

## January 2020 No 247



# Perrie Lectures 2019

## The Opportunity, Challenges and Politics of Prison Leadership

*Dr Kate Gooch is a senior lecturer at University of Bath*

### Introduction: Leadership Matters Most!

One of the questions posed by the Perrie Lectures Committee in preparation for this year's lectures on prison leadership was, 'Is a different style needed to solve the current crisis?' In answer to that question, this lecture begins from the premise that the answer to today's crisis starts and ends with strong leadership at every level of the Prison Service and Ministry of Justice, and within prisons themselves. More 'management' is not the answer to today's challenges. Action plans, targets, performance measures and assurance mechanisms won't do it. HMP Liverpool and HMP and YOI Brinsford did not improve because of actions plans, but through strong and capable leadership. Simply pouring more resources into prison will not do it — although greater financial investment is needed. Relying on the recruitment of vast numbers of new officers will not do it — although more staff are needed. Leadership matters most — and it matters most in a crisis. Yes, more resources matter — the last five years have shown that you can breach a minimum threshold where there is too little investment in the prison system with a severely detrimental impact on the experience of imprisonment for all. Yes, more staff matters. Yes, developing confidence and competence in those staff matters. Yes, reducing the size of the prison population matters. But you put all that — money, people, a reduced population — in the hands of strong and competent leaders, but then distract them, limit them and hamstring them, progress will be slow. Put resources, more and better equipped staff, and a reduced population in the hands of strong and competent leaders who are given a '*licence to lead*' and change is possible. Strong leadership brings failing prisons back from the brink. Strong leadership takes prisons deemed to be 'healthy' or 'high performing' and improves them further still. Strong leadership creates an environment where people are more likely to flourish rather

than disintegrate, where lives are saved not lost, where people grow instead of shrink, and where people find some hope even in what can often be a hopeless situation. It can be the difference between success and failure, and between inertia and change.

Whether for good or for ill, then, the quality of the leadership team defines a prison. John Maxwell — a well-known and well-regarded American author on leadership — once said, '*Everything rises and falls on leadership.*'<sup>1</sup> This is no less true in a prison than it is in any other organisation. John Conrad argued, 'A penal institution is the lengthened shadow of the man [or woman] in charge'<sup>2</sup> The impact and influence of a Governing Governor — but also the Deputy Governor and the senior manager team (SMT) — is more than a shadow effect! What happens at the top is often mirrored at the bottom! If the Governing Governor, Deputy Governor and SMT cannot agree and are inconsistent in their decision making, there will be inconsistency at the frontline. If there is a lack of integrity at the top, staff may follow suit. If there is a laissez-faire attitude at the top, staff adopt the same approach. If there's an overtly sexualised culture within the SMT, you shouldn't be surprised when frontline staff share that culture. But if the Governing Governor and his/her SMT actively find ways to go the extra mile for staff, staff will do the same for prisoners. If senior managers value hard work, then staff will too. If the language is important to senior managers, it will be reproduced by staff too. If giving second chances is important to senior managers, staff will be more willing to give them to.

So much of prisons research focuses on the centrality and quality of staff-prisoner relationships (and rightly so), but it misses the point that the quality of those relationships is directly influenced by the quality of the relationships between staff and managers/senior managers. Lyon argued, 'Prisons stand or fall by the people who manage them.'<sup>3</sup> Leaders set the tone. Leaders determine what is encouraged, praised and rewarded, or ignored, tolerated and disciplined. Leaders

1. Maxwell, J (1999) *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the person others will follow*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, xi.
2. Conrad, J. (1960) 'The Assistant Governor in the English Prison,' *British Journal of Criminology*, 10(4): 245-261, 245-246.
3. Lyon, J. (2003) 'Managing to Work in Prisons', *Prison Report*, London: Prison Reform Trust, 3

are the example. In their book on military leadership in the United States, Willink and Babin comment, 'It's not what you preach, it's what you tolerate.'<sup>4</sup> Or, put another way: The things you walk past are the standards you set. During one research project, I was always struck by the way the Governing Governor would always stop to pick up and dispose of any litter that he noticed as we walked around the prison. It was perhaps no surprise that these subtle indicators of his expectations about cleanliness, his attempts to lead by example, and his willingness to show that cleanliness was everyone's responsibility created an environment that — even in an ageing Victorian prison — was immaculate.

