed (Nhlapo, 2020). This transition demanded a more strategic, empowered HR function that could navigate the complexities of decentralised labour relations frameworks.

The constructs of this study were examined through the lens of two theoretical approaches, system theory and conservation of resource theory (COR). Initially introduced by Dunlop (1958), systems theory views industrial relations as a subsystem within the broader social system. According to this theory, workplace relations are governed by formal and informal rules covering various employment matters, including recruitment, wages, hours and performance. The model views industrial relations as a self-regulating system, where changes in one component impact the others, driving the system towards equilibrium (Abbot, 2006). The ability to navigate these challenges is important for the HR field, as labour relations incidents often involve psychological and organisational dimensions that may extend beyond the scope of existing policies or conflict-resolution frameworks. According to Armstrong (2021), HR professionals serve several roles, including business partner, change agent, custodian, internal consultant and strategist of organisational values. This multifaceted role expands the scope of work for HR practitioners, especially when they encounter situations where discrepancies between employee behaviour or organisational decisions and company values need to be addressed. Armstrong (2021) posits that balancing these responsibilities can be challenging within contexts such as labour relations, where organisational and professional values may compete. Wallo and Coetzer (2022) state that HR practitioners' daily work is fragmented, reactive and dominated by operational tasks rather than strategic work. In their study, Gumbie et al. (2023) identified bureaucratic systems as challenges in effective HRM. The absence of flexibility limits HR's ability to act as a strategic partner, often reducing its role to that of procedural compliance rather than proactive management. Rabeng (2003) found that managers and supervisors within the DCS are often inadequately equipped to manage employee relations effectively. This study highlights the need for comprehensive labour relations training to form an integral part of correctional college curricula.

Including labour relations as part of the correctional college curricula is critical for both operational personnel and HR professionals, as the correctional services system in South Africa offers a difficult and high-pressure setting. Apart from the physical and psychological strains imposed on correctional officers (Gist, 2023), HR specialists, particularly those in charge of labour relations, must deal with regular disciplinary hearings, complaints, absence cases and interpersonal issues (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). As occurrences are frequently caused by the stressful and hierarchical atmosphere of the workplace, conflicts between management, employees and organised labour are prevalent (Miller et al., 2024). In this context, HR practitioners are not only policymakers but also important mediators of the climate and employee morale (Paauwe & Boon, 2018). Understanding the elements that drive job

engagement and motivation among these professionals is critical because their capacity to effectively manage labour relations has a direct impact on institutional stability, staff retention and service delivery, among other factors.

The COR, developed by Stevan Hobfoll (1989), explains human motivation through resource management (Radford, 2024). It emphasises that individuals prioritise conserving and acquiring resources to mitigate stress and anxiety associated with resource loss (Radford, 2024). In HRM, the theory provides insights into maximising productivity by understanding how employees value resources. This principle highlights *investment for protection*, where employees invest in resources to ward off potential losses, which illustrates the proactive nature of individuals in safeguarding their job security and development (Radford, 2024, p. 60). This suggests that organisations must carefully balance workloads to ensure additional responsibilities do not detract from the perceived benefits. Resource depletion can lead to defensive actions, impacting organisational culture (Radford, 2024). To mitigate employees' perception of the workplace as a source of distress, it is important to provide sufficient job resources, which can serve as a buffer against such challenges. This is illustrated in the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, which explains the dynamic interplay between adequate job resources and the job demands at hand (Mazzetti et al., 2023). This interplay is especially important for HR practitioners, especially those managing emotionally demanding labour relations incidents, as they are directly exposed to heightened emotional stressors.

