

Role Conflict in Prison

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BEFORE WE CONSIDER the roles and role conflict in a prison there are two factors we must consider. The first is, a prison is a total institution with all that implies. The second is the apparent conflict in aims inherent in the containment or security aspect of prison and the reformatory or rehabilitation task it is expected to perform.

A total institution is recognised by the all encompassing or total character which is symbolised by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside, i.e. walls, locked doors, etc. A prison is primarily organised to protect the community against dangers to that community.

The normal social practice is for people to sleep, work and play in different places, under different authority and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of a prison is a breakdown of the barriers normally separating the three aspects of life I have mentioned.

Firstly, all aspects of life are conducted in the one place and under the same authority.

Secondly, each phase of the individual's life is carried out in company with others all of whom are treated alike and required to conform together.

Thirdly, all phases of life are tightly scheduled and planned under a central ruling. The rules are imposed by an authority and finally the enforced activities are dovetailed into an overall rational plan and designed to fulfil the official aims of the prison.

To control and implement the movements and activities of largish groups of people, a small number of staff are used. This, of necessity, results in surveillance rather than supervision and guidance—a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been told in a situation where non-compliance will stand out clearly.

In such a situation there is a basic split between staff and inmates resulting in preconceptions one has about the other. Staff can see inmates as bitter, mean and

untrustworthy. Inmates can see staff as condescending, authoritarian and rigid. Staff can feel superior and righteous; inmates can feel inferior and blameworthy.

These are a few basic features of a total institution and they apply not only to prison but to establishments ranging from a mental hospital at one end of the scale to a monastery for religious training at the other; from a public school to a home for old people.

A prison has two legal requirements laid upon it. One is contained in the Order of Court or Committal Warrant and decrees the length of time the offender will be contained away from society. The second is a statutory law requirement which directs that the offender shall be encouraged and assisted to lead a good and useful life.

In the first instance, the inmate's co-operation is not invoked. He is removed from society and once that is done, he is not obliged to co-operate in his containment. Strictly speaking, of course, the man who agrees to be sent to an open prison and remains there and serves his sentence, in part co-operates in his containment. However, to ensure any progress in reform and rehabilitation, the inmates' co-operation is essential.

Thus we have a situation where the inmate is contained by physical means, such as walls and locks, against his will, and expected to co-operate in his reformation

willingly when no sanctions against his non-reformation can be brought to bear.

By the same reasoning he can see the establishment committed to two aims—to keep him and reform him. He will more easily identify with the success of the latter than with the success of the former. We may now turn to conflicts of interest, conflicts of roles in the day-to-day administration of a prison, but before we do I would like to point out that staff who successfully deal with role conflicts are staff who understand the problems of a total institution and the apparent contradictions of security and training or treatment goals.

The original concept of a prison sentence was that it should be punitive. Isolate a man at work, at exercise, even at church, give him degrading and non-productive tasks such as the crank and the treadmill to perform and he would reform his ways. That the Gladstone committee found men were discharged from prison brutalised and embittered under such a system is now a matter of history.

But the system was in essence simple. Contain inmates for the period of their sentence and submit them to an uncomplicated, punitive regime. It followed that the organisation to manage such a system was also simple and uncomplicated.

The prisoners were under a system of surveillance by staff and

staff were under surveillance by senior staff and so on. There was a hierarchical pyramid of command and orders were passed down the chain of command. All that was asked of inmates was that they obeyed orders and conformed to a rigid regime. All that was asked of staff was to ensure the regime was maintained to ensure prisoners carried out orders and to carry out orders themselves. Aims and goals were built into the system and staff were not asked to become involved directly in a treatment situation.

There was no treatment even in the sense we know it; there was no communication between staff and inmates, there was little or no communication between senior and junior staff and as a result no organisational or role conflict was permitted to develop.

