

The establishment of the Offender Engagement Programme reflects a renewed awareness among policy-makers of the importance of trust-based personal relationships in sustaining offenders' commitment to the process of desistance from crime. It also highlights a perceived deficit in the current level of probation staff skills in engaging and motivating offenders.

While the extent of this 'skills deficit' may be exaggerated, it has stimulated a fruitful search for remedies, one of which involves recognising and making use of expertise in the voluntary and community sector (VCS). The VCS has widely-acknowledged strengths and skills in engaging and working productively with difficult, vulnerable or hard-to-reach client groups, including offenders. In many cases this is achieved through some form of one-to-one 'mentoring', in which a supportive personal relationship is developed between the worker/ volunteer and the client. However, it is unclear how the relevant skills can be most effectively harnessed in practice.

There are two potential approaches. The first involves closely analysing VCS interactions with clients, to identify methods for successful engagement. These skills and techniques might then be transferred to offender managers through new forms of training (perhaps using VCS staff as tutors). A second approach has already been trialled in some areas, where VCS mentors and offender managers might work in partnership with the same offenders, each having a distinct role. This article briefly considers each approach.

It is important to note that the ground rules under which VCS staff and offender managers operate are different. This means that some techniques and practices may be difficult to transfer, or in some cases inappropriate. Although there are exceptions, offenders' participation with the VCS is generally not mandatory; they do not normally need to attend appointments at specific times or intervals. Moreover, the kinds of relationships developed are often characterised in terms such as 'client led'. This emphasises the point that any services offered are tailored to the individual and delivered largely in response to his or her wishes – or at least, in line with collaboratively agreed aims and plans (see, for example, Maguire et al. 2010). By contrast, probation supervision inevitably entails a degree of compulsion, backed up by the threat of breach if the offender fails to comply with court orders or statutory conditions. Offender Managers also have less discretion about how much time they can spend with any individual and must pay close attention to considerations of risk. As a result, there may be more focus on 'criminogenic needs' or aspects which the offender manager, rather than the offender considers important.



VCS staff often argue that any degree of compulsion would undermine their relationships with clients; the client is empowered and motivated in large part by the very fact that it is their own choice to engage. This suggests that, however well they applied VCS ‘techniques’, offender managers could never achieve similar levels of engagement. However, until relatively recently, it was almost an unquestioned assumption among probation staff that a defining skill of the officer’s job was the ability to develop close and trusting personal relationships while simultaneously exercising ‘firm but fair’ use of authority. Moreover, it was argued, if used properly the latter could enhance mutual respect, and actually strengthen rather than undermine relationships. Similar views are still quite widely held today, albeit less often explicitly articulated.

In short, there is no reason to conclude that techniques of engagement developed by the VCS cannot ‘work’ in a situation where supervision is compulsory. Detailed empirical research remains to be done to distinguish more clearly between (a) principles, practices and techniques that can be applied successfully in both VCS and probation environments, (b) those which work well for the VCS but need adaptation to be successful for probation, and (c) those whose effectiveness is intrinsically linked to the voluntary nature of the relationship, and hence are unlikely to aid probation work. Perhaps the most easily transferable skills are those around

active listening, ‘coaching’, building self-esteem and empowerment, while fully ‘client led’ ways of working may not be feasible.

The second broad approach involves using VCS staff and volunteers directly as mentors, working in tandem with offender managers. While the officer focuses mainly on assessment, sentence planning and management, the mentor develops closer personal relationships with supervised offenders and attempts to boost their self-belief and maintain their engagement with rehabilitative work. This may include simply meeting up in a public place to offer companionship, reminding them about and/or accompanying them to appointments, helping them to make links with community groups, or supporting prisoners on release. Such activities are undertaken only after full consultation with the offender and with his or her voluntary agreement.

Again, while this is attractive in principle, it must be recognised that probation and VCS staff have different working cultures, and dovetailing their interventions may be difficult. However, perhaps the most significant and promising development in this context has been the increasing popularity of the Integrated Offender Management (IOM) model, which involves multi-agency partnership working aimed at both managing and rehabilitating selected persistent offenders (Senior et al 2011). An important effect of IOM is to move away from the

normal probation-dominated offender management model, and to encourage collective decision-making about how to manage each case. This gives a greater voice to voluntary agencies and affords a prominent place to their distinctive ways of engaging clients. If successful, this approach may pave the way for more systematic and effective harnessing by the criminal justice system of the undoubted interpersonal skills that reside in the VCS.

References

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