

Evaluation of Spark Inside's Systems Coaching Programme at HMP Pentonville

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Spark Inside¹

Abstract

In February 2016, the charity Spark Inside was invited to pilot the Systems Coaching Programme with prisoners and Prison Officers in HMP Pentonville's G Wing. HMP Pentonville is a London Category B/C local male prison, with G Wing being the largest of the wings, holding approximately 370 prisoners at the time of the workshop. The Systems Coaching Programme is a forum that brings prisoners and Prison Officers together to discuss deep-rooted issues and tensions. Using techniques from Systems Coaching, it allows participants to reframe previous discussions to uncover the root cause of the issue and develop solutions to improve the situation. The Systems Coaching Programme consisted of two workshops which took place on the 4th and 23rd of February 2016. The aim was to create a sustained, progressive cultural change on the wing through facilitating a positive change in pro-social relationships and communication; empathy and positive perception; and behaviour. In total, 50 prisoners and Prison Officers attended. This report details the impact of the Systems Coaching Programme using a mixed methods approach of pre- and post-questionnaires, interviews, workshop observations and a data extract provided by the prison.

Key findings

- Prisoners' relationships with Prison Officers significantly improved and became more positive after the Systems Coaching Programme ($t=1.7, p=.05, df=22$).
- Prison Officers' empathy toward prisoners significantly improved after the Systems Coaching Programme compared to beforehand ($t=2.4, p<.05, df=16$).
- The number of positive entries on prisoners' Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) records increased by 81 per cent after the Systems Coaching Programme, which was statistically significant ($t=3.7, p<.05, df=22$).
- 100% of the Prison Officers and prisoners interviewed recommended the Systems Coaching Programme.

¹ For more information, contact emma@sparkinside.org or visit www.sparkinside.org.

Background

In the UK, violence in prisons reached an all-time historic high in 2015, with serious assaults rising by over 35% compared to the previous year (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). One of the contributing factors may have been a policy decision to move young people, aged 18 to 20, from Young Offender Institutions into adult prisons from late 2013 onwards (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015). These challenges are even more pronounced in male local prisons where there are high levels of overcrowding and understaffing due to cuts to prison budgets (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2015). Integrating young people into stretched establishments has exacerbated and intensified problems, the impact of which has been experienced throughout the system by prisoners and Prison Officers (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). This has made relationships between Prison Officers and prisoners even more important at a time when they is arguably most strained. To address this tension, Spark Inside developed the Systems Coaching Programme and were invited to pilot the programme at HMP Pentonville.

HMP Pentonville is a Category B/C local male prison located in the London Borough of Islington. It has been in operation since 1842 and now has an operational capacity of 1,310.² HMP Pentonville is divided into 7 wings, each varying in characteristics and size. G Wing is the largest of these wings and at the time of the workshop housed 370 prisoners. There is also a strong union presence amongst prison staff. On G Wing, in the 4 weeks prior to the first workshop, there were 5 fights between prisoners, 3 assaults on Prison Officers, 2 assaults on prisoners, 29 self-harm incidents and 1 suicide. This highlighted the need for an intervention to improve relationships, build cohesion, and reduce violence on the wing.

The Systems Coaching Programme

The Systems Coaching Programme was designed to create a space where Prison Officers and prisoners could see each other as human beings outside of conventional roles. The Systems Coaching Programme emphasises that every opinion within a system matters, which enables marginalised perspectives and common viewpoints to be heard. The Systems Coaching Programme differs from traditional conflict resolution programmes; it goes far beyond the conventional facilitated conversations and instead explores emotions, values, beliefs and personalities to inform and enrich the group's reconciliatory process. It allows participants to experience the roles and opinions of other stakeholders in the criminal justice system that are often in conflict with their own position. Programmes using a similar application of Systems Coaching have been implemented in contexts including challenging schools, corporate organisations, families, post-apartheid South Africa and in policy-making e.g., Sweden legislation 2013/2014 (Deep Democracy, 2016).³

