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# Prison Leadership: Purpose, Presence and Perspective

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**In this article my aim is to provide a personal perspective and reflections on prison leadership. This is very much a ‘practitioners’ insight rather than any attempt at academic analysis, although I have benefited enormously from conversations with Munazzah Choudhary who is researching prison leadership for her PhD and has certainly helped to stimulate my thinking. But principally, I want to offer some practical thoughts about leadership in prisons from my own observations and experience.**

## Context

In my final address to Governors at the Governors’ forum in November 2018, I referenced the emphasis Lord Gus O’Donnell, former Head of the Civil Service, gave to his 4 ‘P’s when seeking to create a more effective leadership culture for the Civil Service. Those 4 ‘P’s were: pride; passion; pace and; professionalism. All are relevant and applicable to leadership in prisons, but I offered 3 ‘P’s of my own for Governors to specifically reflect on in their own leadership roles. These were: purpose; personal Impact/presence and; perspective. In this article, I’d like to expand on these 3 ‘P’s and outline why each are important, indeed vital, for prison Governors in providing effective leadership to their establishments today.

I don’t intend to analyse or comment on ‘transformational’, ‘servant’, ‘adaptive’, ‘authentic’, ‘charismatic’ or any other models or style of leadership — others are much better placed to do this. Rather, I want to concentrate on a few of the practical realities which leaders face today in an institutional prison environment. However, before turning to this I do want to make one broader point. Much of the literature on leadership deals with the personal characteristics which are important for leadership at all levels. But equally important and widely recognized in the literature is ‘context’. In her literature review, Munazzah Choudhary references Bryman who makes the point that ‘effective leadership by individuals is an interaction of the individual and their context’<sup>1</sup>.

Similarly, Atonakis, Cianciob and Sternberg in 2004 argue that ‘context in which leadership is enacted is a key to its understanding’<sup>2</sup> and I have learned that there is a whole school promoting ‘contextual leadership’. From my perspective this is very good news — because it seems to me clear and unarguable that context is critical when considering prison leadership. It is leadership within a very specific controlling, coercive context and in a very political environment — as prisons, in our democracy, operate under political direction and oversight on behalf of the public. This context is very important, and it is that very specific unique context of prison that makes leadership within them so challenging, complex, fascinating and crucial to the effectiveness of the custodial environment and the experience of prisoners. Governors and prison leaders are not free to do what they want within their closed institutions but must operate in accordance with legislation and statute, subject to political direction; parliamentary scrutiny, media comment and public expectations. This context is important and needs to be understood and properly acknowledged.

## Purpose

Turning to the first of my 3 ‘Ps’ — ‘Purpose’. Prisons do of course have multiple purposes, and this in itself creates dilemmas and challenges for prison leaders. Many commentators have reflected on the multi-dimensional requirements placed on prisons, their leaders and staff and accordingly pointed out the difficulties and risks which can arise from competing objectives creating the potential for inconsistency, disharmony and conflict for both staff and prisoners. Alison Liebling’s post-9/11 study of HMP Whitemoor brings this out vividly<sup>3</sup> — evidencing the impact which a changing political narrative and expectations have on the confidence of leaders, staff and prisoners in a long term prison where questions of risk and ‘public acceptability’ create tensions with the prisons’ aim to provide a progressive rehabilitative and inclusive regime. This is a genuine dilemma — with confused or

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1. Bryman A (1992). *Charisma and Leadership in Organisations*. London: Sage
  2. Atonakis, J., Cianciob, A. and Sternberg, R. (eds) (2004) *The Nature of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
  3. Liebling, A., Arnold, H. and Straub, C. (2011) An exploration of staff–prisoner relationships at HMP Whitemoor: 12 years on. Cambridge: Prison research Centre available at <https://www.prc.crim.cam.ac.uk/publications/whitemoor-report> accessed on 02 August 2019

conflicting objectives highlighted consistently in reports and reviews on the operation of prisons (usually when things have gone wrong!). It was a theme in the Woolf Report following the riots of 1990<sup>4</sup>; in the Woodcock and Learmont reports following the escapes in 1994 and 1995<sup>5</sup> and was explicitly referenced in Admiral Lygo's review of the management of prisons<sup>6</sup> where he identified competing objectives through a lack of clarity of purpose and the blurring of policy and administration being a significant issue creating leadership complexity. In an article in 2008, Shane Bryans argues that 'the prison environment remains one of great ambiguity in terms of its purposes'<sup>7</sup>. He is absolutely right- this is indeed the case. It is a reality, I suggest, which prison leaders (at both national and local level) must recognise, accept and embrace in order to provide effective leadership within their prisons.

