

# TRAINING FOR GOVERNING

Derek Williamson

*Academic adviser at Prison Service College, Wakefield, and lecturer in Adult Education Centre, Leeds University.*

## Background

Training for governors has been around for four decades. But only in the last five years has training for governing been regarded as a pivotal aim and activity of central training. For 40 years, the standard entry point to the governor grades was the Wakefield Staff Course. For many, the staff course has been supplemented by one or more general development courses, often associated with promotion and/or courses designed to develop specific skills such as hostage incident management and handling industrial dispute. All of this may be termed 'training for governors'. In 1983, with the introduction of the command course, an attempt was made comprehensively to prepare governors for governing, that is for taking charge of a prison department establishment as governing governor. This was followed in 1984 by the introduction of senior command studies for class II governors. Before 1983 hundreds of governors had taken charge of prisons without specific training for doing so. Before this time, it tended to be assumed that the innate qualities and abilities of those selected for their staff course, the further training undertaken, along with, say, 12 or more years of experience in three or four establishments provided a sufficient base from which to move into the governing role. Why

then was training for governing introduced?

Perhaps the most evident justification for its introduction was that the role of the governing governor was becoming increasingly complex. In his introduction to the formal programme for the first command course, the then Commandant of the College wrote 'The course has been designed to fit newly appointed governors for their enlarged and challenging roles, whilst retaining traditional liberal and humane values which remain the core elements of the profession' (Driscoll, 1982). At that time some of the role-enlarging elements were identified as human rights, natural justice, financial control, escalating social and industrial problems, increased legislation and government intervention. Somehow, training for the expanding remit of governors was to try to encompass the effects of inevitable change within a general management approach while continuing to have regard to long-standing human values.

Two other factors may be referred to as important triggers of the introduction of training for governing. First, there was central government's forceful thrust to bring about tight financial control and accountability. Generations of governors had been conditioned into thinking that, while a conscientious effort to minimise

waste and extravagance was necessary, occasional over-spending was unavoidable, could readily be justified by reference to the need to maintain security and control and, in any event, could be reasonably accommodated through the supplementary vote procedure. A sea of change of attitudes and approach was needed if governors were to accept genuine accountability for budgets, to take financial control and to integrate a financial dimension into the general management of their establishments.

Secondly, there was a growing determination within the Prison Department, in keeping with the tougher stance adopted by central government, that management should be empowered to manage and should not be capable of being diverted from reasonable objectives by collective staff strength. The May Inquiry had been set up in November 1978 as a result of industrial unrest. The Committee's subsequent Report (1979) stressed the importance of industrial relations training for governors, not merely as a means of preparing them for fire-fighting but, more importantly, as a means of managing their staffs in such a way as to prevent 'the root causes of industrial unrest from developing'. In another section of the Report, May stated, 'what we would like to see is the unambiguous re-assertion of leadership from the centre both at headquarters

and also by governors at establishments'. The hope must have been, not only that training would enhance the quality of governing, but also that the service as a whole would hear the message that central government and Service management together were in earnest about their intention to exercise control and to manage effectively and efficiently.

There were other factors which contributed to the decision to introduce training for governing—the views and influence of a number of key people, comparable forms of training in other services, the perceived need to develop a comprehensive training strategy—but it is by no means certain that these alone would have been sufficient to launch such major change. The impetus for this change, as for many others, is to be found fundamentally in the central political determination that collective staff strength should be contained, that management should manage and that financial control should be established and maintained.

### Taking Stock

Since 1983, almost 100 class III governors have attended the command course and approaching 50 class II governors have undertaken or are in the process of undertaking senior command studies. What has this experience amounted to and can any general conclusions be drawn?

Perhaps the first point to make is that training for governing is here to stay. It would surely be inconceivable, and perceived as retrograde, to turn back the clock to the time when initial training and experience comprised the only common preparation for governing. However critical governors might have been (as many of them have) of the particular courses which they attended, almost without exception they have supported the principle of training for governing.

The time is ripe to ask what can be learned from the experience of training for governing thus far and how can future training be shaped to meet individual and organisational needs more effectively?

