

January 2020 No 247



Perrie Lectures 2019

Humanity, Leadership and Hope

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This article aims to highlight the importance of humanitarian leadership and how leaders can be nurtured (and sometimes found in the most unusual places). It aims to encourage and inspire those who work in prison to think differently about leadership, sharing a case study of how a prison grew, over the period of 2 years, and how authentic, humanitarian leadership was at the centre of the change process.

Humanitarianism is the **active** belief in the value of human life, the essence of which lies in the capacity and willingness to make tough decisions in challenging and complex situations, characterised by rapidly changing circumstances and high levels of uncertainty. To understand humanitarian leadership within the context of prison, I firstly want to reflect on my time in Norwegian prisons and how I came to conceptualise in my own mind, what a humanitarian leader is.

Learning from 'exceptional humanitarian leaders'

Over a three year period I researched Norwegian prison practice, examining which aspects of practice support personal growth, in a place that has been recognised by some as 'exceptional'. I carried out three photo-essay projects in three prisons; Bastøy, Halden and Sandaker halfway house. The research was appreciative in nature and enabled prisoners and staff to capture through word and photography those aspects of practice that were meaningful to them. I came to learn that within each of these prisons, humanitarian leadership was present and active within everyday practice. Firstly, Tom, the Governor of Bastøy prison, demonstrated an active belief in people and reinforced to me the simplicity of change through the focus on humanity and relationships. He also reiterated the point that any change starts at the top and the importance of a strong, visionary leader within any prison. Are, the Governor of Halden prison, was also active in showcasing his rehabilitative-focused prison, welcoming people in and making his walls semi-permeable to the public so that they could witness first hand the value of a safe and person-centred environment. And finally, Sandaker's Governor, Lars, was described as an individual with a big heart, who promoted equality and care within his practice. These

three Governors passionately believed in rehabilitation and actively promoted this in everyday practice.

The final international Governor I wish to mention is Attila. Attila is a Hungarian Governor who dedicated the majority of his prison career establishing a positive rehabilitative environment in his prison, during his time as Governor in Eger prison. I had the pleasure of working with Attila during my time working for the Council of Europe, as a Consultant. Together we considered how a humanitarian and rehabilitative approach could be applied to a treatment programme for those individuals convicted of acts of Terrorism. During this time, we shared our experiences and reflected upon what makes a humanitarian leader within prison. Attila spoke of the importance of visibility, creativity and asking for help. With little funds, he engaged the community, charities and Non-Governmental Organisations, to support him in building trust between the prison and local community, utilising the media to capture the changing culture within his prison. He facilitated the changing narrative of prison officers and worked tirelessly to develop his prison, and those that worked and lived within it. I learnt a great deal from these four International Governors and they remain my inspiration and continue to provide support and reassurance, when things get tough.

Applying humanitarian leadership to an English Prison: Introducing the Prison Growth Project

Six months after finishing my research in Norway, The first English Prison Growth Project started at HMP Guys Marsh. This project was research-informed and used the knowledge from the Norway research to consider how the principles of growth could be applied sensitively and responsively to an English Prison. These principles are:

- ❑ Experiencing Normality- Doing activities which mirror the outside community.
- ❑ Tasting freedom-Experiencing moments of freedom, which provide space to reflect upon ones identity.
- ❑ Finding pro-social ways of coping with the pains of prison-These strategies help prisoners to manage the inherent pains that are associated with losing one's liberty.

- ❑ Experiencing peace and joy-This includes physical and relational spaces and activities, which promote as a sense of inner peace.
- ❑ Meaningful work- This principle focuses on finding meaningful activities that are individualised and personal, leading to a more purposive life.
- ❑ Authentic Leadership- This features a leadership style which is visible, true and trustworthy.
- ❑ Connecting with nature-This principle recognises the importance of spaces and opportunities that enable people to feel connected to the world around them.
- ❑ Developing meaningful relationships-This principle is central to all other principles and highlights the importance of deep and positive connections with other people, including peers, staff, families and the wider community.
- ❑ Promoting Wellbeing- This principle focuses on the individual and their wellbeing, to build strength and resilience.



The Prison Growth Project is a community-led project which recognises the importance of hope and relationships in culture change. It embraces the voices of staff and prisoners, to collectively address the inherent problems that are faced in prison and provides a platform whereby individuals can voice their ideas and thoughts relating to growth. Over the past two and a half years, the Growth Project has carried training and events to provide staff and prisoners the opportunity to see what a rehabilitative environment **feels** like. Through this experiential approach, research was carried out to recognise the impact of the initiatives, to assess whether they successfully promoted a rehabilitative climate. The Prison Growth Project centres its values on hope, humanity and trust. It recognises that those who live and work within prisons hold the answers to prison growth and provides an opportunity for these voices to be heard and actively used, to support positive change.

What does humanitarian leadership look like in an English Prison?

