

Beyond Occupational Standards

Jamie Thompson discusses the importance of standards and motivation in the content and process for careers in community justice.

Many will have been watching the developments over the last few years in probation qualifying training with some interest. In an intensive two-year programme, trainee probation officers complete an undergraduate degree and a level 4 NVQ. The Community Justice National Training Organization (CJNTO) regulates the content and delivery of both elements. On completion of these elements the CJNTO awards a Diploma in Probation Studies (Dip PS).

A vastly expanded fourth cohort of trainees is due to start this year, which seems to indicate that the Home Office has a level of confidence in the arrangements. Universities and NVQ awarding bodies seem to be coping with the particular demands of the award and the CJNTO reports itself generally well satisfied. There is no hard evidence yet about how award holders are faring in practice. The first cohort has been in employment now for about a year and we urgently need an evaluation of how they and the employers rate their performance and progress. Meanwhile informal local reports are positive. So far then it seems that this new and radical approach to qualifying training has been a success and with proper evaluation may be able to demonstrate that the Dip PS is 'fit for purpose'.

Occupational standards

At the heart of the Dip PS programme are the Occupational Standards for Probation. It is against these standards that competence is assessed for the NVQ and it is from the knowledge and understanding requirements of these standards that much of the degree curriculum is generated. It is therefore an award that is very much designed to be 'fit for purpose', namely to equip trainees to operate as probation officers. The great strength of occupational standards is that they require a clear articulation of the skills, understanding and knowledge required by any particular occupational group. The occupational standards tell us what a probation officer needs to be able to do and so by definition provide a template for the management of training and development. Of course the

weakness of occupational standards occurs when they are allowed to atrophy, so the challenge for any occupational sector is to ensure there are healthy mechanisms to make sure that standards reflect change.

It is principally through the medium of occupational standards that the CJNTO seeks to offer a structure for staff development and training to the wider 'Community Justice' sector and the range of standards is growing rapidly. As sectors and organizations 'opt in' to occupational standards they are obliged to consider a number of important issues:

- Registering with or setting up a new NVQ assessment centre
- Resourcing the NVQ infrastructure of assessors and internal verifiers
- Human resources policy in relation to the NVQ (e.g. who can or must do it? Time limits for completion? Strategy in relation to those who fail to complete? Time allowances for staff undertaking NVQ? Relationship of NVQ to appraisal processes?)
- Training and support for staff in relation to supporting the NVQ; in-house provision, training providers, short courses, FE, HE?

In the process of addressing these issues we can expect that considerable thought will be given to the relevance and importance of staff development and the nature and size of the resources that need to be devoted to it. These are big questions. How can we ensure our workforce is 'fit for purpose'? The Probation Service are not alone in understanding the importance of being able to articulate ever more clearly what it is they do and to demonstrate that it is done consistently and to a clearly defined standard. Clearly, occupational standards offer a structure around which robust management of these issues can be built.

There isn't necessarily a problem with all this. Occupational standards are an important way in which organisations can be more transparent and accountable and this is clearly a good thing. The dangers only become apparent if the approach to training and development is predominantly managerial.

Criminal justice careers

Routes into careers in community and criminal justice are many and varied. Probation is still attracting second careerists, people making more or less radical shifts from other established jobs. Interestingly probation

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is now attracting and recruiting more first careerists, younger men and women with a background of voluntary work and/or higher education who are joining the service as their first substantial job. The mix is more rich and varied than ever and the motivation to learn and to practice extraordinarily high. This happy situation is not exclusive to probation. At the point of entry to the criminal justice sector many agencies are employing highly motivated individuals. Indeed at the point of entry we tend to value this motivation very highly. It's why we select people. We know that it takes a level of passion and commitment to do our jobs. It's difficult to be a probation officer for very long if you don't care about the work or don't think it is important and worthwhile. It is vital to nurture the excitement, the enthusiasm and the energy that new recruits bring to our organisations.

Is it possible to sustain this excitement, nurture this enthusiasm and harness this energy as part of a staff development and training strategy? There are a number of prerequisites to doing so;

1. Positive Organisational Culture

Are excitement, enthusiasm and energy valued in the organisation? In particular does the organisation value individual differences and qualities? Everyone is responsible for the organisational culture but the 'buck' stops at the very top. Senior managers and heads of organisations set the culture.

2. Learning Environment

Is there room for debate about how and why things are done as they are? Is discussion encouraged? Is it possible to innovate and contribute new thoughts and ideas? Is it possible to admit mistakes and learn from them?

3. Dialogue

Is there two-way communication between the individual and the organisation about developmental needs? Does this dialogue take into account both the needs of the organisation and the needs of the individual?

Training and development strategies founded on occupational standards don't preclude any of the above considerations but they don't automatically address them either. Indeed in a complex, demanding and time-limited programme such as the current probation qualifying arrangements it may prove difficult to consistently protect excitement, enthusiasm and energy in the face of such a tightly prescribed experience. Future evaluation should explore how probation trainees have felt about their training experience and how this has impacted on their view of the service. Many outstanding probation officers and indeed potential probation managers have and will emerge through the current arrangements. It will be interesting to see over the next few years how many move on to other careers in the wider community justice sector.



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