

CODE SWITCHING

Introduction

Consider these three ways of asking a prisoner to stop doing something:

- “Go on mate, put a sock in it will you.”
- “Finish what you’re doing now and start moving back to your cell.”
- “Stop that right now!”

The first example – “put a sock in it” – is casual. It’s the same tone we might use to tell a friend to stop doing something. Our words and tone seem relaxed. This encourages a relaxed response from the prisoner. It may elicit a casual response, making the request seem optional: “I will if you’ll leave me in peace for a bit,” for example. It might even elicit anger if a prisoner saw it as rude.

The second example – “Finish what you’re doing now” – is more formal. The words and tone show that this isn’t a request, or a chat between friends: it’s an instruction. This might seem heavier – and so more likely to elicit resistance. But a clear and formal instruction seems more likely to elicit the prisoner’s compliance.

The third example – “stop that right now!” – is more urgent, and more panicked. The officer seems worried, rushed, and not in control. It’s likely to prove jarring or alarming to the prisoner.

We may see each of these codes – these ways of communicating – used in prison. Using a formal register while chatting to a prisoner during association would stilt the conversation: a casual tone will work better. An officer giving an instruction or emphasising an expectation will need to speak more formally. This underlines the role they are playing. If we are trying to stop a fight on the other side of the landing, we might even use an urgent tone – “Get off him!” – although calm formality remains preferable. Each code has its place – sticking to just one undermines our communication. Switching between codes allows us to fit our message to the need, the occasion, and the prisoner we’re speaking with.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- Adapt to the situation:** To use registers effectively, we need to treat them like tools, taking up the one which is best suited to the situation. Think about the effect we want to have on the prisoner(s) we’re talking to, and the persona we’re adopting. Let’s say we’re projecting warmth, having a chat, and trying to show we care about a prisoner’s wellbeing. We can drop the formality and choose a casual register to emphasise this. Now we need

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to challenge poor behaviour. We can use a formal register. Just as we monitor our body language, we can monitor the effect of the register we use.

- B. **Switch:** A conversation may demand more than one register. If we're having a relaxed conversation about the football with a prisoner, we'll take on a casual register. "Did you see that penalty last week? Awful shot, all over the place." Let's say the prisoner takes things too far: "Anyone tells me they like Chelsea, I bang them up." We now need to switch to a formal register. We might say, "Let me just stop you there we don't use aggressive language like that on this wing." Assuming the prisoner takes our point, we can then switch back to something more casual: "What do you reckon to their chances against Everton?"
- C. **Highlight the change:** We can further increase the impact of code-switching by highlighting the switch. As we move from formal to casual, we can interrupt the flow of our conversation and take on a more formal stance. As we move from casual back to formal, we can use a bridging phrase to signal the change. So, in response to "Anyone tells me they like Chelsea, I bang them up." We might pause, draw ourselves up and say, "Let me just stop you there we don't use aggressive language like that on this wing." We can then bridge back to a casual register by saying, "Shall we move on? OK, so what do you reckon to their chances against Everton?" It could be helpful to narrate this change for prisoners: "I just need you to understand that what you said wasn't acceptable. We can relax and talk about the football again now." The aim of code-switching is to end all interactions on a positive note rather than dwell too long on the negative/inappropriate comment or behaviour. This isn't always possible for example a prisoner may not back down, and it may not be possible to end the conversation on a positive note.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Overusing the casual register.** We may find we use the casual register too much. This is particularly likely if we are making an effort to seem friendly and approachable. It may be worth distinguishing when we need to switch into a formal register. When giving an instruction, for example, always switch into the formal register. Clear boundaries make it easier for a prisoner to know what they can do when. Using formal register makes it easier for prisoners to know when we're giving an instruction, and when they can relax more.
- **Overusing the formal register.** We may also find that we overuse the formal register. This may reflect not feeling secure on the wing and trying to maintain and enforce boundaries with prisoners. This is particularly likely when they are sizing us up as a new officer, trying to see where our boundaries lie. This

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isn't to discourage using a formal register: it's better to start formal and relax when you can. However, if we are spending most of a shift in formal register, we may want to pick a couple of times where we can relax into casual register – and see what the effect is.

- **Using the urgent register.** We are unlikely ever to choose an urgent register. When we're worried, or feel like we're losing control, we may find ourselves shouting "Help!" or "Stop that now!" or "Leave him alone!" We have taken on an urgent tone, whether we meant to or not. There's no immediate solution, what matters is that we note it and try to avoid using it in future. In particular, if we find it happening frequently, try to identify what the trigger is: in what situations do we feel panic and find our register slipping to urgency? We can then remind ourselves to pause briefly, breathe deeply, and stick to a formal tone.

Case Study 1

Officer Riley must complete accommodation fabric checks this morning. They are feeling a little rushed and approach a cell. They open the cell door to inform the prisoner they need to complete an AFC of the cell and to ask them to leave the cell for a moment so they can complete it. The conversation plays out as follows:

Prison officer: Morning, how you doing today?

Prisoner: Could hardly sleep, he snores so bad, I'm feeling rough.

Prison officer: Sorry about that, there's nothing worse is there... I'm here to do an accommodation fabric check.

Prisoner: I'm trying to catch up on my sleep, do the other cells will you.

Prison officer [in an urgent and slightly aggressive tone]: Don't you talk to me like that. Out of your cell now.

Prisoner: What's this, I live here, you can't just kick me out like that.

Prison officer: Out now.

Prisoner: Just shouting at me like that, this is against my human rights.

This is a **non-example** for several reasons listed below:

- Firstly, when the prisoner shows some resistance to allowing the officer to complete the accommodation fabric check the officer responds using an urgent and aggressive tone. This immediately escalates the situation leading the prisoner to behave in a hostile way towards the officer.
- Secondly, the officer doesn't attempt to return to the casual register with the prisoner. It is important when code switching to switch back to the casual register so that the original conversation can continue. This practice allows

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you to continue to build relationships with prisoners even when faced with challenging conversations.

An example in this situation would be for the officer to use the formal register and adopt an assertive stance (**strategy 2**) initially when the prisoner shows some resistance. They could also utilise the purpose not power technique (**strategy 5**) to explain the purpose of an AFC. Finally, once the prisoner complies with their instructions then they would return to the casual register and could then ask more about the prisoner's problems with their sleep. Perhaps the officer could ask them whether they have considered looking into a cell swap.

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?

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:

- Could you use a code switch in response to any resistance from a prisoner?
- Would you adapt your code switch based on the situation and prisoner that you are speaking to?

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?

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- 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?