Losing Faith in the Service: A Path to Disenchantment among Governor Grades

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Enchanted workplaces are those where employees feel connected to their work and where they are active agents who believe they can make a difference, find meaning in their work and flourish.[1] Enchanted employees are passionate and motivated with increased happiness, job satisfaction and organisational commitment.[2] Such concepts are in turn related to increased mental and physical health, and decreased staff turnover.[3] Maintaining an enchanted workplace, and reducing disenchantment, therefore has positive implications, individually and organisationally.

Employee disenchantment represents the transition from high engagement in work, alongside admiration for the organisation, to feelings of disappointment, betrayal and disillusionment arising from perceptions about treatment by the organisation.[4] Disenchantment includes lower motivation for work, and negative emotions about colleagues, managers and/or the organisation.[5] Existing evidence has shown that a range of factors can lead to disenchantment, and the impact of disenchantment can be negative for both the individual and the organisation. For example, perceptions of inequity, whereby an employee feels their input exceeds their outcomes can lead to increased absenteeism and staff attrition, compared to employees who perceive higher levels of equity.[6] Conversely, employees feel increased fairness and satisfaction when there is equitable distribution of recognition and workload.[7] Other factors which have shown to contribute to feelings of disenchantment include feelings of distrust, and perceptions of broken promises and mistreatment, especially by superiors.[8] In addition, autonomy, defined as a state of being able to self-govern has been shown to be important in wellbeing and productivity in work.[9]

Given the link between disenchantment and both wellbeing and attrition, and that prisons are facing workforce pressures due to decreased retention,[10] it seems pertinent to understand disenchantment amongst prison leaders. This article utilises the same data and methodology outlined in Harrison and Nichols (this issue) to highlight the presence of disenchantment amongst prison governors and operational managers. Briefly, the methodology comprised of qualitative interviews with 63 prison governors and operational managers, analysed using the principles of Thematic Analysis. The current article will use the data to argue the presence of disenchantment, before exploring contributing factors to disenchantment and finally, examining how re-enchantment might be facilitated.

Findings

Feeling disenchanted

While it is important to note that this does not apply to all participants in the data set, many participants described feelings which would align to disenchantment. More specifically, when asked about whether their feelings towards their role had changed

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3. Meyer, J.P., Stanley, D.J., Herscovitch, L. and Topolnytsky, L. (2002). Affective, continuance, and normative commitment to the organization: a meta-analysis of antecedents, correlates, and consequences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 61, pp. 20– 52.
4. Treglown, L. & Furnham, A. (2022). Employee Disenchantment: The Development of a New Construct and Measure. *Psychology*, 13, 1517-1538.
5. Ibid.
6. Stecher, M. & Rosse, J.G. (2005). Aren't there two parties in an employment relationship? Antecedents and Consequences of Organisation-Employee Agreement on Contract Obligations and Violations. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour,* 24, 585-608.
7. Forret,M. & Love, S.M. (2008). Employee Justice Perceptions and Coworker Relationships. *Leadership & Organisational Development Journal*, 29, 248-260.
8. Treglown, L. & Furnham, A. (2022). Employee Disenchantment: The Development of a New Construct and Measure. *Psychology,* 13, 1517-1538.
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and, if so, how, participants described feeling let down, often after many years of service:

> I feel let down by a service that I've given years to, I feel, they let me down . . . after everything I've given and the amount of commitment over the years and the amount of dedication to a very specific, important role … [I] have lost faith in the service (PGA 29).

For some, this meant less engagement and motivation in their work, such that they were concerned about whether they were doing the right thing for the service:

> I've always loved the job. And actually, I don't feel like that at the moment, which is a shame. That challenges me because I think if I'm not giving it 100 per cent, am I doing the right thing for the service? So, I've never thought that before. I've always been that person that if the phone went, I was there. Or if there was a riot, I was there. Whereas now I'm starting to lose that motivation (PGA 20).

For one particular participant, the development of disenchantment meant a shift in the perception of their role as a vocation, towards a process of just surviving:

> I was passionate about our work. Now I'm not quite so. Now it's about survival for me (PGA 49).

Furthermore, it was described that such feelings of disenchantment were a contributing factor in the turnover of governor grade staff:

> I think I'm the fourth Governor here in four years. I've had 3 Deps in 18 months, and I think you can see even new colleagues that have come in, who should be really enthusiastic, they're getting quite disillusioned quite quickly (PGA 20).

