

## Communications

by G. EMERSON

A NUMBER OF YEARS ago it used to be said that communications were the life blood of industry. In that context and at that time it was generally understood that "communications" meant transport—ships, railways and so on. If, however, an up-to-date industrialist, in touch with all the latest thought, uses the term, he is more likely to mean something quite different—instructions, reports, training, consultation, all the means whereby information necessary to the efficient functioning of the organisation is passed to the appropriate people.

If communications in this sense are important in a factory, it is surely self-evident that they are even more important in the Prison Service, which is concerned with the complex and difficult task of handling a large number of human beings—and not the most co-operative set of people at that. In order to discharge our statutory responsibilities and the Home Secretary's directions, we have to house prisoners securely, feed them, clothe them, look after their health, organize work for them, carry out programmes of training and treatment, maintain the fabric of our prisons, build new establishments, and so on and so forth. What is necessary for one purpose is liable to interfere with another. Without a high degree of co-

operation there would be chaos. And for the best possible co-operation we need the best possible communications.

We need to communicate upwards as well as downwards, and sideways, too. Clear instructions must obviously be given from the Commissioners downwards. But the Commissioners cannot do their job properly unless they are provided with all the information that they need for the formulation of policy in accordance with the Home Secretary's directions. The policy cannot be a sound one unless it is based on the practical experience of the men and women on the ground.

Horizontal communications are of no less importance. For communications include consultation, and different departments, whether in an establishment or at Head Office, must keep one another informed of relevant developments and must consult together before taking decisions of common interest. Consultation must involve a real effort to understand the different points of view and the special problems of the various departments.

These are simple, practical matters of communication. There are others, less obvious. Is it sufficient that a prison officer, say, or an instructor in a workshop, has been told how to do his

job, to whom to report and whom he should consult? It could be argued that maximum efficiency requires that he should also have an understanding of the general aims of the penal system and of the particular function of his own establishment. Writing in the January, 1961, issue of the Journal, Mr. Gordon B. Hardey suggested that the Government's aims in penal reform lacked clarity and did not come alive sufficiently for the prison officer to feel compelled to think about the basic purpose of his work. This also is a matter of communication.

Only a little thought is necessary to estimate the importance, and identify the objects, of good communications, but it is much more difficult to decide how to improve communications if this is found necessary. First there is the question of the content of the communication—communicate what and to whom? Then there are the many different methods to consider. In the exchange of information between the Commissioners and their establishments—to take only one part of the whole system of communications in the Prison Service—there are the standing instructions embodied in the Prison Rules, Standing Orders, and Rules, Standing Orders, and Circular Instructions; written and oral instructions issued about particular circumstances arising from time to time; visits to establishments by Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners; annual

reports by governors; conferences on particular subjects at Head Office; central conferences of governors, stewards and other grades; and informal discussions of different kinds. Which of these methods is most suitable for what purposes? How far could the content and the form adopted in each case be improved? Is it the system or the human element that is mainly to blame where communications are poor? If it is the human element, can people be instructed or trained to communicate better?

Few will doubt that there is scope for improving communications in the Prison Service—if only because it is natural for each of us to feel that he himself is not told or consulted enough. At any rate, so important a matter clearly deserves investigation and this is being undertaken by a working party under the chairmanship of the Chairman of the Prison Commission. The other members are drawn from various grades of the Service and the writer is the Secretary.

The Working Party's first task will be to collect the views of the Service on communications. Consultative Committees at the various establishments are being asked to consider the matter. The Working Party will also be glad to receive suggestions from any individual member of the Service. These should be sent to the writer at the Head Office of the Prison Commission as soon as possible.