

CS25: HMP RYE HILL LEADERSHIP TEAM

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Context

HMP Rye Hill opened in 2001 as a Category B privately-run prison. It accommodates up to 660 prisoners serving sentences of 4 years and over, including life sentenced prisoners. The prison was managed at that time by GSL and is currently managed by G4S.

In 2007 the prison was experiencing significant difficulties with staff recruitment, retention and development across all levels. The prison was under a rectification notice for failing to deliver services according to contract, meaning that GSL would forfeit its contract if Rye Hill failed to address a number of specific areas of concern. At the time there was a number of seconded senior staff from other GSL prisons in post including the Director and several members of the Senior Management Team (SMT).

The SMT were considered to be committed to the prison, wanting to do a good job, and with the unfulfilled potential to be an effective leadership team. At the time, however, they appeared to be demoralised following the loss of a number of colleagues and the lack of consistent leadership.

In May 2007 Prison Dialogue (PD) was approached by Jerry Petherick, the Managing Director for GSL. He had previously been the Prison Service Area Manager responsible for HMP Dorchester where he had met PD when they worked there very successfully (see CS14).

Aims and Objectives

PD was commissioned to develop a proactive stance within the Leadership team, and to develop the SMT into a functioning team with shared ownership for the development and progress of the whole prison during this difficult time. This included ensuring the newly appointed Director was positively received and that together they established a shared understanding of what they could achieve as they rebuilt their confidence and effectiveness as a team.

Although all PD's early UK-based work (in HMP Whitemoor, Cambridge, HMP Long Lartin and HMP Blakenhurst) was paid for by the Prisons and Community themselves (see CS1 to CS13), subsequent UK-based work had been funded by

charitable grants for some years. PD considered that being dependent solely on grant funding was unsustainable in the long term, and welcomed this directly contracted and paid work at HMP Rye Hill.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

Building on the Nebraska and Washington experience PD knew the impact of Dialogue to change the discourse, the identity and the sense of purpose amongst colleagues. Initially it was essential to build a collective container for the HMP Rye Hill Leadership Team to enable them to talk and think together better. PD spoke individually with SMT members at the prison to understand the situation from their point of view and build rapport that could be built on collectively. Usually their leadership meetings would have focussed on specific operational issues and action plans. With PD's encouragement and facilitation a broader-based conversation emerged about the situation at the prison, helping the team to recognise and provide the leadership that was required at that time. PD coached the new Director as she arrived and worked with her towards bringing the new leadership team that she formed to an off-site session at the PD offices the following year.

Outcomes

The interim period awaiting the arrival of the new Director allowed time for PD to create stable framework for the SMT. Once engaged in a more authentic conversation they began to talk and think together differently about their situation and move beyond their history and differences. They began to work as a team as they realised how the operational difficulties were affecting them. They moved from talking about me (the solo story) and my work, to us (the collective story) and our shared work owning and shaping the future of the prison.

This intervention provided PD with a profile within GSL (and subsequently G4S) to undertake paid contracts that were good value.

Learning

A container (or contained environment which is conducive to good conversation) is essential to change the discourse (or depth of openness and honesty with which people talk and think together). Once the discourse has changed one can address the identity and energy of a team to shape its future.

Dialogue skills can shift stuck situations and to enable a difference to be made in a short period of time.

WORK IN PROGRESS