

CS18: HMYOI PORTLAND BENBOW

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Context

HMYOI Portland was built in 1848 to hold convict prisoners on the island of Portland. In 2005 it housed 650 young offenders. It had especially inadequate physical conditions, including a lack of in-cell sanitation. Its reputation was for poor staff prisoner relationships, poor standards of decency and lack of purposeful activity. It was still operating under the shadow of the past tough militaristic regime and there were racist abuse investigations taking place when Prison Dialogue (PD) became involved.

Since his arrival at HMYOI Portland the Governor, Steven Twinn, had improved the performance on all targets through his robust and highly visible management. PD had been working at nearby HMP Dorchester since 2003, and the Governor there, Steve Holland, and the Area Manager for both prisons, Jerry Petherick, believed that PD could help to address some of the underlying cultural issues at HMYOI Portland. In 2005 conversations began with the Portland Governor and Senior Management Team (SMT). PD was funded by charitable grants to work at HMP Dorchester and was able to dedicate a limited amount of that resource to HMYOI Portland.

Aims and Objectives

The prison needed to develop a more rehabilitative regime, and specifically to address concerns raised by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Race Equality Action Group. Performance management efforts were driven forcefully by the Governor and his SMT, and ownership for performance needed to be taken deeper into the staff ranks. PD wanted to work with a whole prison change approach in a second prison (see Case Study CS14) and to use the Implicate Change Model (©Dialogue Associates), a Dialogic participatory change model.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

PD based the intervention on the Implicate Change Model (©Dialogue Associates), following a sequence of phases, namely: Identify, Name, Discover, Gather, Get-it-together, Commit, Design. Engagement sessions with the Governor and his SMT led to a common understanding of the situation and

they identified the presenting needs and opportunity. In the Naming phase, the scope of the work was agreed to be limited to Benbow housing unit, where change would have most relevance to the rest of the prison. The title “Making Benbow a better place to live and work” was selected for having meaning to all staff and prisoners alike. A staff notice was issued to inform everyone of what was proposed and to introduce PD, who then embarked on a series of visits to Benbow to understand the different perspectives as part of the Discovery phase. They held individual conversations with staff, managers and prisoners, and also group Dialogues with staff and first line managers together. Concurrently, the Head of Psychology conducted a workplace assessment on Benbow. It became apparent to everyone that working relationships between managers and staff, and between peers in the staff team, were dysfunctional and needed to be addressed first in order to then improve the situation for prisoners. The Gather, Get-it-together and Commit phases were undertaken through two sessions. In the first PD brought together the three layers of management for Benbow, and in the second managers from the SMT joined all the staff. This process took place over almost 12 months in total.

Outcomes

Staff and managers understood some of the behaviour that was causing trouble for themselves and others and were able to make significant changes. The big themes were a lack of direction and leadership, a lack of pride among staff (who felt under-appreciated), poor communication, inconsistency and a lack of teamwork among staff. Very specific actions were agreed, eg improvements to the staff facility room, inclusion of first line managers in management meetings, creating regular forums for consultation and decision making. As a result there was better delegation of responsibility and authority through the ranks. There was a good foundation of understanding and appreciation of the value of a Dialogic approach that led to Portland inviting PD to support other initiatives, including working with the Governor and SMT on forming a clear vision for the prison, creating staff/prisoner forums, facilitating the transition of Governors when Steven Twinn left (see CS20) and HMYOI Portland’s involvement in Threshold Dialogue (see CS21). PD’s funders were pleased to see the learning from HMP Dorchester taken into another prison.

Learning

PD's facilitators further developed their skills, and by using the Implicate Change Model (©Dialogue Associates) and several Dialogic patterns (including the Five Question pattern and sub-group contracting) they took a significant step towards becoming professional Dialogue Practitioners.

WORK IN PROGRESS