Prisons must inevitably balance competing requirements. Effective leaders recognise this and work hard to provide clarity, coherence and purpose within this context. I believe the 2003 Criminal Justice Act helps in explicitly setting out the 'Principles of Sentencing'. These are specifically defined as punishment; public protection; reduction of crime; reparation and; rehabilitation. There are clearly and rightly multiple objectives in sentencing an individual following

conviction for a crime. Prisons serve the public by delivering and implementing the sentences of the courts — which by definition have multiple purposes. In particular, punishment; public protection and rehabilitation are all components of a custodial sentence for those convicted and sent to prison. They are not mutually exclusive — but can be challenging to deliver and maintain in balance and inevitably tensions and conflicts arise as a result. Such complexities are heightened by political 'emphasis' which can change regularly, influenced by ministerial pre-disposition, media coverage and public opinion. It is in this context that prison leaders must set direction and provide purpose and clarity. This means recognizing the multiple purposes of prison and calls for a holistic and measured approach to leadership which maintains these objectives in balance. It is why prison performance cannot be properly assessed by

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having only one or two key indicators. A 'balanced scorecard' is a good and necessary management tool — because prison leaders need to maintain a balance — keeping prisoners in custody, maintaining safety, managing risk, promoting and supporting rehabilitation — all are important and while they are inter-related, they all require attention. As Chief Inspector of Probation, Andrew Bridges spoke routinely about the three interlocking circles required for probation delivery. These were: delivering the sentence of the court; managing/mitigating the risk of harm posed by an individual and; providing interventions and support to reduce the risk of reoffending. Prison leadership can equally be seen in this way. Holding prisoners securely to deliver the sentence of

the court; holding them safely to prevent harm to themselves; others and the wider public; and working with them to support effective rehabilitation and reduce their risk of reoffending. The original Prison Service 'Statement of Purpose' did, in fact, sum this up rather well:

*'HM Prison Service serves the public by holding those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them to lead good and useful lives in custody and after release'*

Maintaining balance is key. I recall taking responsibility for Grendon as Area Manager in 2002. On my first day three long sentenced prisoners convicted of very serious offences escaped from the sportsfield. I was an admirer of the work Grendon does. I believe in promoting rehabilitation and in the capacity for individuals to change. I am a supporter of the Therapeutic Community approach — and had indeed established a democratic TC in one of my prisons — but much to the upset of the Grendon community at the time, and to many of the staff — I led work to significantly tighten security across that prison. This was necessary — because the escape demonstrated how the prison had become unbalanced — putting at risk its very existence.

For Governors over recent years, balancing regime provision and safety — has been a challenge. Determining when to maintain activities and when its right and necessary to 'lock down' to search and respond to safety

4. Woolf, H. and Tumim, S. (1991) *Prison Disturbances April 1990: Report of an Inquiry* London: HMSO
5. Woodcock, J. (1994) *Report of an Inquiry into the Escape of Six Prisoners from the Special Secure Unit at Whitemoor Prison in Cambridgeshire on Friday 9 September 1994* HMSO: London; Learmont, J. (1995) *Review of Prison Service Security in England and Wales and the escape from Parkhurst Prison on Tuesday 3 January 1995* London: HMSO.
6. Lygo, R. (1991) *Management of the Prison Service*. London: Home Office.
7. Bryans S (2008) *Prison governors: New public managers?* in Bennett J., Crewe B., and Wahidin, A. *Understanding prison staff* Cullompton: Willan p.213-230

concerns are difficult judgments to make — but absolutely necessary ones. The work to develop rehabilitative culture and rehabilitative leadership — is really impressive and massively important. It is the right approach and absolutely what the Service requires. During his time at Grendon, Jamie Bennett was able to deliver a transformative rehabilitative culture, but this was only possible for the long term population he held because it was within an appropriately secure environment — enabling the prison to effectively deliver the sentence of the court, and protect the public.