The Systems Coaching Programme at HMP Pentonville consisted of 2 workshops, each lasting 2.5 hours. In total, 50 Prison Officers and prisoners attended the programme; 41 participants attended the first workshop and 36 attended the second workshop. Prior to the workshop, all participants were invited to complete a questionnaire asking them what they perceived to be the main challenges on the wing. These challenges formed the possible topics of conversation for the workshops. Each workshop was structured in the following manner: introduction by the facilitators; a facilitated group conversation focusing on perceived challenges; development of solutions; and an emotional debrief. During the introduction, participants were asked to vote on a topic for the facilitated conversation. The structured conversation began with a participant role-playing a stakeholder perspective, and offering a viewpoint on the agreed topic. For example, a prisoner shared an opinion from his perceived perspective of Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Justice, while a Prison Officer responded from the perspective of a young offender. Other participants were invited to respond from other

² As of May 2013.

³ Systems Coaching combines Systems Thinking, which highlights organisational dynamics (Senge, 2006), and Life Coaching, a personal development tool to improve decision-making, motivation and resilience (Spence & Oades, 2011). It enables participants to understand and resolve issues that have affected a system.

vantage points: notably, because they were not speaking from their own perspective, the conversation did not become personal. Throughout the conversation, participants spoke from one or more roles, or just 'stood' in a role to experience this perspective. In some instances, multiple participants stood in a role together and in others, the role was just occupied by one participant. Through this process, the facilitators and participants identified challenges facing the system; for example, the influx of young offenders and effects of disruptions during association.

Following the facilitated conversation, participants self-divided into groups of up to 8 prisoners and Prison Officers to brainstorm solutions to the issue discussed. The top two solutions and action points devised by each group were collected and presented to participants by the facilitators. The workshop concluded with an "emotional debrief", where participants described their experience of the workshop in one word. At the second workshop, a member of prison staff gave an update to all the participants on the progress of the actions points devised at the first workshop.

In the first workshop at HMP Pentonville, the selected theme was 'the regime' however, the workshops observations identified the more significant challenge of the violence and disruption caused by younger prisoners – one experienced by both Prison Officers and prisoners alike. As a result, additional young offenders were invited to the second workshop. The selected theme for the second workshop was 'more staff' and through the facilitated conversation the wider political and social context of the criminal justice system was discussed – with a sense of disempowerment felt by Prison Officers and prisoners. Action points from the Systems Coaching Programme included a prisoner mentoring scheme between older and younger prisoners, a Prison Officer mentoring scheme for prisoners and gang mediation.⁴ During the emotional debrief, participants described the Systems Coaching Programme as "constructive", "open", "hopeful" and "enlightening".

Methodology

The aim of this research was to examine whether the Systems Coaching Programme created a positive, sustained culture change on HMP Pentonville's G Wing through examining the following questions:

- 1) Did relationships between prisoners and Prison Officers improve?
- 2) Did prisoners and Prison Officers become more empathetic to each other?
- 3) Was there a change in prisoner behaviour?

A comprehensive mixed methods approach was employed using multiple data collection tools: questionnaires, p-NOMIS data, workshop observations and interviews.⁵ Anonymous questionnaires were distributed to participants 1 week pre-programme and 4 weeks post-programme. They included a covering information sheet describing the research. The questionnaire consisted of 3 open-ended questions and 24 quantitative questions using a 5-point Likert scale to examine pre- and post-intervention changes to: relationships and communication; empathy and positive perception; and behaviour (see appendices). Workshop facilitators and assistant facilitators were also asked to complete a post-questionnaire regarding the structure of the Systems Coaching Programme and potential improvements.

A data extract from p-NOMIS was used to measure key indicators including Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) entries and status,⁶ complaints, adjudications and restraints. Data was captured in a 4 week pre-programme period (7th January to 4th February) and a 4 week post-programme period (23rd February to 22nd

⁴ For a full list of the action points please contact Spark Inside.

⁵ Research was conducted by Spark Inside's Data Officer, Emma Dickinson.

⁶ IEP status acts as a proxy indicator for general behaviour and IEP entries are an indicator of notable positive and negative behaviours.

