

SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP IN CORRECTIONS: THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING POLITICS AND CRIMINOLOGY COMPATIBLE

The emphasis on leadership at this conference is both welcome and important. In today's post recession and post 9/11 world, where difficult economics and the rise of new forms of terrorism has generated equally challenging politics, the task of being of being a successful leader in corrections has become more complex.

High quality leadership and good management skills are in my view essential if we are to respond to the challenges and still deliver excellent corrections.

I want to use this session to examine the components of successful leadership and identify the practical management and leadership skills that will best generate success

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC AND POLITICAL CONCERN ABOUT CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Corrections is a particularly difficult field in which to be a successful leader and I want to explain why I think this is so.

Dealing with difficult and often troubled offenders some of whom have committed horrendous crimes is always emotionally challenging work but corrections is now an increasingly a politically sensitive area in many countries because of a rising level of public concern about crime.

It is broadly true that the public fear crime while also being fascinated by it. Victims can feel extreme hurt and pain, which may translate into a desire for revenge. Relatives and close friends of victims who

see the hurt and pain suffered by their loved one are also likely to argue for tough and meaningful punishment for the perpetrator.

Across the world an increasingly diverse media operates twenty-four hours a day competing for market share in order to generate greater profits. This fierce competition for market share creates a temptation for the media to exploit and amplify the public's raw feelings about crime. They do this by leading on crime stories, often over dramatising them and playing up public fears about crime. Thus feeding the demand for tougher punishments.

At the same time we need to recognise that many criminals, particularly those most likely to be identified and caught, have led damaged and difficult lives. They are more likely

to have come from a broken home,
to have spent time in their youth in the care of the authorities,
to have dropped out of school before school leaving age,
to be without any specialist employment skills or educational qualifications,
to be a substance abuser
to have mental health problems.

For many, crime and the associated chaotic lifestyle have become a deeply ingrained response to the pressures in their lives.

Tougher punishment will not by itself correct any of the offender's deficiencies and problems. Indeed, it may make some of them worse.

Instinctively though many people expect punishment to act as an effective deterrent to reoffending.

If, as so often is the case, when a deterrent sentence does not prevent reoffending many people react by believing this is because the original

punishment was simply not tough enough. These feelings can be used to ratchet up the demand for longer sentences in tougher conditions.

Alternatively, the view of more liberal commentators may be that re-offending is to be regarded as a failure of the corrections agencies, because it means they have failed to meet the needs of the offender.

In any discussion about crime and punishment you will quickly find that most people, no matter how little knowledge and experience they have of the subject, believe they know the answer to how tough punishment should be or what treatment will make offenders give up crime.

Because democratic politicians have to pay attention to the public's views if they want to be elected, they often regard the public's strongly held views and their fear of crime, fanned by an active and competitive media, as a political reality they must live with rather than one they can change.

It is tempting for opposition politicians to exploit "failures" to prevent and deter offending by advocating populist policies for tougher punishment. Parties in power can be just as tempted to launch tough new initiatives or eye-catching treatment programmes that they claim will "solve" the problem.

The risk is that this generates an unrealistic expectation that all repeat crime can be prevented. Depending on the different views of our critics one or all of the following are often offered as the cure all solution:

a deterrent punishment based approach,
treatment programmes to correct the offender's deficits
a control-based approaches of supervision and surveillance for offenders in the community.

In this climate any repeat crime may be seen as a failure by the authorities. This is particularly risky for senior leaders in corrections because accountability for such failures may well be handed over to them rather than shouldered by the politicians who over-sold the effectiveness of their policies.

Leading corrections organisations in such an emotionally charged and politically contentious atmosphere, where there are often wide swings in policy, is obviously difficult.

Having said why the task is difficult and complex I want to suggest an approach to management and leadership that may help.

FIRSTLY A REMINDER ABOUT WHAT WORKS

After decades of criminological research across most of the developed world we know quite a bit about what works and also what does not work to reduce reoffending, though we do need to be aware of the limitations of the research base.