There were a number of factors described by participants which seemed to be contributing to this path to disenchantment. These are summarised as a lack of perceived value and care, challenges to

autonomy and responsibility, bureaucracy, and reduced progression and development. Each of these will be outlined in more detail below.

Lack of perceived value and care

Within our study, many participants described feeling that they were not valued in their work. This perception had arisen from a reported lack of organisational appreciation and recognition, as well as a perceived paucity of public appreciation and recognition. Many participants described themselves as feeling like 'just a number in the machine' (PGA 40), 'a five-digit number on a spreadsheet' (PGA 43) and 'as disposable as the food containers from last night's food' (PGA 43). A number of participants reported feeling the service did not care about them. For some, this was a significant contributing factor in the transfer of feelings of motivation and engagement to a more disenchanted position. For example:

> I kind of realised that really, I am just a number to them . . . I churn out the work and I try to do the best but I'm just a number to them. They don't really give a s*** about me if I'm really honest (PGA 13).

There was a sense from some participants that while they had given everything to the service, this level of commitment and support was not reciprocated from the organisation. In addition, while many governors still had a sense of pride in the organisations they worked in and their roles as prison leaders, there was a feeling that they were not cared for at a national level:

> This service will suck every inch and ounce of me, and it won't be there for me (PGA 33).

> I'm really proud to work for HMPPS [but] nationally, no, they don't care, they don't care who you are, what you are (PGA 23).

A lack of care towards staff was also borne out through audits and inspections:

> HMIP came and did lots of things during Covid. And they came and did a few inspections . . . I'm pretty certain it was all prisoner focused. There was nothing . . .

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focused on staff, it was all around what we're providing for prisoners . . . The staff are absolutely a secondary thought, in everyone's thoughts (PGA 39).

As outlined in the previous article, prisons are not ordinary places of work. They are characterised by the presence of often traumatic incidents. Managing such incidents from a governor perspective, within the context of a perceived lack of value and care, was a contributing factor in transferring to a disenchanted state of mind:

The trauma of going through that [series of incidents] and then hitting Covid. And we hit it quite spectacularly at the beginning. These have taken their toll and I do find myself almost regularly contemplating . . . 'can I make it to January? Do I have it in me to carry on until January?' . . . I'm asking myself questions that I wouldn't have dreamt of asking myself two years ago (PGA 3).

The lack of perceived value and care seemed to be exacerbated by the fact that participants felt they had been let down in a number of ways, including safety not always being prioritised, with this example referring to the fact that prison staff were not offered vaccines during Covid, when there had been a clear threat to staff safety:

It was shortly after they'd said prison staff couldn't have vaccines. And I was fuming about that. Not least, a member of staff just died. I'm like, 'this is madness' (PGA 1).

Furthermore, disenchantment seemed to be arising in situations where governors had observed their own staff and colleagues experiencing significant health issues but not being properly cared for. Again, these reports were after many years of service:

I've got three staff off at the moment with cancer, you could be terminal, go on half pay, go on nil pay, lose your house, and then die. You know, you could have done 30 years in prison, never had a day sick . . . and I've got in

trouble so many times over the years for carrying on paying people because it's morally the right thing to do for me. But you get places in prisons where they'll go, nope, you know, because they're following the rules and do what they've got to do. It just makes you feel that we don't care as an organisation or as a government (PGA 27).

As a result, there was a clear sense that more care and consideration, particularly around staff health and wellbeing, was needed in order to retain staff:

I don't think we're at the stage yet where health and wellbeing is embedded enough to stop people from leaving (PGA 42).

Autonomy and responsibility

A core finding from our research was that governor grade staff experienced much frustration at being given a lot of responsibility, but very little autonomy in the running of their establishments:

I'm quite happy, hold me to account but give me the control to actually deliver it . . . give governors autonomy, trust governors to deliver it. But they talk about autonomy but then take it away because they want to control everything. But I'm carrying the risk if a prisoner dies in my prison, I'll be the one that's in the coroner's court (PGA 20).

The tension between autonomy and responsibility was also particularly prevalent when managing contracts with external partners within the prison, and this was a significant source of frustration:

It's the things that I have no control over, that frustrate me the most. Things like the FM contract, you know, facilities management . . . a big part of my role, what I'm judged on is the environment. I have absolutely no control whatsoever on the facilities management . . . I'm responsible for the quality of prisoner education, but I have no influence whatsoever on the contract that's been provided. Again, I've just got to use the contract to try and get the best out of them (PGA 17).

