

## **CS31: G4S UNION MANAGEMENT PARTNERSHIP**

### **by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball**

#### **Context**

In 2010 the Offender Management Division (OM) of G4S, a private company, was contracted to run four prisons. Staff at three of the prisons were represented by the GMB whilst the fourth had a local Staff Association. National and regional staff from the GMB, local representatives, prison and OM senior management met quarterly (as the JNCC), and for some months they had planned to hold an off-site strategy day. Prison Dialogue (PD) had been working in G4S prisons (GSL before being acquired by G4S) since 2007. They had facilitated off-site meetings for the Managing Director (MD) of OM and were seen as being able to facilitate transformational Dialogue for individuals and teams. The Managing Director asked PD to facilitate the off-site JNCC Strategy Workshop.

#### **Aims and Objectives**

The MD wanted to establish a partnership with the Union in which they could talk and think together effectively with clear expectations to establish common understanding.

#### **Method: Activity, Participants and Duration**

The request to facilitate the meeting was made to PD one week before the off-site. Despite the limited time, PD used the container-setting process that they would use for any significant meeting. Jane Ball, the consultant due to facilitate the session, spoke with as many of the people who would be present as she could. She wanted to understand the situation, needs and opportunities from each of their perspectives, whether union rep, operational manager, HR manager, local or national. The process also anchored a relationship with each participant. The MD sent out a note the day prior to the meeting to explain that a participative process would be used to gather the agenda on the day.

When PD arrived at the meeting venue, four large round tables with chairs were set up around the room. The tables were removed and a single large circle of chairs was created so that everyone could see each other, which was more conducive to talking and thinking together as a whole group. People

were cautious when they arrived, especially when they saw the room set-up. More comfortable participation was established by a check-in process in pairs, and then as a whole group. Small working groups were used to create the agenda and people were relieved to see that they had common interests. A big feature of the first day was a Concentric Circle process. The Union representatives were together in one group, and the Managers in the second. Each group talked together to decide on a genuine open question that they would like to ask the other group. They had enough time to give the task serious consideration, and then the Managers sat in a circle and the Union surrounded them with a second concentric circle. The Union reps asked the Managers their question and the Managers considered it in dialogue. In the outer circle the Union reps listened carefully. The roles were then reversed, with the Union in the inner circle and the Managers in the outer circle. Finally, everyone was invited to come together in a single circle of chairs for a Dialogue about what they had learned from the two concentric circle conversations.

This concentric circle pattern gave a clear opportunity for the different perspectives to be voiced, and listened to, developed respect and understanding, and revealed how the different perspectives were integrated. After a long and productive day the Dialogue was finally closed at 6.50pm.

Day 2 started with time for Union and Managers to meet in their local groupings. A pattern to set expectations was used next. The Operational Prison Managers, HR Managers and Union Reps were in 3 separate groups. After preparation time, they outlined their expectations of each other and heard a response, until they agreed that the expectations were reasonable. Operational Managers outlined their expectations of HR, and vice versa. Operational Managers outlined their expectations of the Union, and vice versa. Union outlined their expectations of HR, and vice versa. It was a thorough contracting process.

## **Outcomes**

This was an iconic meeting that was referred to at JNCC meetings in months and years to follow. A partnership was established that surpassed the expectations of many of the people who were there. The MD said: *"..the way you encouraged mutual trust was superb. After the workshop I am really enthused about the future health of our relationships.."*

## **Learning**

Some of the G4S Managers who were nervous about PD's approach (telephone calls prior to the meeting, removing tables and putting chairs in a circle, etc) learned that Dialogue is a methodology that is very effective for helping people to talk and think together effectively. They come to realise that the steps that are required to set a good quality container are always basically the same and are powerful whether you complete them over a month or a day. Also that the Dialogic Patterns have profound impact on the way that interfacing groups develop partnerships.

WORK IN PROGRESS