

Can one person really make a difference?

Gill Attrill is a Deputy Director in HMPPS, overseeing the Insights Group and prison culture programme.

Is part of your role and responsibility to help improve the culture around you? Do you find yourself questioning ‘what difference can I really, honestly make?’. If so, you are not alone.

Culture is a little like water; it surrounds you but it's hard to grip. It can lift you up, it can drag you down. You can get pulled along by the current, you can find yourself swimming against the tide. It is a force to be reckoned with.

Changing culture, knowing where to even start, can feel overwhelming. It's hard to know where to focus your efforts as an individual, to have confidence that as a ‘small fish’ in a ‘big pond’ you can make a tangible difference.

It would help if we knew the answer to ‘what are the most effective things I can personally do?’ In this

paper I am going to suggest three things. Three things that as an individual we can control, and we can do well.

Wield the evidence

Much of my career has focused on bringing evidence and insight to help answer challenging questions. We have a wealth of excellent work setting out what makes a culture feel safer, more rehabilitative, facilitates positive change, and is a better place to work in. My colleague, the brilliant Dr Ruth Mann, helpfully translated this evidence into a simple yet powerful triangle that still points us in the right direction when we think about focusing our efforts.¹

Figure 1. An evidence-based model for prisons that best protect the public by reducing reoffending.

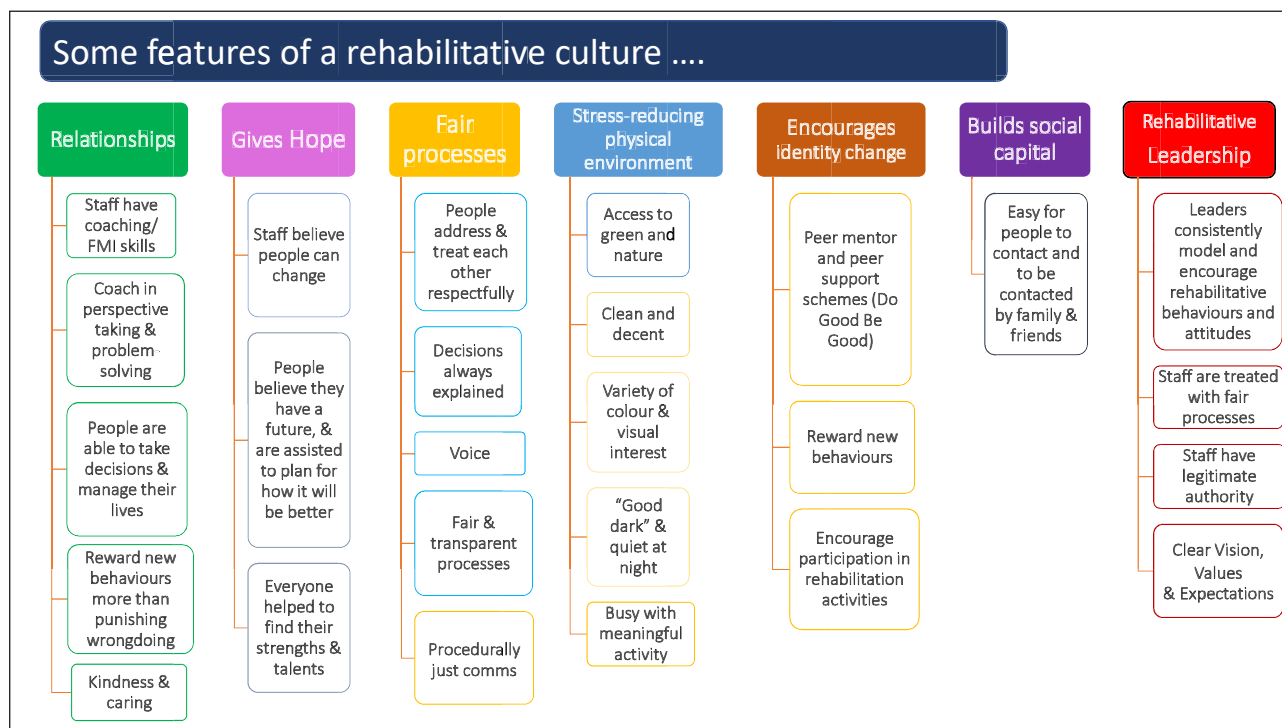


Equally, her work on features of a prison that reduces reoffending reminds us of the behaviours, relationships and attitudes that make a difference

and which we as individuals can i) model, ii) encourage, and iii) reinforce. These are outlined below in Figure 2.²

1. Mann, R., Fitzalan Howard, F., & Tew, J. (2018). What is a rehabilitative prison culture? *Prison Service Journal*, 235, 3-9.
2. Mann, R. (2019). Rehabilitative culture part 2: An update on evidence and practice. *Prison Service Journal*, 244, 3-10.