March). IEP positive and negative entries and adjudications were gathered for 40 G Wing prisoners during the pre- and post-programme periods. The IEP status of the same sample was collected the day before the first workshop (the 5th February), and 4 weeks after the final workshop on the 22nd March. Prisoners who were released or transferred during the post-period were dispelled from the sample. Complaints and restraints were captured for the total G Wing population in the same pre- and post-programme periods.

In addition, both workshops were observed and interviews were conducted with 6 participants (3 Prison Officers and 3 prisoners), 4 weeks after the final workshop. The interviews ranged in length from 25 to 50 minutes. Interviewees were selected based on availability and to represent various levels of participation (e.g., attendance at one or both workshops). As such, they were not representative of the whole participant sample.

Results

Data from the pre- and post-questionnaire were entered into Excel, grouped into categories and then scores were aggregated accordingly. In total, 42 pre-questionnaires (23 from Prison Officers and 19 from prisoners) and 32 post-questionnaires (12 from Prison Officers and 20 from prisoners) were completed. Additionally, 4 post-questionnaires were gathered from the facilitators and assistant facilitators. Quotes were taken from the interviews conducted with 3 Prison Officers and 3 prisoners.

Relationships and Communication

The improvement of relationships and communication between Prison Officers and prisoners, and between prisoners was a key aim, as both have been shown to be related to positive culture (Crewe, Liebling, & Hulley, 2011). Questions 1, 2, 3, 9, 14, 15, 16 and 24 were aggregated to produce a score for pro-social relationships. A series of *t*-tests conducted showed that after participating in the Systems Coaching Programme, prisoners self-reported a statistically significant improvement in their pro-social relationships with Prison Officers *t* statistic of 1.7, *p* value equal to .05 and 22 degrees of freedom (*df*). One prisoner participant said: "There are people suffering in silence here who need someone like me or someone like you to sit down in front of them and just listen. And not be judging them, actually just take time and say you know what we care, we want to help." There was no statistically significant change in how Prison Officers saw their relationships with prisoners, although all Prison Officers interviewed reported benefits from interacting with prisoners in a different environment. One Prison Officer stated that he appreciated being able to see the prisoners in another capacity: "It was nice to see the prisoners out of a wing setting away from it, they totally act, not totally differently but they spoke a lot more vocally than they would."

Questions 8, 10, 13, 22 (prisoner only) and 23 (staff only) from the questionnaires were aggregated to produce a score for perceived strength of communication on the wing. There was no statistically significant difference in perceived communication by either prisoners or Prison Officers; however, there was an improvement in prisoners' responses (*m*=2.6 pre-workshop and *m*=3.0 post-workshop) which was strong, though did not reach conventional significance levels (*t*=1.6, *p*=.06, *df*=32). Changes in communication were also assessed through the interviews. One theme that emerged was an observed change in how young people in the wing interacted with and approached Prison Officers. Examples of the improved communication between Prison Officers and prisoners included an increase in informal "banter" and open body language. In addition, one of the Prison Officer interviewees shared how he had started communicating differently with a prisoner with behavioural challenges:

"There's a prisoner on the wing at the moment who didn't actually attend the session that I went to but has got, like, behavioural problems. I've had a chat with him and then I've sort of established possibility what's causing that. And whenever I see him sort of about to erupt I pull him aside to have a little chat with him, then he sort of realises and goes away and he's calm. Well calm for an hour but he's calm, well [the] situation is

calm.”

Empathy and Positive Perception

Empathy was defined as an understanding of the needs and feelings of others without placing any judgement on these feelings. Questions 11, 19 (staff only), 22 (staff only) and 23 (prisoner only) from the questionnaires were aggregated to produce a score for positive perception. *T*-tests showed that after the Systems Coaching Programme, there was an increase in prisoners’ perception of Prison Officers (from $m=2.6$ to $m=3.2$) however, this did not reach statistical significance. There was no statistically significant difference in Prison Officers’ perception of prisoners. An increase in positive perception was reported in the interviews as interviewees perceived a more holistic view of the system; one Prison Officer noted, “it was nice to have people looking at things from a different perspective rather than Officer versus prisoner or prisoner versus Officer.”

Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 17 (staff only), 18 and 19 (prisoner only) from the questionnaire were aggregated to produce a score for empathy. *T*-tests showed that both Prison Officers’ and prisoners’ empathy increased after the Systems Coaching Programme. Prison Officers had statistically more empathy towards prisoners after the Systems Coaching Programme with a *t* statistic of 2.4, *p* value of more than .05 and a *df* of 16. All interviewees explicitly articulated that they had developed increased empathy as a result of the Systems Coaching Programme. One Prison Officer reported that through the Systems Coaching Programme, he realised: “Staff can look and think, you know what he’s actually right, and maybe if I was in that situation I would probably react in that way.” Another observed that “you can actually learn from a prisoner’s point of view. If they let out their emotions and their feelings you can take on board that this guys needs a bit of support, or he needs someone to chat to and you can take it from there.”

Interviewed prisoners shared that through the Systems Coaching Programme, they were also able to empathise with other prisoners: “It gave us a chance to understand what staff go through, young inmates go through, old inmates go through – so it gave us the chance to experience how they feel about the prison at the moment.” Another said: “It did give a chance for the young offenders to see the staff’s point of view and see the older inmates’ point of view.” A third said, “It’s good to have an insight of people around and what they’re going through to hear their side of things, you know, how would you deal with it?”

One prisoner suggested that the Systems Coaching Programme enabled him to better understand the behaviour of criminal justice stakeholders outside of his wing: “The programme... gives you a great insight into inmates, staff, even Michael Gove who’s in charge of the Ministry of Justice, we got the experience of someone having a role-play and seeing what he has to say”. This indicated that the Systems Coaching Programme also allowed participants to gain a better understanding of their contextual environment. Through internalising the roles and experiencing a problem from another point of view it allowed individuals to understand the reactions of others. Individuals could see the impact upon the system and were able to reflect about the wing as a community. Through seeing the different individuals of the wing in a unifying and open environment it enabled individuals to reflect on how the system currently works and what can be done to change that.

Behaviour

Behaviour was measured by examining differences in IEP entries and status, adjudications, complaints and restraints pre- and post-programme, as well as through interviews. A *t*-test showed that there were significantly more positive IEP entries on prisoners’ records after the Systems Coaching Programme ($m=.7$) relative to before ($m=.1$), $t=3.7$, $p<.05$, $df=22$. There were also fewer negative IEP entries on prisoners’ records after the Systems Coaching Programme ($m=.7$ to $m=.5$), although the difference was not significant. This could indicate that prisoners’ positive behaviour increased; Prison Officers were more frequently acknowledging positive behaviour; or a combination. One interviewed prisoner said that the greatest

behavioural difference he observed was with the young adult prisoners: “[For] the young offenders that did attend this programme, there has been a change in their behaviour. I can see it even with the please’s and thank you’s, and they’re, you know, learning to break the ice with Officers and different inmates without having this persona of being a hard rock within prison, being this tough guy. It’s made an impact on them.”

Complaints against G Wing staff increased in the 4-week period after the Systems Coaching Programme compared to beforehand. This could have been due to an increase in perceived Prison Officer misconduct, or alternatively, prisoners may have felt more empowered to record the complaints because they felt that they would be acknowledged. A paired *t*-test used to compare the number of prisoner adjudications before and after the Systems Coaching Programme showed no significant relationship. The number of restraints also increased after the Systems Coaching Programme (from $n=6$ to $n=14$).

Participant Satisfaction with the Systems Coaching Programme

Participant satisfaction with the Systems Coaching Programme was measured through interviews and post-questionnaires. All interviewees said they would recommend the workshop to others. Both Prison Officers and prisoners said they particularly appreciated the existence of a forum that enabled them to speak to each other as equivalents. One prisoner commented that the prison system is generally focused on “inmates, inmates, inmates” and the Systems Coaching Programme workshop gave “officers a chance to express as well...you actually hear how they feel because outside that programme no matter what happens, what they’re feeling, they have to keep on a professional level and it’s hard.”