Bhoodram (2010) highlights that correctional service officers face a challenging work environment with rising job demands. South (2025) highlights the complex roles correctional officers must perform daily, navigating between compassion and discipline while adhering to strict rules. Officers must exercise significant interpersonal skill, as building strong relationships with inmates can be crucial in de-escalating tensions, preventing confrontations and even averting fatal outcomes. Reports of the high-risk nature of the work show reports of incidents of serious physical assaults (Radebe, 2025; South, 2025). Beyond physical harm, the long-term psychological trauma experienced by officers is profound and far more difficult to quantify. Recent years have seen multiple violent attacks on correctional officers in South Africa (Dlamini, 2019; Radebe, 2025). The DCS has acknowledged the problem, and employee representatives continue to press for faster implementation of safety improvements. This is further compounded by uncertainty regarding their authority, responsibilities and overextension (Bhoodram, 2010). Furthermore, international studies report correctional officers experience burnout, job stress and organisational stressors such as high workload (Evers et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2024). Juvenile correctional officers in the United States (US) experiencing job stress reported high turnover rates (Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2021), and 57% of Canadian correctional service employees tested positive for at least one mental health disorder (Ricciardelli et al., 2024). While literature highlights the demanding nature of correctional officials' work, the scarcity of recent studies

focusing on HR practitioners managing labour relations in the correctional services context reveals a research gap. Therefore, this study explored the experiences of HR practitioners in the DCS with a specific focus on managing labour relations incidents.

## Research design

The research method followed in this study is discussed next.

### Research approach

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the experiences of HR practitioners in managing labour relations within the DCS. Guided by a social constructivist paradigm, semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants' work environments. A qualitative descriptive design was used to explore the experiences of HR practitioners in the DCS.

### Research strategy

The study commenced after obtaining the necessary approvals from the tertiary institution, followed by written permission from the DCS. Data collection occurred in the HR function of a correctional centre in Gauteng after the researcher informed potential participants from the HR department about the study's objectives. Upon consenting, participants received details regarding the time and place of their semi-structured interviews, which were held in a boardroom at the facility. Once the interviews were completed, the researchers transcribed and analysed the data to finalise the research report.

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

After obtaining ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty, a letter requiring permission to conduct the study was sent to the head of the DCS in Gauteng. Following permission from the correctional facility, an invitation letter was sent to the HR department, inviting HR practitioners to participate in the study. An information session was subsequently scheduled, during which the study's objectives, providing written consent and voluntary participation were discussed. Interviews were scheduled with interested participants according to their availability on-site. The researchers served multiple roles, including planner, data collector, analyst and writer. Responsibilities included preparing the proposal, obtaining permissions, conducting semi-structured interviews, transcribing and analysing data with a co-coder, and writing the final report.

### Research participants and sampling methods

Human resource practitioners whose dedicated function includes managing labour relations incidents within the DCS at a Gauteng correctional facility were invited to participate in the study. These practitioners function within a dedicated unit in the HR department. The practitioners had to have at least 1 year of relevant HR experience in a South African correctional facility. A total of 21 participants ( $N = 21$ ) were included based on data saturation, comprising 47.62% males and 52.38%

females, with the majority aged 40–49 years. Twenty participants were Setswana-speaking, and one spoke English.

### Data collection

Semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45 minutes to one hour, were used to collect data, providing ample opportunity to probe and elaborate on participants' responses. The following interview questions were posed to the participants:

- How do you experience managing labour relations incidents?
- What type of labour relations incidents do you manage?
  - Can you give a detailed description of what happened?
- What are the challenges you experience managing labour relations incidents?
  - What actions did you take in response to the incident? (refer to specific incidents).
  - What was your mindset during the incident?
  - What were your thoughts during and after the incident?
  - What were your feelings during and after the incident?
  - What did you find the most demanding aspect of the incident?
  - What has this incident meant to you since?

The sample size obtained to reach data saturation was 21 participants ( $N = 21$ ). When the sample size reached eight participants, data saturation was reached. However, the researcher felt the need to conduct further interviews to obtain rich data. Data saturation refers to the point in the study when sufficient data have been gathered to draw an inference about the participants' experiences (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### Data analysis

After the data were electronically recorded, all the responses were transcribed and captured on an Excel sheet. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data from the interviews. The qualitative analysis process involved the researchers manually reading through the data, identifying recurring themes and interpreting the meaning of these themes (Creswell, 2014). This method ensured an exploration of significant patterns of the participants' experiences of managing labour relations in the DCS while adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidelines for developing distinct and rich themes. The findings were presented in a narrative, supported by evidence (direct responses from participants), to address the research objective.

### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

By ensuring credibility through member checking, familiarisation with the organisational culture and validating findings with participants, an accurate representation was confirmed. According to Harper and Cole (2012), one notable benefit of applying member checking is that it allows researchers to affirm the legitimacy of their findings. In this study, transcripts of their interviews were returned to participants to verify whether they accurately reflected their responses, and no corrections were required. Transferability was addressed by detailing

the study's context and ensuring comprehensive data collection, enabling readers to relate findings to similar situations. Confirmability was strengthened by engaging an external expert in qualitative research, an academic in industrial psychology, to review and validate the themes, ensuring they were grounded in the collected data. The expert received a copy of the data sheet, which included the identified themes and supporting quotes. After reviewing the material, the expert provided comments for the researchers to consider, suggesting the merging of specific themes and identifying potential new sub-themes.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Economic and Management Science's Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC). The study was approved and awarded the ethics number NWU-00668-22-A4. Researchers must adhere to fundamental ethical principles, including respect, non-maleficence, beneficence, integrity and justice (Levitt et al., 2018). In line with Creswell's (2014) guidelines, this study adhered to ethical protocols by ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity, in accordance with the *Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)*. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and guidelines were in place to prevent harm and collect only relevant data.

## Results

The data were organised into sets of themes and sub-themes, including the participants' direct responses. As the data were collected in English, no translation was required. The findings reflected three themes, which were termed frustration, emotional load and resistance to receiving constructive support (Figure 1):

### Theme 1: Undervalued expertise and systemic constraints

This theme captures participants' recurring sense of frustration and disempowerment arising from their professional counsel being disregarded, cumbersome decision-making processes and resistance to more adaptive, innovative practices. These factors create an environment in which HR practitioners feel undervalued, hindered by resource mismanagement and constrained by employees' (especially supervisors') resistance to adopting a more flexible working procedure. This theme highlights how the experiences of managing labour relations in the DCS contribute to the participants' feelings of frustration and disempowerment. The theme comprised three sub-themes, (i.e.) dismissed counsel, challenges in workplace decision-making and resistance to innovation.

*Dismissed counsel:* Participants reported that their recommendations were often dismissed, particularly by senior management. The participants shared the frustration that arises from being unable to influence decision-making despite having valuable insights or expertise, as can be seen from the following excerpts:

| Theme 1:<br>Undervalued<br>expertise and<br>systemic constraints   | Theme 2:<br>Emotional load  | Theme 3:<br>Resistance<br>to receiving<br>constructive support  |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dismissed counsel</li> <li>Challenges in workplace decision-making</li> <li>Resistance to innovation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Job strain</li> <li>High job demands</li> <li>Stigma attached to the job</li> <li>Work-home spillover</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resistance to training and legislative updates</li> <li>Lack of insight</li> <li>Authority problems</li> <li>Resource mismanagement</li> </ul> |

Source: Adapted from: Makau, L.I. (2023). Exploring the experiences of human resource practitioners managing labour relations incidents in the correctional services. Unpublished master's mini-dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus

FIGURE 1: Themes and sub-themes.

'Going through what has transpired in these incidents, I find myself referring more serious cases to be handled by labour representatives before a formal process is necessary. The issue is that senior management tends to disregard advice from lower-ranked staff, while junior management [SCOs] generally do not face this issue when offering input.' (Participant 2, Female)

'I frequently find myself advising the management area on anticipated sanctions, but my advice is ignored due to the high emotions at the time. Eventually, the employee wins the case.' (Participant 10, Female)

*Challenges in workplace decision-making:* The data revealed significant frustration among participants regarding a culture of over-formalisation, which hinders swift resolution of workplace matters and contributes to employee frustration and resource mismanagement, as can be seen from the responses by Participant 9 (Male) and Participant 4 (Male):

