

CS9: HMP BLAKENHURST MONTHLY 2-DAY DIALOGUES MAIN

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Context

HMP Blakenhurst was a newly-built local prison which was opened in 1993 and operated by a private company, UKDS. (A local prison is the American equivalent of a jail, serving the courts and holding prisoners on remand and short term sentences). It accommodated 850 male prisoners and served the Redditch and Birmingham area in the UK. Prison Dialogue (PD) was invited to work there by the Prison Director, Peter Siddons, who had heard about Prison Dialogue's work at HMP Whitemoor and HMP Long Lartin through a public talk given by the Director of Prison Dialogue at the Group Analytic Society in London in December 1995. Following a period of consultation PD agreed a contract in August 1998 to provide a non-accredited Dialogue Programme. The prison undertook to provide the participants, both prison staff and prisoners. The first pilot dialogue was delivered in November 1998.

Aims and Objectives

The prison's contract with the Prison Service required non-accredited programmes to address the needs of the very short-sentenced prisoners who might only be in the prison for a few weeks and did not qualify for any other courses. The 2-day Dialogues provided around 100 inmate activity hours per day which was well in excess of UKDS's contract. Had they not met the required target for hours of purposeful activity hours it would have resulted in financial penalties. Beyond this, the Director was interested in the PD proposal for socio-therapeutic group work to improve relationships in the prison. The arrangement with PD required the prison to gather a minimum of 20 prisoners, drawn from every housing unit in the prison, 2 uniformed staff and 1 senior manager to attend each two-day session.

PD welcomed the opportunity to understand the workings of a privately-run local prison and wanted to develop a body of Dialogue facilitators through apprenticeship. They were also increasingly interested in how to develop a socio-therapeutic intervention across a whole prison. Their proposal to run a 2-day Dialogue every month addressed all these interests.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

On the 5th and 6th November 1998 the first of the 2-day Dialogues was convened. Two uniformed prison staff were detailed to attend for the 2 days along with 20 prisoners who had little idea what to expect. The 18 senior managers in the prison were obliged by the Director to attend by rotation. PD provided 2 facilitators and were generally accompanied by 2 volunteers who were interested or in training to become facilitators. This was the first time PD had run Dialogues where participants were required to attend rather than participating on a voluntary basis. Given PD's awareness of the value of voluntary participation, it was necessary to rapidly hone their skills to ensure that people wanted to participate in the Dialogue. In particular this was achieved through 'check-ins' (inviting comments from each participant at the outset of the meeting). Following the check-in, prisoners who wanted to leave were allowed to do so. Few did - usually only 1 or 2 and often none of the prisoners would depart. The check-in and the check-out (at the close of the meeting) became an essential part of the Dialogues.

After his first Dialogue session one prisoner said: *"At first I thought it was about inmate to officer, but was pleased that we were able to speak as person to person"*. A member of staff said: *"I have identified some problems I did not realise before – where prisoners had stopped complaining because they felt they weren't getting any response"*. Another participant said: *"People have begun to disagree more amicably"*. The Dialogues quickly gathered a positive reputation. Management, who were apprehensive and often grilled by the prisoners at first, found the overall experience constructive and a contribution to their credibility and understanding of their impact on prisoners and staff. One Manager said that: *"I value the wide range of issues covered and the fact that we were able to take our minds outside of the prison as well as dealing with issues that matter within the prison"*.

Uniformed staff were equally apprehensive at first but they appreciated the presence of management and many found it a useful opportunity to learn about areas where they lack information. They started to realise they could do good quality personal officer work in a large group of prisoners who were supporting and challenging each other. One member of Prison staff said: *"This is my first time in (Dialogue), and I enjoyed it immensely. I've done something today I don't usually do, which was to sit down and talk to prisoners. I've been*

surprised that it is not all one-way traffic towards me. I've had the chance to put in my views and I have learnt something today as well as enjoying myself".

The presence of managers by rotation led to candid conversations about the running of the prison, and included significant insights for the managers as well as others about all areas of the operation, including catering, security and programmes.

At Blakenhurst PD, for the first time, began deliberately describing the Dialogic Practices (voice, listening, respect, suspension) to the participants as a means of enabling the group to talk together better. This led to a wide variety of themes emerging in the group, extending well beyond prison life into personal challenges of individuals in their journey through life. The group participants wrote one-page reports for circulation in the prison containing feedback comments intended to be read by prisoners, staff and managers. PD required facilitators and trainee facilitators to write up each 2-day Dialogue as part of their professional development.

As the Dialogues matured prison staff acted as convenors for the group, and PD maintained its independent status by declining to be issued with a set prison keys. Despite the high turnover of prisoners the Dialogues proved popular for the full 3 years that they ran in this format, only stopping when the Public Sector won the contract to run the prison and changed the agreement that PD had had with UKDS.

Outcomes

Invariably over the 2-days of dialogue a spirit of impersonal fellowship emerged in the group despite the significantly different backgrounds and positions of the participants. The prison vastly exceeded its target for purposeful activity hours for a very modest cost. Rapport and relationships between management, staff and prisoners were relaxed and enhanced and there were many examples of individual development evident amongst all who attended. For example the Head of Security learned that prisoners had the same interest as he did to keep the prison safe and reduce the flow of drugs, and the impact that search dogs had on elderly relatives visiting prisoners.

PD extended its facilitation capacity significantly, with nearly 20 different trainee facilitators experiencing live dialogues within a secure environment.

PD's reputation was such that in August 2001, when HMP Blakenhurst was transferred from the private sector, PD was awarded a new 12 month contract with Her Majesty's Prison Service for the Dialogue groups to contribute to the transition process with the new management and regime. This contract was later cancelled on change of managers.

Learning

PD learned the skills to engage people to turn reluctance to attend a Dialogue into voluntary participation. Having established their willing participation, PD learned to use the Dialogic Practices explicitly to enable prisoners, prison staff and managers to talk and think together constructively. For example, one Prison Officer said: *"My first dialogue. It was different from what I had expected. I thought it would be all confrontation and digs against staff and the prison. I have gained insight into how inmates feel. I was glad to see the Director in the group yesterday and have a chance to get to know him better"*. A prisoner added: *"Hearing ourselves speak has helped us to understand ourselves and others"*. Another participant, following their first Dialogue said: *"The conversation has been good. We all as a group want this to go on. It's good for morale within the prison. People learn more about themselves by the types of topics that are brought up. Everyone has something to contribute in the group. No matter how big or small, every bit helps- and it is good to talk"*.

It became evident that a regular series of Dialogues can impact a whole organisation and this developed an appetite for PD to use Dialogue as a means of whole-system intervention. This was developed in PD's next phase of work at HMP Long Lartin (helping to open a new Prison Wing and turning around a failing Wing, and later to help to turn around a whole failing prison at HMP Dorchester (see CS7, CS8 and CS14). Dialogue started to emerge as a professional activity where facilitation skills were a necessary but only first step towards becoming a Dialogue Practitioner.