

AROUND CORRECTIONS

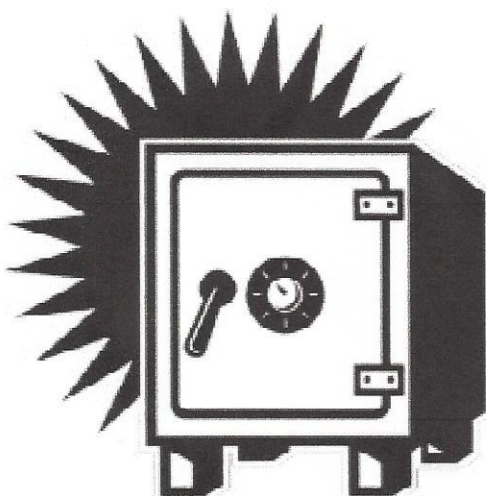
WHAT IS A SAFE CONTAINER?

You may have been in a meeting recently where somebody said “this is a safe container” and you wondered what they meant. Looking around the room you might have questioned how safe it really felt. Perhaps you were concerned about the consequences of saying what you actually thought because people might not like what you said and would judge you. Or you might have been worried that what you said could later be told to a colleague or someone more senior and result in trouble for you. So what is a ‘safe container’?

A ‘container’ is a term to describe the relationship between two or more people. Each team has a container, as does each prison and district office. If the container, or pattern of relationships, is good then the atmosphere is conducive to talking and thinking together well. If the container is weak and does not feel safe, then people are reluctant to speak up and their interests are not included particularly well. A strong container feels safe, has energy and the potential for constructive change to occur. Like all relationships, this takes work. The quality of the relationship depends on how aware and respectful people are of each other, when they are together, and when they are apart. When the container involves a larger group of people it may take time to for everyone to feel comfortable and confident of each others’ motives and behaviour. The interest is to create strong and safe containers where issues that matter can be resolved effectively and good decisions made, but this is not the case simply because someone says “this is a safe container”. It takes work to achieve.

In the past the VA DOC was more authoritarian than now. When the staff was told what to do, the required answer was “Yes, Sir”. The primary need then was to establish safe and secure physical incarceration. At that time the Department could be described as a dominantly para-military organisation. Times have changed, however. Today orders still have to be obeyed without question, and the established security and safety will not be compromised, but the Department is also committed to lasting public safety and greater fiscal accountability. That requires more thoughtful relationships

between staff members, better communication and the use of Evidence Based Practices. It means hearing more input from others before decisions are made. It requires working with people and thinking through the implications and consequences of decisions with those affected.



Our history inhibits many of us from speaking openly, and leads us to fear that saying what we really think may cause trouble, particularly if repeated in the wrong way to others later. Blame-free meetings are needed where people say what they think genuinely and respectfully, where they are listened to openly and respectfully, and where they are supported and challenged clearly and respectfully. This sets a safe container and allows real enquiry rather than debate, thereby enabling us to think through the implications and consequences of the decisions we make. This is the quality decision-making we are aiming to achieve across the Department through the

use of Dialogue and the Healing Environment.

The Healing Environment is defined as follows: *The Healing Environment is purposefully created by the way we work together and treat each other, encouraging all to use their initiative to make positive, progressive changes to improve lives. It is safe, respectful and ethical – where people are both supported and challenged to be accountable for their actions.* If people are accountable for their actions, then we can have strong and safe containers. This means that when people speak they do so in a responsible and professional way. And when people listen they take responsibility for not judging people during a meeting, and by not talking behind people’s backs after the meeting. Also, when later telling others about a conversation we maintain the same blame-free and respectful attitude by talking about what was said, but not naming or implying who said it. This is the kind of environment we all need to build together. It is the aspiration – to create ‘safe containers’. This is why we have Dialogue Skills Trainings and the Healing Environment Initiatives, and we are making good progress...

Submitted by Peter Garrett