

'What you are doing in Virginia is ground breaking.'

By Bill Taylor
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During the past year of my studies in the theory and practice of Dialogue, I sometimes asked myself: "If Dialogue is so great – and I believe it is – then why isn't it more widespread?"

I met and talked to inspiring individuals who believed Dialogue could rejuvenate their relationships at work and home, but I never came across a big organization dedicated to using Dialogue from top to bottom as a way of harnessing the collective intelligence, wisdom and energy of all their people.

Then I visited Virginia to see Dialogue at work in the State's Department of Corrections. The experience transformed my sense of the possibilities of this "new way of talking and thinking together".

Along with my colleague Mark Seneschall from the British-based charity Prison Dialogue, I spent four days in Virginia in early October 2016. We sat in on a new round of Dialogue training designed and delivered by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball, who have been working with VA DOC for four to five weeks every year since 2012.

For an hour at the start of each day, Peter and Jane introduced small groups of Lead Dialogue Practitioners to higher levels of skills training. Larger gatherings of VA DOC staff then went through a light-hearted test of their Dialogue knowledge in the form of a game show. And the afternoon of each learning day was devoted to introducing Working Dialogue, a new model of practice which combines Dialogic principles with project planning in a way that can be applied to solving any work-related problem or the development of a new opportunity.

Around 400 VA DOC staff went through the training and Mark Seneschall and I talked to around a quarter of them and had the opportunity to take part in many of the learning activities.

It now seems clear that Dialogue is established as a foundation practice helping Virginia Department of Corrections metamorphose from a less effective punishment-based regime to a prison culture that has the second lowest re-offending rate of any State in the USA.

"Dialogue is one of the founding building blocks of the cultural change we're involved in at Virginia Department of Corrections," said a clinical psychologist who has spent all her career in the department. "We like to think of ourselves as the cutting edge of Dialogue.

"Voice brings out some things my guys might not be naturally comfortable talking about. Even if you just know little bit about Dialogue, it's still effective."

A visiting senior member of the leadership team in the corrections system in Maryland made the same point. “What you are doing here in Virginia is ground breaking,” she said. “We see you as the pioneers.”

On a visit to the VA DOC Academy, I was struck by how Dialogue is proclaimed as a core working practice for everyone who walks through the front door. “Suspending Judgment As We Dialogue Together” says a banner displayed above the main reception desk. “Talking Together/Thinking Together/Learning Together/Finding Common Ground/Creating New Meaning Together.”

The impact on new recruits must be powerful and immediate – and also a strong contrast with the regime of twenty years ago. One Dialogue Practitioner working with female offenders told me: “When I started as a corrections officer, we couldn’t talk to the warden. Now everyone has a voice and it’s all the better for it. Even the offenders I work with are introduced to Dialogue from Day One.”

An assistant warden said: “Dialogue gives everyone a voice and also ensures we hear listen to everyone’s voice. When I was a corrections officer, there was a plan and you just did what you were told. Now all that has changed for the better.”

At Green Rock Correctional Centre, a senior member of the leadership team said he believed Dialogue had contributed to a paradigm shift not only in the way staff talk to each other and contribute to decisions together, but in the relationship with offenders. He said Dialogue had changed the atmosphere in State prisons for the better – lowered the temperature, as he put it. “This is great stuff we’re doing here.”

A VA DOC technician who is now a lead Dialogue Practitioner said he had seen a difference in the way offenders carried themselves and behaved. “They’re calmer. If you expect the worst, then that’s what you’re gonna get. I used to be one of the ‘lock ‘em up and throw away the key’ guys. But I have changed my mind. What we used to do just didn’t work.

“If you put a bear in a cage and poke that bear with a stick every day for twenty years, then he’ll be a very angry bear by the time he gets out of the cage.”

