

# Just Prisons

*Bruce Reed, Director of the Grubb Institute, who directs intermediate management development courses for the Service.*

What purposes have prisons in our society? Unless we understand what a prison is for, management is not going to be very realistic. The key point about management is that it has to achieve a goal, a purpose and until that purpose is understood you cannot determine how to behave as a manager.

Management theory is being overwhelmed by an assumption about economic viability, about profitability that in turn has led to management gurus coming up with all kinds of schemes to become more efficient. This philosophy has spread to public service bodies like the BBC, the Health Service, and Education, and the Prison Service. But this is not enough. We need to understand the distinctiveness of being a manager in the Prison Service, which administers the severest sanctions of the law.

Compare this with schools and hospitals. In schools teachers engage in careful planning and service delivery for the development of young people. In hospitals doctors and nurses develop their knowledge of illness so as to heal people in delivering a health service. These institutions pose many problems but the process is developed for the well being of the child, and the patient in a caring and humanising environment.

But although there are some similarities with education and health, the work of prisons in understanding criminal behaviour has to address another factor. Whether it is called lawlessness, evil or sin, it has defied the best minds of civilised society to explain it. The individual criminal may have a reason for committing a felony, but in the wider context of society the very existence of crime has no logical explanation - it is **irrational**.

The response of society is to try to devise rational methods to control this irrational behaviour. What method is used will depend on the culture, the beliefs and values of society. Our current practice includes the option of depriving these persons of their freedom - to lock them up to control them - to protect the public. Sadly this response only results in another difficulty. To lock people in cells, behind barbed wire with constant surveillance is inevitably a **dehumanising** process. The challenge the Prison Service is presented with is to manage an institution that has to employ dehumanising procedures to try to cope with irrational behaviour.

This forces us back on the **values** we consider are vital for the way we manage. A central factor for the Prison Service is that prisoners need to be treated with justice - justice put them in prison. Whereas the running of a commercial company regards money as the key to success, in a prison, **justice** is the key factor in successful management.

The quality of a prison governor as a manager is directly related to his/her conception of justice. He/she will recognise that such justice requires that they **develop the ability to deliver efficient regimes so that prison, despite irrationalities and dehumanising can become an institution of justice.**

In British society the prison service is based on the principle that prison is the most just way available of dealing with criminality. Whatever its managers do is against this background. Learning to be aware of their own behaviour is crucial to enable us to manage those negative forces and make constructive decisions to contribute to a regime marked by justice and its accompanying qualities of respect, compassion, honesty - signs of humanity to counter the institutionalised dehumanisation.

We may seek to focus on problems to do with competence, some with dishonesty, others to do with ignorance, others with choosing priorities. Underlying all this are the personal relationships with other people and their standards of justice in relation to our own in working with the prisoners. The purpose of the Prison Service as set out in our literature is the struggle to keep people in custody and at the same time to maintain values of justice and humanity.

Bruce Reed  
February 2000