

CLEAR DIRECTIONS

Introduction

Clear directions are easier to follow. We've all experienced this. Arriving at an unfamiliar destination without a single wrong turn – thanks to the sat nav – is one illustration of their power. Wrestling with the manual, trying to work out how something new should work, shows how essential they can be.

Giving clear directions is particularly important in prisons. They remove ambiguity about what prisoners should do. This helps prisoners – and prison officers – in several ways. First, there are many reasons why they might not know exactly what's needed: they may be new to the prison or wing; they may have been asked to do something different yesterday. Prisoners with limited English, hearing impairment, or difficulty processing information benefit most: the wing can be genuinely overwhelming for them. Second, it reduces wiggle-room for prisoners who may not want to follow instructions. Clarity removes scope for creative misinterpretation: "Oh, sorry guv, I thought you meant I should go this way." Third, if prisoners know exactly what's needed, exactly how to complete an application, and exactly what to do to work towards enhanced, we make it easy for them to do the right thing.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Be precise:** Say exactly what you want to see. It's hard for prisoners to know what to do if we give vague or negative instructions. For example, if we say, "Don't stand there," where should prisoners stand? If we say, "This is too loud," does that mean prisoners should whisper, go somewhere else, or stop what they're doing entirely? The answers may seem obvious to us: but we need to make them obvious to prisoners. This helps prisoners who genuinely aren't sure what to do and reduces leeway for prisoners who don't want to do it. Instead of saying "Don't stand there," we might say, "Stand by the wall." Instead of "This is too loud," we can tell prisoners what to do instead: "The game's fine, but use your normal speaking voice." (We're focusing here on the direction alone. There are lots of other ways we might refine these directions – we'll tackle them in **strategy 5: purpose not power**, and **strategy 7: warm/firm**. The simplest way to make our directions clear is to make them observable: to say what we want to see. Asking a prisoner to "Stop causing trouble," isn't observable: what exactly should we see them doing? Asking them to "Go back to your cell now," is: we can see whether they've done it, and follow up accordingly.

Unlocked

- B. **Specify timeframe.** A cue makes directions clearer by specifying when prisoners should act. If we tell prisoners, “I’d like this tidied up please,” they may do so. But later, when things aren’t tidied up, they might argue that they’re still going to get things tidied up, as soon as they’ve finished whatever else they’re doing. A cue – “I’d like this tidied up now please” – makes our expectation clear and creates some urgency about action. It emphasises that the direction isn’t optional: it must happen. Like saying what we want to see, this makes it easier for us to follow-up.
- C. **Instructions:** Sometimes, directions become longer and more complicated than intended. We might start with something simple, but add multiple steps: “First... then... and remember...” Prisoners may get lost. If a prisoner doesn’t follow the initial direction, don’t repeat it. Instead, give them the first step to take – as simply as possible. Imagine struggling to organise movements, as prisoners mill about noisily: some are heading to exercise, others to healthcare, and others to courses. We can simplify: “First, everyone going to healthcare, line up by the gate. Thank you. Next...”
- D. **Acknowledge:** Acknowledging prisoners’ compliance is a powerful tool. This can be as simple as a “Great,” or a “Nice one,” or a “Thank you.” It shows prisoners that we’re monitoring what they’re doing – and that we notice when they do things right. It can also be a useful encouragement, particularly for those who aren’t used to interacting positively with officers. It also sends an important message to other prisoners. If we’ve asked prisoners to go back to their cells, acknowledging those who have done so signals to everyone else that this is happening – now – and encourages them to comply too. We don’t have to wait until the prisoner has done everything right: acknowledging that they’ve taken the first step in the right direction may help them to keep going.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Over-complicating instructions.** It’s easy to make instructions too complicated. We can use too many words. We can describe multiple steps at once. We can add conditionals: “If you’ve already had a shower, head back to your cells. If you haven’t, you can go there quickly now.” Whenever possible – and whenever prisoners don’t comply – simplify instructions. Use fewer words. Describe fewer steps. Include fewer alternatives. A single step, in a few words – “Line up here for exercise” – is easy for prisoners to do and easy for us to monitor and acknowledge.
- **Waiting for complete compliance before acknowledging.** We want everything to be done properly – so it might be tempting to wait for this to happen before we acknowledge the prisoner. But when we acknowledge their

Unlocked

initial action, we encourage them to keep going – we might even smuggle the next step or further clarification in. “Great, you’ve got the mop, let’s start at this end of the **wing**.”

Case Study 1

Officer Strachan has been asked to unlock prisoners who are attending Friday prayers. It is a couple of minutes before Friday prayers are due to start. Officer Strachan notices two prisoners chatting on the landing and approaches to ask them to go to the multi-faith centre. The officer says: “Lads, come on now. Stop dilly dallying.” After a minute the prisoners start to slowly walk towards the entrance to the multi-faith centre. Officer Strachan then says: “Stop taking the mickey now lads.”

This is a **non-example** of the clear directions technique because the officer doesn’t say exactly what they want to see happen and doesn’t give the prisoners a cue to act. They also don’t acknowledge when the prisoners begin to comply and start to walk towards the multi-faith centre instead they show their frustration at the prisoners for not acting right away.

An example in this instance would be if the officer approached the prisoners and said: “Alright lads. You need to go into the multi-faith centre now. We are going to stop letting more people into Friday prayers in a couple of minutes. Alright.”. After the prisoners began to comply they could then say: “Thanks lads just head over to my colleague there to have a quick rub down search before you go in.”

Case Study 2

Officer Singh is trying to speed up the serving of the evening meal at the servery because the regime is running late. Officer Singh approaches a group of prisoners: some have their lunch while others are waiting in the queue but are distracted. Officer Singh says “OK. We are running behind on the regime. If you have your food, then please stop speaking to people in the queue and go upstairs please. That would be helpful. For those still waiting then go on ahead. There is no one being served right now. After that go upstairs. Thanks.” After Officer Singh makes the request most of the prisoners who have got their lunch start to make their way upstairs but officer Singh doesn’t acknowledge their compliance.

Consider why this example is a non-example? What could the officer have done differently to execute the clear directions technique effectively?

Unlocked

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn't choose to use this technique:

- Are there any situations where you wouldn't use this technique. If so why?
- How can you effectively deliver more complex directions to prisoners?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?