

# THEORY AND PRACTICE

Finlay Graham

*Principal Psychologist, H.M. Prison, Frankland.*

There are two central elements of Fresh Start.

(1) The division of staff into small working groups managed by Principal Officers, within which staff work fixed and more predictable hours as detailed by their group managers. Reliance on an allegedly inflated level of overtime would be replaced by a more efficient system of attendance, more closely matching the real work requirements of the establishment.

(2) The creation of a management structure which provides clearly defined roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.

The two basic principles of team working and accountable management would probably be accepted as valid by most organisations. My practical experience of Fresh Start has been at Frankland dispersal prison which has a complement of about 250 officers and lies just north of Durham. At Frankland, the achievement of the two basic principles of Fresh Start has not been without difficulty.

## **Team Working**

The first problem lay in the size of the teams. Initially, the Fresh Start consultants envisaged teams of around 20. They were right to set 20 as the target since the aim of creating teams is to provide a manageable staffing unit which brings closer identification and involvement through increased continuity. A body-blow was dealt to this ideal when the proposed staff groups at Frankland contained 40 and more officers. Such large groups are unlikely to generate the feelings of belonging and mutual support upon which real team spirit will thrive.

The second problem lay in the fact that we could not produce groups which would operate independently whilst maintaining fairness in the working conditions for officers across the groups. Specifically, officers attached to a wing group would have

worked many more evening and weekend duties than their colleagues in other groups. The level of this inequity was so marked that it was considered intolerable. The solution was to build in a system of support at weekends and evenings to the wings from other groups. This was another major blow to group continuity: by increasing further the number of officers working in a group, the achievement of a genuine team working atmosphere began to seem remote.

A third problem lies in group management itself. The wings operate to a task-line which requires a Principal officer's presence at evenings and weekends whereas other groups do not have such a requirement. In order to achieve equity, a shift-pattern had to be created to provide continuous PO cover to each wing but not necessarily by its own group manager.

Group working has now been running at Frankland for three months. Throughout, there has been a perceived need to exercise some central control of group detailing. The reason has been the failure of groups to provide sufficient staff to meet their minimum staffing levels. Initially, central control was exercised by a Principal Officer but staffing problems became so all-consuming that a Governor V was added. Both individuals attempted to overcome projected staffing deficiencies. Both showed signs of stress. The task is almost impossible because group detailing and central control are opposite sides of the same coin.

If the Governor insists groups meet their tasklines or minimum staffing levels, then this requires a system of central control. He cannot have group detailing and central control simultaneously. The only way this can be done is for the central agency to directly specify a group manager's detail. Doing so is seen as interference and attacks the very heart of group detailing. Failure to do so is acceptance that group managers will interpret the local agreement differently and will manage differing levels

of effectiveness. Staff quickly latch on to such inter-group differences and these become a source of considerable discontent.

Reluctantly, I am drawn to conclude that team working may well prove to be an unattainable goal in a dispersal prison like Frankland. My own preference would be to develop Senior Officer centred teamwork as the size of the teams would be more conducive to the development of team spirit.

## **Accountable Management**

Whilst agreeing with the second principle, I question the means by which the Fresh Start proposals seek to achieve it. They attempt to provide accountable management by a successive division of accountability into a highly compartmentalised management structure supported by a hierarchy more artificial than real in its subdivision of responsibilities. The Governor, holding ultimate responsibility and accountability, is in practice left isolated from the actual processes managed. To an unnecessary extent, he is reliant solely on his 'top team' for information.

The meeting structure evolving to support management has three main components.

### *(a) Top Team Meeting*

Chaired by the Governor and attended by the Heads of Custody, of Medical Services, Works Services, Management Support Services and (possibly) of Inmate Activities. This would represent the overall policy-making for the establishment. For this purpose, however, such a group is unrepresentative of the management task, excluding as it does the bulk of the Governor grades. In a large establishment the Governor IV Head of Inmate Activities attends such a group whilst the Governor IV Heads of Operations and of Residences are excluded. Such ambiguities make little sense in relation to the delivery of the establishment's management task.

**(b) Functional Block Meetings**

Chaired by an intermediate manager and attended by group managers. Operational policy would appear the logical agenda for such meetings, but the role of the Head of Custody in relation to the meeting structure is unclear. Logically, he should be chairing a meeting of the Head of Operations, Residences and Services, although in practice this would be fairly artificial—both in content and in levels of management.

**(c) Group meetings**

Chaired by the group manager and attended by the group's Officers and Senior Officers

I generally question the effectiveness of communication through such a hierarchical and compartmentalised management structure. The dangers of division and consequent suspicion stemming from such a structure appear substantial.

Frankland has for several years now, run a Central Management Group structure in which a single meeting (attended by Governor grades, Chief and Principal Officers, and heads of specialisms) forms the hub of managerial policy-making. This is supported by a daily meeting, attended

by the same people who meet briefly to discuss the immediate, operational issues of the day.

Both are fairly large meetings in terms of the numbers attending but experience has proved them to be easily managed in addition to providing effective communication. The Governor chairs both meetings which, for a relatively small amount of his time, keep him well-informed by a widely representative group in policy and operational matters. Under Fresh Start reorganisation, the Central Management Group structure has been retained at Frankland in order to bring managers together and encourage cooperation rather than competition between groups.

In an attempt to secure potential benefits of a compartmentalised, hierarchical structure (such as managerial ownership and autonomy) a middle management tier has been created. Some of our previous departmental meetings and committees have been transformed: for example, the Regimes Committee becomes the 'Activities and Services functional block meeting'; and the inter-wing meeting becomes the 'Residential functional block meeting'.

Each functional block holds formal, minuted meetings which are chaired by its head and attended by its group managers and Senior Officers. This incorporates SOs into the meeting structure. Each group subsequently holds its own, less formal meetings, led by its manager and attended by as many of its staff as are available. It is hoped that the benefits of the Central Management Group system can be married with the clarity of responsibility and accountability offered by Fresh Start.

In conclusion I agree wholeheartedly with team work and accountable management (the basic principles of Fresh Start) but would question the methods advocated for achieving these. Experience indicates, however, that whatever method is chosen, a great deal of work remains to be done before tangible benefits are perceived. Bulletin 8 was well-received by staff, generated pressure for Fresh Start to be implemented quickly, and opened a window of opportunity for change. Frustration, bitterness and suspicion are rapidly replacing enthusiasm and the window is closing. Further development will be very hard won. ■

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