But what do we mean by prison leadership, and why does it matter? Who leads, and how? Is there a difference between governing, managing and leading? Why does leadership make a difference, and in what ways and with what effects? I first began to think more specifically and systematically about these questions during a multi-site study of prison violence involving one prison that had been deemed to be failing but was on a steady journey of transformation and change, and another prison which was experiencing a series of high profile, serious incidents.<sup>5</sup> As those studies ended, and others began — including a longitudinal study of the opening of HMP Berwyn,<sup>6</sup> a study of prison homicide, and another on 'rehabilitative prisons'<sup>7</sup> — questions about leadership, governance, organisational resilience and organisational change continued to dominate. This lecture draws upon these studies — which has involved inter alia interviewing 120 senior managers, managers and policy makers — as well as the knowledge and experience drawn from visiting prisons, meeting with Governing Governors and senior managers, working alongside senior

...working alongside senior management teams, and presenting to diverse audiences of managers, senior managers and senior policy leads. This has allowed some triangulation of the original research findings, as well as generating new lines of enquiry.

management teams, and presenting to diverse audiences of managers, senior managers and senior policy leads. This has allowed some triangulation of the original research findings, as well as generating new lines of enquiry. Whilst this article does not seek to answer all of the questions posed above, it focuses on:

1) the changing role of the Governing Governor; 2) the need to move from relying solely on positional influence to personal influence; 3) the foundations of strong prison leadership; and finally, 4) the contemporary challenges of prison leadership at a time when the Prison Service is said to be experiencing 'enduring crisis in prison safety and decency'<sup>8</sup> — challenges that have been experienced more acutely in some prisons.

#### **'Working on Shifting Sands': The Politics of Prison Leadership**

Prison leadership is undoubtedly complex, but the politicised nature of prison policy means that prison senior leaders need political dexterity and skill ('leading up and out'), and an ability to provide stable, consistent direction to staff within a context of rapid policy change ('leading down and from within'). For example, during the project phase (2014-2017) and lifespan of HMP Berwyn to date (2017-), there has been three Prime Ministers (Cameron, May, Johnson), 6 Secretaries of State for Justice (Grayling, Gove, Truss, Lidington, Gauke, Buckland), and 5 Prisons Ministers (Selous, Gymiah, Stewart, Buckland, Frazer). In addition, there were two general elections, the Scottish Referendum, the EU Referendum, and the Welsh Assembly elections, which in each case created a period of purdah — momentarily pausing certain communications by civil servants. The constant reshuffling within Central Government is disruptive; each reshuffle leading to fresh briefings,

4. Willink, J. and Babin, W. (2017) *Extreme Ownership: How the US Navy Seals Lead and Win*. New York: St Martin's Press, 61.

5. I am grateful to Professor James Treadwell, Staffordshire University, and David Sheldon, Kings College London, with whom I conducted the research on prison violence. The research was supported by funding from the University of Birmingham's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account.

6. This research was supported by the University of Birmingham's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account and remains ongoing.

7. This project — entitled 'The Rehabilitative Prison: An oxymoron or an opportunity to radically reform imprisonment?' is supported by the ESRC (grant number ES/R010145/2) and is conducted with Professor Yvonne Jewkes, University of Bath.

8. House of Commons Justice Committee (2019) *Prison Population 2022: Planning for the Future*. Sixteenth Report of Session 2017-2019. London: House of Commons, 6.

creating 'pauses' whilst priorities are assessed and established, prompting inevitable policy change (conceptually, normatively and linguistically), and generating new priorities for financial expenditure. Such policy change can occur even when — as has been the case for the last nine years — the leading political party has remained the same. During the tenure of each Secretary of State for Justice of the Coalition and then Conservative Government, there have been references to 'rehabilitation.' Precisely how 'rehabilitation' was framed and understood, and how it was married with other possible priorities — such as public protection, crime detection (within prisons) and security — has differed each time. From plans to build 'Titan Prisons' and effectively warehouse prisoners (Grayling), to 'hope' as a 'central' concept (Gove), to autonomy (which slipped into empowerment, and then slipped from the agenda entirely) (Truss) to 'robust action to improve prison safety' (Gauke) and a drive to 'clean up our filthy prisons' (Stewart) — the pace of change has been relentless. This has implications for senior policy and operational leads within the Ministry of Justice and central HMPPS, but it also has implications for senior leaders within prisons themselves as they grapple with ways to, for example, fit what is 'right' into what is 'new', respond to closer and more intense political and external scrutiny, make sense of new Ministerial priorities and provide clear direction to a staff team whilst *'working on shifting sands'* themselves. The Governing Governor might be the most senior leader within their own prison, but they are also leading from the middle of an organisation and within a wider civil service with complex layers of management and governance.

### **'The Governor is God?': The Changing Role of the Governing Governor**

During fieldwork and interviews, I've sometimes heard staff — at various levels of seniority — reference the maxim 'The Governor is God', implying something about the power and status afforded to the 'Number 1' Governing Governor. The veracity of this statement might rightly be questioned, but the sentiment captures something of the respect held for the office of the Governing Governor as well as the considerable

