

Reflections on a Period of Secondment to the Private Sector

Ivor Ward found surprising parallels in the management structures of a major retail chain and the prison service.

Some years ago I spent fourteen months seconded to the private sector. It was the first time an operational member of the prison service had been offered such an opportunity. The aim of the secondment, agreed between the host organisation, my career development officer, and myself was that it should allow an opportunity to see another organisation in action (my only work experience having been within the civil service and the majority of that within prison service) and to practice (and hopefully develop) my management skills in a different environment.

Retail therapy

The host organisation was the market leader in its field, which I hasten to say, had absolutely nothing in common with the prison service. The secondment did however take place at a most interesting time in that the prison service was just about to embark on a structural change and the host organisation, in common with many multi-site, retail operations, was already working along similar lines of command and control.

After an initial three month learning curve, during which I spent periods in different stores and at head office learning about operating procedures (and the world of business in general) I was left in charge of a store for six weeks. The manager and one of the assistant managers had been 'moved out' leaving just the one assistant manager and myself to run the store. This period further served as my 'apprenticeship' and allowed me to gain some direct hands-on management experience. I have since reflected on the relevance of a short and concentrated induction period in terms of the way in which the prison service structures the pathway for fast stream direct entrants to the governor grade.

The next stage in the secondment was for me to take over the role of a district manager with responsibility for the performance of thirteen stores. Again, the post holder was physically removed from the scene and deployed on other duties. I was expected to carry out the full range of tasks as they related to performance, staffing and customer issues. The regional controller, as my line manager, and those above him at director level had made it clear from the start that they wished to offer me every encouragement and give me as much scope as possible to act in role. The company could not afford any shortfall on my part that could jeopardised the profitability of the district or the company's public image.

Having returned to the prison service and seen the new area manager structure in place it was interesting to reflect, compare and contrast the two organisations and in particular the roles of district

and area manager. Such reflections were given even sharper focus by the appointment of an 'outsider' from the private sector to the post of Director General.

The points of similarity between the company and the prison service were more numerous than points of disparity. For example in response to a question about the low level of staff training, store managers told me that they simply did not have sufficient resources to allow them to meet their targets. Almost an identical response to that from a group of governors confronted with a similar challenge from their area manager.

Organisational dynamics were almost identical in terms of the gulf between the stores and head office and indeed between various parts of the head office structure. It was almost a mirror image of the gulf between prison establishments and headquarters and the lack of communication within headquarters. I ought not to have been surprised by these observations but I had an expectation that, as a successful business operation, everyone would be singing from the same song sheet and in perfect harmony. The song may well have been the same (making money and keeping the company in its number one position) but the melody was not always in key. That said, it was quite clear that the prison service still had the cutting edge as a dysfunctional organisation.

As a district manager I was expected to be out and about visiting the stores at least 80 per cent of the time. Paperwork was minimal and generally took the form of an immediate response to a specific issue in a prescribed format and relaying the information upwards often by telephone. Pure written work in the form of putting together a business case, policy or strategic planning document was a rare event for a district manager. This was in stark contrast to the demands placed upon a prison service area manager to respond to tight deadlines on lengthy and complex policy papers while maintaining a multi-layered network of official and voluntary sector contacts. It quickly became clear why many area managers were finding it so difficult to keep to their visiting schedules.

Store visits were lengthy affairs and I was expected to allow one full day and at least one 'call-in' visit to each store once a month. The full day visit was highly inspectorial by nature and demanded that the entire shopping area be walked slowly and carefully paying attention to the layout of the merchandise and the overall standard of the store as seen by the customer. Attention had also to be given to the back of store facilities such as the warehouse, administrative and staff areas. There would also be discussions on management issues such as financial performance, personnel and staffing.

My observation was that in the main the district manager exercised an almost excessive control over the store managers and in some instances was actually trying to run the store. In part this was because some of the district managers (and some store managers) had poor inter-personal skills and even fewer basic management skills and were unable to work through the line structure. Rather than challenge or offer guidance and development to the store manager they found it easier to manage the store by over visiting and several telephone calls each day to check and double check events. Others adopted a similar role but did so because they had yet to grow into their new role and clearly missed the thrill of being in charge of a store. This scenario is one that has been repeated within the prison service with some area managers finding it very difficult to make the transition between roles and even finding the new role uncomfortable. At the time of the secondment I found little formal preparation on offer to newly appointed district managers — something I was to experience at first hand a few years later when I was launched into the area manager role without any preparation and when I found my secondment experience as a district manager really paying dividends.

