

**NEBRASKA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS:
Leadership transformation through a wall history,
Succession Dialogue and Strategic Planning**

by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball

Context

The Director of Corrections in Nebraska, Harold Clarke, met Peter Garrett who was giving a presentation on Dialogue at the Shell Learning Centre in Woodlands, near Houston, Texas. Interested in Dialogue and inspired by Peter's stories of Dialogue work in prisons he invited Peter to work with his Executive Team in the Nebraska Department of Corrections. Work permits for Prison Dialogue were granted because there was no comparable expertise in Corrections in the US. Nebraska was a small Correctional system with 14 prisons and no responsibility for Community Corrections.

Aims and Objectives

For the first trip in 1999, Director Clarke's main interest was introducing Dialogue and open conversation into his hierarchical organisation. By the second trip two years later, he was keen to continue skill building, to address stuck relationships between senior leaders who had served together in the Department for a decade or two, and to create a shared vision for the Department for the next five years.

Prison Dialogue was keen to gain experience of the US Correctional system, which was very different from the UK Prison Service, and to begin to assume an international stance. The opportunity to work at a state level with state executives was a step beyond the work that had been undertaken to date in the UK at a prison level.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

For the first trip in June 1999 Peter Garrett visited Nebraska on his own. He held sessions in headquarters with the Executive group for a day and then went off-site with all of the Wardens of the state prisons on the second day. On both days Dialogue skills were introduced to the Executive and the Wardens, and on the second day in particular the expression of the severe pressures of working in the Department became very evident in a genuine and

heartfelt Dialogue. The deep emotions experienced by the Wardens were hidden behind the neutrality required in public statements that would be read or heard by the media, state officials, correctional staff, prisoners and their families, victims and their families and different lobbying groups. The Wardens knew death row prisoners for many years before their execution. By the end of the day a number of the Wardens were in tears talking with their colleagues about their experiences.

For the second trip, two years later in 2001, Peter was accompanied by Jane Ball and they had a much fuller theory for whole-system change. They telephone interviewed the whole Executive Team from the UK before their trip in order to understand the issues and challenges being faced by the Executive and planned their sessions in terms of the needs to be addressed, the opportunities and the nuts-to-crack. They held a sequence of conversations as a deliberate container building exercise, starting with the preparatory telephone calls, then meeting first with the smaller Director and Deputies group, followed by meeting the entire Executive Team.

The first face to face meeting with the Director and the Deputies was a powerful engagement for the 6 people in the room. Relationships that had been stuck for 20 years were realigned by together depicting the life of the Department, in chapters, on flipchart pages on the wall. This Wall History led to recognition and understanding of the individual leadership styles of the Director and Deputies, arising from the dominant conditions as they took on their leadership roles. Overnight they slept on their memories of the past, and they returned the following morning wanting to tell more stories of how they had survived the years, each in their own way.

The shift in their relationships was evident to the Executive that morning when they were invited to listen to a fishbowl reflection on the first (previous) day's session. They could see an authentic change in the Director and Deputies, rather than hearing the more common and less convincing advocacy about change. The power lay in the fact that the Director and Deputies were now part of the same story. An invitation was extended to the Executive to sign their names onto the Wall History at the date they joined the Department, and to add their personal story to the collective story.

The Director and Deputies had worked on the next (future) chapter they wanted to lead together, the leadership style they would like to use, the

culture they would like to develop and the milestones they would like to achieve. This vision of the next chapter was covered over, to be revealed later, but first the Executive were invited to design the next chapter that they wanted. There was significant correlation between the visions of the Director and Deputies and the Executive and this was taken forward into a further day of strategic planning. Before closing, Peter worked with just the Director and his Deputies clarifying critical issues about their collective succession plans, whilst Jane worked separately with the Executive on their vision. The whole group closed together with a check-out.

Outcomes

There was a shift from the foundational skill building and aspiration to an experience of the power of Dialogue amongst the Executive and Wardens in the NE DOC. Also, the strategic planning and succession clarification connected the Dialogues directly to pressing organisational needs. This resulted in a Dialogue Room, with a large oval table, being constructed at HQ to reinforce the Executives' work with Dialogue.

Prison Dialogue embarked on a generative relationship with Harold Clarke and subsequently worked with him in Washington, Massachusetts and Virginia.

Learning

The Nebraska DOC used Dialogue as a core leadership development forum for its staff to learn how to talk and think together more effectively. This was sustained for many years.

Prison Dialogue learned that the profound experience of Dialogue could be engendered whether or not people had learned Dialogue skills, and were clearer that the skills are needed to sustain the Dialogue over time rather than to initiate the experience. Another significant learning was from the Wall History. It became evident that the identities of individuals and organisations can be transformed through personal stories being woven together with factual history, and that challenges faced by Executives, often managing silo activities in large and fragmented organisations, can be addressed through Dialogue - by understanding and addressing history rather than ignoring it. Inevitably Prison Dialogue's pursuit of systemic change through Dialogue was seen as necessary and fundamental from this point.