Examining the experience of training for governing is greatly enhanced by the fact that both the command course and senior command studies have been (or, in the latter case, are being) systematically evaluated. (Williamson, 1986 and Farrow, 1987). In the absence of written evaluative studies, experience is easily

lost and mistakes repeated. Continuing or periodic evaluation is essential if training is to develop positively and effectively.

It is interesting to note the different styles adopted from the outset by the command course and senior command studies. The command course took the form of a continuous residential course stretching over almost three months and comprising a range of knowledge and skills which, from a needs analysis, had been judged relevant to the governing of a small or medium establishment. In contrast, senior command studies comprise a series of modules and attachments along with individual projects and consultation. The command course focused essentially on many of the tasks which class III governing governors are expected to perform whereas senior command studies are designed as preparation for further promotion and postings to class I establishments or headquarters.

Despite the evident differences in the two training modes, reactions of those who have experienced them or who have worked closely with them tend to point in a similar direction.

First, both 'courses' are perceived as competing with the work-place for the time of the governors concerned. The command course was judged by most class III governors as too long and inconveniently scheduled (close to a change of post) and senior command studies are judged by some class II governors as over-demanding in terms of total time commitment.

Secondly, there is the related question of quantity. The command course 'resolved' this problem by compressing substantial amounts of varied material into pre-determined time boundaries. Courses were experienced by participants as tightly-packed and lacking sufficient time for reflection, assimilation and discussion. Senior command studies provide more opportunities for discussion and for sharing experience but offer more modules and subjects than most class II governors have been able to accommodate in their demanding schedules with the result that some planned events simply do not take place.

Thirdly, each course raises, in different ways, the important question of the ownership of learning. The command course, despite several attempts to individualise at least parts of the course, remained stubbornly rooted within a tutor-centred, didactic training mode. Senior command

studies set out to develop agreed, individualised programmes of learning along with individual consultative support. In neither case have participants felt that they had a sufficient share in the ownership of their own learning. While senior command studies comes closer to achieving this aim than has the command course, it tends to be the more individualised activities of senior command studies which are squeezed out by competing demands.

In making these points it is all too easy to give an impression that the two courses were entirely misconceived. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many governors who have participated in them have spoken of the benefit derived from them and some have seen them, potentially at least, as extremely valuable. But what has also been commonly suggested or implied is that more effective and efficient ways of learning should be found which take greater account of individual needs, experience and circumstances.

### A Broader Perspective

In a recent report from the National Economic Development Office (1987) Professor Charles Handy compares management training in five countries—Japan, USA, West Germany, France and Britain. He says, in relation to management training, 'There is, in the majority of large corporations in these countries (Japan, USA, West Germany and France) a formal policy for continuing education and development; it is written down, often expressed diagrammatically, systematised and circulated'. Whereas, in Britain, a 'formal written statement about the aims, direction and content of management development was unusual even in those organisations which had an organised approach to management development' (International Management Centre for Buckingham, Report for the MSC, 1987).

Handy's report goes on to suggest that there is widespread agreement that 'the real basis for continuing learning in management is experience at work' but considerable difference in the ways in which experience is provided and related to learning. 'In Japan both parts (ie experience and learning) are heavily formalised; in the USA it is more opportunistic and individualist' but in Britain it is still 'often a process of "accidental development" in which experience, job trans-

fers and education sometimes happen to dovetail'.

Some governors might recognise the 'accidental development' syndrome in their own experience. This is not to suggest, however, that all would welcome the 'heavily formalised' approach of the Japanese. But there may be steps which could be taken which would be consistent with British prison service culture and which, at the same time, might move preparation for governing beyond happenstance.