Maintaining balance and providing clarity of purpose and ‘moral leadership’ to staff given the complexity of the work we do is crucial — and Governors need to understand this — as not everyone does.

More than one Minister, over the years, has for example, spoken about improving ‘prison discipline’ without understanding how a legitimate desire for improved order or a ‘tougher’ more challenging regime can be misinterpreted on the ground leading to unintended consequences and on occasions abuse of prisoners. The introduction of the ‘short sharp shock’ for young offenders in Detention Centres in the 1980s is but one example of this. However well intentioned the policy it had unintended consequences — which reverberate still today — with some former staff now facing criminal charges for their actions at that time.

In a coercive and controlling environment — which prisons are, maintaining balance, humanity and purpose in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity is a priority for prison leaders.

### Presence

Given the complexity and ambiguity and the physical reality of the prison environment personal presence is essential if prison leaders are to be effective. Well run and effective prisons require leaders at all levels who are present and active. Absence creates a vacuum which will be filled to the detriment of staff and prisoners alike. Good prison officers recognise that ‘no go’ areas cannot be tolerated because staff absence means dangerous prisoner coercive control. Similarly, good leaders know their presence is required every day.

Role modelling expectations is important for any leader in any organization but it’s particularly important in closed institutions where power is necessarily unbalanced. So physical presence is important — but presence means, for me, much more than just being there. It is much more than just ‘being visible’ — essential as that is. For me, effective leadership ‘presence’ in a prison requires four

things : an understanding of prisoners; an understanding of staff; an understanding of culture across the prison and; an understanding of the routines, resourcing and regime (interventions) which impact on the lives of the community every day. The best leaders care about what they do; care about what they are achieving; care about what they will leave behind — and in this context the best prison leaders care about their staff, their prisoners, the culture in their prison, and the 3 ‘Rs’ (routines, resourcing and regimes). Each of these is crucial to the effective performance of a prison. So presence alongside staff and prisoners, a deep understanding of the institutional dynamic and personal attentiveness to the daily routines is a pre-requisite for success.

The nature of prisons where legitimate coercion is a necessary feature means that power imbalance must be managed to prevent abuse. Prisons are places where staff are required to operate with constant and legitimate concerns about their own safety — where integrity, courage and maintaining a moral compass are all crucial requirements and where things can go wrong when legitimate authority oversight and control is absent. A leader’s personal presence in this context is vital, and it’s as important today as it’s always been. But it has to be an informed presence — with proper appreciation and understanding of daily routines, concerns, issues and the cultural dynamic operating in

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the prison environment.

The scale of the task and the risks involved mean that leadership presence is vital for Governors but equally vital for leaders and managers across the prison. It has to be a team approach — creating active presence which promotes confidence and trust for staff and prisoners alike. Such a presence breaks down barriers creating openness — where information is shared and where community is created. This isn’t easy, in fact it’s incredibly difficult given the custodial context we’ve already discussed — but it is a feature of the most effective establishments.

Leadership ‘absence’ is by contrast, incredibly dangerous and in the extreme leads to shameful abuse — that can occur and persist notwithstanding external scrutiny. The abuse in the segregation unit at Wormwood Scrubs in the 1990’s was not, for example, picked up when the prison was inspected. Neither, much more recently, was the mistreatment at Medway Secure Training Centre where Ofsted gave it a ‘good’ overall rating and it took a Panorama undercover investigation to expose the reality. A similar situation occurred at Whorlton Hall care home for vulnerable adults — exposed again in a Panorama undercover investigation in 2019.

On site 'presence' from an effective leadership team could have and should have identified and prevented this prolonged and systemic abuse. It isn't easy — but evidence shows we cannot rely on external scrutiny alone (important and necessary as it is) nor should we be dependent on undercover investigations. Rather prisons must develop a culture where leaders at all levels are present and are actively promoting a culture of openness and trust where information is shared, and a positive rehabilitative approach is practiced. Leadership presence — is vital but it must be informed, constantly questioning, people focused and above all honest in its application.