**Strong leadership is essential to any organisation and a powerful force for driving change and improvement.**

influence and power the Governing Governor can exert within their own prison. Fox once argued, for example, 'The governor is the keystone of the arch. Within his own prison, he is ... supreme.'<sup>9</sup> Even as late as 1997, the Prison Service publications stated 'Prisons remain very hierarchical and almost feudal. There is a strong dependency on the role and person of the Governor ... The key managerial role in the Prison Service is that of Governor.'<sup>10</sup> Yet, changes to both the nature of the Governing Governor role and in the management structures above them has undoubtedly altered the supremacy and sovereignty of the Governing Governor. With the advent of privatisation, co-commissioning, greater managerialism, more intense and direct scrutiny from a range of bodies (including ministers and international human rights bodies), greater (although not extensive) judicial oversight, greater partnership working, a changing workforce and a changing prisoner population, the Governing Governor role has evolved to require a range of skills beyond operational knowledge and experience alone. As Alison Liebling remarks, 'The nature of governing has become more 'business like' and more focused on targets and outcomes ... Some governors have described the modern role as rather like the role of a 'chief executive'.<sup>11</sup> In the 15 years since this was published, there has undoubtedly been another shift in the tone, responsibility and demands on prison leaders. In 2016, Liz Truss, then Secretary of State for Justice, stipulated:

*'Strong leadership is essential to any organisation and a powerful force for driving change and improvement. Following our reforms, governors will have significantly greater authority and flexibility (along with greater accountability) in determining how their prisons are run, including how to prioritise and deliver services within their prisons.'*<sup>12</sup>

One might be forgiven for thinking that this statement from Liz Truss' White Paper on Prison Safety and Reform should actually read:

*... governors will have significantly less authority and flexibility in determining how*

9. Fox, L. (1952) *The English Prison and Borstal System*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 87.

10. HM Prison Service (1997) *Prison Service Review*. London: HMPS, paras. 9.14, 10.9.

11. Liebling, A. (2004) *Prisons and their Moral Performance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 397.

12. Ministry of Justice (2016) *Prison Safety and Reform*. London: HMSO, para 37.

*their prisons are run, but more counting (not necessarily accountability).*

On one hand, Truss' emphasis on the importance of governors held the promise of more autonomy, more scope and 'greater control to innovate',<sup>13</sup> greater licence to develop bespoke services and approaches for their prisons, but even this promise was tied to the language of competition between governors in the form of published league tables and greater accountability to 'highlight success and lay bare failure'.<sup>14</sup> Little was said about the consequences for governors of either success or failure, or the extent to which wider systemic, cultural or structural difficulties could or should be taken into account when assessing 'performance'. Since Truss' tenure, there appears to have been a retreat from the notion of governor autonomy and even greater focus on 'improvements', assurance mechanisms and accountability. The demands on leaders have changed, but so have the styles and skills needed.

#### **'By Order of the Governor': Moving from Positional Influence to Personal Influence**

Recently, I visited a prison and was struck by the number of notices displayed in and around the gate that ended with the phrase *'By order of the Governor.'* This communicates a very specific style of leadership — 'command and control', dictatorial, authoritarian. As one senior manager reflected: *'ultimately you [as the Governing Governor] are the big decision maker and the buck stops with you. [The Governing Governor] will get buy-in because he's the number one and because it's hierarchical.'* Whilst clear lines of decision-making power and authority are not problematic, leaders are less effective when rank alone is the primary source of power. It is easy in a hierarchical organisation for this to become the default position, but it is a relatively blunt and unsophisticated use of power. Influence based on position alone is limited. It can sustain you short-term, but it is rarely effective in achieving long-term, transformational change. There will always be times where a 'command and control' approach is needed — for example, when there is an

ongoing incident — but when you rely solely on rank as a default style of leadership, people only tend to follow you when they know you are looking but may not do so when they know you aren't there, won't see, or won't check. When you rely solely on rank, there is a risk that compliance is superficial or purely instrumental. In leadership, who you are always matters more than what you are. In other words, who you are always outranks rank! If you have to rely on a title to get things done, your personal influence is limited — people are not necessarily following because they want to, but because they have to. It is respect based on fear, not on regard; but control is not leadership!

#### **The Foundations of Strong Prison Leadership**

...people are not  
necessarily  
following because  
they want to, but  
because they have  
to. It is respect  
based on fear, not  
on regard; but  
control is not  
leadership!

There are three core components of strong prison leadership: 1) leading by example; 2) leading the way ahead; 3) leading the team. First, effective leaders are credible leaders — and credibility comes less from what leaders say, than what they do. Leaders can only 'lead by example' when they consistently display strong character and competence, and where their core values and convictions align with their decision making and priorities. It is this that gives leaders their moral authority to lead, gives them the ability to influence others, and that engenders trust

in those that follow. Second, effective leaders are future orientated. 'Leading the way ahead' requires vision (an ability to create the future), strategy (an ability to chart the course and explain the how, what, when and, most importantly, why), and an ability to check and adjust the course (by checking the 'health' of the prison, forensically analysing trends and closing the information gap between the SMT and staff). Being able to 'lead the way ahead' can breathe hope, purpose and focus within a context where hope can dissipate quickly, and where a clear sense of purpose and priority can be lost. Finally, effective leaders know how to build an effective, invested, secure and growing team. To do so, leaders need to be able to connect, they need to be consistent, they need to celebrate success and *'catch people doing something good,'*<sup>15</sup> and increase both their own leadership capacity and that of their team.

13. *ibid*, 3.

14. *Ibid*.