### **An Alternative Approach**

Pursuing the broader perspective further, the tasks facing prison service training seem to be, on the one hand, to devise and implement a soundly-based, coherent and comprehensive plan for training and, on the other, to enable Service managers, as they progress to higher levels of responsibility, to take increasing ownership of their own learning. In practice, this would probably mean that the central training organisation would continue to provide approved, formal training both for new entrants and for many experienced staff as they change posts or take on different responsibilities. But for governors and other managers the central training organisation would become increasingly the facilitator of individualised continuing learning programmes. What is envisaged is that compulsory training would be provided for new staff and for experienced staff taking on those new tasks and responsibilities for which training was available. As governors and other managers move into higher posts, so the compulsory element of training would decline and the expectation that they would take increasing responsibility for their own professional development would grow. As individual members of staff progressed to higher levels of responsibility so their 'learner role' would move from 'trainee' (recipient of what others decide was needed) to 'professional' (having a high degree of control over what and how they learned).

For this to occur there would be, at the highest levels and throughout the system, commitment to continuing staff development. It would require that learning and experience be perceived as two sides of the same coin, each having no meaningful existence without the other. The means of learning would need to be defined in the broadest possible way, encompassing professional discussion, meetings,

seminars, supervision, consultancy, reading, self-teaching, conferences, external courses, exchange visits and placements, central courses or other training opportunities and, possibly, many others. The vision for the future might be one of a career-long, seamless interweaving of experience and learning in which formal training would be an important but not dominating thread. There would be a carefully fostered understanding that the job of running a prison required continuing personal and professional development as well as, and as part of, attention to daily managerial work. The test of the appropriateness of such a change would be the extent, in practice, to which governors gave attention to their own professional development.

It would be inappropriate to attempt to elaborate in fine detail the implications of the kind of approach suggested. However, to be practicable, a clear policy and a broad developmental programme would be needed. These would need to provide scope for individual career and development planning arising from a partnership of interest between each individual and the organisation represented by line managers, and personnel and training staff. Individual records of career plans, experience and training would be needed to minimise inappropriate duplication of experience and to aid rational and collaborative decision-making.

Within this approach, the central training organisation would continue to make an important contribution. However, it would need to become much more responsive to individual and establishment needs. Closer communication between the College and other outstations would be needed so that each could understand the other more readily and both could operate on a common awareness of the subtly changing world of prison practice. Part of such communication could be in the form of the College's researching managerial experience and practice in a constant endeavour to deepen and extend understanding and retain immediacy and relevance of training content and method. A further development would be that the College could establish some form of learning resource centre incorporating the library, self-teaching facilities and academic, training and research consultancy. In this way, training could become more individualised and have more immediate relevance to current

work. As confidence in the training policy and programme grew, the question would arise as to the extent to which individual attention to personal professional development could contribute to judgements relating to readiness for promotion. In any event, the question of whether or not governors had undertaken particularly important elements of training would probably influence promotion considerations.

### **Summary**

A principle on which prison service training has been built is that the central training organisation can hold and teach the knowledge and skills required by practitioners. It is a model of provision and receipt. Learners see little opportunity to influence the content, methods and timing of their own learning. Control over what is provided, and how, rests largely with the central training organisation. Such a model may be effective and entirely appropriate for training new staff. It becomes decreasingly effective and appropriate as staff gain experience and attain higher positions. Senior staff are expected to exercise greater responsibility in their work and they need to take greater responsibility for their own professional development. Thus the concept of training itself needs to be broadened to incorporate more diverse ways of enabling higher management development needs to be met. The central training organisation has a part to play in this process but it must extend its own vision and broaden its concepts if it is to be an acceptable and credible vehicle for encouraging and enabling individual professional development and effective governing. ■

### **References**

- Driscoll, A. W. (1982). *Commandant's Introduction to the Programme for the first command course* (January-March 1983). Unpublished.
- Farrow, A. (1987). *Senior Command Studies I—Progress Report*. Unpublished.
- Handy, Prof. C. (1987). *The Making of Managers*. A report on management education, training and development in the USA, West Germany, France, Japan, and the UK. National Economic Development Office.
- International Management Centre for Buckingham (1987). *Developing directors: the learning processes*. Report for the Manpower Services Commission.
- May Report (1979). Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the United Kingdom Prison Services. HMSO. Cmd. 7673.
- Williamson, Derek. (1986). Report on the evaluation of the first five Command Courses for Prison Governors, 1983-1986. Unpublished.