

Discovering Respect: a Social Change Driver

Building relationships shifts social attitudes and behaviours in a prison environment

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Between 2008 and 2011/12, committed employees and inmates have produced encouraging improvements in the Danish Prison Service. This is especially true of the State Prison of Nyborg, where results include reduced absenteeism of guards, reduced staff stress and burnout, and improved relations between inmates, guards, and social workers. Better communication, fewer incidents of threats and violence, and multiple minor changes in behaviour are resulting in greater mutual respect, enabling possibilities for re-socialisation. A shift in 'mental models' is emerging among leaders and staff, leading to increased awareness and appreciation for a bottom-up, inclusive, shared participation in social innovation.

Adapting and using the Positive Deviance approach (PD) ¹ for some of our most pressing problems has been a critical success factor in this process. The basic premise of the approach is that in every community some people have measurably better behavioural practices and outcomes than people in similar situations. The experience of exploring these differences has been intense, demanding, frightening, challenging and rewarding.

This chapter describes our journey and quest to improve the system and solve some of the critical adaptive challenges we faced. Through our work, and drawing primarily on examples from the State Prison of Nyborg, we have identified some key learnings that may be useful to others in their change practices.

The challenge and urgent need for change in our system

For many years the Danish Prison Service has been acknowledged worldwide for its high performance based on a combination of humane policies and practices. Evaluations over time have revealed effective rehabilitation of incarcerated citizens, low re-offending rates (recidivism) and an excellent working environment. Yet, many complex and chronic challenges remain; threats and violent incidents amongst prisoners, and between prisoners and guards. The result is a stressful working environment and high levels of absenteeism and burnout. Our efforts to create more meaningful working lives for guards, social workers and prisoners have produced inconsistent results. Our competent and well-intentioned people have tried to solve these persistent 'wicked problems' ² over time, again with inconsistent results. Where improvements have been made, many have not been sustained.

To illustrate the complexity of our task, we only have to remember our core value: "Excellence is only achieved through the art of balancing hard and soft approaches" ³. By definition, this leads to conflicting goals, e.g. demonstrating flexibility in the daily routines whilst obeying rules and regulations. The former CEO of the Prison Service underlines the wickedness of our main tasks: "I consider the relational work between inmates and staff one of the most important fields of a manager" ⁴. The situation in the State Prison of Nyborg, one of the largest maximum-security prisons in Denmark reflects the state of the rest of the system. This is the story about social change and some important messages around the change agency and leadership that made it possible.

Getting started – meeting the founding father of Positive Deviance

Until October 2014, I was development and innovation director of the Danish Prison and Probation Service. In 2007 I had the pleasure of working with the founding father of Positive Deviance, Jerry Sternin. He represented a totally different perspective on change than I had previously practiced as a senior civil servant. I was fascinated by this gentle, positive anthropologist. He kept talking about the wisdom of local communities and solutions that were already working. I knew that our traditional top-down, hierarchical, expert and problem-driven approaches were not working as well as they could. I was confused, frustrated and yet eager to unlearn and try something new. I decided to call Jerry to discuss possible next steps. He immediately suggested we started working together to get an enquiry process started. Our stakeholders were rather sceptical of this new approach, but I managed to persuade them and obtained some seed initial seed money.

Giving the work back to the people by changing the problem definition

I was very excited as we developed a detailed project plan. Our team started preparing trends on various key performance indicators around staff absenteeism, threats, violent incidents, and staff harassment. We met with Jerry and after a while he said in his friendly way: "Are you sure the staff and the inmates want to work on these issues? And don't you think we should ask them about how they see the problems?" Realising we needed to approach things differently, we were ready to go and ask the communities about their concerns and engage them in the problem-solving process, as Heifetz⁵ suggests.

Shortly afterwards, Jerry became seriously ill and he asked his friend and colleague Mark Munger to help us. We then began planning open workshops for local staff and managers. The 'invitation' for the workshops was very open - the only requirement was a willingness to spend time and effort in discussing their concerns. Although excited, our team was worried that we were not prepared enough and were too eager to predict themes and outcomes of the process. Mark tried to calm things down by saying: "Be confident. All will emerge!"

Approximately 40 people chose to attend the initial workshop. We talked about their most pressing problems. They were keen to work with us - but not on problems around absenteeism. Instead they were concerned about the risk of threat and violent incidences, improving communications and tackling issues with gang related inmates. They seemed enthusiastic, and there was a feeling of something new and different emerging. This came as a surprise to us from head office, being used as we were to defining the problems and coming up with the solutions ourselves.

