

Leadership Development: engaging hearts and minds

Community Corrections, Canberra, Australia

International reform in corrections focuses on developing capable leaders and managers. It also focuses on increasing community corrections services to improve rehabilitation and reintegration and reduce recidivism. This project focused on the two objectives, through leadership development in community corrections.

Janet-Lee Hibberd, General Manager, Australian Capital Territory Community Corrections, decided to use a peer leadership development approach, CoachingOurselves,[®] she had learned about at the 2015 ICPA Conference. It was a strategic tool to stimulate the reforms and culture she was striving to establish. CoachingOurselves[®] is a niche workplace-based program, facilitating managers and teams to learn and practice management and leadership more effectively. Small groups meet for 90 minutes to work through relevant topics in guided discussions to combine new concepts with relevant experience and knowledge they share with each other, thereby generating new thinking, feeling and practice.

The CoachingOurselves[®] group consists of eight team leaders, the Senior Operations Manager and the Manager, Change and Workplace Culture (Kate Milner) who assumed responsibility for coordination and facilitating the sessions. The group has been meeting monthly since February, 2016. Each meeting, they discuss a different CoachingOurselves[®] topic.

The Need: A 2012 external review of Australian Capital Territory Community Corrections recommended development of a cohesive evidence-based case management framework, along with significant organisational change and capacity development. Janet-Lee Hibberd was appointed in mid-2013 to lead implementing the report's recommendations. She determined one key was to focus on increasing the leadership and management capacity of team leaders so they could better implement the other improvements, including professional supervision, individual coaching and support and coordination of training.

Community Corrections staff supervise 1,000 parolees and probationers, including 200 doing community service work. Their mission is to reduce the risk of further criminal conduct, contribute to community safety and administer court orders. Under the direction of a team leader, Community Corrections Officers have direct responsibility for the case management, supervision and monitoring of a caseload of clients on court and parole orders and for the provision of reports and advice to the Court and releasing authorities.

Their work is highly operational, time pressured and often involves volatile situations. As a consequence, consideration for management development approaches included the need to be practical, timely and effective so that team leaders would quickly realize the benefits and commit to ongoing engagement and implementation.

The First Six Months. During an informal evaluation of the leadership development program after six months, participants spoke of feeling uncomfortable, and wary of each other, in the first few sessions. However, they were soon fully engaged:

"I think in the first two sessions, every example we were trying to give or every dialogue we were having we were trying to show our colleagues how great we handle a situation. I think we were trying to put a positive spin on all our examples. I think it was the third session where it was ok to say 'These are things that we are not doing very well'."

"The third session was really good, it opened the dialogue a little bit more, and someone said...that sometimes it is all about taking a risk, and that risk paying off...for me the strength of these sessions is that to varying degrees everyone has taken a risk of some sort and felt supported."

The role of a manager can be a lonely experience. Individuals can feel they are the only one experiencing their particular management challenges, and they may not have the experience or knowledge of managing a situation like the one they are in. Kate Milner's role includes overcoming this feeling by concentrating on building connections with managers, their teams and across the unit. Her perspective is that CoachingOurselves[®] has enhanced the group's ability to communicate with each other and across teams and has strengthened their confidence and skills as managers. Kate observed:

"Following one particular session of deep discussion it was like a bubble burstpeople suddenly realised they weren't alone and that they were part of a team. Everyone has pulled together from thereon."

The majority of team leaders have less than three years management experience in community corrections. Many welcomed the opportunity to focus on management skills instead of the day to day operations meetings that filled their diaries:

"The majority of us are new and in our infancy in our role as managers. I think the more we talk about management related things, especially those that we can talk about candidly or have a laugh about or talk about some of the negatives or air our dirty laundry...that is what we have found most useful."

"I have found it invaluable as a new kid on the block. It helps me understand how everyone else ticks and I don't get an opportunity to do that in the day to day."

"I think that we recognize management is something that we do need to get better at, we do need to come together and really learn more about each other and where each other's strengths and skills lie so that we can be better at managing up."

Individuals commented that the process de-personalises discussion and helps the group to keep focused on management practices, rather than individuals feeling defensive about their work. The Senior Manager, Operations has noticed the roll-on effect in the workplace and that managers are more open and capable of discussing issues without taking things personally.

"Before, people might get a little bit defensive. Now we are more prepared to listen. Also, because it is a safe place, we have gelled together as a group. People are more willing to pick up on what others are saying. Whereas before they would listen but they would not necessarily hear. Now they are really hearing it."

Cooperation and communication are recognised universally as critically important to being able to work together effectively and efficiently. The managers we spoke with referred to feeling respected, understood and listened to by their colleagues, particularly when things were not going so well. By way of demonstrating the change in their level of engagement, they shared an incident when managers were holding their daily stand-up morning meeting in the open plan office. At the meeting one manager was demonstrably upset and stressed about a workplace situation. They collectively shifted the meeting into a private space and focussed on the issue of concern and possible solutions. They agreed that participating in CoachingOurselves® as a group had increased their comfort in taking shared responsibility and their capacity for joint problem-solving.

Has CoachingOurselves® proven to be effective in community corrections? Participants spoke from their experience, and concluded: *"It has made an absolute difference."* They spoke of areas where things could be improved including keeping to time and being more curious with the topics they selected. They commented that there is no reason that it would not work in other areas of the prisons and corrections sector:

"It works fine because it is not focusing on work -- it focuses on management. You can tailor individual sessions to your own case load or staff members. It would work in any setting."

The Senior Manager, Operations noted her workload has shifted and that she is able to spend more time focussing on strategic support for managers and less on the operational management of front-line staff:

"Whereas before I would have gone to the case manager to discuss, now I will go to the team leaders and discuss how they have to work on that [case load management] because it really needs to get done."

She has credited these improvements to the discussions.

There is a direct relationship between management style at the top of an organisation and the results that are delivered at the frontline. Hibberd understands this relationship and committed resources and support integrated into management development across her Division. By engaging the managers' hearts and minds, she is helping them become better leaders.

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