

Priming the probationers

Elizabeth Eyre discovers how leadership training is helping probation officers deal with change and cope with the stress of their work

“We have a duty to be the best we can possibly be. If a probation officer makes a mistake, it’s usually a pretty serious one and it ends up all over the front pages of the tabloids. We have to have good management to allow officers to protect the public; we’re trying very hard to deliver that.”

Ian Brandwood, HR director at the West Yorkshire Probation Service (WYPS), highlights an issue that many organisations – whether in the public sector or the private one – have to deal with: how to ensure a sufficiently high level of skill so that managers don’t actually prevent their teams doing their jobs properly.

A manager failing to make the leap from doing the job himself to successfully getting his team to do the job for him may not necessarily mean the difference between life and death in the private sector – more usually it’s the shareholders’ pockets that feel the effects – but it certainly

can in the public sector, especially among the emergency services.

The probation service, for example, regularly makes the news, accused of failing in its duty to protect the public when dangerous convicted criminals re-offend after having been released back into the community. The organisation blames those failures – which it says are rare – on the fact that it is in a constant state of change. Home secretaries come and go and every one presents the probation service with a new set of expectations.

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Growing prison populations, inadequate funding and the delayed implementation of a new computer system – as well as unrealistic expectations by the public – are also problems. In his annual report, published last month, chief inspec-

The West Yorkshire Probation Service is the fourth-largest in the country, serving a population of about 2.2 million people. It employs about 1,200 staff based in probation service offices, prisons, probation hostels and criminal courts across the county. It deals with approximately 12,000 cases each year, supervising 7,300 offenders in the community and 4,600 in custody or on licence.

tor of probation Andrew Bridges warned that there was a danger that offenders could no longer be managed effectively because of the demands on probation officers.

Bridges said: “Our overall point here is... to highlight the contrast... between rising expectations and a squeezed capacity to meet them.

“There appears to be a growing assumption that an offender committing a further offence always constitutes a public service failure. Yet... supervision in the community is not prison in the community, and so an offender who is not locked up does have the opportunity to commit a further offence.”

He added that the costs of new work, requirements and infrastructure meant that funding, although it had risen above inflation, would not keep pace with increasing demands. This made offender management potentially “undeliverable”.

On a more local level, the West Yorkshire Probation Service (WYPS) has found that the constant change has induced ‘change fatigue’ among staff and has also encouraged transactional relationships between managers and their teams.

Staff members have recorded high levels of stress-related absenteeism, which adds even more to the problems facing colleagues who are coming in to work – they are obliged to pick up the extra workload, which adds to their own feelings of stress and overwork.

The service has also experienced an unusual issue – probation officers who are skilled at giving feedback to, and communicating with, clients have found it almost impossible to do the same with colleagues.

All of these issues prompted WYPS’s HR director, Ian Brandwood, and chief probation officer Sue Hall, to look to management evaluation and leadership development training for a solution.

They asked Masterclass, a UK-based management training consultancy that specialises in working with the public sector, to develop a programme that would provide managers with the tools and skills to enable them to be more proactive in times of ongoing and frequent change.

The aim was to improve the leadership skills and practice within the WYPS so it could deal with change more effectively, and to change the management style from transactional (managers telling team members what to do) to transformational (managers inspiring and motivating team members to perform more effectively).



Brandwood told *TJ*: “We had two fundamental reasons for looking at the programme of training.

“The first was to change the management culture within the probation service; in common with lots of organisations, most of our managers had been promoted based on their technical performance or skills, not on their managerial or leadership capabilities. There are increasing pressures on the probation service to perform

A probation officer provides one-to-one supervision for an ex-offender

and there needed to be a step change in management performance across the organisation: our managers weren’t as clear as they should have been about how to enhance the performance of their staff, so a shot in the arm about motivating and inspiring people was particularly important.”

The WYPS had been part of a pilot programme by the Health and Safety Executive looking at workplace stress. The research showed that the main contributor to stress was poor management and leadership.

Said Brandwood: “West Yorkshire has a particular problem with stress-related absence: we are losing four days per year per employee to stress. Clearly we needed to do something about it. We tried to clamp down on excessive absence and reduced it across the board, but it was still a quite startling statistic.

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“The probation service has been outside many of the reforms forced on the public sector in recent years, so we had to find a programme that would move us forward but that would still be within the culture of the service. We looked at a couple of programmes and talked to two or three organisations about how we could put a programme together, and Masterclass was best placed to provide what we needed.”

