

Staff Training and Principal Officer Laing

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THERE ARE TWO aspects of penal institutional life which have always seemed to me to be absolutely inevitable and unavoidable, namely, relationships with inmates and staff training. If one goes as far back as the mid-19th century by reading the stories of imprisonment, usually written by the literate of the convict population, there is evidence that this was always true. The system at that time, moreover, was in part designed to prevent relationships with inmates developing, and by concentrating the staff task on custody, effectively minimised the need for staff training. Nevertheless, the impressions from many of these books which most forcibly comes through is of the primary importance of the landing officer and the party officer in the work to be done. If this is true then, how much more so is it true today?

Often, when attempting to make these points to Prison Service staff who are on courses at the Staff College, I have referred them to an article written several years ago and published in the second issue of the

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL. This article was one by Principal Officer Robert Laing, now, unfortunately, deceased, who at that time was at Wakefield Prison following service at Liverpool and Dartmoor. Recently, it has become obvious that this particular issue of the PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL is becoming impossible to acquire, and we might be in danger of losing the benefit of the wisdom it contains. The editor of the PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL, therefore, has kindly consented to repeat the article in this issue.

When reading or re-reading this article, however, we should be prepared to see what Principal Officer Laing was not saying, as much as what he was saying. For instance, he was not saying that the Prison Service has not changed at all since 1935, but rather that basic principles do not change often or very much. Areas of emphasis, official and otherwise, may be different, and this is important. The organisation which attempts to carry out the principle may change or be changed, and this is also

important. But basic needs may very well not change at all.

The need which is dramatised by this piece of autobiography is that of the inexperienced (at any level) to be trained, and the certainty that if the training is not done by the right people, it will, in the end, be done by someone who is not the right person. In these circumstances, the organisation is heavily dependent, as P.O. Laing was, on the goodwill and sense of responsibility of the wrong people.

The article points out three major training facts, namely:

- (a) That centralised staff training can only be very general and is always in danger of being irrelevant.
- (b) That unless some particular person has responsibility for local staff training it is not likely to be done well, and may not be done at all (e.g., "find out the same as I had to").
- (c) That, in fact, staff training in the Prison Service is unavoidable if only because newly-joined staff cannot get from place A to place B in a penal institution without some form of instruction.

Staff training is not dependent upon the existence of formalised lecture series delivered by those who are highly competent, on an academic level, in the various disciplines which form part of our professional field. These will certainly be important and, at some stages, absolutely essential if the

service is to continue to develop its techniques. The daily working of a penal establishment, however, is a practical affair of routine and relationships, which requires that practical training on the job, by planned methods of supervision, be given. This applies just as much to locking doors as it does to case work and group work. To ignore this is to reproduce the situation which P.O. Laing so well describes and, moreover, to do this in institutions where the complexities have been allowed to show themselves over the years instead of being suppressed by the system.

INMATE PARTICIPATION

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Robert M. Laing

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We hear a lot today about inmate participation and other techniques designed to improve relationships with our charges. It would be idle to deny that there is often division in our ranks on these topics, or that some of the old certainties are crumbling. Whether you greet it like a New Dawn, or sigh for the days when an order was an order and contained its own justification, you cannot ignore the trend—for in association, in workshop and wing and sports and TV committees, in group counselling, in many sacred fields, the inmate is participating as never before.

Or so it would appear. But looking back on 25 years I some-

times wonder what is really new after all. How often is a form of words mistaken for a principle? How often, in the fairyland of theory, is a ripe old pumpkin transformed into a glass coach? For even at Dartmoor, those many years ago, there were human relations and experiences shared—and it was not only prisoners who benefited. For the newly-appointed officer in those days "The Moor" was a tough nut to crack, and his senior colleagues lent precious little weight to his arm. "Find out, the same as I had to", was the trainee's daily bread. At "lectures" too we were stuffed with large indigestible hunks of standing orders and there was one infallible formula for every awkward situation not covered in that august work—it was "at the governor's discretion".

However, there were also the inmates, and they had their part in the scheme of things. Perhaps I can best illustrate this by relating a little story, from which the reader may extract his own moral.

Accompany me then, on my first morning's duty at "The Moor". I have been told, with the usual economy of instruction, (*Me*: "What do I do?" *Senior officer*: "Find out, the same as I had to") that I am in charge of the slaters' party. This leaves a pretty wide field unexplained, but at least I know such a party exists, and that I am likely to find it waiting in the yard—which I do. It consists of two men, a tall, ugly one and a short, brisk-looking companion. The latter is plainly not

accustomed to being kept hanging about, for as soon as I appear he leads off with a slightly reproachful air towards the F.O.W.'s office, where they are to receive their instructions. Both are apparently skilled workmen, for the conversation is carried on from both sides with a wealth of confidentiality and a great deal of technical detail. I know something of the trade, but it does not occur to anybody to test this or to put me in the picture at this stage. In fact, they ignore my presence completely—whether out of tact or something less flattering I cannot decide.

I am still mentally juggling with the problems of status involved in all this, when somebody decides he had better at least hand me for safe-keeping the pass for the materials issued, and we proceed to the inner gate.

Gatekeeper and prisoners exchange laconic informations, ("You're working down at . . .?") "Yes, that's right, Guv,") and we pass through. I pick up what I can of this, and even begin to square my shoulders a little.

Suddenly, Shorty stops and says, pleasantly but with disconcerting casualness: "You got the keys of the 'bunk', Guv?" I am taken aback. I know that the 'bunk' is the storehouse where tools are kept, and that someone, obviously, must have a key to it. However, Shorty comes to my aid again. "Just go back and ask for key No. 17", he advises.

I hesitate, and the party waits

impassively for the next move. The ball is in my court, so to speak. I return to the gate, where the gate-keeper confirms, with faintly raised eyebrows, that I do in fact require a key, and its number is 17. It was not his business, of course, to tell me so in the first place, and it is clear that he regards me as a bit of an eccentric, and wonders what the service is coming to these days. I take the key from the glass case pointed out to me, and rejoin my party.

They drift on again, observing the customary rule of silence—but eloquent enough, I have no doubt, in their own way—until, as we draw near the outer gate, Shorty remembers my education again.

“You’ll need a gun, Guv”, he says firmly.

“Oh—will I?”

“That’s right, Guv. Just slip over to the gate lodge and ask for No. 6 gun and belt.”

There is no doubt now that my party’s only desire is to have everything done right and according to precedent, and I have no reason for suspecting any other motive. I no longer hesitate, therefore, but go confidently to the lodge and demand the gun and belt in question. The information is correct, the weapon

is duly issued and bestowed about my person in the regulation manner, and off we go again. The initiation, I feel, is complete.

In a moment, however, it dawns on me that something is wrong. Shorty is hanging back, with a stubborn expression. I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Well?”

“What about inspecting the pouch, Guv, to see if the cartridges are all there?”

Deflated again, I oblige him. They are all correct. I snap the pouch shut with an air of finality, rally my forces for one supreme effort to control the situation, but it is no good. So far from being finally reassured, Shorty’s face now registers acute apprehension.

“Well, what haven’t I done now?”

“Aren’t you going to open the breech, Guv, and make sure you haven’t got one up the spout?” he asks reproachfully. “Somebody could get hurt”.

And only when they are satisfied that I am at last thoroughly conversant with my duties, and no one is in any personal danger from my inexperience, does the slaters’ party step out contentedly down the road.