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# Dialogue Practices Help Transform the Virginia Department of Corrections

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Beginning in 2010, the Commonwealth of Virginia began an ambitious effort to transform the way it helps ex-offenders successfully return to their families and communities. Since then, the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) has worked with other state agencies and stakeholders to support Gov. McDonnell's Adult Reentry Initiative. In 2011, the department joined in a partnership with the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) to provide financial and technical support for the initiative. One of the unique features of this initiative is the central role being played by a set of innovative practices known as "dialogue."

The goal of dialogue is for people to talk and think together to develop a shared understanding about where they are in order to develop a common vision of what they might do next. One of the main themes of dialogue is full participation in the most active sense of the word — everyone must be engaged in the process and, through engagement, should be actively involved in designing and redesigning the process as it unfolds.

To assist in implementing dialogue in Virginia, the DOC and NIC turned to two experts in the field with whom DOC Director Harold W. Clarke had worked before: Peter Garrett and Jane Ball, who had both used dialogue practices extensively in prisons in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Both serve as trainers for department staff and coaches for those who have been trained, as well as advisors to the executive staff implementing the practices throughout the system.

## Using Dialogue to Effect Change

In Virginia, the strategy to respond to the challenge of reentry has been built around the use of dialogue, both as a way of improving communication within the department and to implement systemwide change. Most changes in organizations are technical in the sense that there is a problem to be solved and the goal is clear — eliminate the problem. At other times, an organization needs to undertake a different kind of change in which no one knows exactly what the outcome will be. This occurs when an opportunity, challenge or threat, that is entirely new requires a novel solution. This different type of change is adaptive in nature. The problem and the response must be understood and supported by everyone involved and affected by the change. This, in turn, requires innovative approaches to communication, because the strategies that work well to deal with technical problem-solving do not work for adaptive change.

The advantage of actions such as debate and discussion is that they can quickly lead to a decision. The downside is that they are based on the idea that there are two or more pre-existing "sides" to every issue. In rushing to get the talking "over with" and to start fixing the problem, corrections professionals run the risk of missing the real point of working together. This is where change efforts often stall as organizations try to push through an initiative only to find out that they will have to backtrack and get buy-in from crucial internal groups and external stakeholders. If crucial internal groups and external stakeholders are not fully engaged, their support for a decision is also likely to be weak. Implementing a policy based on a false belief that it is understood and supported by everyone

has little chance of success. It takes more time and energy to go back and fix the effects of a false start than it does to get it right the first time. Dialogue is designed to initiate a change, implement it and sustain it.

This requires a level of communication that takes the form of genuine dialogue. Dialogue can create a climate in an organization where people can begin to examine ideas together in a process that is inclusive, builds relationships and encourages engagement. In this way, communication can become more effective in clarifying assumptions and their implications so shared understandings can emerge. At such times, when there is a need for the kind of adaptive change that requires full engagement — and will lead to solutions that are owned and will be supported by everyone — true dialogue becomes essential to success. Dialogue, however, takes time and effort; it is a process that must be cultivated at a pace that allows people to absorb the changes occurring to and around them. Dialogue is, by definition, going to be challenging for everyone involved.

### **The Four Dialogue Practices**

As powerful as it can be, dialogue is actually based on just a few principles and practices that are easy to learn. For example, one technique is the use of a check-in at the start of each training session and every dialogue meeting. During the check-in, everyone in the room takes their turn to say something. The check-in provides each person the chance to bring his or her voice into the room and to listen to the voices of others. Dialogue practitioners indicate that “voice” means more than just speaking up. Communicating one’s voice is a type of expression that is genuine and authentic. In its truest form it is an expression of a unique talent or strength. The complementary practice of “voicing” is the practice of listening. When people are listening, they are paying attention to others in order to understand the real meaning of the message. Genuine communication requires both voice and listening.

In addition to voice and listening, there are two other practices, “respect” and “suspension.” Respect is simply taking other people and their views seriously and, by doing so, making clear that they and what they say is important. Respect is not the same as agreeing with or approving of everything others say, but it is impossible to practice respect while demeaning or dismissing others. Respect is reinforced when people use the fourth dialogue practice — suspension. When people practice suspension, they are honestly inquiring into the assumptions and implications of their own views. To do that, they have to abandon a habit of judging others based only on their own interests and concerns.

### **Upcoming Workshop**

The DOC and NIC will be co-sponsoring a workshop at the American Correctional Association’s 143 Congress of Correction in National Harbor, Md. (the Washington, D.C., area). Facilitated by Clarke, the workshop will be led by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball. This half-day workshop will introduce participants to the principles and practices of dialogue, an innovative approach to help corrections professionals communicate more effectively with each other. Presented in a participatory and experiential style, this workshop will give participants a practical introduction to communication strategies they can put into practice immediately. For more information about the upcoming workshop, email Christopher A. Innes at [cinnes@bop.gov](mailto:cinnes@bop.gov).

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