

Wicked Challenges

Lars Thuesen

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IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT PAST, the Danish Prison and Probation Service suffered a set of really complicated and wicked problems. Many things indicated a tough and stressful environment – for both inmates and front-line staff alike. Though most of the inmates and guards stuck to the common, daily routines – which perpetuated the stress – there were a few hidden exceptions. Some inmates and guards managed to behave differently, thereby succeeding in coping with and overcoming the challenges of the environment. These exceptional individuals led lives that were more meaningful, thus avoiding stress, burn-out and alienation. Though the complicated and wicked problems are not solved, an emerging and very powerful process has started

and some really interesting results are seen.

This is the story of those hidden heroes, their successful behaviours and coping mechanisms, and how we all – finally – began to learn from them.

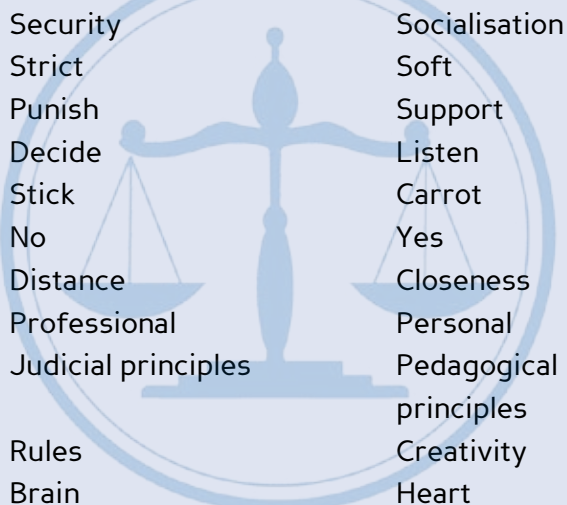
Strict and soft

The Danish prison system is acknowledged worldwide for its low rates of recidivism, high numbers of inmate re-socialisation, high security standards, and healthy working environment. Nevertheless severe social challenges exist. The overall goal of reducing criminality is not an easy one, even in a system that seeks to achieve a balance between tough and soft approaches. The nature of the challenges is often

systemic, complicated, and rife with dilemmas in the daily working routine. It is a system that, on one hand, entails a lot of control and regulatory mechanisms and, on the other, requires a lot of flexibility and individual judgement in order to function effectively.

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Balancing dilemmas in daily working routines



Security	Socialisation
Strict	Soft
Punish	Support
Decide	Listen
Stick	Carrot
No	Yes
Distance	Closeness
Professional	Personal
Judicial principles	Pedagogical principles
Rules	Creativity
Brain	Heart

The dual purpose of the prison service mission makes it complicated to manoeuvre at the operational level. The staff constantly needs to balance strict and soft approaches in tackling their work with inmates. Accordingly, the inmates need to adopt and accept a variety of behaviours from guards that might seem conflicting, though necessary, to pursue the overall goals. Over the last decade there has been a “tough on crime” policy due to government decisions. Within the context of reducing recidivism, these political mandates complicate the balance between strict and soft approaches even more.

At the same time the nature of crime has changed dramatically, as has the profile of the inmate population. Previously, prisoners could be characterised as relatively homogenous which is no longer the case, mainly due to the globalisation of crime and a rise in gang-related criminality. Alternatives to sentencing have also been introduced, further adding to the complexity.

Human-resource issues are also complex and deeply connected to the system’s dynamics. Many front-line

officers feel a lack of meaningful work, and they often fear and sometimes experience threats and violent incidents. Furthermore the culture among staff and in relation to inmates can be harsh, and one out of five employees has recently experienced some kind of harassment from either colleagues or immediate managers. The front-line staff also experience that management do not handle conflicts adequately.

In short, the system lacks the needed social capital, trust and confidence to create better working and living conditions. Too often the result is stress and burn-out among guards who have an average rate of absenteeism of over one month per year, and whose average retirement age is 48. These are alarming statistics, particularly when compared to Danish norms.

Secret local heroes

I first started planning the Positive Deviance intervention in 2008 with Jerry Sternin and later with Mark Munger. It had a slow start and is a long journey, and senior management including myself have been impatient and eager to see results. But the slowness of the process is perhaps one of its strengths. As Jerry put it: “You have to go slow to go fast.”

Only over the last six months have we seen distinct individual behaviours among what we call our secret local heroes, i.e. the front-line staff working daily in several facilities with inmates and clients. Through them we have discovered some interesting patterns among staff and inmates that others just like them can learn from.

