

## RESOLVING CONFLICTS IN PRISON

Debbie Roeger describes programmes for transforming relationships in prison



Opening Doors of Ohio, Inc. is a newly formed, not-for-profit Ohio corporation designed to support conflict resolution in Ohio prisons. The initial spur was a decision made by the management of Marion Correctional Institution (MCI) to change the cultural view of how conflict had been historically addressed and resolved in the prison (see cover article, *Money Can't Buy Me Love?*). The first step was to offer skill-building programming that would allow prisoners and staff to learn new conflict resolution skills. The second step was to implement a "next steps alternative" for unresolved conflict that includes the option for mediation.<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2002, four foundational programmes were implemented at Marion Correctional Institution (MCI) to positively change prisoner culture and staff workplace culture as regards conflict management and dispute resolution. They are: *Opening Doors* (a core programme for prisoners); *Resolution* (a prisoner peer mediation programme); *Conflict Resolution and Team Building* and finally *Workplace Mediation* (both staff programmes).

*Opening Doors* is an intensive shared learning experience for prisoners inside a prison. Over the course of three days, the participating group of prisoners (a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 20) works with facilitators to establish mutual trust, respect and a sense of community. Learning takes place in a facilitator-lead large group, as well as small groups and individual activities. The experiential learning format makes it highly effective as a teaching model given that many prisoners did not do particularly well in a traditional classroom setting. Participants do not take notes, complete workbooks or sit through lectures. The facilitation team consists of a combination of outside volunteers and inside prisoner facilitators trained in the format. This team plans the three-day programme to include a combination of fun and serious activities. Prisoners report that the programme is "creative, fun, open, lively, informative and easy to receive". Each exercise helps participants understand their own behaviour and important principles for change.

### FROM HEAD TO HEART

Throughout, participants are encouraged to recognise that 'the present they are constructing should be the future that they want.' As a result, *Opening Doors* believes that personal growth and change should actually begin during the programme. Activities are directed at building skills for effective conflict resolution, including communication skills, listening skills, problem solving principles, co-operation and learning the power of positive thinking. It is a relational

programme because, as one prisoner reports, "it helps you to get to know new people and to know better the people you already know. It is great for enhancing communication skills and helping one to open up more and show more trust". What makes the programme so successful is that each activity provides an opportunity for participants to learn about themselves and to connect with others through a unique shared experience. One prisoner remarked that it "promotes realness" whilst another said: "it shows and tells you about things most people will overlook and can't deal with because of pride." Experiential learning enables the participant to move from 'head' knowledge (theory) to 'heart' knowledge (practice) and so is more likely to impact the participant's future choices and behaviour. Perhaps the warmest praise came from the prisoner who simply said: "Everyone needs to have their own *Opening Doors* experience".

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### FIRST OF ITS KIND

Recognising that even the best personal skills don't always result in immediate and successful resolution of conflict, peer mediation for prisoners was introduced as the second major plank. Prison is probably the last place you would expect to find peer mediation. After all, prison has historically been a place characterised by confrontation, self-reliance and the prisoner's ability to take care of himself. But an innovative pilot programme in peer mediation at MCI has turned the old prison models inside out. With funding and training assistance from *Opening Doors* of Ohio, Inc. 24 prisoners have completed a course in 'Basic Mediation Skills' facilitated by the Capital University Law School in Columbus, Ohio. The two-day training seminar gave the men a solid foundation in structured conflict resolution through peer mediation. The seminar was the same as that offered to the community-at-large. (Indeed, prisoners particularly appreciated the fact that they were treated no differently than other trainees and were not being patronised). The question left at the end of training, however, was 'where and how can we apply these new skills in prison?'

In response to this question, MCI's Warden, Christine Money, gave approval for the implementation of a peer mediation process at the prison called *Resolution* – the first of its kind in a prison setting. *Resolution* enables prisoners to bring their interpersonal disputes to peer mediation to explore their own solutions with the help of two trained prisoner-mediators. As noted by one trained prisoner-mediator, "In the past, such disputes would have remained unresolved; or brought to prison staff (with inevitable disciplinary consequences) or left to

the prisoners' own devices (an outburst of violent behaviour requiring staff intervention)."

### THE POWER AND THE PRIVILEGE

"The amazing thing about the process is how our natural suspicion turned into a genuine willingness to seek common solutions," commented prisoner Ron Ambrosia following a three-day mediation involving a myriad of conflicts within an eight-man singing group. "Several of us had serious reservations at first, and some believed this was just another way for the administration to shove a resolution down our throats. But as we worked with our mediators we came to realise that we could openly share our problems and find our own solutions. Not only were the mediators well trained, but they seemed to care about us. I've been locked-up fourteen years, and I've never seen anything like it."

Certified mediators at MCI receive regular training in advanced mediation techniques from Ohio's professional mediation community. The professionals volunteer to come into the prison each month under the direction of *Opening Doors* of Ohio, Inc. The interpersonal relationship among prisoners and between prisoners and staff is fragile. Mediation is one of the tools that can help to construct those relationships on more positive foundations – with lifelong implications. Moreover, because the process of mediation can allow a prisoner to experience the power and the privilege of resolving his own dispute within the constraints of the mediation process, involvement in mediation can teach a prisoner life skills that are needed for successful re-entry to society.

Staff may question the value of referring prisoners to mediation. Some may see it as implying a failure on the part of staff to successfully do their job and to resolve prisoner disputes. However this is to misunderstand the value and purpose of prisoner peer mediation. If the prison truly believes that a part of its mission is in fact restorative in nature, then it is incumbent on staff to recognise that an important skill prisoners need to experience is that they have the resources within themselves to successfully and productively resolve conflict. Mediation by its very nature allows a prisoner to experience this success in an appropriately controlled environment. Mediation is not an indication of staff skill deficiency. Rather, it is a matter of staff 'holding back' and enabling prisoners in a way that helps the successful re-entry of prisoners into society.

### CULTURAL CHANGE

During the MCI Strategic Planning Retreat for 2001, Warden Money asked me to spend the day with a varied team of union and management representatives to look at workplace conflict and