With the acknowledgement that change starts at the top, the first two individuals to consider within the context of humanitarian leadership are the Governor and Deputy Governor at HMP Guys Marsh. James (shown right) has been described as courageous, honest and caring and his determination to do things differently and his appreciation of the change process, makes him an inspirational individual. Steve (shown left) was the individual who supported the Prison



Growth Project from the start and gave it the time, investment and freedom it needed to take root and grow. His determination and focus on doing the right thing, rather than what is expected enabled changes to flourish, at a challenging time.

As these leadership qualities emerged at HMP Guys Marsh, these qualities 'feed forward' and influence those in middle manager and down, to officers and prisoners. The encouragement to take risks and do things differently provided an environment for trying out new ideas and be creative.

This leads us to Justin, a Custodial Manager who was an officer when I first arrived at HMP Guys Marsh. The reason Justin features within this piece is founded on a scenario which took place on his wing, involving a prisoner who was struggling emotionally. This prisoner went to healthcare and during his time away from the



wing, Justin cleaned his room, provided him with clean bedding and made him a cup of tea, when he returned from his appointment. Whilst this act of humanity is important in itself, Justin's active demonstration of consideration, care and compassion instilled trust in those witnessing this humanitarian gesture and represented his dedication to a rehabilitative environment. This was not evidenced by what he said, but instead, what he did. His quiet, compassionate approach signified humanity, in everyday tasks in amongst the hectic humdrum of prison life.

The next humanitarian leader outlined here is Cate (see photo), the head of Healthcare at HMP Guys Marsh and employee of CareUK. Cate believes in change and as a respected member of staff, uses her power and influence to stand up for what is right. She listens and brings people together, describing herself as a member of the 'Guys Marsh family.' She represents how those working for external organisations can integrate themselves fully within a prison environment and be part of the community, driving rehabilitation within an important department.

The final member of staff featured here is Jason, an officer who works on Gwent houseblock (seen on the right). During a time that was challenging on his wing, Jason used his initiative and organised a Strong

with the prisoners only grew, as they voiced how touched they were by this activity, which took them off the wing and deepened their sense of community and wellbeing for a few hours. Jason remains passionate about change and is soon to be awarded a Growth Award, due to his commitment to growth at HMP Guys Marsh.

Turning to the individual on the left, this is Danny. Danny was a prisoner at Guys Marsh and worked on the Growth Project for over a year. Danny played an active role in the prison, as resident artist, painting and creating warmer and more positive spaces within the prison (See Lewis and Robertson, 2019¹ for more information.) Danny's passion for change and his contagious personality generated energy and excitement due to the art that he created for prisoners and staff and his dedication to growth. Danny was provided an opportunity to be a humanitarian leader, working alongside staff and prisoners to narrow the gap between them and break down the 'them and us' culture, which hampers the Prison Service.

The final individual I want to introduce is Kam. Kam joined the Growth Project last year and was asked to design an event that would make a positive impact on the community. Kam wrote a screenplay about Spice, recruited the actors, led the rehearsals and held



Man Competition for the prisoners. The event was successful (despite the rain) and Jason's relationship



eight performances to residents, staff (and their families) and the local community. The event raised over £1000 for charity and the evaluation of the event highlighted how it brought a sense of community and

1. Lewis, S and Roberston, S. (2019). 'May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears. The importance of reciprocal hope in prison growth.' *Prison Service Journal*, 244, 17-25

motivated the audience to be part of the solution, working together to address the spice epidemic. Kam is an intelligent, reflective and inclusive individual who grew as a person and continues to grow as he approaches his release. When I first met Kam I could see his qualities as a leader and these only deepened and developed during his time at HMP Guys Marsh.

What qualities connect humanitarian leaders?

Reflecting on these individuals, their active drive for change and desire to make a difference within prison connects them. In order for them to thrive as human beings, they too required the right conditions, to build trust and become the best versions of themselves. The importance of understanding what brings life to prisons is also vital. To live rather than exist. This requires an understanding of the whole person; how they sense prison, how they see people and hear their voices, how they build strength and courage, how they use their heart and passion to change their environment, and how they create energy through the relinquishing of their power, for good.

There is also a need to use their knowledge, to embrace lessons from practice and academic knowledge. With these aspects in place, these virtues feed forward to staff and peers alike. Whilst these attributes certainly empower others to hold an active belief in the value of human life, the cost of not creating conditions that are conducive of growth can be witnessed in some prison practice. With no hope, staff become tired and lack energy. This influences the way problems are perceived and people are seen. Staff are more likely, in this scenario, to retreat to offices, to hear less, see less, feel less and this too, feeds forward. Ultimately, the questions remain; What conditions are being created for our leaders? Do our leaders experience those principles of growth from above and how are they nurtured, or stunted? How might assurance frameworks and managerialism impact on these conditions? How might the politicisation of prisons effect what can be achieved? By creating conditions of growth, our leaders have the freedom to be more creative, to dream more and be the change that is so desperately needed within our prison service today.



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