The technician said helping to spread Dialogue had been the one thing that kept him working in VDOC. He believed Dialogue was now embedded and would survive as a cultural practice even after change at the top of the organization. “There’s no going back now. As the Director says, our focus has to be on the longer term.”

An HR specialist I spoke to said she saw staff “blossoming” through the use of Dialogue, becoming more open and communicative.

A uniformed major told me Dialogue had improved transparency between staff and leaders even when things go wrong. “If I have an officer who screws up for whatever reason, then using Dialogue in the conversation allows openness even though the officer may have done wrong. That way, I have much more chance of discovering if there’s a fault in our processes and how to fix it.”

It seems clear that Dialogue has made some deep and profound differences in the individual lives of corrections staff.

Several women members of VA DOC staff said their relationships with their own families had been much improved by taking into their home lives the Dialogue skills learned at work. One senior probation officer told me: "Dialogue has completely changed the way my husband and I talk to each other. It has transformed the atmosphere in our home. We don't call it Dialogue; we just do it."

Another Dialogue practitioner said: "Suspending judgment is the best thing I have learned from Dialogue. Without suspending my prejudices, I cannot listen well or show respect or encourage others to find their voice."

I asked a female chief security officer whether she ever wished there were less time-consuming talking and listening and more action. She replied: "Yes! That used to be me. I was a traditionalist. I used to say, 'Here's the plan ... let's do it.' Now I have changed my mind. I see that Dialogue brings better all-round communication in the long run."

Even in tense and sensitive situations, staff seems to fall back on Dialogue skills and practices. A VA DOC chief security officer described a meeting with the head of the State Governor's armed security detail to discuss a forthcoming visit by the Governor to a Virginia prison. He told the security chief: "There's no way your team are bringing guns into my prison." The bodyguard replied: "But how can we protect the Governor?"

In the negotiation that followed, the chief security officer used the Dialogic action of opposing in a respectful way to broker a solution acceptable to everyone. The security detail left their firearms at prison reception and the lead bodyguard carried a collapsible wand out of sight under her coat. The visit passed without incident.

"Dialogue allows me to communicate bad news with respect," said the chief security officer.

The new practice of Working Dialogue introduced by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball was widely welcomed. "This is great," said an HR specialist from VA DOC head office. "This is where the rubber meets the road, and area we can get some real traction with Dialogue."

A senior probation officer said: "Now I really get it. It's about more than just talking."

Peter Garrett told me: "The early Dialogue training was about giving voice – hearing people; now it's about getting results."

Several members of the VA DOC staff I spoke to look forward to the day when offenders are more widely introduced to Dialogue skills, not only to improve relations between offenders and staff but also to enable a smoother transition back into the community, potentially allowing stronger relationships with family, friends and future employers.

A senior probation officer said: "It's the offenders with an eighth grade education who need Dialogue more than we do. There's too much focus on staff and management. Dialogue

skills will also be great for that new generation who spend a lot of their time looking down at the screens of their smart phones.”

By definition, the only people I spoke to at VDOC were trained or training in Dialogue, so as a group they were probably more likely to see its advantages. And we have no statistical or scientific proof of how Dialogue has contributed to cultural change across VA DOC.

However, my strong sense is that Dialogue is now deeply embedded as a core practice right across the organization. Staff believe in it. They speak the language of Dialogue fluently and walk the talk in their everyday working and family lives.

As the visitor from Maryland said, VDOC are pioneers in this work. I would say Virginia is leading the world in using Dialogue as a healing practice in corrections – and the world has a great deal to learn from this experience.

Peter Garrett and Jane Ball from UK-based Dialogue Associates are clearly well known and well liked. Their human touch and experiential teaching style go down well with busy VDOC staff. Their teaching materials seem to me effective and highly original.

However, the work takes time and consistent leadership support to be successful. Peter and Jane have been working on this Virginia project for four years. It could easily take another several years before every offender is trained in using Dialogue skills before they begin their journey back into the community.

But that would be a great prize, aspiration and achievement.

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