15. Many thanks to Russ Trent, Prison Group Director for Avon and South Dorset, for this quote.

## 1. Leading by Example

Character, competence and core values matter in terms of how they affect the willingness of individuals to follow the appointed leader, but they also impact the prison as a whole. Prisons are moral institutions. They are an expression and manifestation of moral judgement about the lawfulness (or lawlessness) of someone's behaviour. But beyond that, the 'moral performance'<sup>16</sup> and 'legitimacy'<sup>17</sup> of an individual prison (and the prison system more generally) matters in terms of the pains and harms experienced, and extent to which imprisonment exacerbates or decreases the likelihood of re-offending. The moral performance of the prison starts with the moral authority of the leaders and the moral climate they set and tolerate. Leading by example then is crucial. People will quickly discern and see the gap between what people say and what they do. They will only 'buy into' the leader who they judge to be authentic, credible and trustworthy. It is the combination of character, competence and convictions that give the senior leader moral authority and personal influence, and that determines the extent to which they are seen as trustworthy and authentic.

Character includes integrity, humility, commitment, self-discipline, hard work and resilience. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it is certainly true that integrity is critical to effective leadership. Although there may be an initial 'honeymoon' period when a new leader arrives or is promoted, teams will quickly discern any differences between what they say and who they are, or between the behaviour they demand of others and the behaviour they expect of themselves. If you lose your integrity, you lose. Full stop. People quickly see when someone lacks integrity, and this can jeopardise trust, 'safety' and the extent to which individuals are willing to 'speak the truth to power,' suggest ideas or raise critical concerns in a timely manner. Without integrity, you cannot have legitimacy or procedural justice. If leaders are not boundaried and self-disciplined, they lose the moral authority to demand the same from staff or prisoners. People also see when a leader is committed to their work, when they work hard, and when they are driven by passion. They also see when the reverse is true and take their cue

Character includes integrity, humility, commitment, self-discipline, hard work and resilience. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it is certainly true that integrity is critical to effective leadership.

accordingly. Some individuals will continue to give their very best to their job irrespective of how the appointed leaders behave, but others certainly will not. Resilience is an overused and sometimes flippantly used word, but it is certainly true that leaders need it in abundance. When tragedies, difficulties or problems occur, leaders still need to 'dig deep' and lead their team forward, even when they least feel like and they might feel under the greatest pressure. That they can do so, is almost certainly a test of character.

Leaders need to be capable to be credible. Irrespective of the categorisation of the prison, 'operational grip', instinct and skill still play a role. 'Operational grip' is not synonymous with hyper-masculine forms of power and control — which might be more of a 'crush' than a 'grip' — nor is it synonymous with 'ratcheting up' security measures or 'locking down'. Rather, it is the ability to grasp what is really happening (not just how things appear) and respond effectively to prevent harm, prevent a recurrence of undesired behaviours, or simply move from the way things are to the way things should be. It implies an ability to not only focus on the details of daily life, but also a willingness to take decisive action and focus the attention of staff

on key priorities. It is more than 'quality assurance' or 'visible leadership', but the assumption of responsibility for the 'moral performance of the prison', knowing whether or not the 'basics' are in place (e.g. Are men unlocked when they should be? Is there graffiti or pornographic material in cells?), knowing whether people are in the right places at the right time (e.g. Who is in segregation and for what reasons? Who is in segregation but also on an open ACCT?) and knowing the changes in the health and atmosphere of the prison (i.e. not just 'checking the temperature' but knowing how, when and why that temperature changes). Without 'operational grip', the inner prison world is not only poorly understood but so are the potential risks, either to prisoners, to staff, or to the public. Moreover, without 'operational grip,' it is difficult to detect changes within the prison, amongst staff or amongst prisoners. But as noted above, the changing role of the Governing Governor (and the senior managers they lead) means that operational skill is not enough to

16. Liebling, A. (2004) *Prisons and their Moral Performance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

17. Sparks, K., Bottoms, A. and Hay, K. (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

function effectively. 'Competence' is required in a range of different skills, including business acumen, the ability to influence partners, the ability to manage contracts (even when leaders do not have all the 'levers' they need but any problems have a direct operational impact), and the ability to effectively engage stakeholders.

Senior leaders often differ in their style, philosophies and convictions. A leader might publicly state that they are committed to a particular approach, but their real values and convictions will be evidenced in how they make decisions, how they prioritise different goals and how they evaluate what 'really matters'. Possible modes of governing include:

1. 'Command and control' — Because I said so.
2. The Manager — Because the policy says so.
3. The Economist — Because it is 'value for money'.
4. The Bureaucrat — Because that is how we are measured.
5. The Moral Leader — Because it is the right thing to do.
6. The Servant Leader — Because people come first.
7. The Custodian — Because we need to protect the public.
8. The Academic — Because the evidence says so.
9. The Rehabilitative Leader — Because it reduces reoffending.
10. The Transformational Leader — Because there is hope for the future.