'I feel that I am frustrated about a lot of things or, much rather, the way in which things are done. In a lot of instances, I find that protracted matters that shouldn't even be dealt with using this platform are handled this way, and even then, issues that should take no more than 30 minutes to resolve take an entire day or even a week due to them being politicised unnecessarily.' (Participant 9, Male)

'It differs, in some cases, there really isn't a need to have hearings. For example, in some instances where the employee just merely needed to be sensitised about the process, the employer opted to have a formal hearing, or in instances where there really was no need for this platform, which abuses state resources unnecessarily.' (Participant 4, Male)

*Resistance to innovation:* The findings highlight frustrations stemming from outdated organisational practices and resistance to adopting more flexible, modern solutions to workplace issues. An issue of organisational stagnation and the frustration that arises from the failure to embrace more innovative or adaptive approaches were reflected in the data. This lack of flexibility not only limits potential improvements but also diminishes morale and creates a sense of disempowerment among the participants who are striving for more effective solutions, as can be seen from the following response:

'For example, I would propose that rather than taking leave without pay, let's rather do a lesser sanction. But they would refuse. So, they do not make room for working smarter which in turn frustrates the officials involved.' (Participant 10, Female)

Similarly, Participant 13 expressed dissatisfaction with the employer's reluctance to modernise, as described next:

'The employer is stuck in its old ways of doing things, so in a world that has modern solutions to existing problems we are still employing dated ineffective strategies to go about the day which feels counterintuitive and very frustrating.' (Participant 13, Female)

## Theme 2: Emotional load

The second theme that emerged reflected the emotional load carried by HR practitioners when managing labour relations. The emotional load was reflected by factors such as a lack of psychological support while feeling overburdened with high workloads. Participants also reported facing social and cultural stigma challenges when enforcing dismissals. It seemed that the emotional burden extended beyond work hours, as participants found themselves carrying unresolved cases and stress into their personal lives. The following sub-themes emerged from the main theme, namely job strain, high job demands, stigma attached to the job and work-home spillover.

*Job strain:* The findings showed participants reporting job strain from emotional stress, especially as the disciplinary incidents resulted in dismissals. The participants noted an absence of sufficient support, where they felt overburdened, with no provisions for psychological support despite the emotional toll of handling complex cases. The following excerpts from Participants 7 highlight some of the systemic issues of inadequate support structures, insufficient staffing and emotionally taxing workplace dynamics:

'...there is no support, in fact, they do not even care that you have other work to finalise, they will tell you that someone needs someone from HR to be there so you have to leave whatever you were busy with, attend the hearing and come back and try to catch up. So, support in that regard is not there, we are understaffed, we are overworked and we have too much ... We do not have any type of psychological support, they feel that we need to be strong and it is part of our job and it needs to be done but the psychological impact that cases have on us ... it is a bit tough on us.' (Participant 7, Male)

*High job demands:* The findings reveal significant challenges faced by the participants tasked with high workloads and conflicting responsibilities. Participant 17 (Female) reflected:

'I am the only [employee assistance programme] EAP in the Johannesburg region so I find that I have extremely, too many cases, than it is possible to manage' highlighting the systemic issues of low availability of resources and unrealistic expectations. (Participant 17, Female)

Another participant mentioned:

'Because the members are always trying to push the buck to each other which makes it quite hard to finalise my cases. I find that in most cases as a result I am fighting with the official, and reminding them they need to provide me with the information I require so I can do my work. Dealing with people daily but coming from a negative connotation as perceived by them,

is quite frustrating and is constantly draining. Additionally, my manager requires me to frequently undertake tasks that are both internal as well as external, it does not become possible to complete my investigations in time and essentially sets me up for failure.' (Participant 11, Female)

*Stigma attached to the job:* The findings highlight the significant social and cultural challenges faced by the participants in disciplinary roles, particularly the stigma and relational strain associated with fulfilling these duties. These findings reveal a pervasive culture of stigmatisation and relational conflict in workplace disciplinary processes, as highlighted by the following participants:

