

Outline- SPORE presentation, Riga 17th Sept

The SPORE proposal and the research that has flowed from raise really important issues for those of you who lead and manage Probation Services. Latvia who initiated the work and the other Probation Services who joined in the study are to be congratulated.

Your task now is to use the study to improve performance of Probation in your countries and not just to file it away as an interesting piece of work which will be quickly forgotten. I would go further and suggest the study should have a wider applicability than just to participating countries. I think it is important enough for you to look for opportunities to spread the learning from the study so that other Services can me advantage of your work. I would hope that by generously sharing this study you will gain the recognition and respect the study justifies.

Stress in Probation Work.

I fully recognise that as the study suggests there is inevitable stress in working with difficult, demanding and sometimes threatening offenders. I would also suggest that Probation work carries another important source of stress that we managers can either make worse or reduce.

Because Probation staff have dual tasks. Firstly that of enforcing legal orders , ensuring compliance with them and initiating sanctions for those who do not comply. Secondly that of assessing the risks and needs of offenders and working therapeutically to prevent re-offending.

The task of helping may often be in conflict with enforcing and though we can reduce re-offending we cannot completely prevent it. When re-offences occur it can be seen as a Probation failure. How these issues are handled can enhance or minimise stress.

I think these issues require careful analysis leading to clear principles and policies that staff can understand, regular monitoring to ensure this is the case and absolute clarity that even when it goes wrong staff who have followed policies correctly will be supported.

Good Probation Work and Reducing Re-offending.

The second main point I want to emphasise is the crucial importance of the right staff/ offender relationships in reducing re-offending. I originally began to work with offenders because of my study and interest in Criminology. I have retained that interest and kept my knowledge up to date.

The latest and I think best learning has emphasised the crucial effect that powerful and persuasive individuals can have on an offenders commitment to desist from offending. Building and sustaining that commitment is crucial to success.

Practical help to develop thinking and problem solving techniques, to build educational and job skills, to deal with issues like financial and housing problems and to provide support for drug, alcohol dependency or mental health problems are all important. However without the offenders commitment to, and belief in, the possibility of success they will not succeed.

Right relationships are delivered by people who believe in what they are doing, are interested in those they work with and have a realistic belief in their ability to succeed. They need to have empathy without over involvement, to be genuine and reliable and able to set boundaries as well as to provide practical help.

The congruence between that description and the conclusions of this study that conscientiousness and detached coping are important predictors of adaptive capacity and that competent staff who believe in what they are doing are crucial is quite striking.

Making the Stress Shield Work

From a managerial point of view the most obvious implication is that recruitment should reflect the need for detached coping, conscientiousness and competence. We should aim to recruit staff who demonstrate these factors. We also need to ensure we recruit staff who are likely to share the values that underpin our work and see it as worthwhile and meaningful.

Recruitment strategies while important are not enough. Existing staff and recruits may well benefit from training in detachment and there will be a constant need to update skills training to ensure staff have the competencies they need to do a good job.

Effective leaders will also develop a clear vision and values which emphasises the relevance and importance of our work and helps staff to understand how their work fits in to this. This will require constant communication effort and managers must be consistent. Saying the right words but behaving in a contradictory way will breach trust and undermine the message. The message must be firmly grounded in the realities of the business. An aspirational management message that staff know is not achievable will also destroy the trust in managers and leaders that the Stress Shield demonstrates is so important.

Managers and supervisors need to be alerted to the importance of detachment and the risks that stress pose so they can try to support, encourage and intervene before stress causes damage both to the individual member of staff and as a result to the offenders they are working with.

The executive summary highlights some of the ways support can be provided including innovative schemes like peer mentoring. The ideal package is likely to include effort to recruit conscientious and resilient staff who use detached coping, supported by well informed supervision from supervisors who understand the issues.

The aim is to encourage a supportive team climate where problems can be discussed and analysed openly drawing on the problem solving and resourcefulness of staff. Added depth can be provided by carefully trained peer mentors and regular staff training on these issues. As a result staff should feel empowered to grapple with the most difficult issues safe in the knowledge that they do their best they will receive support and understanding from managers and fellow staff even if things go wrong, as they inevitably sometimes will.

The study provides clear evidence that behaviours and policies of managers can add to the stress of Probation work and that high quality leadership and supervision is important.

Findings include the need for managers to understand the job that staff do and to know its details. This has implication for selection for promotion, it also means that managers must remain in contact with front line work and not hide from it. It implies that managers must be visible leaders who listen to their staff, know them well and who recognise, praise and publicise good work by staff.

Stress can be made worse by clumsy and over complex processes or simple administrative inefficiency, for example providing poor quality IT or badly maintained office accommodation. Getting these practical issues right is a central management task.

Jobs given to staff must be achievable with the time and resources available. In my view management who pass excessive workload pressures on to staff or who fail to acknowledge openly the complexity and risk involved, instead leaving their staff to find a way to get by, are completely abdicating their management role. The damage will be made much worse if managers try to blame individual members of staff for what are really

management failures when something goes badly wrong. Such management behaviour will completely undermine trust.

Summary

If we can get this right and really build into practice the learning that SPORE has provided then your Probation Services will maximise their effectiveness in protecting the public and reducing re-offending. At the same time they will be really good places to work with lower levels of stress related staff sickness and a greater sense of staff well being. This is a virtuous circle as this feeds back into more effective performance and greater recognition for staff of the success of their work.

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8th September 2013