These modes of governing are not mutually exclusive, and any one leader might prioritise different approaches at different times, but it is also true that most senior leaders have a natural bias to particular values, convictions and philosophies. Some may be more risk adverse than others. Some may prioritise 'performance', while others will be more guided by what's right for their prison or for individuals within it. Some will be more bound to national policy and others more willing to flex within certain parameters or try something new entirely. Ultimately, the core values and convictions of the senior leaders will influence the moral performance, legitimacy, and culture of the prison, but they also influence the extent

to which staff feel more aligned with the overall direction and strategy.

## 2. Leading the Way Ahead

In 1952, Florence Chadwick — an experienced long distanced swimmer who swam the English Channel in both directions — attempted the 26-mile swim from the Californian coastline to Catalina Island. After 15 hours of swimming, a thick fog descended and she was unable to see the support boats near her, never mind the coastline ahead. She swam for another hour

and then stopped swimming entirely, finally being pulled into one of the support boats and taken to the shore. Florence quickly discovered that she was only one mile from the island, and later said, 'All I could see was the fog. ... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.' It was neither the exhaustion nor distance that proved the greatest obstacle, but the lack of clear vision. In a prison — as in other organisations — the same is true. It might not be the exhaustion or size of the tasks that creates the greatest obstacle, but the lack of clear vision and strategy. People need leaders who can clear the fog for them. They need leaders who can — even in the midst of greatest difficult and challenges — show them the way ahead, how to get there and why it matters. People not only need *someone* to buy into, but also *something* to buy

into; they need someone to follow who knows where they are going, knows how to get there and is willing to take make bold moves. People will only go as far as your imagination as a leader can take them — if the imagination of the leader is limited so is the team. Ultimately, the willingness to lead the way ahead is a test of courage.

## 3. Leading the Team

The primary responsibility of the leader is the people they lead — not the budget, vision or strategy. Effective leadership always rests on team leadership. Andrew Carnegie, and American businessman and philanthropist, once said, 'No man [or woman] will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself, or to get all the credit for doing it.' A leader who tries to do everything themselves limits the development of their team, hinders progress, disempowers their staff,

Senior leaders often differ in their style, philosophies and convictions. A leader might publicly state that they are committed to a particular approach, but their real values and convictions will be evidenced in how they make decisions.

and ultimately, runs the risk of becoming overworked and overwhelmed. As the old proverb goes, 'He that thinketh he leadeth but hath no one following is only taking a walk.' You cannot lead through emails or notices to staff, you can only lead through relationships with people. Leaders have to connect, but they need to do so based on relationships of trust. The extent to which a leader is consistent in their mood, priorities and evaluation of performance can either create or jeopardise trust. Leaders who are unstable in their mood or emotion, create a sense of insecurity in their team who then do what they can to avoid putting their 'head above the precipice' and 'speaking the truth to power' out of fear of the reaction it will provoke. Leaders whose priorities changed from morning meeting to morning meeting will tend to see knee jerk reactions but not long-term, sustained change and improvement. Unclear or changing expectations cause confusion, ambiguity and inefficiency. The reverse is also true. When there is predictability in the mood, priorities, standards and expectations of senior leaders — and what they will do when things do not go as planned — a team is more likely to view the senior leader(s) as trustworthy.

What a leader can achieve is determined by the strength and unity of his or her senior management team. Rightly or wrongly, what happens within the SMT inevitably impacts upon the rest of the prison. Disunity in the team can easily become disunity within the staff group as a whole. In this lecture, I've used the picture of a classical orchestra as an illustration. At their best, an SMT has a conductor who is directing and leading the orchestra — Indicating when to change dynamics, when to crescendo or diminuendo, when to rest and when to sound again, when more practice is required, what pieces to play. But an orchestra might also have moments where someone hasn't practiced their part, where the second violin wants to be the first (e.g. the Head of Business Assurance *really* wanted to be the Head of Residence or the Deputy Governor), where someone hasn't turned up or has turned up late for practice (or that meeting!), where someone is out of time (team members don't seem to share the same values or principles). What should sound like a beautiful piece of music can sound discordant — so it is with the

SMT. Insufficient attention to the dynamics of the team can leave moments of discord, disharmony and lacking in the right rhythm.

Leading a team well depends not only on the quality of the relationships within the team, but also the extent to which the senior leaders(s) give others a 'licence to lead.' Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United State, once said, 'The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it.' Knowing how to empower others and to what extent requires wisdom, discernment and an awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the team. It is about knowing how much to ask for and

when; how to let go and when to hold tightly; when and how to check, and what to check; how to address work and behaviour that falls below standards and expectations; and, when to ask for more. It also requires that decision making and authority is set at the most appropriate level — not all decisions need to be made by the most senior leader, but certainly some do. Knowing the difference, and at what level to set the lines of authority can avoid decision making being 'pushed up' unnecessarily. Reflecting on his time as Commander of the USS *Benfold*, Dr Michael Abrashoff explained:

Leading a team well depends not only on the quality of the relationships within the team, but also the extent to which the senior leaders(s) give others a 'license to lead.'