'Another issue is that even if members are trained as disciplining members, most of them do not want to be seen in that manner due to the stigma attached, for example dismissing someone for committing fraud because you may be regarded as a person who doesn't care for others. So, the culture is that you get blackmailed instead of looking at the real facts.' (Participant 5, Male)

'Although I do not have control over how the next person perceives me, sometimes you feel that the line of duty you are in causing relationship problems with colleagues and you are perceived as an evil person whereas I am just doing my job.' (Participant 21, Female)

*Work-home spillover:* The subtheme emerged, indicating a lack of balance resulting in task spillover into the home domain, as reported next:

'A case which could have been dealt with at work now requires me to go home and use my personal resources at my family's time in order to help officials.' (Participant 12, Male)

Setting boundaries between work and personal life were highlighted, as well as providing adequate support within the workplace to ensure that employees are not overwhelmed or forced to carry work-related burdens into their personal time:

'... one needs to offload, one can't just carry all this load and then just take it home because it spills over there as well. So even with the employee wellness day, there is no facility where this is addressed, you just go there to check your BP, which doesn't help because we are not addressing the things that increased it in the first place psychologically.' (Participant 8, Male)

### Theme 3: Resistance to receiving constructive support

The third theme reflects on how participants encountered a lack of support systems in managing labour relations incidents. The theme highlights the reluctance among employees the HR practitioners worked with to engage with updated policies or training initiatives, leading to the participants feeling that their expertise is undervalued. The data show a mindset wherein employees refused constructive support from the HR practitioners managing labour relations in the DCS. The participants indicated they observed supervisory-level issues being escalated unnecessarily, contributing to a punitive rather than corrective climate. The theme led to the following sub-themes: resistance to training and legislative updates,

a lack of insight, authority problems and resource mismanagement.

*Resistance to training and legislative updates:* The data show a gap between developing new policies and educating employees because a reluctance to learn new skills was reported. The data show concern regarding the resistance of certain employees to undergo training or receive advice in various aspects of labour relations, such as initiating cases and investigating and chairing related matters, as stated by Participant 1 and Participant 2:

'...and the unwillingness of employee/s to be capacitated in the handling [*investigation, initiating and chairing*] labour relations matters. Employee relations practitioners are not capacitated with new labour relations developments wherein some amendments were promulgated with regard to the legislative framework. Aligning the new development with the current policies.' (Participant 1, Female)

'The other issue is that people in senior ranks tend to look down on receiving advice from someone who may be a lower rank than they, however the same issue does not exist with SCOs [*junior management rank*] going down generally.' (Participant 2, Female)

*Lack of insight:* The participants reported that several challenges existed that related to a mindset of staff, which can be described as resistance to accepting help. Participants found that a lack of insight was evident because the corrective potential of discipline was not considered, nor were they open to external support. Instead, they view discipline primarily as punishment and resist measures that could address issues more effectively. One participant pointed to the need to shift managerial perspectives on discipline, viewing it as a corrective rather than a punitive measure:

'And changing the mindset of managers that discipline is a corrective measure not punitive, however, each matter should be judged on its own merits.' (Participant 1, Female)

Participant 5 elaborated on the challenges faced in supporting employees through the employee assistance programme (EAP). They described situations where employees, such as supervisors, failed to have insight into personal problems such as substance abuse. Despite confidential support being offered through the EAP, some employees rejected the help or blamed their employer rather than addressing their personal issues, thereby undermining the potential effectiveness of such interventions:

'What makes my job difficult is when a person doesn't want to admit that they are having a serious problem that needs attention. You might find that a person is drinking too much, but after organising an EAP for that person, the person does not take the intervention seriously even though the EAP consultation is confidential. For example, one supervisor went with their officials to an EAP, however there was no improvement when I decided to be part of the process. Only to find that the official does not want to admit that they are having serious problems but instead are blaming the employer.' (Participant 5, Male)

