

CS34: DOC MASSACHUSETTS ELT

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Context

In November 2007 Harold Clarke moved from Washington State Department of Corrections (see CS16 and CS17) to take up the position of Commissioner of Massachusetts DOC (MA DOC), a smaller system of 18 prisons (and excluding Community Corrections). This was the third state correctional department that he had led since being introduced to Dialogue at a session with Peter Garrett in 1998. In December 2008 Commissioner Clarke invited PD to run a Dialogue session with his Deputies, Executive Team and Extended Leadership Team. PD was registered as a non-profit organisation in the US, in Washington State, and had to bid for a contract to provide Public Safety and Security Training in MA DOC in order to carry out the work. The contract was awarded in February 2009 and the trip was scheduled for March that year.

Aims and Objectives

The stated aim in the bid proposal was to develop the engagement and communication skills of the collective leadership of MA DOC and the ability of the leaders to talk and think together effectively. The skills would improve performance, strategic thinking and planning, staff/union relationships, learning and knowledge management.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

Before the visit to MA DOC, PD had entry calls with 14 senior members of the team to build relationships in advance of the visit. This was now a well tried process in the dialogic model that would engage the organisation, activate interest, help PD to understand what would be of most value to the group and any identify big issues, or 'nuts to crack', to incorporate into the session design. As well as learning Dialogue and communication skills, the calls revealed that they needed to create safe relationships, learn how to challenge each other appropriately, forgive each other for things that had happened in the past, and recognise the dangers of their risk-averse and compliant culture.

The two-day session started with the 18 members of the Executive group on the first morning focussing on their leadership, through the lens of the Dialogic

Leading Energies (Visionary, Citizen, Performance and Wisdom), and decision-making, and preparing the ground for the following day when their direct reports would join them for the ELT session. The afternoon was a more intimate session with the Commissioner and his three Deputies, off-site in a hotel room with low comfortable chairs providing a relaxed professional setting for a difficult and personal conversation. Two of the Deputies had many years of history together in the Department and were involved in one particularly serious incident that had included formal procedures and sealed their mistrust of each other. The forgiveness and safety that was needed in MA DOC was needed right there in this relationship. PD used the 4 Question Pattern to help them to reveal their stories: Why did you join MA DOC? What has been your most positive or fulfilling experience? What has been your most negative or devastating experience? Why do you stay? (Elsewhere as a 5 Question Pattern including 'What will keep you here in 2 years time?' it starts to create a direction for the future as well.) As the conversation developed the Commissioner and PD held a strong container for the Deputies to talk frankly to each other in a way that they had been unable to before.

The ELT of 60 people came together on the second day, including all of the prison Wardens, Superintendents and Divisional Heads. PD introduced the Dialogue Skills, Check-in and Check-out, Modes of Talking and Thinking Together, Dialogic Actions and Dialogic Practices. Exercises to learn the skills were interspersed with an enquiry about meetings that had succeeded and failed, using the Dialogue Skills as a lens for understanding what happened and how the meetings could have been improved. The aim was to get everyone using the skills to learn together on the day and find immediate practical applications in their working environment. It was a lively engaged group who worked well together in an awkward super-sized room. PD tried using an evaluation form that asked participants about what they had learned, with the aim of encouraging personal reflection to deepen the learning.

Outcomes

In a short session PD reinforced the value of Dialogue and provided energetic input and skills to support the Director's use of Dialogue in MA DOC. A tough conversation was started to address some of the history of the organisation and more was needed. PD proposed a chaptered story telling process, as they had used in Nebraska and WA DOC (see CS11 and CS16), to move the training contract towards an intervention, but the training budget was cut under

financial constraints in MA and the plans for further visits to MA DOC were shelved.

Without the financial investment that was required to introduce the changes that he believed were needed in MA DOC, the Commissioner moved to a new state where he was resourced to pursue his vision.

In 2013 PD renewed their contact with MA DOC and heard that some Dialogue work continued, namely a Commissioners Dialogue for staff and agencies, a Warden's Dialogue and some use of Dialogue at an institutional level. The National Institute of Corrections (NIC) have awarded a grant to MA DOC to fund the further development of Dialogue work. Also a former Deputy Commissioner approached PD for guidance about starting a Dialogue for prisoners from different gangs in a high security facility.

Learning

In the UK PD had primarily introduced Dialogue to address staff/prisoner relationships, and then as an intervention tool to improve performance, prisoner resettlement etc. This was always difficult to fund and so was either resourced through charitable grants or the work was limited to small areas and budgets. Training provides a route to fund dialogue work and enter a Correctional organisation, where consulting, coaching and intervention contracts are less common. Training dialogue skills is an engaging process that naturally reveals and starts to address the organisational situation, needs and opportunities that require intervention. The organisational intervention work can be done through subsequent training. Of course, as PD experienced in MA DOC, training budgets can also be cut! PD was only able to scratch the surface in MA DOC, but succeeded in getting beneath the surface subsequently in Virginia (see CS39 and CS40).