

CS40 - DOC VIRGINIA DIALOGUE PRACTITIONER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

Prison Dialogue (PD) began working with the leadership of the Virginia Department of Corrections (VA DOC) in February 2012. The contract involved 5 one-week visits over the year plus telephone coaching from the UK. From the first visit, there was substantial acceptance of the value of Dialogue from the Directors, the Executive and the Extended Leadership Team (ELT), and in June the Director (Harold Clarke) requested the training of some staff to become Dialogue Practitioners. PD had done something similar with 8 Practitioners in the Washington Department of Corrections when Harold Clarke was the State Commissioner there (see CS17), and PD proposed a programme involving 6 senior staff. The Director preferred 12, and when it was raised at the Council for the Healing Environment (C4HE) they firmly requested 24 Dialogue Practitioners. A Dialogue Practitioner Development Programme (DPDP) was duly launched in August 2012 with 24 participants. At this point it became clear to PD that the VA DOC was open to an extensive cultural change initiative and widespread training in Dialogue Skills would be necessary to support that.

Aims and Objectives

By June 2012 PD had worked with the top 120 in the organisation, and the VA DOC wanted those Dialogue Skills that had been conveyed to the leadership to be available to all grades in the Department. In the past there had been a dominantly 'command and control' culture in the Department, and a good remnant was still present. The Directors could see how Dialogue constructively opened the doors to participation and better decision-making without loss of order and discipline. So they were keen to take the Dialogue more widely and deeply into the system, and to engage nearly 100 different business units (comprising 39 Prisons, 42 Community Districts and a range of Training and Central Functions).

PD was keen to learn how to engage a state-wide system of over 12,000 employees and 100,000 offenders by developing the capacity internally rather

than bringing in large numbers of external skilled facilitators, and the whole intervention was designed to be led by just two consultants (Peter Garrett and Jane Ball). The proposal for a DPDP fitted well with this approach.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

PD agreed to the VA DOC proposal that the volunteers for the DPDP would be drawn from all three Regions (6 each) plus a further 6 from the HQ (Atmore) and the Academy for Staff Development (ASD). They range hierarchically from Prison Counsellor to Lieutenant to Deputy Warden, and the equivalent in Community Corrections. In the event half those who registered had volunteered and the other half 'voluntold' (ie were appointed to the role). This did not prove to be a problem for PD who had past experience of converting compulsory attendance into a voluntary choice (see CS8 & CS9). What was challenging for the new Dialogue Practitioners (DPs), however they arrived, was the adaptive way PD worked in developing a fit-for-purpose DPDP. They were more used to being told what to do and by when it needed to be completed. PD required them to engage in self-learning and to determine their own workload by using their own initiative. PD did set a minimum requirement, namely to attend 7 days of face-to-face training with Peter and Jane, to join 6 Coaching Trio Calls of 2 hrs each, to attend monthly half-day Practitioner Circles (by Region) and to deliver 8 Dialogue Skills Trainings during the year's programme. Some found this onerous because they were not freed up from much of their existing workload whilst others were hungry and available for much more.

The DPDP began with a two-day session in August 2012 and ended with a Graduation Ceremony in August 2013. One participant was asked to step down because he lacked the work experience in the Department to complete the programme successfully. Fortunately the National Institute of Corrections were keen to support the DPDP financially to enable the programme to be transportable to other jurisdictions. This enabled PD to take the time needed to design and document the curriculum, the learning model and the outline of all sessions, as well as the protocols for the Coaching Trio Calls and the Practitioner Circles.

The learning model for the DPDP, as with the history of the organisation itself, is to 'learn by doing'. There was naturally some apprehension on the part of the new DPs when we explained that after just 3 days of face-to-face work

with PD (two opening days in August and a further day in September 2012, they would be expected to go out and deliver a one-day Dialogue Skills Training (DST), or three half-day DST modules, to field staff up to Executive level. To enable them to succeed PD paired the DPs as co-facilitators (one to lead, the other to support), and choreographed the training with a particular sequence of exercises which, they were assured, would build the kind of container they needed to engage staff in Dialogue. The uncertain novice (rookie) facilitators went out and discovered to their surprise that the DST was largely welcomed by staff who were keen to participate in an open and honest way about their experiences at work. This quickly built their confidence, which further improved their performance and led to yet better results. By the end of the year the DPs not only understood and used the Dialogue Skills, but they had begun to understand and appreciate this adaptive approach to their work.

Jane and Peter continued to support the DPs through Coaching Calls, with three on the telephone for two-hours at a time using a 'reciprocal coaching' pattern. The DST work was directly related the Healing Environment cultural change initiative which DP was supporting in each visit to the VA DOC through two-day sessions with Unit Heads (see CS39). This meant that the Unit Heads understood what the DPs were trying to do, and why, so that they welcomed their involvement training staff in the Units. There were further one-day sessions with the DPs in December 2012 and March & June 2013, before the 23 DPs were certificated in August 2103.

Quality control was naturally a challenge with PD working at such a distance from Virginia. This was managed by inviting the DPs into other sessions where PD could observe them working with staff. The DPs were invited (8 at a time) into the Extended Leadership Team Healing Dialogue and Environment Sessions each quarter, they were invited into the C4HE half-day sessions (12 at a time), and into other intervention work with the Learning Team Pilots (10 for that session) and the two-day Majors and EBP Managers sessions (only 3 so as to not unbalance the mix).

Outcomes

The most obvious outcome was the delivery of DSTs to thousands of staff during the first year of the DPDP. Almost all the Community Districts and HQ/Training Academy staff were covered, along with perhaps 15% of the Prison staff. This was only possible because of the rapid internal skill

development by the DPs. Despite the pain of being thrown into learning, by doing they thrived and have developed a confidence and sense of self-initiative that would not have been possible otherwise.

The organisation has been impacted by wide exposure to the DST, and as the year drew to a close there was a call by the Directors to expand the programme. A further 60 DPs were recruited for the second year of the DPDP (2012 – 2013).

The workforce of DPs accelerated the integration of Dialogue into the Healing Environment initiative, the Learning Teams initiative and the Oneness Agenda (bringing together Prisons and Community Corrections) which had previously operated somewhat distinctly. This amounted to a solid foundation for the overall cultural change sought in the Department, with Dialogue seen as the activity which 'brings it all together'.

Learning

The VA DOC has been learning how deeply the 'command and control' culture, along with its shadow of coercion and fear, is set in the Department's history and way of operating. The C4HE has had to think long and hard about what it means to create a 'safe and strong container' where people can be open and honest without recrimination. They published (department-wide) a definition of a safe container in the interests of establishing one as the norm. This is clearly a result of the Dialogue work and its impact.

PD has learnt, by doing it, how to engage in depth an organisation of over 12,000 people. The DPDP is an important part of that, because without the transfer of Dialogue skills, the cultural change sought would not be sustainable. It also became apparent to PD that the development of DPs would take at least three years. PD sees this as working with the Dialogue Skills in Year 1 (they are the foundation of the whole work), Dialogic Coaching in Year 2 (to embed the skills) and Dialogic Intervention in Year 3 (to shift stuck parts of the system). This appears a feasible intention although early in Year Two, as this is being written, there is clearly much more to learn.