### **Perspective**

My third point is that leaders must maintain a constant focus, integrity and presence. They must balance competing priorities and provide clarity through ambiguity. They have to be able to deal with the 'slings and arrows' of fortune or 'events dear boy events' on a daily basis and remain resilient, calm in the face of adversity, and measured, confident and optimistic when the outlook is uncertain. This too is not an easy task — but it helps enormously where leaders are able to see the 'bigger picture', focus on the 'greater good' and maintain perspective. To be clear, maintaining 'perspective' isn't about a 'laissez-faire'; 'anything goes'; approach. Effective leaders set high standards, expect much, strive to improve and are constantly seeking to make things better. Setting such standards and promoting professionalism at all times is a pre-requisite for success in most organisations and prison leadership is no exception. Retaining perspective in prison leadership is particularly important given the nature of the work and the complexity and challenge presented by the people we work with, the limitations on resources and external support available and the sometimes unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved in this context. 'Keeping your head' is important both for the wellbeing of the institution; for the wellbeing of prisoners and staff; and for personal wellbeing and resilience.

This has become even more pertinent as public expectations, and external scrutiny have increased — placing increased pressure and stress on leaders and staff at all levels. This is particularly evident for establishments dealing with the tragedy of a self-inflicted death or increasingly in dealing with the public profile surrounding an inspection or serious incident. Maintaining morale, purpose and positive endeavour in the face of critical external scrutiny (even where this may be entirely legitimate) is an increasingly difficult but vitally important challenge for a leader. It becomes even more difficult when criticism feels unfair or unbalanced with unrealistic expectations or where an external commentary on an event or incident feels ill-informed or disproportionate. In such circumstances, leaders must take the situation and the issue seriously and must take action in response to events. That is a necessary responsibility. But in doing this they need to maintain a balanced and measured

perspective. This isn't easy — coping when things go wrong, acting to address weaknesses, to put things right, to improve, to learn lessons is right and necessary — but it's important to retain balance and perspective throughout — not to commit to unachievable goals; to recognise human fragility; and on occasions to distinguish between unacceptable grossly negligent action and honest mistakes made by human beings under pressure.

Personal integrity is key here. Maintaining principled commitment to values in the most testing of circumstances for me exemplifies the best leaders and maintaining perspective to avoid being swayed by the pressures of the moment is a vital ingredient for success and longevity.

### **Conclusion**

Of course, leadership in all sectors is all about people and by their very nature prisons are people organisations with daily human interaction at the heartbeat of the institution. The specific context of a prison environment which, by its nature, is coercive and controlling creates a unique leadership challenge.

Effective leadership within a prison requires leaders not only to have a visible presence but to be 'in tune' with the realities, daily dynamic, and culture of their establishment. It means getting alongside prisoners and staff to understand their fears, issues and concerns, and it means understanding the impact that routines and resourcing has on their everyday lives and lived experience. This requires good, effective management to 'govern' the prison and to maintain a positive, active and balanced regime each day. Providing clarity of purpose, acknowledging and balancing the legitimate but often competing tensions inherent in the role of prisons is a requirement for prison leaders. They must maintain security and create a safe environment but also focus on the needs of individuals, treating prisoners with humanity, providing and promoting opportunities for rehabilitation whilst mitigating public protection risks and maintaining public confidence in delivering the sentence and orders of the court. It is a complex and demanding task and the best leaders demonstrate a commitment and care for their staff, for their prisoners and for the wider prison community whilst effectively discharging their responsibilities to the court and to the public as required by Ministers and Parliament acting at all times with purpose and personal integrity.

In an earlier article in this edition of *Prison Service Journal*, an argument was made 'against prison management' or more accurately, against the growth of public service managerialism. In this article, I argue that strong moral leadership with purpose, presence and perspective combined with good prison management is the antidote to excessive exuberant, expedient managerialism. It is this type of leadership that will enable hope to flourish and prisons to succeed within the political context in which they must inevitably exist.