

LEARNING CIRCLES

PERSONAL OFFICER AND PRISONER DIALOGUE

by Jane Ball and Peter Garrett

Context

HMP Oakwood, a 1605 bed male Category C (medium secure) prison in the West Midlands in the UK, was opened in April 2012 under the management of the private security firm G4S. G4S won the contract to run HMP Oakwood under the first phase of the UK government's privatisation programme PCP1, (which was dropped before the second phase PCP2). Prison Dialogue partnered with G4S in the bid for HMP Oakwood, proposing that they would support a cascaded approach to create and embed a vision for the prison from the Director through all of the management ranks, to staff and prisoners. The aim was for everyone who lived, worked and visited Oakwood to work together to achieve the common goal of a safe, productive and effective rehabilitative prison for the future. Steve Holland was appointed as Director of HMP Oakwood. He had worked closely with Prison Dialogue for almost 15 years in 3 other prisons¹. Dialogue was now core to his own leadership style and practice, and he knew what could be achieved through a Dialogic approach. Before the prison opened he worked with Prison Dialogue to



OAKWOOD COMMITMENTS

TO THE PUBLIC

- Have a measurable and cost effective impact on public safety and confidence
- Hold prisoners securely
- Support prisoners' development whilst they are in our care

TO PRISONERS IN OUR CARE

- Hold you safely and securely
- Cultivate your pride, dignity and purpose
- Help you determine that your future life will be with your family and community and not in prison

THE OAKWOOD WAY

Support & challenge to learn the Oakwood Way

- BE FAIR – DEMAND JUSTICE
- OWN YOUR ACTIONS – OWN THE CONSEQUENCES
- REAL WORK – REAL REWARDS – REAL WORLD
- RESOLVE CONFLICT WITHOUT FORCE
- RECOGNISE HARM – REPAIR – RESTORE
- BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE
- START HERE – START NOW – BECOME THE BEST
- HELP PEOPLE TO HELP THEMSELVES
- CARE FOR OTHERS – CARE FOR YOURSELF
- CITIZENS IN THE PRISON – CITIZENS IN THE COMMUNITY

BEING THE LEADING PRISON IN THE WORLD...
...BECOMING THE BEST PRISON IN THE WORLD

develop his vision into the Oakwood Commitment (to the public and to prisoners in their care), the Oakwood Way (ten guiding principles for how people would live and work together in the prison), and the statement 'Being the Leading Prison in the World... Becoming the Best Prison in the World'².

The aim was to set the direction for the prison from the outset, being clear with staff about ethos and expectations as they were recruited and trained, establishing the culture

that they would translate into the day-to-day operation of the prison.

Prison Dialogue had run staff/prisoner Dialogues in prisons at all security levels since 1993, when the first Dialogue was started in HMP Whitemoor a high and maximum security prison in the UK³. The Dialogue skills for engagement, communication and change used by Prison Dialogue⁴ had evolved significantly since those early Dialogues, including the development of processes, structures and training for staff learn to facilitate Threshold Dialogue⁵ and wing based staff/prisoner Dialogues⁶.

Based on this experience over many years, Prison Dialogue had a vision that all prison staff could engage with prisoners in small Dialogue groups as a way to carry out their required Personal Officer duties. In the UK, prison custody officers are expected to fulfil a dual role of security officer and prisoner rehabilitation, which includes motivating and encouraging prisoners to engage in prison activities, listening to them when they need someone to talk to, supporting and challenging their behaviour, using coaching skills along with authority and discipline. As well as their general responsibility to every prisoner, those who work as residential officers are Personal Officer to a small group of prisoners (usually 10-15) on the housing unit where they are based. They are responsible for knowing more about the individual circumstance and character of these prisoners and as such are able to address some of their individual needs. In most prisons the reputation of Personal Officer work is poor, at best it is patchy and dependant on the motivation of the individual officer. Staff complain that there is not enough time to do Personal Officer work.

Learning Circles were introduced at HMP Oakwood as a group forum based on Dialogue for Personal Officer work.