Participants recommended that the Systems Coaching Programme be expanded to other wings in HMP Pentonville and other prisons. One Prison Officer said, “I’m not just saying this, I think all the wings should do it” while another shared, “I’ve spoken to other wings about it and have said it’s a good thing and it should go across the board”. A third suggested that all people within the prison should participate: “Everyone should do it because if everyone does it then everyone is going to be singing from the same hymn sheet.”

Conclusion

Rising rates of violence, combined with a shortage of Prison Officers, has challenged the extent to which prisons can serve their function as rehabilitative establishments. Whilst tackling these issues is a priority for the government and Prison Governors, little is known about evidence-based programming for doing so. The need and application of programmes tackling prison culture is evident, as one prisoner stated, “Introducing these kind of programmes into the system really does make a difference to the system. To ... getting a greater understanding of a community that lives within itself and trying to think how to make things better within the community we live in.”

In February 2016, HMP Pentonville invited Spark Inside to pilot the application of Systems Coaching with Prison Officers and prisoners through the Systems Coaching Programme. The Systems Coaching Programme provided an innovative, facilitated forum in which Prison Officers and prisoners could discuss deep-rooted issues that have plagued the culture on their wing. The objectives of the programme were for participants to increase or strengthen: relationships and communication; empathy and positive perception; and behaviour.

An analysis of data collected through questionnaires, interviews, p-NOMIS data and workshop observations indicated that participation in the Systems Coaching Programme had a positive effect on these measures, with a statistically significant increase in relationships, empathy and positive behaviour. It is apparent that when participants even temporarily adopted a perspective that differed from their own, it had both an individual and group effect. In addition, through the facilitated conversation and follow-on group discussions, participants collaboratively identified action steps they could immediately take to improve the culture and therefore their wellbeing on the wing. As one Prison Officer commented, “If we can all change a certain few

people's attitudes, [or] not even their attitudes but just having it so people can be empathic, thinking about why this person is behaving this way and that's on both sides. So long as that happens then slowly change will happen."

Future research is needed to examine the sustained impact of the Systems Coaching Programme as well as its replicability across a larger sample size and in other prisons. The analysis conducted was chosen based on the suitability of the data available, the small sample size and the questionnaire attrition rate. Though, these factors will have impacted the analysis and results. Access to data on baseline violence levels and circumstances of recorded incidents, such as restraints, would have aided analysis. Additional issues arose from the low pre- and post-programme adjudications, complaints and restraints.

While the Systems Coaching Programme is not a panacea for prison violence, poor behaviour or tense relationships between Prison Officers and prisoners, it does appear to have quickly made a significant difference in improving these issues on both an individual and group level. The strong endorsement of the programme from both Prison Officers and prisoners is also encouraging. Overall, this research suggests the Systems Coaching Programme was successful in achieving its intended outcomes and worth further investigation and development.

References

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Staff pre-questionnaire

The Process

Questionnaire

You have been selected to attend a workshop Spark Inside are holding on G wing at HMP Pentonville on Thursday 4th February 2016. The workshop is called **The Process** and is about **speaking up and having your voice heard, no matter what your opinion is.**

This aim of The Process is to improve G wing and make it a better community for all who live and work there.

You will find out more about the workshop on the day but before then it would be really useful for The Process if we could hear your views of G wing. We would like to make sure that everyone’s opinions are included so please take the time to answer this short questionnaire so we can help you get the most of the session. Please make sure you answer the questions about your experiences at G wing only, and not about your experiences on other wings or in general at HMP Pentonville or other prisons you have worked in.

We look forward to meeting you on the 4th February!

Spark Inside Team

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What do you honestly think about G wing?

How do you think G wing could be improved?

What do you think needs to be discussed about how G wing could be better?