One of the most comprehensive and useful recent assessments of the lessons of research in both the UK and internationally was published by the British Ministry of Justice (Analytic Series in 2013¹). This assessed interventions or treatment approaches and placed them in one of three categories.

The first was: "good" where there was clear evidence of success.

The second was "mixed and promising" where results were less persuasive because there was either contradictory evidence or good

¹ Transforming Rehabilitation a summary of evidence on reducing reoffending Ministry of Justice Analytical Series 2013 ISBN978-1-84099-608-1

evidence only of changes that theoretically should reduce reoffending but as yet no hard evidence yet that reoffending had been reduced

The final category was "insufficient" where there was simply not enough evidence to draw conclusions.

The assessment showed that there was good evidence of the reduction of reoffending achieved by most of the mainstream drug interventions including:

methadone maintenance programmes,

controlled heroin prescription for heroin addicts,

therapeutic communities,

psychosocial programmes

abstinence based approach.

Well-designed cognitive behavioural programmes were described as having a good evidence base providing they were intensive, involved role-playing and included a relapse prevention component.

Psychosocial interventions based on the principles of risk, need and responsivity were also described as good.

However many widely used programmes or approaches were only assessed "Mixed/promising

Mentoring,

Restorative justice interventions,

Employment/ education training programmes.

In some cases, for example in examining restorative justice, this assessment of mixed/promising reflected contradictory results from different studies, in others it simply reflected the lack of enough good quality research with a large enough sample.

Some widely used interventions, for example "scared straight" programmes which aim to put offenders off committing crime in the future by highlighting how tough punishment such as imprisonment will be, were assessed as having good clear evidence that they did not work and may actually increase the risk of reoffending

Even "good" and well evidenced programmes, when implemented on a large scale, rarely achieve much more than a 10% reduction in offending. This means if 50 out of a 100 offenders were expected to reoffend, then as a result of the "good" programme 45 out of a 100 of those who participate would offend . A reduction of 5 offenders out of a 100 is worth having but can hardly be regarded as the complete answer to crime.

It is not only treatment programmes that have limited evidence of success. I can find no persuasive evidence in the literature that deterrence is effective in making substantial reductions to reoffending rates. (A comprehensive assessment by Raymond Paternoster published in the Journal of law and Criminology in the summer of 2010² pointed out how unclear the evidence is, with some studies indicating longer and tougher sentences were linked to increases crime rates).

Leaders in the field of corrections need to be familiar with the evidence and keep up to date with developments so that they can draw on reliable sources in giving advice to our politicians. We should never over-promise to the public, politicians or to staff. When new

² Raymond Paternoster, How Much Do We Really Know about Criminal Deterrence, 100J. Crim. L & Criminology 763 (2010)

approaches to reduce reoffending are tried it is worth emphasising how important it is to ensure they are adequately and independently researched.

COMBINING EVIDENCE BASED INTERVENTIONS WITH DESISTANCE THEORY

I have for some time been very interested in desistance criminology. An approach to criminology which concentrates on how offenders give up, or desist, from crime, rather than as more traditional criminology has done concentrating on the causes of crime is obviously likely to have relevance for those working to help criminals stop offending and “go straight”.

A day spent discussing the process of desistance with Shadd Maruna then a Senior Lecturer at Queen's University Belfast was the “light bulb moment “ for me. His academic insights into the difficult process of giving up crime, with its pattern of successes and setbacks matched my own experience of working with offenders better than anything else I had come across in my forty years in corrections.

I worked with others to build this thinking into the operation of prisons and probation work in England and Wales. Applying the desistance thinking and combining that approach with using evidence led interventions is in my view the best way of maximising the reduction in reoffending . This was an approach strongly supported by Frank Porporino in a very important article entitled published in 2010 “Bringing Sense and Sensitivity to Corrections³.