At one maximum security prison, for example, we started a user-driven process where inmates together with guards began discovering the secrets of meaningful daily routines. Overall, both inmates and staff were bored, but we noticed a few inmates and guards who were more active than others. These individuals managed to cope and get by despite systemic barriers. Based on these exceptional examples, other inmates and guards began applying and developing new behavioural routines and activities that created more life and

energy in the prison. For example, a 12-week health and nutrition programme was piloted, and it included physical exercise – with guards and inmates participating together. Though this might seem banal or simplistic, it was never done before on a wide scale for large groups of inmates and staff.

The programme has created new energy and meaningfulness for inmates and staff alike. People within our system from other facilities are now beginning to question their practices and want to learn from the initiative.

Another maximum security facility facing high rates of harassment identified the behaviours of “looseners” and “tighteners” among the guards. They found out that the “looseners” had distinct communicative behaviours that were very different from the “tighteners.” Interestingly, “looseners” experience fewer incidents or threats of violence – social proof that their behaviour is successful in coping with the difficulties of the system. Now the others are learning how to apply their techniques.

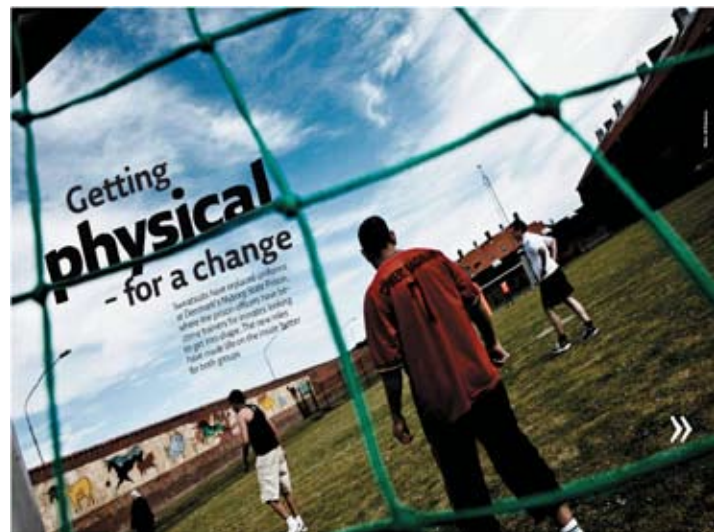
A third prison with similar challenges as well as a high inmate turnover rate has been working on lowering stress, burn-out and the absenteeism among guards. They began a process of identifying staff with less than five days of absenteeism over the last two years. The behaviour of these guards turned out to be very interesting. Three distinct behavioural patterns emerged. Firstly they all have a propensity and motivation to help. They are warm-hearted people, who want to help others in establishing a better life beyond criminality. At the same time, they are able to manage

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and control their desire to help in order to keep the right professional distance. In their spare time, they are socially active, involved in sports, volunteering for NGO's etc. This helps them survive the system dynamics that might result in stress, burn-out and higher absenteeism. An unexpected deviant behaviour came to light: some guards stopped reading inmate dossiers in order to meet the inmate as an equal human being and without prejudice. This behaviour is closely related to human respect and is named “kill your curiosity.” Finally, the deviants are able to ask for help in stressful situations so problems are seen as shared, rather than individual. This pattern is called “swallow your pride.”

Reflections and learning

- Positive Deviance is an emerging process, and while the Prison Service still has a long way to go, some interesting evidence is emerging. The deviant behaviour patterns are now being analysed and the process of teaching others how to act differently has started.
- Framing and defining the right problem is an art and very difficult. It requires a lot of facilitation skills, active listening, being quiet and asking good questions.
- The process of identifying individuals with distinctly positive behavioural patterns takes a lot of time and effort. Therefore the approach should be used only



where other approaches have failed. If easy and accessible solutions already exist, why not implement them instead?

- The process creates a lot of energy and frustration among the inmates and staff. It is about acting your way into a new way of thinking, which is new and unfamiliar. In these circumstances, human beings often want to jump to conclusions quickly.
- Leaders and middle managers need to change their mental models by loosening control and living with the fact that traditional hierarchies are turned upside down. When things get tough they have a tendency to reassert themselves as experts and “fix” instead of letting the change process emerge. The real experts are the local problem owners.
- Finding the right evidence is a hard nut to crack too. The goal is social proof: “somebody just like me is doing it, therefore so can I.”
- Formulating an inspiring invitation that makes people join the process is crucial. It is crucial that the processes are engaging and demand-driven. It should not be driven, only facilitated from the central office.
- Finding the right data is crucial. Skilled facilitation helps, but does not entirely do it. The community needs good data, and facilitators can help to organise and structure it, so social proof can be presented and discussed.
- The approach propagates. Managers responsible for other challenging areas are becoming aware of the positive-deviance approach. For example it is now being considered for use in one maximum security prison in relation to gang-related crime.
- A lot of social challenges move across “silos”, both within the prison system and across boundaries to other institutions, private companies and NGO’s. It is challenging to engage people outside the smaller community because the financial, cultural, and managerial inducements are not present.