A good number of staff had been promoted too quickly in order to fill urgent vacancies. Some had very clearly been over-promoted and in a steadier climate of growth would never have made the short list.

Knowledge and power

My limited understanding of the business meant that I was not able to play the role of overgrown store manager. I could challenge on basic issues and in fact quickly gained a reputation for applying a shopper's eye, but I could not enter into arguments on more technical aspects. My knowledge of health and safety issues came as a surprise to my new colleagues and my ability to ask the odd embarrassing question was enough to keep many of them on their toes and uncertain of just how much I did know. What I was doing however was to keep in close touch with one or two district managers that I felt able to trust with my own sense of inexperience.

Many of the managers seemed unaware of their collective power as a group. Whilst they had been used to a monthly meeting these had tended to be 'tell and sell' events offering the managers little opportunity for self-expression or to demonstrate initiative. It took some time and considerable effort on my part, ably assisted by one or two of the group who had realised that they could capitalise from my entry to the scene, to get the group to come together in the spirit of sharing and resolving rather than off-loading problems. My role then moved to that of facilitator and general guide in the process and to remove the element of threat (as line manager I also controlled their personal bonus) that some district managers had felt was an essential tool in keeping them in check.

The company had mushroomed over the previous three years. This had created a problem at store manager and assistant manager levels in that demand outstripped the number of suitable candidates. A good number of staff had been promoted too quickly in order to fill urgent vacancies. Some had very clearly been over-promoted and in a steadier climate of growth would never have made the short list. This was a valuable learning experience which would come to the fore some years later when as head of personnel management for the prison service I found myself struggling with similar issues of supply and demand and the legacy of a failure to provide proper succession planning.

One major area of difference between the two roles was

that of administrator and contributor to policy. The district manager had no such role to play. His task was first and foremost that of policeman and it was this that I found most dispiriting. Inspection without the opportunity to grow seemed a very sterile exercise. If nothing else it represented a poor relationship (based on distrust and anxiety) between the district manager and the store manager. It was however a scenario that was also beginning to emerge in the prison service and during my own period as an area manager I found some colleagues taking the pure enforcement model as the key to personal and organisational success. It was also apparent that their governors (as was the case with store managers) felt disenchantment at the lack of positive support and encouragement offered to them.

The other critical difference was that the company did not recognise trade unions although it did operate a staff consultative system. This proved a useful vent for dealing with local issues and I was impressed by the weight that managers gave to the process. It brought home to me however just how much time and energy prison service managers had to expend in dealing with industrial relations

issues and the power base that many local branch officials had been able to develop over time. I know that I annoyed many of my new colleagues by telling them that management without the union dimension was easy going and they did not know the real world.

I saw some excellent personnel practices which were light years ahead of what the service was doing at the time. The approach was not the cavalier one of 'give them the sack' that I had always connected with the world of work outside of the civil service. It was a balanced mix of care and concern for both the individual and the organisation with a healthy pragmatism and a swift response to those caught 'bang to rights' in unprofessional or criminal behaviour. There were well-developed and widely disseminated policies on performance reviews, management of sickness absence, (a topic that did not reach the prison service consciousness until several years later) and disciplinary processes. Staff training had a high priority and was underpinned by good quality technology at local level. I recall thinking at the time that the prison service would find it difficult to understand the payback value of inter-active laser disc learning packages. It had after all only just discovered the overhead projector!

The secondment was a valuable and worthwhile experience, which I am in no doubt assisted my preparation for higher command. My first task on returning to the service as Deputy Head of Personnel Management was to organise a series of short and long-term secondments for others. A decade on and I still reflect on the experience and the learning, which often feels more relevant now than it did at the time.

Ivor Ward joined the Prison Service in 1964, and held a wide range of postings including Assistant Governor of Brixton and of Liverpool, Deputy Governor of Holloway, Governor of The Mount and of Feltham, staff officer to the Deputy Director General and Area Manager and Head of Personnel Management. Following his early retirement, he is now acting as a consultant to penal reform organisations and was recently appointed to the Civil Service Appeals Board.