The evidence from England and Wales between 2000 and 2009 (before reduced Government funding in the post recession period undermined the approach being taken), was that such a coherent

³ Frank Porporino. Bringing Sense and Sensitivity to Corrections: From Programmes to Fix Offenders to Support desistance (From What Else Works? Creative Work With Offenders, P61-65 2010 editors Jo Brayford, Francis Cowe and John Deering- See NCJ-230924.

strategy produced much better overall results than would otherwise have been expected.

This evidence of this success was clearly demonstrated in the detailed analysis of reoffending published annually by the Ministry of Justice in its Statistics Bulletin⁴. The key table compares the actual rate of reconviction with the predicted rate. The comparison with predicted reconvictions removes fluctuations in reoffending caused simply by changes to the make-up of the prison population. For example in the UK the recent increase in the number of elderly prisoners imprisoned for historic sexual offences committed decades previously will reduce the future reoffending rate but will not represent evidence of more effective work to reduce reoffending. The predicted rate uses hard factual data like age, sex, number of previous convictions, offence and sentence. The results of the prediction are normally very reliable.

The headline improvement in reoffending on this measure for all adult prisoners was 10.7 % and for the longer sentenced prisoners serving over four years imprisonment it was a staggering 25.6%.

Making significantly better gains than the predicted rate had not previously been achieved in England and Wales and represented a real success. The policy changes that drove that success combined an emphasis on treating prisoners decently and fairly in a way that is consistent with desistance criminology with evidence-based offending behaviour programmes, better education, increased work training opportunities, improved drug detox and better mental health treatment.

The greater success with long-term prisoners provides some persuasive, though not conclusive, evidence for the success of the approach. We knew that the prisons holding longer-term prisoners had the best provision of interventions because we had allocated the additional funding to them. Our own regular surveys of prisoners'

⁴ Adult re-convictions England and Wales: results from the 2009 cohort England and Wales Ministry of Justice Statistics Bulletin published March 2011- Table 3 page 20

perceptions showed these establishments were also more likely to be good at treating inmates decently. The most hard-pressed prisons were the Local Prisons which served the courts. They held a disproportionate number of short-term prisoners, had least access to interventions and often felt less fair and caring when measured on the prisoner surveys. These differences help explain the much lower improvement rate in reoffending of 6.5% for prisoners serving under twelve months imprisonment who mainly served their sentences in Local Prisons.

Just a quick reminder of the key features of a prison/corrections regime that will support desistance from crime: what we are aiming to do is to create opportunities for offenders to see themselves as useful members of society who can break free of crime and who can develop the skills, strategies and gain the support they will need to help them to succeed. We need to remind ourselves how difficult it is to give up even minor bad habits and realise that if stable and secure people like us we struggle to give up smoking, or eat less how much harder it will be to give up being a persistent criminal.

Persuading offenders that they can break free of crime and lead a successful non-criminal life can only be achieved if offenders respect those who are encouraging them to make that change and believe that they treat them fairly and have a genuine care for them combined with a realistic understanding of them and the issues they face.

This means that a prison regime or community corrections approach must operate to consistent principles of fairness and decency, supported by management systems that ensure this happens. This is absolutely essential and extends beyond the residential and treatment functions. For example, how security decisions are taken and how

they are dealt with by security staff form an important part of a prisoner's experience; as does the treatment by reception staff who deal with offenders as they arrive for community supervision.

If they are to feel fair it is essential that prison regimes and community intervention expectations are predictable and consistent, and backed by reliable systems to ensure services deliver what is promised.

There has to be clarity for both staff and offenders about who can take what decision, the extent of discretion and how it is to be exercised, with clear and reasonable rules that staff can explain and defend, and offenders can understand. Decision taking should be prompt, logical and without unnecessary referral upwards.

The approach to security, enforcement and public safety must be proportionate to the risks. I am not arguing for a soft option. Indeed I think Intolerance of criminal activity, such as drug abuse , must be a core principle to ensure a safe environment for staff and prisoners and to give proper attention to public safety. Any management collusion with criminal activity, whether it be explicit or implicit undermines the integrity of the whole approach.