So Brandwood and WYPS chief probation officer Sue Hall met with Masterclass managing director Isobel Rimmer and her colleagues to agree the metrics for the programme, establish the desired outcomes and what key messages needed to be coming from senior management about the training.

“I saw it [the programme] as being able to improve management and leadership competencies across the organisation,” said Brandwood. “WYPS has invested heavily in this – everyone from the chief executive downwards has gone through the programme.”

It was decided that the Kouzes and Posner Leadership Practices Inventory was “by far” the best evaluation tool for the project – “It’s really robust, very well researched and very practical,” said Rimmer – and the programme began with a 360-degree appraisal to provide feedback on all of WYPS’s senior and middle managers and to help identify perceptions about management and leadership practices within the organisation, and to identify what needed to change.

“The research was originally done by two American professors of management theory. Their original publication *The Leadership Challenge* came out 12 or 15 years ago and they’ve gone on to do on-going research,” said Rimmer. “I’ve been using the 360-degree model at Masterclass for at least 12 years.”



A probation officer runs a group supervision session

The first stage of the programme, undertaken in December, required all of the participants (senior management) to complete 360-degree appraisals. They carried out self-assessments and colleagues also gave feedback on their performance. Then they each

had a one-to-one feedback session with Masterclass.

“That’s a big investment of time and money by WYPS, but it really made the difference,” said Rimmer. “It demonstrated commitment to the process from the organisation.”

Brandwood agreed that that demonstration was vital to the success of the programme: “Buy-in from the chief executive and me is very important. Staff can see that we’re driving the programme.”

The 360-degree process was new to some WYPS staff, and some had been shocked by the feedback they had received from colleagues. “They thought they were doing a great job but the feedback suggested otherwise,” said Rimmer.

The first one-to-one feedback session lasted an hour so that, before the programme began, participants knew what their appraisal said and where they

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should be concentrating their efforts.

Two workshops were then held in January. They were designed to follow the Kouzes and Posner leadership behaviours:

- challenging the process (leaders don't accept the status quo)
- inspiring a shared vision (being clear about where you're going)
- enabling others to act (creating an environment in which people can do things well)
- modelling the way (practising what you preach, and values and principles)
- encouraging the heart (reward, recognition, praise).

"Through exercises in the workshops, we talk about creating a shared vision and how we can go about doing that. We work with them in groups to make it real for them," said Rimmer. "The workshops are very practical and experiential. We put a lot of pressure on people to do what they say they're going to do in terms of improving their management performance. If they don't do it, the responsibility is no-one else's – that message is driven home very firmly.

"People have taken that on board and have been very positive about it."

A sponsor for each behaviour has been found within the senior management team and, every two months, an afternoon workshop is held to remind the programme participants of the requirements and to 'hold them to account' for doing what they said they would do. They also review what they have done over the intervening months between the workshops.

The WYPS will be running the bi-monthly workshops for 12 months, to embed them into the organisation. It is also introducing coaching for senior managers to support the programme; it cannot afford to use external coaches, so Masterclass is delivering some training in coaching techniques as part of the programme.



The programme is now being rolled out to the WYPS's middle managers: 360-degree feedback was gathered in February and was followed through with Masterclass-facilitated workshops during the spring.

The WYPS was particularly interested in the effect the development programme would have on organisational performance, staff perceptions and overall morale. Brandwood feels that, if management and leadership performance is improved, that will show tangible benefits in terms of staff performance, and that can be measured by a reduction in absenteeism and the results of the annual staff survey.

The annual staff survey was conducted in June and July, so the results are now being analysed. However, Brandwood says that, generally, "it feels like morale in the organisation is improving".

He added: "We're going to measure the results in a number of ways.

"The 360-degree appraisal was run against the competencies we identified as important and we were able to see how the managers perform. We intend to re-run it in about eight months' time to try to measure some tangible

Offenders undertake unpaid community work under the supervision of a probation officer

improvement in the way that staff perceive their managers.

"We're also going to look at the results of the staff survey to see what colleagues say about their managers.

"We will see if incidents of work-related stress absences reduce. They are already reducing quite significantly – between October 2004 and September 2005, we lost 4,200 days to work-related stress; between October 2005 and September 2006, we lost 2,500 days.

"So we've got more people to do the work – we have the equivalent of an additional eight members of staff at work every day, which is a major benefit.

"We're seeing some very positive benefits from the managers themselves – their enthusiasm seems to be very much improved – and organisational performance is starting to improve quite dramatically. The programme has been a very significant contributor to that." ■