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It was evident that over time, the dissonance between the huge responsibility placed on governors and a lack of perceived autonomy to be able to act appropriately to such responsibilities was at best, frustrating, but, at worse, a contributing factor towards becoming more disenchanted in the role:

I'm finding it less satisfying that lack of . . . autonomy . . . perhaps I need to go and find something else, you know, something else to do. Because I miss that ability to go make what I think are sensible and reasonable decisions (PGA 41).

This was particularly troublesome for participants who had previously been very hopeful about their leadership roles, with the job not subsequently turning out to be what they had expected:

I've intensely, disliked is maybe the wrong word, but tolerated my role . . . it has not been the job that any of us thought it would be . . . none of us are working in the way that we wanted (PGA 8).

Bureaucracy

Bureaucratic disenchantment was reported in a number of ways. Firstly, participants reported their frustrations at the policies in place within the Prison Service. For one particular participant, this had led to what they described as a love-hate relationship:

I hate the prison service. I actually detest it. But I love it as well. So, I work really hard. But when I tell people they absolutely don't believe me when I say I hate the prison service. I hate everything it stands for. I hate everything it does. I hate the policies behind it, the bureaucracy behind it all . . . when you sit down and look at the core values and look at everything that we do, do I believe in all of it? No, I don't (PGA 39).

Secondly, it was widely reported in our data set that there were challenges relating to the communications between governor grades who were operational within establishments, and those who were based in Headquarters. Participants described how each party did not seem to understand or appreciate each other's roles. This resulted in perceived power imbalances and frustrations about the lack of appreciation and understanding:

Now they've got an awful lot of power at the centre. It just makes my job irritating. Really, I'd stay here run this prison [for] the next 10 years very happily. Only if people would leave me alone! (PGA 59).

So, there's people that work in headquarters that have never worked in a prison and who tell us what we're going to do, so they've got no understanding (PGA 26).

The ill-feeling arising from these perceptions was further exacerbated by what was perceived as a barrage of communication from Headquarters into prisons and a lack of a systematic approach to managing this:

I think the relationship between headquarters and prisons is very pathological. Very back to front. And nobody's got an oversight of it. So, what happens is, from the perspective of prison, you get 101 demands from the centre from 101 different people, none of whom are taking into account the other 100 people. And nobody is really taking systemic control of that and the implications of that (PGA 1).

These complex dynamics had undoubtedly contributed to feelings of disenchantment for some governor grade staff:

I can work with prisoners and staff all day long. And I can work with my colleagues all day long. It's the crap that comes down from above that I've got to the point where I'm actually thinking, 'How soon is it? Can I retire?' A while ago, I wasn't thinking that. It's just this constant barrage of stuff (PGA 24).

In addition to policy-related bureaucratic challenges, and challenges arising from the communication between Headquarters and prison-based staff, there were feelings of disenchantment

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linked to a perceived failure to invest in the service in the right areas, and to move the service forward:

> . . . we've had to cut over and over and over again, but yet the cost of living has expanded, the cost of everything has expanded. Yet, prison budgets are cut, top sliced every year, so we've got to make efficiency savings here, or maybe efficiency savings there. And then you see a new director pop up, or you see a new function pop-up in headquarters, or you see this, and you think, but that's got a band eleven, a band ten, four or five band eights. Some people become so disengaged . . . because sometimes the service feels like it's on a hamster wheel. So, you know, we move away from something, and then a few years later, it becomes flavour of the month again . . . I've been there done it. It's tedious (PGA 4).

This resulted in feelings of not wanting to be stuck doing the same thing over and over again:

> I'm not necessarily relishing the prospect of another ten years . . . just doing the same stuff again (PGA 50).

For some, this had led to feelings of wanting to find work in another area, outside of prisons, with less bureaucracy:

> I don't want to be in prisons. I think, why don't I go and do one of these jobs outside of a prison where actually the stress levels are lower, I can get on with my work. I don't have to put up with bureaucracy (PGA 39).

Reduced progression and development

Allied to the lack of perceived organisational development outlined above, a final theme in relation to disenchantment was linked to a perceived lack of progression, development, and inspiration on an individual level:

> Ten years in the prison service, I'm a bit bored. And I don't like the development opportunities [that] are available in the sense that I don't want to be the Governor of a large local, because I think it's a poisoned chalice. And I think it would be very bad for my family (PGA 1).

