

AROUND CORRECTIONS

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

You may have heard people discussing dialogue recently and wondered what they are talking about. If you haven't yet had dialogue training and you're curious, here is a helpful introduction to dialogue from Peter Garrett of Dialogue Associates.

There are times when clear instructions need to be given in a command and control mode, particularly in times of crisis and with issues concerning security. There are other situations in which it is more helpful to think things through with others before reaching a decision, particularly when making changes that affect other people. The simple principle here is to include people who are affected by the change in the decision-making process, and this is where dialogue is needed. In dialogue people are encouraged to contribute their thoughts, experience and understanding in order to improve the quality of decisions.

Dialogue uses some simple engagement and communication skills that are easily learned. The four basic dialogue skills are being introduced into the VADOC by 24 Dialogue Practitioners through Dialogue Skills Training. Without these skills, a few people tend to dominate meetings and proceedings while others hardly ever speak. By using dialogue skills, a much richer way of talking and thinking together can be achieved.

Two of the dialogue skills are about engagement and helping everyone to participate. The first is the Check-in, where at the start of a meeting everyone is asked to make a comment. This gets everyone's voice into the room and makes it easier for people to speak during the meeting. The second is an understanding of modes of talking and thinking together, and when to use which mode. The seven modes run from the more basic forms of monologue (one speaker holds the floor) and debate (trying to win by beating down) to the

more participatory mode of dialogue (reaching a common understanding). Using the wrong mode for what you are trying to do will result in an unhelpful level of engagement. Monologue, for example, is good for making commands,



Employees at VADOC Headquarters engage in dialogue training.

but not for consultation.

The other two skills are about how to talk together productively and reach better quality decisions. There are the four Dialogic Actions -- move, follow, oppose and by-stand -- which ensure that conversation is functional and purposeful. And there are the four Dialogic Practices -- voice, listening, respect and suspension -- which build a "container" in which people can speak and which result in a high quality of talking and thinking together. They are called practices because with practice, you can get better and better results.

These dialogue skills are based on 20 years of research by Jane Ball and myself in prisons and within the criminal justice system in the UK and the US, and further information can be found on the website www.prisondialogue.org.

Submitted by Peter Garrett