*When I took command of Benfold, I realised that no one, including me, is capable of making every decision. I would have to train my people to think and make judgments on their own. Empowering means defining parameters in which people are allowed to operate, and then setting them free. But how free was free? Where were the limits? I chose my line in the sand. Whenever the consequences of a decision had the potential to kill or injure someone, waste taxpayers' money, or damage the ship, I had to be consulted. Short of those contingencies, the crew was authorised to make their own decisions. Even if the decision were wrong, I would stand by my crew. Hopefully they would learn from their mistakes. And the more responsibility they were given, the more they learned.*<sup>18</sup>

18. Dr Michael Abrashoff (2002) *It's your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy*. New York: Warner Business, 29-30.

Abrashoff reminds us that it is not just about clear expectations or simply allowing staff to make decisions, but also responding constructively when mistakes are made. Do we stand by them and support them to learn, or do we blame them, single them out and vilify them? Do we see it as an opportunity to learn, or an opportunity to portion blame? There will almost certainly be some 'red lines' — behaviour that is unlawful or is so negligent as to constitute grounds for dismissal — but beyond that, there must be room for people to learn from their mistakes and know that they will be coached and supported to do so. If people fear making a mistake, you limit the opportunity to learn and improve at an individual and organisational level. If people believe that there is 'blame culture', poor practice is pushed down and not brought into the open. For leaders to succeed, there must be organisational courage and maturity to allow them to explore new approaches, make mistakes and learn from them. Where things don't go as planned — as is inevitable — the correct cause needs to be identified rather than assumed.

## 9 Prison Leadership Challenges

There is no doubt that leadership can be rewarding, but it is also a great responsibility, one that can weigh heavily. Leading others is an act of emotional, mental and physical labour, and it is relentless. Whilst there will be a range of challenges that are uniquely situational, there are several challenges that are common across a range of prisons. They include: the loneliness of leadership; avoiding 'survival mode' as a leader and in others; generating change in a heavily regimented and routine driven context'; succession planning; instigating change with staff who anticipate the tenure of a Governing Governor to be short; the 'virtual prison syndrome'; 'sloping shoulders syndrome'; managing what can feel like 'zero sum games'; and, avoiding the worst excesses of a managerial, performance and assurance driven culture.

### ***Leadership Challenge 1: 'It's lonely at the top!'***

Leadership can be a lonely task. As seniority increases, there may be fewer immediate sources of support and fewer 'safe spaces' to just be yourself. In addition, criticism can become both personal and

public. Leaders frequently make difficult and finely balanced decisions — decisions that may be unpopular, have unfavourable consequences for individuals, and unsettle the status quo. In such situations, sustaining momentum requires leaders to have both courage and conviction; courage to keep going in the face of criticism, and conviction that what they are doing is the right thing.

### ***Leadership Challenge 2: Survival Mode***

Governors, senior managers, managers and staff can become overwhelmed and hopeless. I've heard people use the term 'learned helplessness'; I think a more accurate diagnosis is hopelessness. 'Learned helplessness' starts with hopelessness. But leaders always have to find the way out. That's the job of leadership. To rise up. To stand. To be counted. To dig deep. If a Governing Governor or senior manager does not lead, someone else will. As Winston Churchill once said, 'When eagles are silent, parrots start to chatter.' The silence and absence of the appointed leader always has consequences. Silence and inaction can never be neutral. Power always flows. This begs the question: who is making the decisions about what happens in your prison, what changes can or cannot be implemented? Is it the Governing Governor? Is it the POA? Is it those who live there? Where does power lie?

There is no doubt that leadership can be rewarding, but it is also a great responsibility, one that can weigh heavily. Leading others is an act of emotional, mental and physical labour, and it is relentless.

### ***Leadership Challenge 3: The Seduction of the Routine***

The daily regime is a source of ontological security and comfort for both staff and prisoners. A consistent, timely and predictable regime reduces frustration, contributes to a sense of order and control, and helps ensure that everyone — staff and prisoners alike — are in the right place at the right time and for the right reasons. This habitual routine can make change difficult to achieve and embed. Yet change is essential in any organisation. As the world within and around prisons has changed, so must the solutions. The challenge for any leader in initiating change and sustaining momentum is ensuring that others are following and that those changes seep into the very fabric of the daily habits and routines. Few people eagerly embrace change — although there will always be some. Some fear it, and others will actively resist it.

