

CS15 - HMP DORCHESTER SMT AND WALL HISTORY

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Context

The Senior Management Team (SMT) was one of the areas of concern that had been identified by the Governor in 2003 if he was to succeed in turning around HMP Dorchester, a local prison in the south west of England (see CS14). The Governor, Steve Holland, had a vision for the prison to be a Centre of Excellence for Resettlement, with a healthy and happy staff group surpassing expectations for local prison work. However at an off-site meeting with Prison Dialogue at their offices in Chipping Campden, he realised that the way his Senior Management Team (SMT) operated was ineffective, and he “could see a pattern where he was at the centre of the wheel and each of his reports related to him like the spokes of a wheel”. This in effect meant that he was directly involved in all decision making, which filled his days and left him little time to plan and manage strategically.

Due to very poor operational performance, the Prison was subject to a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) and had 18 months in which to make significant changes to the running of the prison or it would be privatised.

Aims and Objectives

Without reforming his SMT, the Governor could not make his vision into a reality. He realised that he needed to change some SMT members and new recruit people with the right experience, skills and style. He saw that he needed to change the roles of others and to improve their capacity and skill levels in order to create a decision-making team, and give him the space to lead more strategically.

The Governor and his SMT needed to develop a working vision to address the abysmal levels of operational performance in many areas across the prison. They then needed a strategy to actively engage the staff to make the necessary changes to the operational practices if the prison was to improve performance and meet the requirements of the Performance Improvement Plan.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

Once the Governor had assembled his SMT team, three off-site meetings were held for them at the PD offices, and on-going coaching support was provided by PD to individual team members between the sessions. In the first session they took stock of their history, current situation and the future they wanted to create. This was done by together creating a Wall History of HMP Dorchester on flip charts. The first member of the team to work at Dorchester started telling the history at the point that they arrived, describing the situation and their experiences along with key incidents at the prison and in the Prison Service. Newer members came in chronologically until everyone had added to the story, the most recent being the Deputy Governor who had joined HMP Dorchester a few weeks previously. People literally signed the Wall History to signify signing into the story at the time they joined HMP Dorchester. This activity provided an opportunity to share knowledge, understanding and experiences. It bound the SMT in a common story and helped them to understand why the staff they were leading behaved the way they did. One of the Senior Managers said: "The SMT Away-days...gave me a real feel for Dorchester past and present in my first month in post. The result was that I had a clear vision for where the whole SMT and the whole prison wanted to be".

The subsequent off-site meeting involved creating a simple but profound strategy. Although many areas were under-performing, others were doing well, and it was difficult to get clear about what needed to change where. The four step strategy for progress was: Comply, Perform, Serve, Shine. Areas were then defined as to where they were on this progression, and what was needed to take them to the next level. At the third off-site at the PD offices there was an analysis of the different staff groupings which enabled different approaches to be taken with different groupings of people. This identified and shifted one particularly cynical group of uniformed staff, and that accelerated the overall recovery.

Outcomes

The SMT shifted identity from being dominantly me and operating as individuals, to them as they externalised the problems they faced, to us having a shared ownership of shaping the future of the prison. As one SMT member said: "We have a stronger and more cohesive SMT approach".

Developing a working vision enabled managers to set a measurable progressive path to address the variable levels of performance across the prison. The progressive strategy was used extensively: Comply (without which the prison was penalised), Perform (do what is expected to the highest possible standard), Serve (work in the service of others and of the community) and Shine (be a beacon - the best in class across the prison service).

Significant performance improvements were achieved and the prison moved from being ranked 135th of 136 prisons in 2004 to being ranked 35th in 2006

One SMT member said: "I feel I am part of an organisation that's serious about developing its future; it's good to be part of a system that has a sense of pride and a much sharper focus on quality development, moving the prison forward".

Learning

This was the first time that PD had worked with a whole prison and worked exclusively with staff and managers to address their needs. The cascade model started with the Governor, and then his SMT. One SMT member said:" there's much greater understanding of why change is needed now although there's still some resistance. We're certainly going forward with much greater confidence".

Having the sponsorship of the Prison Service Area Manager (the Governor's line manager) provided PD with additional status and authority to affect the situation. This was established in the first meeting PD had with the Area Manager and the Governor together.