This brings us to the situation of today. Steadily over the years there has been encouragement for staff to communicate with inmates, for juniors and seniors to communicate with each other. Experiments such as the Norwich scheme, the hostel scheme, open prisons, working-out scheme groups have been mounted and a genuine attempt to come to grips with the task of rehabilitation has been made. But the primary task of containment has remained. We in prisons may have changed from being punitive-minded to being reformative-minded, but being

security minded has an unbroken history with us—and quite properly so. After all, you cannot train a man who is unlawfully at large in the next county.

Communications and ideas about group work, working-out schemes and other positive aspects of reform now flow upwards, downwards and outwards. Communications about security still flow downwards and in the main only downwards. In a prison, all communications flow through the centre and this is manned and controlled by uniformed staff. Uniformed staff are in a strong position to influence the priority given to communications they feed into the communications system.

They are also not unaware that whilst no one has ever been taken to task over failure to reform an inmate, this is not so about the security of an inmate—and the uniformed officer is responsible for discipline and good order.

Communications, then, are at the source of role conflict. Social workers, psychologists, welfare officers and even idealistic staff, come into work in prisons; the emphasis of treatment has changed; but unless the people I have mentioned can get space in the communications system of a prison, they can become isolated and partly ineffective through no fault of their own.

The following are two examples of role conflict: the prison welfare

officer has a responsibility for inmates' welfare; to do his job he must have access to inmates, not only that, often he requires that men be at a certain place at a given time. His priority is welfare. The discipline officer on whom he depends to gain access to inmates, to whom he goes to get men in a given place at a given time, has a different priority: it is that of good order. As he sees it, it is not all that important that inmate A should see the welfare officer. To the officer discipline and order have a higher priority, and so the communication is not passed and the man does not arrive. It is only when staff recognise the right of other staff to carry a role and the sanction to exercise it that they begin to work as a team—and this requires training. Contrary to the impression I may have given in this illustration, staff have always interested themselves in genuine welfare problems, even in the darkest days, but they were always frustrated in doing something about them as no one else seemed interested. Consequently, training brings quick results. A commentary on the present position at Swansea might be the cry of an already over-worked prison welfare officer that he was being snowed under by discipline staff uncovering inmates problems on their landings and bringing the inmates to him.

The trained discipline officer not only ensures that his role has its

priority, but exercises his responsibility to communicate other inmate needs to the proper authority. He thus ensures other priorities within the prison, not directly his, are fulfilled and in so doing reduces role conflict.

The second example is about work. The industrial scene has changed over the years in prisons. With the advent of new industries it was necessary to appoint civilian trade instructors. These men were civilians responsible for output and production in workshops. They had no immediate production boss in the prison, but were under the control of the Directorate of Industries at Head Office. Periodically they were visited by industrial supervisors, but in the main there was little direct support at the establishment in their carrying the role of production experts.

The situation was that they were in workshops, possibly with a couple of discipline officers and completely isolated from communications about production. In a sense they were captives of staff exercising the role of discipline staff. The result was they began to borrow the tools of discipline staff. They judged their workshops by standards of good behaviour and good order. In this sense an orderly workshop was more important than a productive workshop and, not surprisingly, inmates fell in with these standards. In these circumstances it was necessary to

emphasise to instructors that they had a right to demand a priority for production; that their needs had a place in the system of prison communication.

It was also necessary to ensure that they were supported in the role they carried. Finally, with regionalisation of prisons, it was possible for them to maintain closer contact with their immediate superiors in the field of production.

In conclusion, my experience has been that there are several "musts" to reduce role conflict in an organisation such as a prison. I would list them as follows:

1. Agreement on aims and goals.
2. Organisation of the establishment to carry out aims and goals.
3. Agreement about priorities and methods.
4. Definition of areas of responsibility, authority and accountability.
5. Effective communications.
6. Training of staff.
7. Constant reappraisal and consultation with staff about all aspects of the system.

I suggest it is only along these lines will a solution be found.

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