Please mark how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your time and experiences on G wing.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I believe I am a good role model for the prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
2. Relationships between staff and prisoners on G wing are good.	<input type="radio"/>				
3. I have significantly helped a prisoner with a serious or critical problem.	<input type="radio"/>				
4. I feel I treat prisoners with respect.	<input type="radio"/>				
5. I treat every prisoner on this wing as a human being.	<input type="radio"/>				
6. I empathise with the prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
7. I feel I am treated with respect by prisoners on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
8. I listen to the prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
9. I try to support prisoners when they need it.	<input type="radio"/>				
10. I care about the opinions of prisoners with regards to the wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
11. Prisoners on this wing often display honesty and integrity.	<input type="radio"/>				
12. Staff on this wing show concern and understanding towards prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
13. This wing is characterised by teamwork and participation.	<input type="radio"/>				
14. The atmosphere on G wing is friendly.	<input type="radio"/>				
15. I feel I have a support network on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
16. I can relax and be myself around prisoners on G wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
17. Control and restraint procedures are used fairly.	<input type="radio"/>				
18. Prisoners are often violent and aggressive towards staff.	<input type="radio"/>				
19. Prisoners are here to be punished.	<input type="radio"/>				
20. There are lots of threats and bullying on G wing by prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
21. There are lots of threats and bullying on G wing by fellow staff.	<input type="radio"/>				
22. Most of the prisoners on G wing are bad people.	<input type="radio"/>				
23. This wing is poor at communicating reasons for decisions to prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
24. My experience of working on this particular wing has been stressful.	<input type="radio"/>				

Appendix 2 – Prisoner pre-questionnaire

The Process

Questionnaire

You have been selected to attend a workshop Spark Inside are holding on G wing at HMP Pentonville on Thursday 4th February 2016. The workshop is called **The Process** and is about **speaking up and having your voice heard, no matter what your opinion is.**

This aim of The Process is to improve G wing and make it a better community for all who live and work there.

You will find out more about the workshop on the day but before then it would be really useful for The Process if we could hear your views of G wing. We would like to make sure that everyone's opinions are included so please take the time to answer this short questionnaire so we can help you get the most of the session. Please make sure you answer the questions about your experiences at G wing only, and not about your experiences on other wings or in general at HMP Pentonville or other prisons you have been housed in.

We look forward to meeting you on the 4th February!

Spark Inside Team

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What do you honestly think about G wing?

How do you think G wing could be improved?

What do you think needs to be discussed about how G wing could be better?

Please mark how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your time and experiences on G wing.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. The staff are good role models for prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
2. Relationships between staff and prisoners on G wing are good.	<input type="radio"/>				
3. I have been helped significantly by a member of staff with a particular problem.	<input type="radio"/>				
4. I feel I treat staff on this wing with respect.	<input type="radio"/>				
5. I am treated as a human being on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
6. I empathise with the challenging position that the officers have.	<input type="radio"/>				
7. I feel I am treated with respect by staff on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
8. I feel that staff see my side when I present it.	<input type="radio"/>				
9. I receive support from staff when I need it.	<input type="radio"/>				
10. I believe my opinion matters to the staff and leadership team on G wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
11. Staff on this wing often display honesty and integrity.	<input type="radio"/>				
12. Staff on this wing show concern and understanding towards me.	<input type="radio"/>				
13. This wing is characterised by teamwork and participation.	<input type="radio"/>				
14. The atmosphere on G wing is friendly.	<input type="radio"/>				
15. I feel I have a support network on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
16. I can relax and be myself around the staff on this wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
17. I have the power to change or influence decisions made about G wing.	<input type="radio"/>				
18. Control and restraint procedures are used fairly.	<input type="radio"/>				
19. Staff and other prisoners are violent and aggressive towards me.	<input type="radio"/>				
20. There are lots of threats and bullying on G wing by prisoners.	<input type="radio"/>				
21. There are lots of threats and bullying on G wing by staff.	<input type="radio"/>				
22. This wing is poor at giving prisoners reasons for decisions.	<input type="radio"/>				
23. All staff care about on this wing are my 'risk factors' rather than the person I really am.	<input type="radio"/>				
24. My experience of being held on this particular wing has been stressful.	<input type="radio"/>				