Aims and Objectives

Learning Circles would offer high quality Personal Officer work to prisoners, establish good and appropriate staff prisoner relations, provide regular communication channels between prisoners and staff, challenge prisoners' thinking, and embed the Oakwood Way as the vision of the prison. They would support a smooth prison opening, by providing a forum for prisoners to talk, be listened to and release their frustrations, and for staff to keep prisoners informed during the teething problems that would be inevitable in a new prison. Policies, procedures, training and advice to staff, and the commitment

of managers, would be required to embed and sustain Learning Circles as part of the regime.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

Before the prison opened, the process to run Learning Circles was designed and agreed and a draft policy and Prisoner Compact was written. It was structured so that each Personal Officer would run one Learning Circle for one hour each week. The 12 prisoners they supervised were divided into two groups of 6, and they would meet with each group on alternate weeks. The staffing model placed two officers on each housing unit during the day when prisoners were at work. One of these officers was detailed to Personal Officer duties and would run a Learning Circle during this time, while the other officer supervised the running of the unit, cleaning, security checks etc. After the one-hour Learning Circle the officer submitted a short simple report (via computer) to their manager showing the names of the participants, up to three dominant themes that were addressed and any prison communications that were passed on. They also wrote about each individual participant in their prison record, for example about how they engaged in the session, any issues raised, progress made in their sentence or resettlement plans and any safety or security matters. This was a more thorough Personal Officer report than usual, and would later help the prison to make informed decisions about privilege level⁷, security re-categorisation, parole or other early release schemes⁸. Purposeful activity hours were recorded for the session, and reported for the prison contract targets for purposeful activity.

A half-day Introductory Training for Learning Circles was provided to every new prison custody officer within their initial training. This included the Dialogue Modes, Check-in and Check-out⁹, why Learning Circles?, how Learning Circles work, ground rules for Learning Circles, reporting, guidance for making personal officer entries, and a role play of a Learning Circle was introduced in later trainings. Guidance was provided for setting the themes for more than 20 sessions, enough for most of their first year.

A Learning Circle Development Team (LCDT) of Pioneers representing each of the housing units helped to steer the set-up process and support less confident colleagues. They initiated a Learning Circle newsletter that was circulated to all residential staff every week to give them ideas and current information to stimulate their sessions.

Outcomes

Learning Circles were successfully piloted at Oakwood to show an efficient way to provide high quality Personal Officer work. Organisational structures, policies and training were put in place to embed Learning Circles in the Oakwood regime. Delivery during the first year was patchy due to the ups and downs of opening a large new prison, particularly under such budgetary constraints. In places, with certain officers, Learning Circles were established very effectively and had a significant impact on staff/prisoner relations. One prisoner said *“because I know (the officer) now and know I can discuss my problems with him. I couldn’t knock him out. In other prisons I would have knocked them out!”*

Budgetary pressures led to the early termination of Prison Dialogue’s contract at Oakwood. The shortened time-scale of the contract and the pressures of opening a new prison meant that some aspirations of the initiative were not achieved, such as more in-depth training for staff, and establishing a prisoner Learning Circle Mentor scheme. More time was needed to embed this way of working, and to realise the full value in terms of staff / prisoner relationships, safety, accountability and rehabilitation.

Learning

Group Personal Officer work is effective, it can be embedded in the prison policies and regime, and it can be delivered across a whole prison system to support a purposeful and rehabilitative prison culture. Once the structure is in place it can be used to integrate the different activities that affect a prisoner, for example Programme staff could attend Learning Circles so that their efforts are integrated with Personal Officer work. As such there is great potential to develop in to a large scale Threshold Dialogue process¹⁰.

¹ At HMPs Long Lartin, Blakenhurst and Dorchester. Case studies are available about the Dialogue work undertaken at these sites

² A case study is available about the contribution of Dialogue to the prison opening at HMP Oakwood

³ A number of case studies describe Dialogue work at the staff / prisoner interface. See also Where Dialogue Helps/ Staff-Prisoner Dialogue

⁴ See Dialogue skills section of the prison Dialogue website www.prisondialogue.org

⁵ See Threshold Dialogue case studies on the Prison Dialogue website www.prisondialogue.org

⁶ A case study is available about the wing-based staff/prisoner Dialogues at HMP&YOI Parc

⁷ Incentive & Earned Privilege Scheme (IEP) gives prisoners pre-determined levels of reward based on their behaviour, compliance with regime and rehabilitative activities

⁸ HDC – home detention curfew or tagging awards prisoners early release based on risk factors. Engagement with regime, rehabilitation and behaviour while in prison can make a difference in some cases

⁹ See Dialogue Skills / Dialogue Engagement Skills www.prisondialogue.org

¹⁰ See Threshold Dialogue case studies on the Prison Dialogue website www.prisondialogue.org