

Decency & Human Dignity in Prisons

One day seminar held at HMP Kirkham, Preston, Lancashire
Thursday 21 November, 2002.

“When there is no expectation of reward, that is true altruism”

David Thomas, Governor

“From real self respect, based on one’s own inner qualities, comes dignity. Out of such dignity is born decency for one’s fellow man. This can never be transient”

Seminar participant

Following a decade of hosting seminars for those people who work within prisons, in the Brahma Kumaris own establishments, this was the first event of its kind to be arranged within a prison.

David Thomas, the Governor of HMP Kirkham, opened the day by sharing something of his perspective on the topic. He spoke movingly about the occasions, early in his working life, when he could recall the lack of human decency and dignity, particularly within some prison hospitals. However, even today, he felt that the decency agenda was often denied in the prison working day and that such values were not given enough consideration. And yet, both officers and prisoners recognise the importance that individual, personal relationship play in the running of a prison and that they are the key to growth or lack of growth. However, such relationships are a fragile thing and will only survive through enlightened leadership.

David spoke of three values which he felt were of particular relevance when working with young offenders: fairness, justice and care. It was the expression of these values that were so important in showing HMYOI Lancaster Farms to be such a good role model. However, it is words like ‘caring’ and ‘supportive’ that David hoped would become more acceptable inclusions in every-day language in a prison.

David wondered why the Prison Service doesn’t stay with specific, tried and tested

models that have worked in the past. Much of what was being produced now was nothing new! Decent regimes were produced in 1840, 1912 and 1940 that had a proven record of achievement. Yet recent governmental changes speak of ‘warehousing’ people. This can only lead to producing embittered people without any dignity and in no way can be considered as ‘enlightened concern for one’s fellow human beings.’

David felt that part of the process of enhancing decency and dignity in prisons is to bring about a greater awareness in the public of how our prisons run and to be more aware of the good work being done. This requires investing time in people and allowing more access and information.

In conclusion, David recognised the value that seminars, such as this, provide in encouraging individuals to explore the application of such significant values in their everyday working environment as this will benefit everyone.

There followed a brainstorm, facilitated by Barbara Marsh, an Independent Personal Trainer, that enabled the participants to identify what was the true meaning of decency and dignity for them. It became very clear from this that respect and self worth were needed and that the personal values required for both were often the same. The consensus was that dignity was an inner state of the individual that is expressed externally as decency.

Doug Stephenson, the Brahma Kumaris Prison Education Co-ordinator, spoke of the importance of our everyday use of language. Words carry with them certain associations from which we form our attitudes and perspectives, some of which have a positive impact while others a negative impact. An example could be the daily issues we encounter. If I see them as problems then that will inform my thoughts and behaviour in such a way that a heaviness is experienced. If I see them as a challenge then a more accepting approach is taken while to see them as an opportunity allows for personal growth and enables growth in those I work with. Such positive language of appreciation stems from the awareness of each one's personal worth and value. Through becoming aware of one's own dignity enables an appreciation of the dignity of others.

An appreciative enquiry workshop enabled everyone to revisit and share personal experiences of decency and dignity that they had experienced in their working life and to identify the lasting effect on themselves.

Maureen Goodman, the Programme Co-ordinator for the Brahma Kumaris, restarted the afternoons programme. Through the use of very powerful personal stories, she highlighted the integral need of the core values of love, peace, wisdom and joy for working with decency. The expression of such values enables and empowers the self. It is the appreciation of one's own inner values, one's real dignity, that enables one to work with the interests of the other party foremost in one's mind; this is real humility, from which is born decency. A gentle guided reflection exercise enabled the participants to connect with their inner values and deeper experiences and drew this session to a close.

In the final session of the day, Geoff Marlow, a business consultant, demonstrated that we don't see things as they are, we see them as we are - or more accurately we see them as we see ourselves. The participants had an opportunity to try out various techniques to

increase self awareness and thereby increase their ability to learn from themselves and each other. Drawing on their past experience, they explored how and why there is often significant differences between what we think, say and do. Participants recognised that even though we try to conceal it, other people pick up this concealment. By developing a greater awareness of what is going on within ourselves, we can develop insights that enable us to improve our interactions. Participants took away a set of pragmatic tools to enable them to continue to focus on what is going on inside and its impact on what they see and do 'out there' to improve co-operation and effectiveness in working relationships.

The day was concluded with an open discussion. All who shared, expressed a greater appreciation and understanding of the difficult conditions and challenges faced by all those within the prison environment, staff and prisoners alike. Also, the contribution that the seminar had made towards identifying personal tools, mechanisms and support structures that enhance good relationships.

If your prison would like to host a one-day seminar of this or similar nature, please contact:

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