

CS6: HMP LONG LARTIN DIALOGUES

by Peter Garrett

Context

In March 1994 PD approached a Probation Officer working in HMP Long Lartin to discuss the possibility of establishing a Dialogue Group in HMP Long Lartin. Subsequently, in June 1994, two Probation Officers from Long Lartin attended the Prisoner/Staff weekly dialogue at HMP Whitemoor. The Probation Officers said that after attending that group they *“were left with an overall feeling of elation because that simplest of human encounters called “communication” seemed to be working so well”*. They left keen to do something similar at HMP Long Lartin.

The Whitemoor Dialogue Group had been running for more than 2 years and the value to prisoners, probation and other staff was evident to them. The Probation Officers saw that by convening a large group of prisoners with staff from different departments and different levels of management that PD had managed to promote the free exchange of ideas. *“This in itself has allowed for views to be exchanged across boundaries and for frustration to be avoided”*. HMP Whitemoor and Long Lartin are both High Security Prisons where relationships, at that time, between staff and prisoners were at low ebb. There had been a number of incidents highlighting a lack of respect. There was a high level of violence and occasional loss of control.

Aims and Objectives

The general aims of the group, as proposed to HMP Long Lartin senior prison management in January 1995, were: *“Essentially to improve communication, to raise levels of trust and respect and to enhance the overall quality of relationships amongst inmates themselves and also between them and the staff and management. This diffuses tension and trauma, thereby reducing violence and aggression and contributing positively to the dynamic security of the prison and the overall atmosphere of the establishment”*.

The Probation Team wanted to raise their profile in the prison and improve the quality of their case work. They felt this could be achieved by seeing prisoners interact with each other, as against the typical controlled environment of one-

on-one interviews. The prison was interested in providing purposeful activity for long sentenced prisoners, who suffered boredom and apathy. Prison Dialogue (PD) was looking to expand its activity and train facilitators.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

As with the Whitemoor Dialogue Groups, the aim was to gather a group of 15-20 participants, mostly prisoners. It would be convened by Probation, facilitated by PD and also include other members of staff and a few volunteers from the public. It was defined by the strap line "Everybody Learns but Nobody Teaches". This was the method for humanising the fragmented society and transforming hatred and anger into fellowship. People talked about what mattered to them, no subject was prohibited and putting down of individuals not present was not allowed. The facilitators used a check-in, the Dialogic Practices and a check-out to establish enquiry into whatever subjects the participants raised. Recruitment was by posters and word of mouth. The group met weekly every Thursday morning for 2 hours, with a refreshment break, and everyone participated on a voluntary basis. Some participants attended regularly and there was a turnover most weeks.

The group began in March 1995 and ran for 3 years until July 1998. The average number of participants was 14, and 75% of the group were prisoners. Weekly reports and quarterly summaries were written for all meetings. Prisoners commented: *"This is the only place that I know of in a prison where you have so many different disciplines all together in one room and in one conversation – probation, chaplaincy, psychology. BOV, management, officers etc. This is really helpful. You can understand something of what they are trying to do."* A member of the chaplaincy team said that: *"I have mainly listened during the meetings and I have learnt so much from being part of the Dialogues. There are things I have never thought about before that the Dialogues have made me start to think about"*.

To give a flavour of the Dialogues, during the first 15 week period staff and prisoners reported enjoying a meaningful experience, a motivational introduction to group work, enhanced communication skills, having received and exchanged useful information, explored anger, improved relationships, developed trust and respect, and had diffused tensions and some trauma

Outcomes

Probation Officers noted improvements in offenders' vocabulary, social engagement, reflective skills and interest in other people as well as their own personal development. A member of the chaplaincy team commented that: *"I observe that these sessions have taught the prisoners how to listen to others and comment in a non-aggressive way"*.

The Probation team received positive recognition for their work.

The Prison benefited from a regular forum for purposeful activity and subsequently commissioned PD to use this approach for specific interventions in the opening of a new wing (see CS7) and the turning around of a culture on a stuck and violent wing (see CS8).

PD gained acceptance in the prison and the Dialogues contributed significantly to helping the prison meet its Purposeful Activity targets. Several facilitators were trained and started to become proficient in turning fragmented and potentially violent situations into constructive ones.

Learning

Probation Officers learnt that challenge and support is often better offered to prisoners by fellow prisoners than professionals. A Probation Officer wrote in July 1995: *"I was initially sceptical about the chances of such a disparate group talking and listening together in a constructive way. I have increasingly come to value the method of "non-directed group and have experienced the quality of trust and acceptance that has gradually developed over time. I have learned a great deal about the experiences of inmates and have shared with them our joint frustrations and aspirations"*. Non-directive purposeful activity led some prisoners to discover which treatments they needed and why.

One prisoner said: *"Surely the point about Dialogue is humanitarian. We each put in our part to move forward together"*. Another that: *"Communication is important, and so is being heard. Sometimes it takes a lot of courage to get out of the bottled-up grief. I like the fact that when you express yourself in a Dialogue group you don't get a label attached to you"*.