Figure 2. Evidence-based features of a rehabilitative prison culture.



More recently colleagues in HMPPS layered together multiple pieces of information, data, and insight into HMPPS prisons on to the evidence base regarding effective culture. This helpfully identified 10 key areas where a focus of effort is likely to

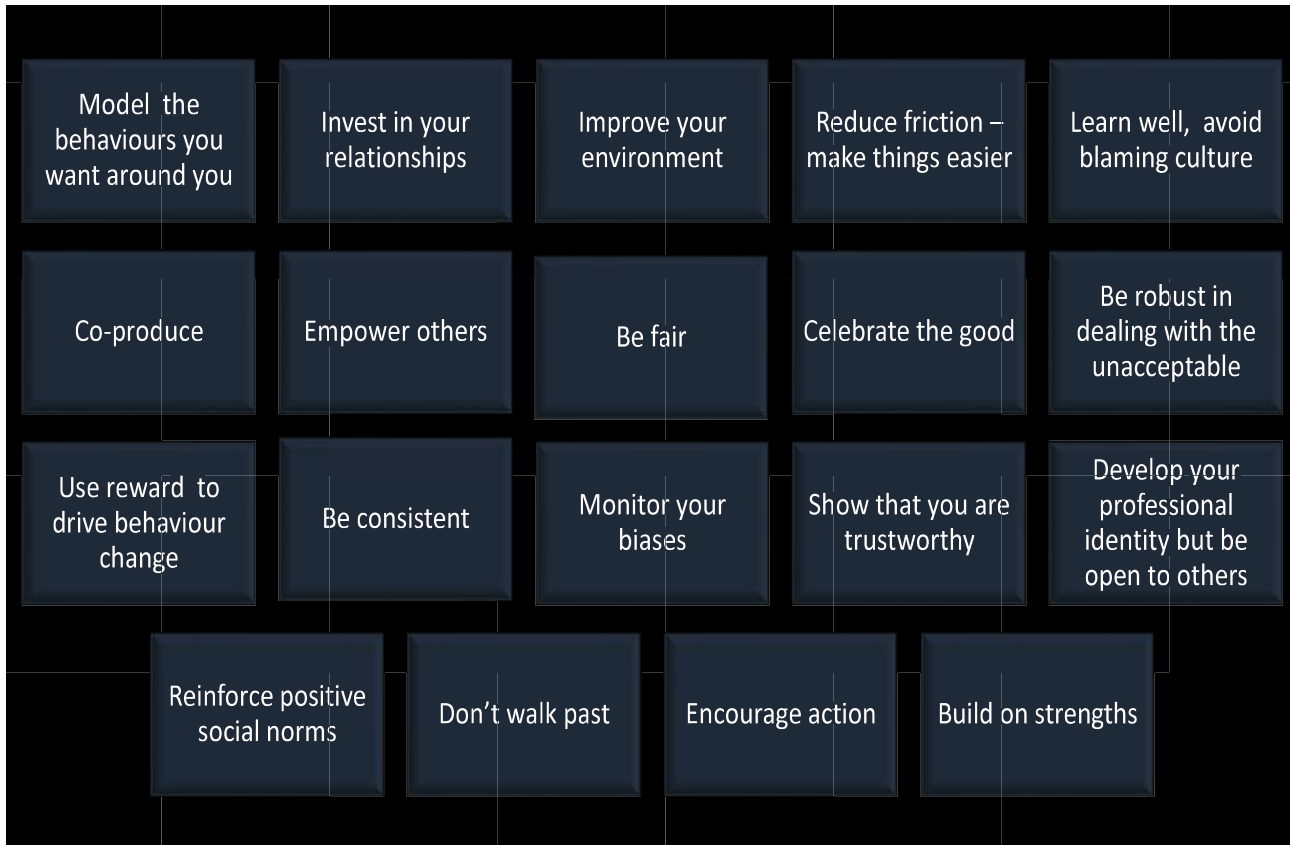
deliver a tangible impact on multiple priority outcomes (such as wellbeing, and safety, as well as reoffending), and the experience of people working and living in prisons (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Evidence-informed features of an effective prison culture.

10 Features of an effective prison culture

1. People feel **valued** and have a **sense of purpose**
2. People feel they are **treated fairly**
3. People feel **listened to**
4. People feel that their **well-being** is protected and cared for
5. People feel **empowered**
6. The **physical environment** is decent and supports safety and rehabilitation
7. People value diversity and are **inclusive with all**
8. People are **open to learning and change**
9. The day to day **processes** around people are reliable and **enabling**
10. People work in **partnerships and collaboration**

Figure 4. Individual actions to support a positive culture in prisons.