Simply getting the management issues and systems right is important but it is not enough. Success is only achievable if staff understand what is required, have the skills and motivation to deliver it and are encouraged and supported in their work. This requires staff to be selected and promoted on the basis of their interpersonal skills and their motivation to treat offenders decently and fairly, so they can forge positive, meaningful relationships with offenders, rather than just being selected on their qualifications or intellectual skills. Personal warmth and a sense of humour should be essential skills for our area of work.

Staff support, appraisal and training systems that encourage and enable staff to develop and hone their skills in working with offenders are important. Though the use of case studies and role-play in training will help, staff need to be enabled to learn from real situations. Too often critical incident review only takes place after major disasters and is about finding someone to blame rather than allowing staff and their managers to review the handling of difficult situations to learn lessons.

Publicly recognising and praising good, not just exceptional, work by staff is a powerful tool in developing the right culture. There must be no tolerance of staff behaviour that is unfair, capricious or aggressive. Any such practice must be identified and addressed; if performance cannot be improved, the staff member concerned must be dismissed.

Publicly recognising and praising achievement by prisoners is also important, for example through award ceremonies for achievement of a qualification or successful completion of an offending behaviour programme. More emphasis should be put on identifying the strengths of offenders and building on them, rather than concentrating solely on risks and deficits

We need to focus offenders not just on their present circumstances but on their future outside prison and beyond supervision. We can help this by enabling positive engagement with external support groups during sentence and giving them opportunities during their sentence to be constructive and to help others.

If we get all of the above elements right, then it will make it more likely that our evidence-led interventions will have the positive effect we are hoping for. Essentially what we are trying to do is to create a

supportive atmosphere which encourages positive change with our interventions giving offenders the skills which will make it easier for them to be successful and to break free of crime

I recognise that none of this is easy. Adopting a consistent approach that harnesses the evidence on what works with the understanding we now have of desistance requires support and investment from our politicians. A support that is not always forthcoming.

I can use recent experience in England and Wales as an example where the spending cuts required to cope with austerity after the financial crisis of 2007/08 resulted in budget cuts but with a political reluctance to make a commensurate reduction in the prison population. This has made prisons less safe with rising violence, murder rates and self-harm and suicide levels. At the same time reducing reoffending work and other support services have been contracted out on a regional basis cheaply to external suppliers. These changes and cost reductions are making it very difficult to deliver the joined up service required.

In spite of the difficulties I believe that leaders in corrections have a duty to explain that reducing reoffending needs a coordinated, systematic approach that draws on the evidence and on the knowledge of how offenders desist from crime. The explanations should help the public and key opinion formers like politicians to understand how easy it is to get hooked into a life of crime, and that mental health, addiction problems and poor life chances increase the risk of becoming a criminal. They should also make clear how difficult it is to

break free from crime and the barriers that have to be overcome if offenders are to desist and resettle successfully.

The tone and manner in which this is done is important if it is to impact positively on the debate. Sounding like an advocate for offenders or denying the reality of individual responsibility for crime is likely to be counter productive, but providing a balanced and careful contribution that acknowledges the complexities is likely to have a positive effect. *Correction leaders need to sound as though they are prepared to embrace positive change and be genuinely willing to do so and not just defend the status quo.*

There are other successes for this approach as well as England and Wales between 2000-2009. I know for example that in Singapore the whole corrections system has been run on this approach and those of us who attended the ICPA Conference in Singapore in 2011 learnt about the gains that were being made as a result. Also in Vermont both prison and community corrections with strong local leadership have delivered substantial improvements to create more positive interactions between staff and offenders

LEADING AND MANAGING IN CORRECTIONS: THE PRACTICAL LESSONS

So far I have concentrated on the big issues but not yet fully addressed the crucial leadership role --that of managing prisons and community services.

