

CS4: HMP WHITEMOOR DISPERSAL PRISONS CONFERENCE RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS CONFERENCE 1999

by Peter Garrett

Context

Dialogue had already been introduced into HMP Whitemoor, a high and maximum security prison in Cambridgeshire, England in 1993. By 1999 weekly Dialogue Groups had been running for 6 years for the main offender population (started on C & D Wings in Sept'93 and averaging 17 participants – see CS1), and separately for 5 years for Vulnerable Prisoners, mainly sex offenders, (started on A & B Wings in Sept'94 and averaging 25 participants – see CS2). All prisoners in the prison were either Category A (high risk) or Category B offenders and housed on normal location with the option of immediate transfer to one of the other 'Dispersal' prisons should there be any challenges to control, order and discipline.

Aims and Objectives

The prison was impressed by the remarkable popularity of the Dialogue Groups amongst the prisoners (and some staff) and saw the groups as beneficial to the regime and a healthy forum for prisoners to find their voice. In 1999, when the Prison Service high security estate decided to hold a conference for its 'Dispersal' prisons at HMP Whitemoor, entitled the *Right Relationships Conference*, the Dialogue Group was invited to participate. The prison saw the Dialogue Groups as an innovative approach and the conference was a good opportunity to 'show case' the successful engagement between staff and prisoners at HMP Whitemoor. Prisoners saw the opportunity to lobby the many influential Prison Service leaders who would be in attendance, and Prison Dialogue (PD) saw the opportunity to work in more depth with the prisoners who participated regularly in the Dialogue Groups as well as extending its reputation.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

Although the prison was segregated with roughly 250 vulnerable prisoners (VPs) housed separately from a similar number on main location, the prison management invited PD to participate in the conference with 6 offenders from

each of the two Dialogue Groups. PD accepted the invitation on one condition: that no veto would be put on any prisoners that they put forward to attend. This was accepted by the prison management, despite the serious security risk of exposing the conference participants to some of the most serious offenders in the country, thereby showing huge confidence in the strength of PD's relationship with the offenders.

The invitation was duly announced in the two separate Dialogue Groups, raising all the issues and prejudices about the segregated housing arrangement in the prison. The main location prisoners refused to participate, as we had anticipated, because they would not be willing to sit in the same circle as 'nonses' (the slang term for rapists and paedophiles). The VPs were highly offended by this response from the main location prisoners and expressed anger and frustration. The PD facilitators had more than a month to allow the two groups to resolve these initial reactions. The first emotional response covered some lack of confidence and poor reasoning. Over several weeks of Dialogue sessions confidence was built deliberately, and prisoners had the opportunity to rethink and reassess. Eventually each group had selected 6 from those who volunteered, plus a short list 'in reserve' in case of loss of confidence at the last minute, and we could proceed. Prison officers were invited to volunteer as well, and a group came from the Segregation Unit to join the Dialogue on the day.

The conference included the governors, deputies and senior staff from all 6 Dispersal Prisons as well as the Inspector of Prisons and many senior staff from Prison Service Head Quarters, numbering over 100 in all. The sessions were chaired by the Director of Security at the time, and PD was seen as an example of 'dynamic security'. The prisoners were included as delegates (apart from the break-out groups on security which they were prohibited from attending) and sat amongst other participants, and bunched well forward in the seating. PD had three participants, including Dave Parsons and Peter Garrett. What happened was remarkable. The Dialogue Groups had enabled the prisoners involved to find their voice over the years, and in the conference they were articulate and confident. They dominated the question times after each formal presentation – to such a degree that in the end the chairman had to ask for questions from anyone other than the prisoners present.

Later in the day Peter Garrett and Dave Parsons facilitated a Dialogue within the conference. We put the Dialogue participants (the 12 prisoners and 2

facilitators) into the inner circle along with 8 uniformed staff who had been previously asked to do so. The rest of the conference participants sat in concentric circles of seating around that inner circle and listened to proceedings. What followed was a full-blooded exchange between the prisoners and the officers, all of whom were from the Segregation (confinement) Unit, about the conditions in segregation. Proceeding varied between debate and dialogue, and challenges of being held in segregation, and the challenges of staffing a segregation block, were well aired in front of the august audience. The 45 minute session ended with a healthy applause, followed by a thoughtful silence, as participants digested what they had heard.

Outcomes

The prison management were both excited and relieved by the end of the conference. They had shown how robust exchanges between staff and prisoners need not threaten order and control, and can allow a release of tension through words rather than violent actions. The prisoners had made clear to all concerned that they are intelligent (despite limited education), that they are compassionate (despite severe circumstances) and that they relish the opportunity to participate. PD showed its professional calibre and revealed something of its unique contribution to Corrections.

Learning

It has become a fundamental ethical assumption as a result of the Right Relationships Conference that people are naturally intelligent, compassionate and want to participate, unless constrained by circumstance. Secondly, when people appear not to be intelligence, compassionate and wanting to participate, then the reason can be found and addressed through Dialogue. That this applies to all management, staff and offenders within a prison context is the remarkable discovery of PD and the secret of its effectiveness in the most unpromising situations.