Increased impatience, scepticism and disappointment – and letting go

The people started to wonder whether they wanted to continue the conversations, and a common and predictable trap then emerged. There was more enthusiasm for 'doing PD' than there was for solving problems. The means became confused with the ends, and it seemed easier to work in a familiar manner – a new programme from central office – which required less soul-searching and could be pursued with the appearance of commitment. It was going to be much more difficult to confront the problems, and to prise out hidden solutions. This would call into question the skill and competence of most members of the prison organisation. So how did we take advantage of what was already working, and expand our solution space, rather than using our usual problem-solving methodologies?

After this initially enthusiastic start, a long and time-consuming process began incorporating numerous workshops and conversations with staff members from the various institutions. Our aim was to define the right challenges on which to work and discover both the usual behaviours and then the deviant behaviours.

The warden of Nyborg was not sure where the process should start and end. At a cooperation committee meeting where management and staff discuss important local issues, he said: "I'm not sure where to begin and end this. But I sense most of us want to engage and address these problems. I know I cannot do it alone, so I need your help" (taken from an interview with the prison governor of the State Prison of Nyborg, Mr. Arne Tornvig Christensen, February 2014).

Everybody including the PD team, my boss, and other important stakeholders were getting impatient and eager to see the results of all the efforts, and critical voices started making themselves heard. I was also impatient and disappointed that nothing seemed to be happening, though Mark kept saying: "You have to go slowly to go fast". I was sleeping badly for some nights, and seriously considered closing down the initiative, but decided to wait a little longer to see what emerged. A senior manager at central level reflects: "The most difficult thing was to start something that we did not know the value of. We were confident about the PD tools, but uncertain of which problems to address". And she goes on: "The challenge was for us to understand that the employees were the ones

with the sustainable solutions. This implies fundamentally new roles, relationships and wider boundaries between staff and managers. And managers need to learn to relinquish control, realise they don't have all the answers and cannot take responsibility for all decisions. We need to facilitate processes and let go of our authoritative power. That is the difficult part". This is an insight also stressed in Stacey's work about adaptive complex processes. He says: "Letting go of control is being in control" ⁶.

The quest for the hidden solutions – the discovery of the treasures of the 'what' and the 'how'

The staff at Nyborg agreed that good, professional staff-inmate relationships were crucial for both job satisfaction and excellent performance. Our staff began asking: "Is anyone enjoying good, professional relationships with the inmates?" And the process of determining who the deviants were, *what* they were doing and *how* they were doing it began. Various behavioural strategies were unleashed during the enquiry processes that followed, and below are three of the 'what' and 'how's'.

A guided tour and welcome

One example we found was a guard who chose to give the inmates a tour of the prison when they arrived. The normal procedure was to register the inmate's details on the computer with the inmate sitting across the desk, creating an immediate distance between the guard and the inmate. Instead, this guard said hello, shook hands with the inmate, looked into their eyes, asked how they would like to be addressed, and if they wanted to have a look around. While touring the premises, he began talking with the inmate about any concerns they may have, he described the daily routines of the prison and was able to establish a good and respectful relationship from the outset. This relationship made it possible to work with the inmate on rehabilitation issues, vocational training, and treatment in a much more effective way ⁷.

An inmate points out: "When I was told that I was coming here, I was furious. I was so negative! Then when I got here, and the officer asked me if I would like a tour, it took me completely by surprise and gave me a feeling that the officers really wanted to make the best out of it". Another inmate says: "The crucial thing was his way of talking... (...)... and that he always used my name". Or as a guard states: "We now take more initiatives towards eliminating the distance between guards, officers and inmates... (...)... the opportunities are there; it's just a matter of taking them...". Yet another: "...We have become rounded and willing to compromise, with colleagues as well as inmates..." ⁸⁹

Respectful keys

The inmates were asked about what they thought a good guard was. A few inmates enthusiastically described situations where guards treated them with respect, or as equal human beings. One powerful example was an inmate describing the way a female guard entered his cell, when he pressed the bell in his cell to call for help. When the inmate pressed the bell the female guard got up immediately from the monitoring room. The usual behaviour was to wait a little, and perhaps sip some more coffee, before they responded. Instead the female guard walked to the cell, jangled her keys so that the inmate could hear that she was on her way. When she stood in front of the door, she knocked (unusual behaviour) and then gently slid the key into the keyhole turning the key slowly before she opened the door. The usual behaviour was to open the door rather roughly. Then she asked if she could enter the cell and if there was anything she could do. The usual behaviour was to enter the cell and wait for the inmate to speak. The behaviour of the female guard helped to build up a respectful relationship with the inmate. She respected the privacy of the inmate's "home" and the inmate recognised that as something very valuable. It is all about relationships and creating a respectful atmosphere. An inmate put it this way: 'A good officer says something before locking the door. It only has to be a little comment like: 'I'm closing the door now, bye'. It's painful just to hear the click of the lock...' ?