Positive deviance in brief

According to Sternin and others (2010), Positive Deviance (PD) can be summed up as follows:

“The basic premise is this: 1) Solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, 2) they have been discovered by members of the community itself, and 3) these innovators (individual positive deviants) have

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succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others.”

In other words PD tries to discover uncommon, successful coping strategies that individuals use to survive under conditions which would generally be seen as impossible by traditional experts. The approach seeks out the latent behaviour and design interventions that enable others to practice the behavioural strategies as well. It is different from traditional problem solving, where you move from problem analysis towards solutions. In PD you flow from problem identification and analysis of successful solutions to solving the problem. It is suitable for complex adaptive change, which means it is not suitable for technical changes where best practices are useful and applicable. Also it is suitable when problems are intractable and need new approaches. The problems and solutions are rooted in the local community, which means that solutions are to be found among local community members.

Positive Deviance has been applied all over the world within various fields, e.g. Vietnamese child nutrition, HIV in Thailand, MRSA in the USA, and gang-related crime in the USA.

Thus, PD differentiates itself from traditional, best-practice, expert-driven approaches, where externally imposed solutions often meet with resistance or rejection. Traditionally it is argued that knowledge will change behaviour, but such an approach often produces poor results. In PD the solution is born in the community and behavioural patterns are analysed and then trained and spread to others in the group. It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting. In other words there should be a change in behaviour then values, instead of trying to change values and attitudes first. PD is therefore practice oriented rather than knowledge oriented.

Another important factor is that the deviant practice one identifies must be transferable to others or in other words a resource that is available to everyone.

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	POSITIVE DEVIANCE APPROACH
Leadership as a Path Breaker. Top-down approach	Leadership as Inquiry. Community takes ownership of the quest for change – bottom up
Outside in. Expert and best-practise driven	Inside out. Community identifies pre-existing solutions
Deficit Based. Deconstruction of problems and design of best practice solutions. Implication: “Why aren’t you as good as your peers?”	Asset based. Community leverage pre-existing solutions practised by those who succeed against odds
Logic driven. Think, then act	Learning driven. Act into new thinking
Vulnerable to Transplant Rejection. Resistance to imported ideas	Open to Self-replication. Latent wisdom is tapped
Flows from Problem Solving to Solution Identification. Best practice applied to problems within the context of existing parameters	Flows from Solution Identification to Problem Solving. Solution space is expanded through the discovery of new parameters
Focused on Protagonists. Engages stakeholders who would be conventionally associated with the problem	Focused on Enlarging the Network. Identifies stakeholders beyond those directly involved with the problem

Design of the positive deviance initiative

It is crucial to design the positive deviance processes the right way. We did three things at a general level.

First, we trained internal PD facilitators. They participated in a programme that was a mixture of theory and practice. Their role is to facilitate rather than attempt to be experts – the real experts are the people in the facilities that own the problems. This has been crucial in the progress of our initiative because internally trained staff have much more street credibility than external consultants.

Second, we designed and initiated Living Universities, where facilitators and practitioners could meet and share experiences of all kinds. We have had five half-day sessions during the process, where reflections, knowledge sharing and burning questions were on the agenda. External practitioners and other interested partners have been invited to participate throughout the process. We named these sessions “kitchen table” discussions, because you usually have

good and useful discussion, while you eat together. Often we asked ourselves “who else should be at the kitchen table” with the result of enlarging the group and enriching the knowledge sharing.

Third, we decided not to manage the initiative in a traditional top-down manner from the central office. We decided to develop a framework and a set of processes that could facilitate local initiatives instead of coming up with solutions to their problems. This change in mental model has proven very effective but was a bit frightening because prison systems are acculturated to the central level coming up with solutions to problems.

Conclusion

From our initial experience of PD, it is clear that deep systemic and sustainable change is possible and within reach even in a complex and challenging environment like the prison system. Success depends, however, on careful attention to the community of people who “own” the problem – from this group will come insight

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into who are the positive deviants, what behaviours set them apart, and how that knowledge is best shared and disseminated. ■

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