

Perrie lecture - 10th June 2005

I thought the best way of approaching this subject was to look at my own journey to managerialism. I joined a Prison Service which, in 1969, had an entirely non-managerial culture. All we measured was the prison numbers. We had no targets and not the faintest idea what our prisons cost. Ostensibly, the Prison Service was a Civil Service bureaucracy but openly maverick Governors ignored central instructions and little of that central instruction was translated into local action.

Establishments ran on custom and practice. There was an underlying assumption that prison officers had been trained and therefore knew what to do. Training was actually only 8 weeks long and majored on marching, punishing PE and judo.

This state of affairs was led by a mainly liberal and decent cadre of Governors but it actually supported a sorry state of affairs. There was:

- gross overcrowding;
- » severely limited regimes;
- « failure to deliver basics of clothing, shaving and bathing in most local prisons;

the complaints system was stacked against the prisoners;
in many prisons, discipline was enforced with brutality;
the long-term prison system, which was holding an increasing long-term population, was barely controlled, with frequent riots and policies which often looked like appeasement.

There were a few 'good' places. Most of the open borstal system was caring and decent and there were individual gems like Leyhill and Grendon. But even in these good parts of the estate, the difference between what Governors thought was the reality of their establishment and actual practice was often stark. I, for example, worked in a borstal and ran a group but no-one ever explained how the group was meant to operate and there was a variety of different styles in which groups were run by different staff; it nowhere near matched the group work theory which allegedly underpinned the regime.

The best Governors expressed a powerful vision and worked almost entirely on charisma. The average carried out their daily operational functions, but had little real impact on what happened.

This reality remained true for much of my career, as various reforms came and went without leaving significant trace. Management Review 3, common working system, introduction of a budget of hours and the May Report.

Management only became to mean something with the advent of 'Fresh Start', followed by the introduction of Area Managers and then Agency status. These

changes brought clearer line management and the advent of the first targets in the initial key performance indicators. However, this same period brought the Service the Manchester riot and the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst, We had not yet succeeded in delivering a

successful Service and we were also struggling to cope with the demand for increased efficiencies.

I can remember exploiting the 'Fresh Start' changes with their clearer management lines in introducing what was my first system of regular bilateral reviews with those who worked to me when I was Governor at Hull. By being clearer about what I wanted done and minuting discussions ensuring that action points were followed through, I began to find you could make the establishment work better. I underpinned this approach by walking the floor and trying to ensure that I not only saw what was going on but tried to 'feel' it. There was a paucity of management information and, without being personally on top of activity and practice in the prison, I could easily have found that I made no difference.

In the brief 2 year period I worked as an Area Manager, I tried, at a slightly larger level, to adopt the same sort of approach, but also to be a bit more systematic about the information that I used. As Area Managers in the initial flush of enthusiasm, we had devised a scheme which would have collected up-to-date information on a number of key things that happened in prisons and fed us that information in a form that made it clear when things were changing and there were anomalies to be examined. Unfortunately, it proved beyond the Prison Service to actually build this system and provide the flow of data it needed. All of us, therefore, depended largely on what we could learn during visits and even at 12 visits a year to each establishment, there is a limit to what even the most astute can learn by this method.

I returned to operational management at the beginning of 1996 charged with trying to weld the dispersal prisons into a more effective and more secure system. The shock of the escapes from Whitemoor and Parkhurst gave a powerful message about our failure and we knew that much of the difficulty in maintaining security was a direct result of the poor control we had over establishments. Whitemoor had had a succession of sit-downs and mass refusals to comply. It was often touch and go in establishments like Long Lartin where the prisoners would lock up on time and it wasn't long since the riot at Frankland in which prisoners had broken out of one of the wings. The shared sense of all of us in the system, Governors and staff of all grades, that something must be done to improve our performance, that the status quo was simply not good enough, enabled change to take place. We had some excellent Governors and some very sophisticated staff who were able to manage difficult and aggressive behaviour with great skill, but this simply hadn't been enough. It was in this environment that I tried, for the first time in prisons, what is called managerialism. The key components were:

- absolute clarity about what we were trying to achieve;
- a willingness to translate that clarity into measurable targets for the activities which would support the process to deliver our vision of decent, controlled and secure high security prisons. All that we did was founded on a detailed understanding of operations and how prisons really work;
- we were prepared to ensure that all decisions were consistent with our long-term goals;
- we operated as a team in which the contributions, not only of Governors, but of other key members of staff really shaped policy and practice;
- once we decided to do something, we ensured it really happened and didn't give up until it had. If there were problems to overcome and risks to deal with, we managed them down, but did not back off.

I can now say that the results of this compared with our previous experience of high security prisons, have been amazingly successful. No Category A escapes since 1995 and no riots in high security prisons since 1998 is, by our previous standards, wonderful. Over the same period, our long-term high security prisons became safer places for prisoners to be in and we introduced better assessment of prisoners and the provision of much better interventions so that high security prisons became one of the major providers of the various offending behaviour programmes.

Not everything was based on measurement and targets. I continued to walk the floor of prisons and tried to 'feel* their ethos and assess their moral performance. We used information from Independent Monitoring Boards and the Inspectorate and we invited in researchers to begin to unpick the complex relationships between staff and prisoners. During this period, Alison Liebling carried out research in both Full Sutton and Whitemoor.

In 1999, when I took on the new role of DDG responsible for all the Service's operational management, I brought with me what I had learnt and tried to build on the lessons I had learnt in the much smaller scale world of dispersal prisons. I knew it would only work if I could exert real management leverage via Area Managers. I had to rely more on data and the assessments of others. I couldn't hope to do what I was doing and know every establishment personally.) was clear that simply measuring the bulk of what we did would not be sufficient and I knew that, at the heart of any prison, is the relationship between staff and prisoners and the way the 'culture' dictates how prisoners are dealt with. It was early on in this period as DDG when, in discussion with Brodie Clark, we decided that we needed to find a way of measuring this 'culture'. We knew that Alison Liebling had developed some pretty sophisticated assessment systems which gave a decent handle on this difficult to measure variable. We thought that, if we could include something like this in the standards audit system, we would be able to make better progress. It was out of this discussion that MQPL was born. MQPL has taken us beyond the measurement of quantity, beyond the measurement of quality of process and into the measurement of the quality of relationships which lie at the moral heart of imprisonment. We are still building on this. The new weighted measures on race relations give another sensitive measurement of the health of the morally crucial issue of the delivery of good race relations in prisons.

In short, I think we have discovered in prisons that managerialism works, and can be aligned with the delivery of decent relationships and caring treatment of those we imprison. It works because we can find measures of the moral performance of

prisons and we can use our managerial skills to enhance the morality of what we deliver.

I know that this works because we are successfully doing it. If we had not gone through this journey and had continued to rely on good intentions and the charismatic and well meaning nature of our senior Governors, I do not believe we would be delivering as well as we now are. We have still much to learn about how to combine a wish as managers to run efficient and effective services with a concern for the moral performance of prisons. In my view, imprisonment is always morally difficult and can only be defensible if we think hard about the moral issues, take decisions which are based, not only on what works, but what we believe to be right and are prepared to use our management skills to ensure we deliver on our good intentions.

Phil Wheatley