Doing meaningful things together

The common practice was that many guards on duty closely followed the rules, regulations and norms and although they were paying polite attention to inmates' requests, they kept to themselves. This was the same for the inmates. It was not very popular to talk to and mingle with guards. As part of the process, we discovered many examples of inmates and staff engaging in meaningful activities together. Examples vary from setting up sport and nutrition programmes, cooking and eating together to making sweets and small things out of magic dough. The activity in itself was not that important; it was the respectful relationship that was valued by both inmates and staff, and it provided a sense of normality.

One manager reflects: "... I was inspired when I realised that this was the culture that sets the bar for my ambitions. Getting visits in the unit means a lot for the inmates. It has created self-regulation... (...)... In this way our fantastic environment is sustained. When somebody new arrives, it is hard for them to do something wrong, because they understand the consequences for the rest of the group". And she goes on: "This is a huge benefit for us, not only in terms of recognising the inmates and their relatives, but also in terms of security. The fact that we involve the inmates and look them in the eye, creates more security than any security manager could ever do... (...)... Security is not just a matter of surveillance. In my opinion, it is also about relations"

Mark Munger reflects on the journey

They realised that the problems they hoped to reduce or eliminate required far more than technical solutions. Because the Prison and Probation Service, like most complex organisations has many elements, from a central office to dispersed institutions at some distance, to groups with diverse interests, administrators and managers, social workers, inmates and their families and advocacy groups, guards and their families, a union, political parties in and out of government, etc. Lars realised that there was little agreement on problem definition, let alone a solution. In addition, the processes he hoped to initiate would require new learning, and transfer of new knowledge into new behaviour. But, as he read and learned more about an asset-based, 'what works' approach, he was intrigued by the possibility that new behaviour might precede new knowledge. His imagination was captured by the possibility of 'acting our way into a new way of thinking'.

When I first entered Nyborg State Prison with Lars and Mads, I was impressed by the sounds of the doors closing behind me as I came into the search and detection area. None of the prison movies and television shows I had seen had prepared me for the power and implication of closing off the outside behind me. I felt absolutely unfree.

Very early in our collaboration to bring asset-based change to the Bureau of Prison and Probation Service, I had raised what I thought might be both a practical and philosophical challenge. How can efforts to build on existing freedom, and create new freedom thrive in an environment designed and managed to be inherently unfree? This question would stay with us, as there would be brilliant flashes of discovered answers, which continue, as inhabitants of Nyborg create independence, as inmates, as guards, and as supervisors and managers.

One fundamental premise of the effort at Nyborg was that social rehabilitation could not proceed, and uniformed personnel could not reduce stress and anxiety, unless relationships could be improved and maintained. The first enquiry was to ask if there were productive, respectful relationships between inmates and guards, and if so, how did these occur? The answers to these questions then fuelled the next round of enquiries, to discover what individuals and groups did, and how they did them.

A second premise, which emerged in the effort, somewhere between what might be thought of 'Getting Started,' and 'Building Engagement,' was the discovery that some people were letting go of standard practice. They were approach problem-solving differently, and while they were technically within approved guidelines, they had altered standard practice.

In a confined environment, the idea of 'letting go' is fraught with peril. Guards and administrators have a mandate to maintain good order and discipline, and

to provide for the personal security and welfare of guards and inmates alike. This important mission is joined with the other broad purpose of creating circumstances in which inmates could develop new attitudes, skills, and behaviours, which would serve them better upon release, and reduce their chances of reoffending and readmission. How to 'let go' became an important question, answered in many different ways.

And it was a specific question at every level. For the warden it meant policy, practice, and symbolic as well as active leadership. For those who reported to him, it meant both the above, and specific changes in their own managerial behaviour. For guards, as individuals and on units, it meant the possibility of the redefinition of conventional practice, with potential risks to body and reputation. For inmates, it suggested new opportunities, which came with new insecurities, and new doubts. To make this environment more complex, everyone involved would have to 'let go' a bit, in a contemporary time period. There would be no easy way to orchestrate this process, as it became profoundly clear that change would have to be simultaneously bottom-up, inside-out, and top-down.

