

CS37: HMP OAKWOOD PRISON OPENING

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

G4S is a multi-national company and one of the main private providers of custodial services in the UK. In 2011 they won 2 new prison contracts in the first phase of the new government's Prison Competition Programme (PCP1). As well as winning the contract to manage the public sector prison HMP Birmingham (see CS36) they won the contract to manage a new prison, which was subsequently named HMP Oakwood. HMP Oakwood was due to open to prisoners in April 2012 and would fill to 1610 places over the next 12 months.

Prison Dialogue (PD) had been working with the G4S Offender Management (OM) Leadership Team and in a number of the G4S prisons since 2006 (see CS25 to CS33). PD agreed to partner with G4S on their prison bids to create the opportunity for a more sustained and better resourced programme of Dialogue input to support the way that those prisons were run. In the bid, PD proposed using a cascade model to create and embed a vision for the prison, starting with the Director then including in turn the Senior Management Team (SMT), other managers, staff and then prisoners. The cascaded approach had been fundamental to the transformation of HMP Dorchester (see CS14).

Prior to the opening, the set-up project was managed by a Mobilisation Team. The operational leadership were appointed later, worked alongside the Mobilisation Team and then took over the reins. A long time partner of PD (in HMP Long Lartin, Blakenhurst and Dorchester) and advocate of the Dialogic approach was appointed as Director of the new prison. He anticipated this would be his final role in charge of a prison and wanted to create a legacy based on over 30 years experience working in criminal justice and make Oakwood the 'Best Prison in the World'. This ambition would face challenges and PD knew that in the early years of HMP Whitemoor, the Dialogue Groups had provided a forum for challenging issues to be addressed, so PD saw this as an opportunity to use Dialogue skills in support of opening of HMP Oakwood.

Aims and Objectives

The aim was open Oakwood without loss of order or discipline despite the inexperience of most newly recruited staff, to create a vision for a different way to run prisons focussed on what was really needed for prisoner re-settlement, and to integrate the vision into the ethos, structures and processes of the prison. For both PD and the Director, Dialogue was an essential part of what was needed to achieve this.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

During mobilisation PD proposed that a Mobilisation Board should meet regularly to manage the inevitable tensions between the short-term project-thinking of the Mobilisation team and the long-term operational thinking of the Director and SMT. Despite reminders, this was not actively pursued.

Before the prison opened PD worked off-site at their offices with the Director to develop his vision. The Oakwood Commitments, 'to the public' and 'to prisoners in our care', and the Oakwood Way of 10 principles on which the prison would be run, were the result of this work. The Director knew that staff/ prisoner relations were crucial for the success of any prison, especially one that would inevitably test the patience of the prisoners as systems were established. How do you get several hundred new frontline staff, many of whom had never worked in this field, to handle these relationships appropriately? How can you accelerate a process of learning the practice of working in a prison? To address these challenges PD developed an Adaptive Learning programme with five Senior Managers who came with almost 150 years experience between them from Public Sector Prisons. The Adaptive Learning programme was an engaging process for trainees to visit other prisons, look around, shadow, have Dialogue with staff and prisoners, and reflect together afterwards to develop and test their classroom learning.

As Senior Managers were recruited to the Senior Management Board (SMB), they held six-monthly off-site meetings with PD before and after opening. The two-day sessions allowed them to take stock, make sense of and adapt to what was happening in a very fast moving and challenging situation, to align their thinking in a joined-up strategy, and build their team during a highly challenging period. Quarterly one-day 'Not Far Away days' (ie almost but not quite off-site) were held at the prison for the Director and SMB with their department heads, to build their teamwork, introduce Dialogue skills to help them to talk and think together, and to address operational issues.

Learning Circles were introduced for Personal Officers and prisoners to talk regularly (see CS38), with residential First Line Managers (FLMs) involvement. These small unit-based forums for Personal Officer work were designed to allow issues to be discussed as they arose, and to develop appropriate, positive relationships between staff and prisoners. PD provided a basic training in Dialogue for Learning Circles for all of custody officers to initiate this process.

PD recorded interviews with the Director and members of the SMB to capture their stories of the first year at HMP Oakwood.

Outcomes

HMP Oakwood opened successfully and by April 2012 was full. The former Director General of the Prison Service who was employed by G4S to review progress at the prison said he it was the most successful prison opening that he had witnessed. Good working relationships and team spirit were established between the staff and managers running Oakwood, despite the enormous challenges of the situation. The regime did not always meet the aspirations of the vision, that was a work in progress, but the aspiration was clear to everyone. The Oakwood Commitment and the Oakwood Way were posted in large letters in the prison gate for everyone to see. In acknowledgement of the innovative work at Oakwood from Day 1, including the Adaptive Learning and Learning Circles and other inspiring work, the Director reworded his aspiration to ‘...Being the Leading Prison in the World... Becoming the Best Prison in the World’

Learning

Opening a new 1600 bed prison is a complex challenge. Everything is new, the buildings, structures, processes and people. Inexperienced staff are in a new situation, and even most of the experienced staff find themselves in a new job, or operating at a more senior level than ever before, or working for a private company for the first time.

In a new and fast changing situation staff have to come together regularly to talk and think with the relevant people and adapt to the many challenges. The natural instinct seems to be to act and not waste time talking, but the ability to talk things through collectively is crucial, especially in complex situations where each decision and action affects many others.

PD learned about the power of a clearly articulated vision from the very outset. The Oakwood Commitment and the Oakwood Way made it clear from the start that the prisons job was about much more than just locking up people. Everyone knew and accepted that, even though it was not yet achieved.

WORK IN PROGRESS