#### Leadership Challenge 4: Succession Planning

The transition from one governor to another can look like the best and worst examples of the Olympic relay race. At its best, the transition is planned, smooth and fluid, ensuring that the team can — to continue the sporting analogy — run a winning relay race. At its worst, the baton is not passed at all (e.g. a new Governing Governor is not appointed for several months), is dropped (e.g. the Governing Governor has a style or approach that is fundamentally different or contradictory causing a break in momentum), or one is trying to pass to the other but to no avail (e.g. the incoming Governing Governor openly criticises their predecessor). Poor transitions lead to inertia, insecurity, a loss of focus, and loss of momentum. Lord Laming argued, 'No prison should be left without a governor for weeks or months. Nor is it sound management that Governors and senior managers change too quickly, or stay longer than their performance merits.'<sup>19</sup>

In all of the difficulties in succession planning, what is easily lost is the reality that the relay race is a team sport. Each person in the relay plays a part, they should each build on what has gone before, and contribute to what is to come. In the worst examples, it leads to competitive 'one-upmanship', where the incoming Governor seeks to tear down or compare his or her achievements with that of his or her predecessor. Leadership is a team sport. Far better to have a culture of honour and building others up, than tearing them down. Competitiveness also ignores the reality that it takes any organisations needs different leaders with different skills and strengths. You need both great leaders of few, great leaders of many. There is a tendency to judge leadership based on how complex or large the prison is. However, such concerns should be irrelevant. Large complex prison may suit some leaders but not all. Small prisons may suit some leaders but not all. The point is not the size of the leadership task, but the size of the leader. Within any group of senior leaders, there will be some who are great leaders of 10s, others who are great leaders of 100s, and others who may be greater leaders of 1000s. What matters is not the number of people you lead, but how you lead.

No prison should be left without a governor for weeks or months. Nor is it sound management that Governors and senior managers change too quickly, or stay longer than their performance merits.

Far better to influence one life positively than negatively. Influences the lives of many. The aspiration then should be to increase our leadership capacity and capability — to stretch to be the best leader and have the greater positive influence on those within our stewardship — not to increase the size of our portfolio for the sake of it, or simply to feel more legitimate as a leader.

#### Leadership Challenge 5: 'Tin Helmet Syndrome'

Nearly 20 years ago, Lord Laming and the Committee were told:

*'When a new prison governor comes in and wants us to change things, we know if you just sit tight for long enough, another one will come along and want to do it differently ... Governors come and go so regularly that the only stable thing in a prison is the POA, so that's where we are loyal to.'*<sup>20</sup>

Since the tenure of a governor can be short, some prison staff will simply put the 'tin helmets on'. Put simply, if a staff member does not like the approach, ethos or vision of the governor, they simply bunker down and simply wait out the year or two before they leave, trying not to put their head above the precipice in the mean time. You might assume that this would be more typical behaviour

amongst officers, but individuals in middle management and senior management positions have confessed to adopting the same approach.

#### Leadership Challenge 6: The 'Virtual Prison' Syndrome

The virtual prison syndrome occurs when there is a gap between the prison that the Governing Governor and senior team *think* they have, and the prison that they actually have. It is the difference between what is intended and what is achieved, or the difference between rhetoric and reality. The extent to which a gap exists depends on whether or not there is visible and engaged leadership by the senior team, and by 'middle managers' (Band 5/6 managers). The health of a prison can only be ascertained by walking around it, smelling it, opening the doors, speaking to prisoners and staff,

19. Lord Laming (2000) Modernising the Prison Service: An Independent Review by the Targeted Performance Initiative Working Group. London: Home Office, 4.

20. *ibid*, 11.

checking whether cells are graffiti free, whether server areas are clean, whether the regime is consistent and timely, by not just being visible, but by being engaged, asking questions, and checking the details. It requires a tenacious desire to keep *'turning over the rocks'* and check what lies underneath, and then deal with what is found rather than simply *'put the rock back down'*.

### **Leadership Challenge 7: 'Sloping Shoulders' Syndrome**

The person with 'sloping shoulders' does not go unnoticed for long. 'Sloping shoulders' syndrome occurs when senior managers or members of their team shy away from taking responsibility for their actions or shy away from the hard work necessary to complete a task/project or govern effectively. When leaders and/or their team are suffering from 'sloping shoulders' syndrome, inertia and frustration quickly sets in as decisions are avoided or delayed. It may also impact the rest of the senior team who either have additional work or are left 'blindsided' by the absence of information and intelligence. Inadvertently, senior managers who demonstrate 'sloping shoulders' set a culture that make it more likely for staff to distance themselves from responsibility (e.g. not signing for checks) or where decisions are 'pushed up' out of a fear of being blamed if things go wrong.

### **Leadership Challenge 8: Zero Sum Games**

Whilst much can be drawn from the wider literature on leadership in, for example, business, schools, the military, the police, high-performance sport, the prison environment is sufficiently unique that it presents particular challenges, and brings common leadership problems into sharp focus when faced with life and death decisions, when trying to discern when to move and when not to (e.g. in the immediacy of an incident or when trying to maintain or restore order), when balancing risk to the public, and when managing the sometimes conflicting priorities and values of staff and prisoners. Whilst leadership resources often discuss the importance of leading a team, they rarely discuss how you balance the needs and demands of multiple audiences — leaders have to weigh the impact of the

decision for staff and prisoners, who may have different beliefs about what the 'right thing to do is in a given situation. Staff and prisoners instinctively understand the importance of the Governing Governor. When It appears that their tenure may be coming to an end — or even months before — speculation and gossip is often rife. As one individual commented, *'The one thing we want to know is, is he for staff or is he for prisoners?'* The implicit assumption is that a Governing Governor is either one or the other, and decisions that are made at a senior level may amount to 'zero sum games' seen either in favour of 'us' or 'them'. The way in which such decisions are made and on what grounds

is also complicated by the reality that people are held against their will. Leaders are responsible for people who are living in extreme situations, and who may or may not survive competently, but also in an environment where there is a natural bias towards punishment and punitiveness (even amongst prisoners).