And, since Lars worked in a large organisation which was integrated with Police functions and culture, 'letting go' would need to happen within his bureaucracy, starting with his Director General, other senior officials, Lars' team and their peers, and the Guards Union. As Lars followed the adaptive leadership practice of asking provocative questions, he was continually asking "who else should be at the table?" Every time he got an answer his own role and responsibilities changed.

As an American and a stranger to Denmark, I had only a tourist's insight into being Danish, or in a larger sense, Scandinavian. There were many times I felt naive and foolish, because superficial similarities between the surfaces of our cultures led me to make assumptions which were often hilariously incorrect. After a series of blunders, I felt I needed some guiding principles to help me find my way. So, I asked for help and insight, and continued to observe.

One characteristic, which I had read about, was the profoundly democratic and egalitarian nature of Danish society. There was much less economic and social distance than in my own familiar environment. After repeated demonstrations of durable respect for the opinion and autonomy of others, I began to think that Danish soil would be uncommonly fertile for the approach we were trying to build. Absence of humiliating hierarchy, and attentiveness to social goals made at least the beginning of our efforts much easier, as guards and others immediately took to an approach which valued their expertise and asked them to express it.

The emergent signs of improvement and behavioural change

We see signs and improvements at Nyborg – and in our system. We see positive trends in some metrics. But the picture is puzzling, because we are not sure about the specific cause and effect. Obviously the PD initiative has led to important changes, but attention from leadership and intense monitoring has also had an impact. The table below illustrates some of the most important positive changes.

Nyborg State Prison - 2009 compared to 2011	
Quantitative signs	Qualitative signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13% reduced absenteeism amongst prison staff. From 22 days to 19 days on average per year • 10% increase in general employee satisfaction • 16% reduction in stress • 19% less burnout • 8% increase in perception of meaningful work • 9% increase in employee involvement • 25% improvement in perceived management quality • 15% improvement in perception of support/ supervision from superior • 15 – 18% increase in trust (social capital) • 44% decrease in violent incidents and threats among inmates (from 26 to 18 incidents) • 14% decrease in threats and violence against staff • 20% decrease of inmates in isolation cells 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved relationships between inmates, guards and social workers based on mutual respect make the possibilities for re-socialisation work more effective. • Improved positive and respectful conversations and dialogues creating more meaningful prison lives for inmates and better work lives for professionals. • Improved conversations about the importance of relationship as a driver for innovation and change among staff and managers. • A shifting mental model: increased awareness of the benefits up bottom up co-created approaches to effective change among managers. • Though the PD initiative is no longer a project staff keep talking about PD behaviour in the system.

Key messages for other change leaders

Throughout this experience, we have challenged normal conventions of what leadership means, and set in motion activities which point to leadership as practice and activity rather than as position. In order to do this, we decided to use a relationship-building process. This has been a rewarding, challenging and very enlightening endeavour. We believe that the conditions for letting go of control, co-creation and letting the communities decide for themselves is even tougher in a prison environment than in any other organisation. So if it is possible to create space for social innovation by building trusting relationships in a command and control prison system – it can happen anywhere.

The main driver of change has been a powerful cocktail of five ingredients:

- Re-defining the challenge from a managerial to a community-driven problem,
- Letting the community discover the 'what' and the 'how' of existing solutions,
- Using relationship-building among community members as a driver for behavioural change,
- Changing leadership roles from executives to facilitators
- Combining internal and external change leadership to obtain sustainability

Redefining the challenge from a managerial to a community-driven problem

Although it might seem banal, for us it has been crucial and difficult, to redefine the challenges on the managerial agenda, e.g. reducing staff absenteeism to a community-owned set of problems. It is crucial, because it has given the work back to the people. By letting the community define the problems itself, the staff feel implicated and they start owning the problems. It is both difficult and banal, because it seems so simple, yet is very difficult to put into practice, especially for leaders and managers.

Letting the community discover the 'what' and the 'how' of existing solutions

Once you discover deviant practices, the challenge is to make the new practices available to the rest of the community, so it can learn from the deviants. Though the 'what' and the 'how' appear simple and at first sight easy to copy, this is often not the case, because of cultural obstacles in doing so. In other words, if it were easy, the practices would already have been disseminated. PD is not a 'one size fits all' best practice approach. It is crucial that the community decides for itself how the practices be disseminated to all relevant individuals. People have to 'vote with their feet' instead of being told what to do. So the learning happens from the bottom up, and by spreading the practices from person to person, like ripples in water.