*Authority problems:* The findings showed that issues that could have been addressed on the supervisory-level were unnecessarily escalated and deemed unnecessarily punitive. This theme revealed that rank was a contributor to whether or not suggestions or ideas were accepted or rejected, despite their merit, as can be seen from the following responses:

'Our department could honestly do better. There is room for improvement quite a lot. Those who represent the employer even though they are technically just employees like everyone else, tends to behave in such a way that causes frustration to the lower ranking employees in that instead of placing the agenda forward of pushing the DCS' mandate of rehabilitation and security, they are more preoccupied with showing the juniors that they have power. So, I find myself dealing with a lot of issues that result from misuse, or abuse of this power.' (Participant 12, Female)

'The other challenge I have seen in our department is that they do not have a resolution mindset, but rather a punitive mindset which makes our job even harder because as labour relations practitioners we are supposed to be mitigating however, I do not see that happening. Rank is a somewhat contributor, but mostly it's due to not liking the other person for one's own petty reasons. So, the culture is mainly the issue.' (Participant 3, Female)

*Resource mismanagement:* The findings highlight concerns about the inefficiency and financial cost of disciplinary processes, particularly when such cases are unnecessarily escalated to formal hearings. The data show the need for more cost-effective and proportionate approaches to disciplinary matters.

Participant 9 opined that these processes came at a significant expense to the state, suggesting that the misuse of disciplinary platforms not only impacted organisational efficiency but also wasted public resources:

'Mind you all this happens at the expense of the state.' (Participant 9, Male)

Participant 10 elaborated on the associated costs, describing disciplinary hearings' logistical and financial implications. The participants showed concern that resources that may already be regarded as limited were fruitlessly wasted:

'This is frustrating in that for something to go to a disciplinary hearing it wastes state resources because it has went a long way, which translates into money lost by the state. Remember the initiators and chairpersons are not supposed to be from the same management area, the associated costs include, petrol allowances from Limpopo or even KZN, accommodation, food, and other allowances. Only to find that the case itself is not serious enough to go through to a disciplinary process, however as the management area feels it should go that way, it frequently does. Only to find that the case will be won by the employee in arbitration anyways.' (Participant 10, Female)

## Discussion

### Outline of the findings

The study's findings highlight the frustration and disempowerment of the HR practitioners when managing

labour relations in the DCS. In particular, the participants felt overlooked and their expertise undervalued as HR practitioners providing support in the labour relations function. They reported feeling constrained by employees' resistance to adopting a more flexible working procedure when dealing with disciplinary issues. They experienced a high emotional load stemming from high job demands and described the organisational culture as predominantly punitive, rather than corrective. The findings highlight a need for better screening of labour relations incidents and improved policy compliance practices.

Ntsiful et al. (2018) state that workplace frustration arises when employees feel obstructed from achieving their goals, often because of communication breakdowns (Ntsiful et al., 2018). Such frustration can lead to anger, disappointment and stress, negatively impacting job satisfaction and performance (Ntsiful et al., 2018). In this study, the participants elaborated on this dynamic by reporting that they felt 'not heard' and that their time was wasted, amplifying their frustration. Participants also reported high job strain, referring to a heavy emotional load from continual conflict mediation between managers and employees. They described significant emotional pressure stemming from these demands, with no available psychological support or relief measures. The findings revealed work-home spillover, indicating a broader emotional load. In addition, a stigma surrounds HR practitioners' labour relations work, mainly because of its association with disciplinary processes against colleagues. The managers the participants worked with were sometimes reluctant to acquire new skills, indicating a lack of capacity to implement new policies effectively. These findings align with the JD-R theory (Mazzetti et al., 2023). Unmitigated emotional demands deplete emotional, cognitive and physical energy, resulting in exhaustion and burnout (Mazzetti et al., 2023). Individuals experiencing a state of exhaustion are more vulnerable to stress, causing difficulties in initiating sleep and other health-related issues.

