

CS20: HMYOI PORTLAND GOVERNOR'S 2-DAY HANDOVER

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Context

The Governor of HMYOI Portland, a prison for Young Offenders in the south-west of England, was due to retire from the Prison Service. The Governor of HMP Dorchester, with whom Prison Dialogue (PD) had worked for several years, was appointed to take over his role. PD was invited to manage the transition process which occurred from midday on 23rd to midday on 25th October 2006.

Aims and Objectives

The aim was to ensure a seamless transition of leadership. There are two significant factors that are likely to interfere with such a process.

Although the date of handover of accountability is formally defined, typically there is a significant gap between the departure of one Prison Governor and the arrival of the next. This may be because the outgoing leader leaves early (through illness or dismissal) or more often because they have accumulated leave that takes them out of action some weeks before the handover date. On the other hand the incoming leader sometimes cannot be freed up from their existing role immediately. If they are, they usually make an appearance on Day One of their new role, but are then typically called away for a series of strategic meetings about the new role with their seniors, and also need time off to relocate themselves and their families closer to their new workplace. As a result a gap of several weeks is common and several months is not exceptional. The second in command 'acts up' during this period and short-term decision-making is relatively unaffected, but larger and longer-term decisions (particularly difficult or unpopular ones) tend to be postponed (whilst we wait to see how the new Governor wants to do things, whilst a few may be unduly accelerated (whilst I can get on and do what I want to do with nobody there to notice or over-rule me).

Secondly, different leaders have different leadership styles. This is a breath of fresh air for some, but not for others. Over-reacting to the new leader's apparent needs and interests (which are clearly different from those of the previous leader) can swing all the immediate attention in a new direction and

away from other critical accountabilities. The result can be that the boat that was leaning too much to one side, may now list too far to the other.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

To manage the potential 'gap' in decision-making, PD designed a 2-day handover with the entire Senior Management Team (SMT).

It happened that PD had jointly interviewed the two Governors about their style of leadership 5 months earlier in April 2006, because they were both working with PD to support the transformation of their prison. This proved to be invaluable preparation for the handover. The interview included a key question about their first day on assuming leadership of a new prison. The one had very practical and material interests. He would go in very early on his first day and walk around the entire prison noting the physical state of things. He would then hold an entire staff meeting at which he explained how he intended to run the prison what he expected of people and what they might expect of him. His style included careful documentation of all decisions made and his persistent follow up until they had been completed to his satisfaction. The other Governor was a relationship-based leader who, on his first day, expected to meet the Deputy first and have enough time to start to form a relationship with him or her. He would then meet the individual SMT members whilst being shown around their Departments by each of them. He followed this with a Senior Management Team (SMT) meeting at which they considered together what was needed and how to work together in running the prison. It is not difficult to imagine that changing from one leadership style to the other would have an impact on the SMT and needed to be taken into account in the transition design. Understanding one's own leadership style and explaining it to people deliberately from the first day is very helpful. Also, understanding the leadership style of SMT members, and how they make decisions, is essential for coaching them, which is essential for good leadership.

A month before the meeting PD met and talked with all SMT members individually to understand their views and build some rapport with them to set a container.

From the early afternoon start of the first day of the Handover, the SMT completed things with the retiring Governor by reviewing what had been achieved during his tenure, acknowledging one another and having dinner together. The incoming Governor was not present. He joined the group for

the second day when both leaders were then with the SMT. On this second day there were introductions, a Dialogue about the state of the prison and a formal handover at the close of the day before all having a relaxed social dinner together. That marked the exit of the old leader who departed after dinner and did not return for the morning session on the third day. The following morning the new Governor picked up the reins with his SMT. The subject was about how each SMT member would like to take their department forward and what decisions they wanted to make during the next year. PD facilitated the sessions.

Outcomes

There was a virtually seamless handover, no loss of decision-making momentum and an effective forum for the SMT to adapt to the leadership style of their new Governor.

Learning

Setting a leadership container with the SMT was the key to the smooth transition, and deliberately addressing decision-making at the outset of the new Governor's tenure was very effective. PD may have considered interviewing the two Governors in a 'fish bowl' surrounded by the SMT on the second day, which could have been more impactful for the SMT in how they were to adapt to the new leadership style, as well as providing greater learning for the Governor's themselves.