Leaders are still living with the organisational memory and impact of benchmarking, fair and sustainable, and competition (some are still reverberating from it!). Ultimately, then, leaders have to reconcile themselves to the reality that they will not, and cannot, always be popular. The choice, then, is: who and what dictates their decision making and priorities?

### **Leadership Challenge 9: 'Hitting the Target but Missing the Point'<sup>21</sup>**

It seems you cannot spend too much time in a prison before hearing references to 'performance', 'assurance,' action plans or targets. But perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves is: *who is assured by assurance?* Does all the industry, activity and scrutiny regarding performance and assurance actually improve the baseline performance of prisons? Do prisons improve their legitimacy, decency and 'moral performance' by counting more, or through effective leadership, sufficient resources, and competent staff? Why, despite the emphasis on performance measures and data, do we still see prisons struggling to maintain basic levels of cleanliness and decency? Liebling and Crewe describe a transition in prison management from a 'managerial-plus era' (managerialism with an explicitly values driven approach) to a 'managerial-minus era'

The implicit assumption is that a Governing Governor is either one of the either, and decisions that are made at a senior level may amount to 'zero sum games' seen either in favour of 'us' or 'them'.

21. Many thanks to Russ Trent, Prison Group Director for Avon and South Dorset, for this quote.

(managerialism in the context of economic rationalisation).<sup>22</sup> Arguably, we are now in third era of managerialism, one that is structured by greater political irrationality (as noted above) and closer political scrutiny (partly a product of the introduction of a Urgent Notification process, the exposure of significant decline within some prisons, and the return to 'law and order' policies for political expediency). Greater focus on 'performance' and 'assurance' is demanded — as per the Prison Safety and Reform White Paper — but might also be seen as a natural response and defence to the intensification of political scrutiny.

The inherent danger in the emphasis on 'performance' and 'managerialism' as a response is that time and attention is not only diverted to getting the data 'right' rather than getting the prison 'right'. It is also possible for managerialism to generate, or at least encourage, a moral malaise. As an academic, I inherently recognise the importance of rich data, but I also know that numerical data only ever tells part of the story, and that it is not always possible to 'measure what matters'. Six year ago, as part of the Perrie Lectures, Nick Hardwick reminded us of the lessons that the Prison Service could learn from the Mid-Staff Inquiry. The Inquiry Chairman, Robert Francis QC, concluded:

*'... that patients were routinely neglected by a Trust that was preoccupied with cost cutting, targets and processes and which lost sight of its fundamental responsibility to provide safe care.'*<sup>23</sup>

*'If there is one lesson to be learnt, I suggest it is that people must always come before numbers. It is the individual experiences that lie behind statistics and benchmarks and action plans that really matter, and that is*

*what must never be forgotten when policies are being made and implemented.'*<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting on the relevance of Robert Francis' comments

*'... it is my contention that Robert Francis' Inquiry into Mid Staffs hospital has lessons from which the prison service, if it was prudent, could learn. I say this not to point the finger at things that are going wrong, but to try and prevent that happening.'*<sup>25</sup>

The risk that both Robert Francis QC and Nick Hardwick alert is to is that is can be too easy to focus on numbers and not individuals, for 'performance' to matter more than people, and for leaders to stop thinking about what's 'right' and focus on what's right for the figures and targets. Focusing only on data makes it easy to forget that each number represents an individual, and that everything that is measured is experienced.

## Conclusion

Leadership is expensive, sacrificial, and relentless. But is also carries great reward and great opportunity. To conclude, I end with this reminder from Harry Truman, 33rd President of the United States of America: 'Men [and women] make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.' Perhaps for our purposes, this quote is more useful be rephrased as 'Men [*and women*] make history and not the other way around. In *prisons* where there is no leadership, prisons stand still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.'

22. Liebling, A. and Crewe, B. (2012) 'Prisons beyond the new penology: The shifting moral foundations of prison management,' In: Simon, J. and Sparks, R. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Punishment and Society*. London: Sage, 283-.

23. Francis QC, R. (2013) Press Release: The Mid-Staffordshire NSH Foundation Trust Public Inquiry. Available online: [https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s20021/HWB\\_MAR1413R03.pdf](https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s20021/HWB_MAR1413R03.pdf)

24. Francis QC, R. (2013) The Mid-Staffordshire NSH Foundation Trust Public Inquiry, 35. Available online: <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06690#fullreport>

25. Nick Hardwick (2014) 'Lessons for the Prison Service from the Mid Staffs Inquiry.' *Prison Service Journal* 211: 3-13.