The findings revealed that participants experienced their jobs as stressful; some participants attributed this to a punitive culture rather than a corrective approach. The participants reflected on their experiences of how supervisory-level issues are escalated unnecessarily when they could have been addressed in a corrective and supportive climate. Literature states that a punitive workplace culture often serves as a trigger for a high-stress environment, contributing to an increased sense of job demands (Konteh et al., 2023). Crawley (2004) states that constant exposure to danger and a lack of institutional support tend to harden staff attitudes, leading to emotional distance and suspicion, which could lead to punitive responses to both inmates and fellow staff.

From a systems theory viewpoint, research highlights that challenges within a correctional services environment are not isolated events but interconnected issues that influence the entire organisational ecosystem (Muller-Jentsch, 2004). Systems theory emphasises the interdependence of individual employees, departments, policies and procedures, suggesting

that changes in one aspect of the system can have significant cascading effects elsewhere. Key implications include inadequate policy alignment, punitive disciplinary approaches and high emotional demands on HR practitioners, which are not merely individual issues. Instead, they reverberate through the entire network of relationships (Muller-Jentsch, 2004). In order to create sustainable improvements, interventions should address the entire organisational structure, policies, leadership behaviours and resource allocation. The research suggests balancing job demands and available resources is crucial for system stability. From a systems viewpoint, introducing counterbalancing measures (e.g. improved resource allocation, clarified procedures, enhanced support services) can restore equilibrium and strengthen the overall system's resilience. A punitive workplace culture negatively affects the entire organisational system by producing a harmful feedback loop where stress and fear lead to disengagement, reduced performance and higher turnover. Systems theory suggests that, in order to break this cycle, organisations need to create positive feedback loops through supportive leadership, open communication and the provision of resources for employee growth (Mazzetti et al., 2023).

The conservation of resources theory (Radford, 2024) states that organisations must carefully balance workloads to ensure that additional responsibilities do not detract from perceived benefits. Resource depletion can lead to defensive actions, impacting organisational culture (Radford, 2024). From a conservation of resources standpoint, interventions that replenish or strengthen resources can mitigate high emotional load and enhance resiliency. Providing job resources such as supportive leadership, emotional debriefing opportunities, skill-enhancing training, and fair, transparent policies gives HR practitioners the means to offset high job demands (Radford, 2024). Poor decision-making often involves failing to consider pertinent information, including key stakeholders, or allowing biased or incomplete data to guide decisions, resulting in wasted resources, missed opportunities and negative outcomes (James et al., 2022). Ineffective leadership promotes conflict and reduces accountability, often because of inadequate delegation (Çoban, 2022). Resource misallocation also fuels mismanagement. Consequently, it is in the organisation's best interest to address the demands placed on employees, such as emotional strain and job stress, or at least offset these pressures through access to adequate job resources. According to Mazzetti et al. (2023), employees are more motivated to achieve their goals with sufficient job resources.

## Practical implications

The insights gathered from this research suggest several concrete interventions and improvements that the DCS and similar organisations can implement to enhance the availability of resources and address the demands faced by HR practitioners in managing labour relations. Figure 2 provides an overview of the three intervention levels and the practical implications of the study:

## Individual-level interventions

Job crafting encourages HR practitioners to redefine their roles, focusing on tasks they find meaningful and reducing emotional strain. In addition, job rotation could be considered where the HR practitioners regularly shift between similar-level roles to enhance their skills and to expose them to more uplifting work environments. Emotional intelligence training could equip HR practitioners and managers to communicate more effectively and self-regulate during conflicts. This could especially be beneficial in reducing punitive tendencies. Employee assistance programmes provide counselling and support for HR practitioners under high emotional load and can also explore ways to address work-home spillover. This could further contribute to supporting HR practitioners in managing frustration levels and feelings of disempowerment. Training and development opportunities offer relevant job-related guidance so that HR practitioners can effectively manage labour relations incidents.