What is profoundly simple and disconcerting is the realisation, from a leadership perspective, that the most intransigent problems require resolution by all levels of the prison hierarchy working together. As in other settings, such as healthcare, people often know what they should do (wash hands before touching a patient) but still do not follow this practice every time. The fact that some of their colleagues practice good hygiene one hundred percent of the time is provocative and disconcerting. For guards and supervisors in prisons and detention houses, there is superficial agreement about *what* their responsibilities and duties are. What was discovered to be far more significant was *how* those responsibilities and duties were carried out.

Leaders played a crucial role in this experience. They helped frame the narratives around the deviant behaviours, so that other members of staff would listen and consider doing similar things. For example the guard who does the guided tours for the inmates, was not very proud of himself and felt uncomfortable, because there was a cultural norm implying that although you should deal professionally with the inmates, you are not meant to fraternise. So his manager helped to explain the importance of what he was doing in terms of relationship building, and how it was helping to motivate the inmates to engage themselves in re-socialisation activities.

It is also important to notice that once you begin finding the deviant treasures; a lot of other practices are often uncovered. It is a bit like trying to squeeze a ketchup bottle, where finally a lot of ketchup comes out. Suddenly you see successful practices everywhere.

Using relationship building among community members as a driver for behavioural change

It took a while to get where we are now. But realising the primacy of relationship-building as the main and most powerful driver for behavioural change has been the most enlightening insight for us.

We think a new more enlightened model and paradigm for change is evolving. This has various implications. As a system we have become more humble and curious about what the real wicked problems are and where the solutions are to be found. The result: we listen more carefully and respectfully with an open mind, before we decide what to do. We are developing a new leadership and management style, where co-creation, letting go of control and facilitation are at the core of our approach.

Our former CEO expresses this very clearly. Once the implications of positive deviance became evident, he became very interested in what was going on. He had of course supported the PD initiative from the beginning. But after he saw what happened in the prison communities he decided to put it on the strategic executive management agenda. He stated that building sustainable, professional relationships was the most important strategic goal. He also wrote a chapter in a book about excellence in prison management, where employee involvement based on PD in innovation processes was stated as being the most important driver for change. He put it this way: "This type of issue cannot be resolved merely by directives from top management, but requires complex and dynamic interaction between individuals and groups whether staff or inmates. Management may create the setting for such interaction and fertilise the soil, but ideas have to be sown and grow in the prisons"⁴. So we now speak about relationships as being an important driver for cultural change in a very different manner than five years ago.

Changing leadership roles from executives to facilitators

We are still using the standard top down, management-driven approach for standard problems and situations. But there is more reflection around the use of leadership styles. Leaders and managers act more often as facilitators in addition to their role as executives. A senior manager at central office notes: "We have become more aware of when to use different leadership styles. Crisis situations like hostage taking is not suited for PD, but for other wicked problems it is very effective." But more and more often we consider involving staff, inmates and other stakeholders in defining the problems and challenges in the search for effective solutions instead of sitting in our ivory tower analysing and developing solutions that are hard to implement afterwards. A new habit of 'go and ask' is emerging, which can be seen as our modest and humble acknowledgement that the local staff and inmates are the real experts. This constitutes a major shift both in our mentality and in the leadership paradigm.

We have realised that change is not a linear process. It is an iterative process fraught with uncertainties, small successes and failures, and calls for strong and persistent leadership. It is also crucial for leaders to be aware when to push and when to let go. Leaders need to create spaces for fruitful conversations and help to facilitate them. They also need to know when to let go, be quiet and let the community enquire. It was really a process of moving from textbook facilitation to skilled improvisation. Leaders and managers became adaptive leaders. Guards re-energised and felt they were doing really important work and inmates took charge of their own lives. It was all based upon improving respectful relationships.

Combining internal and external change leadership to obtain sustainability

We are certain that the combination of a strong internal change agent with the power and courage to get started together with an external 'stranger' has proven to be very effective. The complementary skills, mind sets and approaches formed a strong cocktail. The power lay in constantly challenging our perceptions and bringing new tools and reflections to the table, in combination with knowledge of the system and persistence.

Social change requires a lot of time, determination, effort and energy. So it has been important to constantly remind ourselves to keep positive, which at times was really tough. It has been worth it when I see the light and engagement in guards' and inmates' eyes, when they talk about the changes that have been happening.

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