Field Notes
Electric Maze, NetWork, Sentinel
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Background

One of the most rewarding experiences of my career has been working with the California Department of Corrections. I began my relationship with the CDC working with the warden, administration, management and staff of two prisons in California. What began as a training program turned out to be far more than simply teaching the concepts of leadership, teamwork, and understanding cultural change.

The primary responsibility of the prison caretakers is to maintain a safe and secure environment while providing empathetic care for the inmates of the prison community. The wardens (comparable to corporate CEOs) I worked with displayed a total commitment to change the cultures that existed within their organizations. They also expressed a desire to be the best they could possibly be for their organizations, and to modify their traditionally "top down" management environment. They believed that a different culture would enable their leadership to create an atmosphere of trust, mutual dignity, and respect for every person ~ from the top-level managers to the inmates themselves.

The prisons had approached me to help them in making the transition from traditional business management to the establishment of leadership teams. They wanted a proactive, leading-edge approach that would help teach their work force do several things:

- learn the difference between managing and leading
- learn how to get others to share this new vision
- learn to be role models of positive leadership
- to increase teamwork
- to learn how to understand and manage their constant and dynamically changing environment
- to build on each other's strengths and recognize one another's accomplishments

This project clearly required more than a "text book" approach to learning. Therefore, a program was designed that incorporated action learning devices and activity-based training to enhance and accelerate learning.

Key Learning Points

We used learning devices from Interel (and others of a generic nature) to create a safe learning environment for participants to explore different leadership approaches. This allowed them the opportunity to recognize and observe their own behaviors, their teammate's behaviors, and how they reacted to their teammates behaviors. It also provided a forum for discussing the consequences of their behaviors in the learning activities as well as in their work environment. The action learning activities also let participants experience things in a "light" manner that safely led to discussion of "heavy" issues. Here are some examples of how learning devices were used to focus on specific topics.

Managing vs. Leading

The NetWork™ from Interel Inc. is a group-marking device with 8 strings for 4 to 8 people to maneuver. This device provided an appropriate learning opportunity for participants to understand the difference between "managing" in an autocratic environment and making the shift to "leading" in a participatory environment. In the typical prison world, management had always been "top down". The activities with the NetWork were a non-threatening way of experiencing a new and different approach.

Teamwork

Using the Interel Electric Maze® an environment was created for participants to work as a team to accomplish a task. Their goal was to get their entire team across the Maze without sounding an alarm. During this activity participants could observe how they treated each other in the process of accomplishing the task. In a typical prison environment, it is easy to see who the leaders are ~ they are typically exhibit forceful leadership at the exclusion of others. Through the Electric Maze activities, however, we observed the emergence of teamwork where more members of the team were able to contribute to the successful accomplishment of the task.

Managing Change

The Interel Electric Maze was used a second time to help participant learn to manage change. This time we started with a more difficult maze configuration that included an unannounced change in the "safe" path just as the teams had about half of their members across the maze.

The unannounced changes created a range of emotional responses and actions taken by participants. Often in work environments difficult situations result in angry reactions and loss of trust; some of this was exhibited in the course of this activity. The challenge of this Maze activity was, however, to help participants learn how to rebuild a workable team environment and become more resilient and flexible in handling sudden change. This was extremely relevant to the challenges the prison communities faces on a daily basis.

Understanding and Managing Change Over Time

Interel's Sentinel™ was used to demonstrate how change is handled by participants some time after a cultural change is initiated. This multi-dimensional learning device is not easy to master. As in the real world of prison life, many participants blamed (1) the environment (the device itself), (2) each other, or (3) the facilitator for their failure. Some expressed denial that they had any responsibility in the unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem at hand. Some simply blamed the facilitator/leader for not "telling them" how to solve the problem! Through this activity, participants were able take a long, hard look at their own behaviors and their team's behaviors in their attempt to master this problem-solving activity. The key learning point was to understand that everyone goes through change at various times, and that everyone handles change in a different way.

Miscellaneous Approaches

Other learning devices were used to illustrate the importance of having "shared" vision and of obtaining "buy in" and commitment from member in their organizations. Activities where some members were blindfolded helped participants build trust and take risks. Self-assessment tools (i.e. the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)) were used to provide participants with specific feedback from their own perceptions and the perceptions of managers, peers, and subordinates. These were particularly helpful in helping participants understand and appreciate the inherent difference between people. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), authored by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, was used to baseline and benchmark the frequency of leadership behavior and characteristics in participants.

Conclusions

Over the years, I have worked in many business environments. However, it was through the work I did in these prisons using action learning devices and activity-based training methods that I really learned about real-time "process facilitation". These prison environments had been so entrenched in old traditions of command and control that is was very difficult for participants to see that there could be another way to work.
In these programs, it became clear that there is a distinct balance between a team's task and its process, and that that balance determines a team's success. Handling individual and team interventions "on line" and helping groups to move towards achieving common goals ~ including becoming healthier organizations ~ was critical to the prisons I worked in.

Many of the participants in these groups were former street cops and/or military personnel. Through our work together, many of

these tough facades were softened. People admitted to hurting from the pressures of working in the tough, stressful prison world. These people longed for human interaction and "affection" from each other. Many, including myself, were moved to tears after spending five days together and "encouraging one another's hearts". I learned compassion for an environment that I never knew existed. I learned passion from the prison leaders who had visions of a better and healthier workplace. The commitment these people had towards changing their own behavior and to building a better place for their employees to work went far beyond anything I have ever witnessed in my 29 years in corporate environments.