Firstly, I want highlight my belief that what our front line staff do is very difficult. In our prisons a relatively small group of staff work to maintain the order and security of a much larger group of offenders, many of whom have a track record of aggressive and difficult behaviour towards others, particularly those in authority. We often underestimate the skill required to do that

In community corrections the situation is a little different but still challenging.

The possibility of abuse by staff of offenders or, just as bad, corruption of staff by offenders or staff colluding with offenders, is very real.

If it all goes seriously wrong the consequences of violence, escape, disorder or self-harm and psychological damage are ever present.

It is crucial that these inherent difficulties and risks are understood and openly acknowledged by those of us who are leaders of correctional services.

Following my retirement in 2010, I became involved in advising others on running their prisons and correction services. This gave me a chance to see different ways of operating and the time and space to make the best use of my 47-years experience in corrections. As a result, I identified what I think are the key elements of successful leadership and management.

- Leadership and management skills are both important and they must be combined. Simply having the charisma and skill to persuade your staff to do difficult things is not on its own enough. It needs to be accompanied by high quality management skills that support good business decisions and a continued concentration on achieving high quality and reliable operational delivery.
- The long term direction and purpose of the organisation must be made clear and consistently and effectively communicated.
- Each decision you take counts. Decisions must fit and be seen to fit within an overall long-term direction, even when dealing

with emergencies. Indeed, emergencies may paradoxically provide opportunities to move the agenda forward by providing the burning platform that persuades others that change must take place.

- *It is in my view absolutely essential that leaders in corrections know the detail of their business well.* If they do not, the risk of bad decision taking with unintended adverse consequences is unacceptably high. Poor operational decision-making undermines the effectiveness and credibility of the leader.
- Even when made under pressure, decisions must be operationally sound. Implementation of change needs to be thorough and effective. Simply announcing change is never enough. Proper and careful project planning is required to identify both the risks and any conflict with existing arrangements, and to manage them so the problems are resolved in a well-controlled way and not in a chaotic fashion by front line staff under pressure.
- Determination and resilience are key leadership qualities in our area of work, as is a willingness to pay attention to the evidence. This evidence includes operational data and other management information but this must be combined with a thorough understanding of front line staff and a willingness to listen and be prepared to consider feedback even when it includes uncomfortable messages.
- Good leaders use their skills to manage and influence the wider environment so that the organisation is able to be more successful. They equally ensure the demands on their time and effort that flow from this are not so great that they distract from the core task of running the organisation. Communication with external stakeholders needs to be consistent with internal

messaging in order not to damage the clarity and perceived integrity of internal messaging.

- In complex and large organisations the leader cannot expect to carry out the leadership task unaided. Very few people can be good at every task on their own, and even if they are, there are not enough hours in the day for them to single handedly manage and lead a complex organisation. Good leaders therefore build strong teams that collectively contain the full range of skills needed. Effective team leaders recruit good and powerful senior managers around them and encourage and facilitate constructive contributions to big decisions. They do not perceive their best senior managers as threats or rivals but see them as adding to the strength of the team, making it more effective.
- *Above all else leaders in corrections must have absolute personal integrity. Those who cannot be trusted will never be fully successful.*

CONCLUSION

I know that the approach I have advocated to reducing reoffending and managing corrections is challenging, particularly in underfunded and overburdened systems struggling to deliver the basics.

Wherever we work however I believe leaders in corrections have a duty to be well informed and knowledgeable about what works to reduce reoffending. They also have a major role to play in increasing political and public understanding about what is possible, always seeking to maximise the positive impact that can be made without over promising.

The gains that are possible with limited resources may be small but they are still worth striving for. In my view in our area of work unless we constantly try to improve what we do performance will begin to

slip back, so simply preserving the current position is not a viable option.

In order to make the positive impact that the research evidence and criminological thinking demonstrates is possible, the important leadership role of influencing the external environment must be combined with high quality hands-on leadership of staff and effective and well organised management of the business.

Phil Wheatley

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