One final reflection from the evidence base is a list of things we can do as individuals, on a daily basis, that can have a positive impact (Figure 4).

This does, of course, raise the tricky question of where to focus your attention. Where will your personal effort create the greatest benefit? To answer this, you need to have a grip on what the strengths and issues are within the culture you are working in. These may of course feel very different in different places, for different people, and at different times and circumstances. This is where using our understanding of risk and effective assessment can help us.

Use what you already know about good assessment

We are a sector that understands risk, we can define it, measure it, we have tools for predicting risk and methods for reducing it. We can apply these professional skills to understanding the culture around us. This is a critical step towards finding meaningful indicators of what our cultures are really like and if progress is being made and sustained. There are multiple tools for looking at your

environment, culture, quality of prison life. We have a choice. We can follow a simple principle of good assessment to give us as clear as perspective as possible: use multiple methods, include multiple perspectives, look across multiple time frames.

Tell good stories

One of my first jobs was working in a therapeutic community in the Florida Keys, an under-funded residential service in an old electrical goods factory, sitting on a scruffy dock managed by a small group of international staff. We worked with about 20 people with severe mental health, addiction, and personality challenges. We all lived in the same building. I shopped with the residents, we spent Christmas day together, we shared a kitchen and bathroom. It is the closest I have ever been to living day-to-day life alongside the people in my care. This photograph (Figure 5) shows the building; my bedroom was bottom right of the image. This is the wall at which a resident, distressed at having to leave the community because of persistent alcohol use, drove his car at speed, smashing into the building before driving off. It's also where I was woken in the middle of the night by the unnerving sound of a shovel hitting the dirt as

Figure 5. Therapeutic community building in the Florida Keys.



a grave was being dug outside my window, for a newly deceased resident's dog.

My first day working in a prison I was sent to reception to have my staff ID produced. I stood where prisoners were asked to stand in front of the camera. Behind the camera was a full-length picture of a naked woman with a snake wrapped around her. 'That's not right' I said, when I got back my to office. 'No, it's not' came the reply, 'you can make something of it but the officers won't open the doors when you go to see the prisoners'.

Do you recall the scene in the movie *Jaws*, where young marine biologist Hooper (Richard Dreyfus), Police Chief Brody (Roy Scheider), and fisherman Quint (Robert Shaw) are seated around the cramped table in Quint's boat, late at night? The boat is rocking, they are drinking and telling stories. Compelling, memorable stories. You can see the shift in their relationship. By sharing stories, they are beginning to bond, to find what they have in common. It's a pivotal moment for them as a team. The atmosphere becomes more sinister as Quint tells

the story of being on the USS *Indianapolis*, which was hit by submarine torpedoes.

*'Eleven hundred men went into the water. Vessel went down in 12 minutes. Didn't see the first shark for about a half-hour... You know that was the time I was most frightened. Waitin' for my turn. I'll never put on a lifejacket again. So, eleven hundred men went into the water. 316 men come out, the sharks took the rest, June the 29th, 1945.'*³

Back to Florida for a moment. My story of the resident driving a car into my bedroom and the dead dog outside the window. Why did I choose that as a story to tell you? Why did I choose that when I could have told you about the day a resident came back from their first day at work, about helping a resident move into their first home, or about taking a man to see his family for the first time in a decade?

My first day at work. That story is thirty years old now. It is true but it doesn't reflect the prison service of today.

3. Spielberg, S., Williams, J., & Williams, J. (1975). *JAWS*. USA.

And back to *Jaws*, one of the most influential books and movies of our time, a compelling award-winning piece of storytelling. The author, Peter Benchley, has said that he wishes he never wrote the book because of the way the world then viewed sharks. The Director, Steven Spielberg, has also been reported sharing the same view: 'I truly, and to this day, regret the decimation of the shark population because of the book and the film'. *Jaws* changed the way the world and media view sharks. What followed was the decimation of the American shark population and a huge drop in sharks and rays around the world.

Stories matter. They have power beyond the moment they are told. Why is this? Stories engage our emotions, stories better convey meaning, stories

are persuasive, stories are memorable, stories reflect your values, and stories are retold.

We have a choice over which stories we tell and pass on. We have a multitude of stories which showcase what a 'good' culture looks like and the difference it can make to people's lives.

There are three blockers to effective, safe, rehabilitative culture; 'I don't know what it is, I don't know how to do it, I don't believe it will make a difference even if I do'.

Telling a good story, a compelling story can give the answer to all three. It can show what's possible.

Let's tell stories which create a better world around us.