

The importance of culture where it comes from, where it goes wrong, and how it can be sustained and improved.

Charlie Taylor is HM Chief Inspector at HM Inspectorate of Prisons for England and Wales

Thank you very much for having me, I am delighted that we can finally get together after last year's postponement. I want to talk today about the importance of culture, where it comes from, where it goes wrong, and how it can be sustained and improved.

I have now been in post for two and a half years, having started during the dark days of November 2020, when prisons were locked down and fears that the pandemic could sweep through crowded wings remained. To the credit of both my predecessor, Peter Clarke and the Prison Service, the inspectorate remained in the field throughout. As Chief Inspector, I was very lucky to take over an organisation that already had such a strong reputation, forged by the likes of Anne Owers, Nick Hardwick and the late David Ramsbotham — who very sadly died last year.

And I also inherited an outstanding team of knowledgeable and dedicated professionals. If we put out an SOS on a Sunday night, because we're suddenly short of an inspector, volunteers will come forward, prepared to jump in their cars and drive half-way across the country, to make sure the inspection goes ahead.

We have imported some of this can-do attitude from the Prison Service, where leaders know they need to stick around until the job's done. The Inspectorate also has a culture that encourages challenge. When I came into post, having worked with the Civil Service for eight years, I was both taken aback, and also delighted by the way my colleagues would argue, when they didn't agree with me.

I am sorry that governors and prison leaders don't get to be a fly on the wall when we are deliberating our healthy prison test scores, at the end of the inspection. They would, I think, be reassured by the robust debate that takes place before a final judgement is made. As a leader, I was fortunate to inherit an organisation with such strong values and ethos.

Imagine how much more difficult my job would have been if I had to create that culture from scratch. How would I go about encouraging people to challenge each other, particularly if they came from

organisations where it isn't done? How would I get people to volunteer to spend the best part of two weeks away from their families, if it wasn't already established in the inspectorate? When we proposed returning to inspection, just after the lockdown had begun, no one demurred, they just got on with it.

Being inspected of course, is never easy. I've been a head teacher and I've had that phone call. But it provides leaders with the opportunity to get an independent check-up on the culture of their prison. Our anonymous surveys give an indication of morale which we can further triangulate in our conversations with prisoners and staff. Once measured up against what the data shows and what leaders tell us, we have a pretty good snapshot of the culture of the jail.

I find the best way to define the word culture is to think of it as a series of habits and values that add up to 'the way we do things round here'. One of the reasons my job is so interesting, is because every prison has such a different culture. Even those with a similar population and category, in the same part of the country, have a particular atmosphere. In the same way that isolated islands have acquired their own unique flora and fauna, prisons, situated on just a few acres of land, and necessarily closed to the outside environment, develop their own ecosystems that have taken years to evolve. The architecture and design also make a difference — compare the open spaces of Wormwood Scrubs against the more closed Pentonville. Even the identikit prisons like Bullingdon, Highdown and Elmley all feel very different to walk round.

Understanding how cultures get created also helps us to understand how to change them. In the last two years, we have been consistently critical about the levels of purposeful activity in jails, with too many prisoners locked up with nothing to do. There have been some exceptions. In January 2022, we inspected Coldingley. There we found, despite a Covid outbreak, prisoners unlocked for much longer than we had seen in the other category C prisons that surround London. Similarly, at the end of the pandemic, in most reception prisons, we found prisoners locked up for up to 23

hours a day, but Elmley and Altcourse were managing to run far more open regimes. What I found out subsequently was that these three jails had always had a decent track record of getting prisoners unlocked. Because of the pervading culture, governors had fewer difficulties in persuading staff to return to an open regime — it was just what they did.

HMP Stocken is another prison that has bucked the trend. When we inspected earlier this year, we found five hundred prisoners in free flow around the jail. This was despite Stocken experiencing difficulties with recruitment, a reason we are frequently given for why regimes in other prisons remain locked down. With some of the lowest levels of violence in the category C estate, Stocken also gave the lie to the idea that less restricted regimes equal more violence. As one prisoner put it — ‘if you want mobile phones or drugs, you’ve come to the wrong place.’

Similarly key work on which we reported on in last year’s joint thematic on offender management in custody, remains a very underused way of building relationships and supporting prisoners on their journey through the system. When we inspected New Hall last year, it had the lowest levels of self-harm in the closed women’s estate. It was also one of the few prisons that is running an effective keyword scheme. I am in no doubt that these two findings were related.

Oakwood, the largest prison in the country, is another jail that was flourishing despite the pandemic. But this was not always the case. When it opened in April 2012 it acquired the nickname Jokewood and our first inspection revealed some substantial difficulties. But under the remarkable leadership of John McLaughlin, it was transformed. When we inspected in May 2021, John had left, but progress was being maintained by his replacement Sean Oliver.

What was remarkable about Oakwood were the levels of trust that the jail was prepared to give to prisoners. One was running a workshop in which he was teaching wood working skills to some of the most vulnerable prisoners, helping them to gain in confidence and cope better inside. They made products such as bird boxes, benches and picnic tables that could be sold outside the jail or made to order for staff members. There was no direct staff supervision, despite there being all sorts of potential weapons available - a level of freedom that would be inconceivable for

prisoners in most other jails. One man, doing a very long sentence, told me he had a sense of meaning in his life that he had never felt before, either inside or outside prison.

There were many other prison-led initiatives with an army of trusted prisoners moving busily round the prison. The jail simply couldn’t have run as successfully without the prisoners’ help. The men at Oakwood appreciated the trust they were given and were desperate not to lose the opportunities they had been offered. As a result, the behaviour at the prison is usually excellent. When he left to open Five Wells, John McLaughlin, sadly now retired, was able to take some of his Oakwood prisoners with him specifically to help transport the culture into the new prison.