## Team-level interventions

Team-building activities could assist in improving communication, building resilience and strengthening peer support. Peer support networks and debriefing sessions could provide much-needed spaces for HR practitioners to discuss and process work challenges. Mediation and conflict-resolution training reframe difficult situations from punitive confrontations to constructive dialogue. Equipping both HR practitioners and managers with effective communication and conflict-resolution strategies can help to ensure that HR practitioners' contributions are heard and taken seriously, mitigating feelings of underappreciation. Supervisor support ensures that managers develop emotional intelligence, communication and supportive leadership competencies. Ensuring supervisors are trained in supportive leadership helps them recognise and affirm HR practitioners' contributions, thereby improving perceptions of being valued.

## Organisational-level interventions

Organisational interventions must prioritise a drive to develop conflict competence by emphasising core values and norms that support a constructive approach to conflict

| Individual level interventions  | Team level interventions   | Organisational level interventions  |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job crafting</li> <li>• Job rotation</li> <li>• Emotional intelligence training</li> <li>• EAP programmes</li> <li>• Training and development</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team development</li> <li>• Collegial support</li> <li>• Mediation and conflict management training</li> <li>• Supervisory support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR policies and procedures</li> <li>• Workplace culture assessment</li> <li>• Resource allocation</li> </ul> |

Source: Adapted from: Makau, L.I. (2023). Exploring the experiences of human resource practitioners managing labour relations incidents in the correctional services. Unpublished master's mini-dissertation, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus

Note: Interventions are directly applicable to the DCS.

EAP, employee assistance programme; HR, human resource.

**FIGURE 2:** Three intervention-level approaches to address resources and demands in the Department of Correctional Services.

resolution. To achieve this, management and supervisor training programmes focused on effective conflict management are essential, ensuring that issues are addressed at the appropriate managerial level rather than being reflexively referred to HR. Structured mediation practices should be introduced to resolve conflicts before escalating, reducing emotional strain on HR practitioners. A review of HR policies is necessary, with a particular focus on establishing clear and consistent rules for managing disciplinary enquiries and grievances. Policies regarding sanctions for specific categories of offences must be clearly defined and strictly adhered to, ensuring transparency and accountability in all disciplinary processes.

### Limitations

The interpretative nature of qualitative research is relevant to this study, as it highlights the richness and potential subjectivity inherent in analysing participants' perspectives. Because the findings rely on the researcher's interpretation of interview data, there is a risk of researcher bias or misrepresentation of participants' viewpoints. This was addressed by implementing strategies such as member checking and expert reviews to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. The study was conducted within correctional services, a context that may differ significantly from other public-sector or private-sector organisational environments. Another limitation stems from the language used in the study. While all interviews were conducted in English, participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, which may have influenced their responses. Future research could enhance generalisability by employing random sampling with larger participant groups.

### Recommendations

Integrating mental health interventions into the labour relations management context is essential for reducing the emotional toll on employees. By embedding support mechanisms into policies, providing tailored training, utilising technology and focusing on a culture of well-being, the organisation can enhance the well-being of HR practitioners. These efforts align with Guest's (2017) emphasis on prioritising employee well-being as a cornerstone of sustainable HRM. As part of the practical implications of the study, individual, group and organisational-level interventions are suggested to effectively address workplace incidents such as those revealed in the findings of this study (Giga et al., 2018).

### Conclusion

This research explored the experiences of HR practitioners in managing labour relations incidents within the DCS. The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges HR practitioners face, including frustration with ignored expert advice and high emotional strain. The results also revealed a pervasive culture of punishment, characterised by unrealistic expectations and ineffective management practices. Addressing these issues through

a three-intervention-level approach on a holistic level is advisable.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

L.I.M. conducted this study as part of his master's studies, and was responsible for the data collection, data analysis, interpretation and writing of the dissertation; L.I.G. is a professor and supervisor of the study, and responsible for the data analysis and interpretation, as well as writing up the article for publication purposes.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, L.I.G., upon reasonable request. The data are collated in Excel sheets and password-protected. A link can be sent to access the data on Google drive.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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