The service doesn't really provide great traction or inspirational opportunity as far as I can see (PGA 33).

The lack of progression was also linked to the previous theme around a lack of perceived value:

> There is little or no inspiring direction for some of us . . . our abilities, our experience, our skills, are often just . . . taken for granted (PGA 33).

Sometimes this accompanied a sense of a lack of investment in staff which increased workload pressures on governor grades because they were having to do the work of staff working in grades below them. This created a further void of staff with the right knowledge and experience to do the role fully:

> I also think because managers are often acting down, they don't have time to performance manage, appraise, encourage the staff that they need to, it's kind of, you know, just get on with it (PGA 4).

For some people, disenchantment was evident in people ending their pursuit of promotion. This was because the process was seen as challenging and, in some cases, impossible:

> When I looked at the Dep's workbook, and I read it, I thought, there's no way somebody working in a jail is going to be able to hit all of these points. So [it's] almost impossible. And I looked at the process. And so, I thought, 'Well, you know what, I'm never going to be Deputy Governor'. And that ambition and career and appreciation died in that moment (PGA 24).

The presence of disenchantment at promotion opportunities, whilst partly due to the pressure of the promotion process itself, was also linked to not feeling supported and valued and was perceived to be creating a vacuum in senior grades:

> I genuinely think the prison service [has] got a problem looming at band 9/10/11, Deputy Governors, Governing Governor posts, and we're seeing that across the country. And you can say what you like but I'll tell you exactly what it is in my opinion. People don't want it . . . It's not like they don't feel that they're capable. There are some quality people out there. But they don't want to be cut adrift, not supported, devalued (PGA 33).

Implications: Creating re-enchanted workplaces

The findings above indicate that there is disenchantment amongst prison governors and operational managers. The main contributing factors on this transition to feeling less engaged with work were linked to a lack of perceived value and care within the turbulent prison context; a dissonance borne out of high levels of responsibility but a lack of accompanying autonomy; bureaucratic challenges arising from policy, headquarters communications, and a lack of service development and appropriate investment; and a lack of individual progression and development opportunities. When embedded in existing literature, the evidence suggests this could have a profound impact on individual wellbeing and job satisfaction, as well as workplace engagement and attrition.

However, evidence also suggests that it is possible to create re-enchanted workplaces and that there are conditions which facilitate this on an individual and organisational level. These conditions include:

- ❏ *Good working conditions,* inclusive of salary, job security, personal growth, positive leadership relationships, feeling valued and feeling part of a community;[11]
- ❏ *Meaningful work* and being able to have a positive impact on others;[12]
- ❏ *Shared leadership,* characterised by team working and support amongst leadership teams;[13]
- ❏ *Servant leadership*, which is characterised by humility and concern for others, empowerment, stewardship and holding people accountable for outcomes;[14]
- ❏ Autonomy supportive leadership;[15]
- ❏ The presence of *job crafting* whereby people are able to shape their own job to align role demands to their personal abilities and needs;[16] and

- ❏ The presence of *copassion* which refers to the responding to the positive emotions of another (not to be confused with the related concept of compassion).[17]

Therefore, implications for practice are that the Ministry of Justice, HMPPS, providers of private sector prison services and organisations such as the Prison Governors Association should work to facilitate the conditions outlined above. More specifically, there is a need for improved conditions with reference to salary, personal development, and relationships with leaders such as those working within HMPPS headquarters. There is a need for governors to feel they are having a positive impact on others, this could include colleagues, prisoners, and wider society. Teamworking, accountability, empowerment and humility should also be fostered. Governors should be supported to feel they are able to act autonomously and can have a degree of flexibility to shape their roles to individual strengths. Finally, the concept of copassion should be brought to awareness and encouraged. These conditions do not all need to be present for re-enchantment to be present, but they are also not mutually exclusive such that numerous concepts, such as autonomy and job crafting, arguably, go hand in hand. The facilitation of these could be achieved through increased opportunities for listening and reflective practice, increased gratitude communication (saying 'thank you'), flexible working opportunities, and workload reviews,[18] and via leadership training events, conferences and meetings, better general communications between prison leaders at all grades. Evaluation of such actions could also be introduced using measures of employee disenchantment,[19] and measures of job satisfaction,[20] used over time. Working towards a more re-enchanted workforce may subsequently have a positive impact on workplace engagement and retention, as well as individual wellbeing.

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