In other jails, governors face very different challenges. Some prisons were built more than a hundred and fifty years ago with ways of doing things that have been formed and sustained over many years.

The hardest job for any governor is to change the culture of a prison, to remove those things which are undermining progress while enhancing its positive aspects. When taking over a prison in real difficulties, the first step is to get things operating properly. Making sure that the regime runs on time, that prisoners reliably get the basics — soap, towels, sheets, clothes, and pin numbers for the

phone. It is also essential that staff and prisoners are clear what is expected of them and that the prison is bearing down on the ingress of drugs and other contraband to prevent associated violence.

Only when these expectations are fully embedded, and the prison has become a safe place to live and work, can the governor begin to delve deeper into the culture. To some extent, making these systems run smoothly is the easy bit — that isn’t to say that it doesn’t take enormous dedication and personal commitment from leaders, but easy, because running a more predictable and well-organised jail, is in everybody’s interest.

Where governors get the most resistance is when they begin to dig into the bedrock of the culture. Translating a vision from the governor’s office to the wing is the most difficult part of all. Most of us find change difficult and some people hate it. When Paul Newton took over Birmingham, he said that it was only when he had been in post for a few months, that he realised the scale of the task he faced. Every stone he

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turned over he found problems, some which were long-term, deep-seated, and often protected by vested interests, who did not want to be exposed or held to account.

But you must have some sympathy with staff when it comes to change — in some jails it feels like there is a revolving door of governors arriving and then quickly moving on. When we inspected Manchester in 2021, I saw on the board that there had been 10 governors since the turn of the century. While each one no doubt did their best to change things, and some remained long enough to make good progress, when Rob Knight took over in November 2019, parts of the jail still retained bits of culture that had been there since the Strangeways days.

Why would officers who had seen governors come and go bother to buy in to the new boss? It is no surprise that staff are more likely to take their lead from longer-serving uniformed staff than from what they see as another here today, gone tomorrow leader.

In jails where leaders have stuck around for many years, they own the culture. What happens in the jail, and what they are prepared to tolerate, is on them. Governors like Judith Wallsgrove at Parc or Emily Thomas at Isis have been there long enough to be able to mould the culture, so that it aligns with their own vision. But creating culture cannot just be dependent on the charisma and drive of one brilliant leader, however important that may be.

The best leaders create a set of values that are understood, shared and lived by the whole staff. They build a leadership team that is resourceful, skilled, challenging and collaborative. If you visit the therapeutic prison, Grendon, you find an ethos that pervades the institution. Officers are a crucial part of the therapeutic programme, supporting prisoners to make sense of their previous lives and plan for their future. Expectations of officers are high at Grendon, but they are also well trained.

In other parts of the estate, things are more difficult. Absurdly, the first-time governors meet newly recruited staff, is the day they start work in the prison. How can you make sure that someone has the right values if you've never even met them? Governors tell me of their frustration of having to go through protracted HR processes to get rid of staff, who, had

they been involved in the recruitment, would never have been taken on in the first place.

Senior uniformed grades are another group who do not get enough support or consideration. These officers, custody managers and senior officers are the culture carriers for prisons. They have often been there the longest and have seen governors come and go. If the values of the leadership team do not enthuse and permeate through this group, then a glass floor forms which leaders will be unable to penetrate. They will get passive acquiescence rather than the real commitment that they need.

The army recognises the importance of sergeants and corporals as a critical cog in the chain of command.

They are carefully selected, and then thoroughly trained. Indeed, training is seen as too important to be left to individual units and is run at the centre. Sadly in prisons, there has been nothing like the level of investment in custody managers. They often tell me they have had no real training and are just expected to learn on the job. That is no way to create a cadre of expert professionals.

What this means is that while many custody managers are outstanding, some become a malign influence on the prison. And, because they have so many staff to manage, they tell me they spend much of their time chained to a computer. This is at the expense of where these staff should be adding the most value

— leading their teams, making sure that standards are kept, that people do what they are supposed to do and that new recruits are supported and mentored. They should be setting an example of how to look after, manage and interact with prisoners, not spending their day on the phone to HR chasing up someone's back pay. Custody managers are simply too important to be left to make it up for themselves, without the right supervision or support.

What assessments of workplaces often show, is that people who lack autonomy at work become more stressed. Leaders, at least, can make decisions, solve problems, and engineer change. The further you are down the food chain the more you just have to suck it up. Successful organisations push down responsibility to the lowest possible level. The army, that you might expect to be entirely hierarchical, understands that every soldier must be a leader. In battle, there won't always be an officer or a corporal to give you an order.

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To be successful, you have to be able to trust those who are both above and below you. I am convinced that trust must be an essential part of every tier of the prison system. In a large Prison Service, in which, when things go wrong, they can go very badly wrong, there is an understandable temptation to maintain central control. But if you want people to flourish, you have to make them responsible for the things for which they are accountable. I am well aware of the frustration governors feel, when we criticise their prison in areas over which they have limited authority, such as education provision, works programmes and recruitment.

But if, like me, you believe governors should be given more control of the levers of change, then they

too must be prepared to pass down greater responsibility to custody managers, wing staff and ultimately to prisoners themselves. Of course, risks need to be managed and people at every level need to be held accountable. It therefore worries me greatly when officers say they never see the governor around the prison — and depressingly, at one place I inspected, prisoners couldn't even tell me if the governor was male or female.

Giving trust also involves taking calculated risks, because inevitably things will go wrong. But giving the right level of trust to the right people, with the right training and support in place, will allow those who live and work in our prisons to flourish and the culture of their jail to be transformed.