

CS39: DOC VIRGINIA ELT

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

The Virginia Department of Corrections (VA DOC) recruited a new Director, Harold Clarke, in 2010 to run the Department and to implement the Governor's Virginia Adult Re-entry Initiative (VARI). This involved a substantial change programme based on Evidence Based Practice (EBP) to achieve lasting public safety (by treatment of all offenders whilst in their care) as well as temporary public safety (through safe and secure incarceration). The Director knew that Dialogue would be an essential ingredient for the Department to succeed, and he invited Prison Dialogue (PD) to work with them late in 2011.

Aims and Objectives

The Director knew that the VA DOC had one of the lowest recidivism rates in the US, but believed much more could be done. He wanted his Executive and Extended Leadership Team (ELT) to be trained in Dialogue skills so that the better engagement and communication would enable the other changes he was implementing. PD had worked with him 5 years previously in Washington, and elsewhere prior to that, and understood his leadership style well, so they knew the invitation to provide training could easily develop into a full leadership intervention, which is what happened.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

PD contracted for 5 one-week trips to Virginia during 2012. Before setting out from the UK, where they are based, the PD consultants Peter Garrett and Jane Ball telephone interviewed every member of the Executive (26 people) including the Director and his three Deputies. This gave them a working knowledge of the storyline of the Department, its strategic plan, the various initiatives underway and the current hot issues and challenges. Importantly, it also set the 'container' for the intervention. On arrival in Virginia this container was developed progressively, first with the Director and Deputy Directors, where Peter and Jane deliberately set the working relationship as a partnership. Then they worked for several days with the Director, Deputies and their Executive Team, introducing Dialogue skills to them and then

preparing them to work with their Extended Leadership Team (ELT). The next step was meeting with the entire ELT (numbering around 120 including the Executive and the Deputies and the Director).

That first one-day meeting with the ELT was designed to gather the collective identity of the ELT, and to charge them with leadership energy and purpose. A variety of exercises were introduced to get them engaged with one another to practice more authentic conversation and Dialogue. They were lined up right around the large meeting room ordered by the date they joined the VA DOC, and together they looked at the changing leadership styles over the years from inception. Story-telling was encouraged. A leadership framework (the Leading Energies) was introduced as well as the Dialogic Actions and the Dialogic Practices. The need for good communication was emphasised by depicting the hierarchical line from the Director down to the Correctional Officer (10 or 11 levels) on one side, and down to the Probation and Parole Officer on the other (7 or 8 levels). It was intended that the day would have a feeling of depth and initiation. It turned out to be an iconic day. As well as a wholehearted engagement and participation, the larger group suffered the inconvenience of meeting all day and eating lunch in a secure venue (the Powhatan Prison Visits Hall) which had very noisy air-conditioning units and only 2 toilets for the 120 people.

Having marked a clear start with the ELT, Peter and Jane then opted on future quarterly visits (June, Sept and Dec '12) to hold a 2-day meeting with one third of the ELT at a time. The ELT includes all Unit Heads and most are the Wardens of Prisons or the Chiefs of the Probation Districts. Rather than doing one region (East, Central or West) at a time, the choice was for representation from each region and from the HQ, along with the Executive Team. These smaller meetings (of around 50 people) were used to experience the Dialogue Skills more thoroughly, and also to develop the Healing Environment (HE) Initiatives proposed by the Director. During each two-day session the Unit Head was invited to determine the local needs of their own Unit, and to develop a participatory HE Initiative that was unique to their situation. This was a deliberate challenge to the culture. Having been a command and control culture for many years, people expected to be told what to do, even at senior leadership levels. Many of the Unit Heads were confused about what was required of them and had little experience of engagement with most of their staff apart giving talks and issuing instructions to them. PD's proposal was that

good decision-making needs input from those who are affected by the decision, and that the HE Initiative is a way of learning first-hand how to do that. They gradually developed an understanding of what this means in practice, and their progress is now tracked in the monthly regional meetings. PD also included an Offender Walk in the sessions. This is a Dialogic pattern that involves spatialising the whole Department in the room. Prisons are put on one side and Community Corrections on the other side of a symbolic 'prison wall', and then two or three ex-offenders walk their 10 or 20 years journey through the VA DOC – from arrest to incarceration to release into the Community. PD facilitates an enquiry into their experience, physically and emotionally as they make the one hour walk. The aim is to show that lasting public safety (the VARI strategic aim) is only fully successful when each of the Offender Journeys is successful. There are currently around 100,000 such journeys in the care of the VA DOC and everyone has the same purpose – a successful Offender Journey through to resettlement in the Community.

PD contracted to work with the VA DOC for a further year, enabling the training of 24 Dialogue Practitioners to provide Dialogue Skills Training (DST) across the Department. Later in 2014 a further 60 Dialogue Practitioners were recruited, bringing the number up to over 80 DST trainers. The intention is to expose every member of staff (around 12,000 people) to the Dialogue Skills. At the same time the Unit Heads were invited to return for a second round of 2-day Dialogue and HE Sessions, and this time to be accompanied by their Deputy Warden or Chief. This was a further progressive step in the building of the extended leadership container and the developmental progress over the year is very evident.

Outcomes

The command and control leadership style that had dominated the Department included some use of coercion and fear. Shifting that requires a contained environment within which people can be more open and candid without suffering repercussions. This began to happen, and the quality of decision-making in the Department was clearly improving as a result.

A year after they started, the HE initiatives were starting to bear fruit. Real engagement was taking place about issues that matter to people locally, and meetings that had always been run in a traditional way were changing to become more participatory. It was no longer so easy to predict who would

speak, who would stay silent and who might influence the decision reached. That was a very healthy sign.

There were 18 to 20 different initiatives underway across the Department when PD arrived at the VA DOC and it was not clear how they related to each other. The Dialogue work has brought them much closer together, including depicting them all in a single graphic entitled 'Serving the Commonwealth of Virginia'. The Dialogue work has deliberately incorporated the Healing Environment Initiative, the Oneness Agenda (combining Prisons and Community Districts) and the Learning Teams as overlapping activities. The overall alignment and integration has been significantly enhanced.

The ELT members are themselves openly using the Dialogue Skills that they are encouraging their staff to use. This 'walking the talk' is as powerful as it is unusual.

Learning

The VA DOC as a whole has begun to experience the value of Dialogue for leadership engagement, improved decision-making and the overall flow of thinking, including shifting collective attitudes and opinions. The ELT can see the accountability progression that runs from disciplining staff or offenders, holding them to account, coaching them, and using Dialogue to change the collectively held views.

PD has had the opportunity to learn how to engage a system of over 12,000 people in an intimate and effective way. It involves well-designed intensive one-week visits supported by extensive telephone work with the leadership and a range of key players.

PD developed a substantial research element to track this large-system change work that included work by an internal research division in the VA DOC as well as active involvement from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) and the Urban Institute.