

WARM/FIRM

Introduction

Think back to your time at school. You probably had at least a couple of really firm teachers. They were the teachers you knew better than to step out of line for. As a result, you probably worked hard – but you may also have felt a little scared all the time, afraid of getting in trouble.

You likely also had teachers who were warm and caring, but lax. You liked them, but you learned you could get away with things: coasting, chatting in lessons, missing homework. Looking back, you could have achieved more in their lessons.

If you were lucky, you had teachers who balanced warmth and firmness. They held you to high standards: you worked hard, did your best, and were proud of what you achieved. But they did this kindly, patiently and generously. They were warm consistently, and firm when necessary.

When we work with prisoners, we want to achieve this same balance between warmth and firmness. Prisoners find punitive and confrontational prison regimes oppressive. But lax and laissez-faire regimes make prisoners feel unsafe, and unsupported to change. Prisoners need clear, firm boundaries – applied fairly, reasonably and warmly. We must be firm to maintain safety, security and order, and to push prisoners to do their best. But firmness alone grates: no one likes being treated firmly. If we are firm and warm, we can bring out the best in prisoners.

Imagine we're speaking to a prisoner who's new to the wing and is struggling to adjust. They've just done something seriously out of line:

- "That's not OK, this will go to adjudication," is pure firmness. It's the right decision, but it's articulated so badly that the prisoner is likely to resent it.
- "That's not OK, I know you're having a tough week, and I want to support you, so I'll let you off this time. Don't do it again," is too warm. We are failing to hold the prisoner to account for their actions.
- "That's not OK, I know you're having a tough week, and I want to support you. This will go to adjudication. If there's anything I can do to help you fix things, please tell me," balances firmness with warmth. We are holding the prisoner accountable, while showing that we want to help.

This example is of giving a consequence, but the same principle applies in any interaction with a prisoner: we want to show the prisoner that we have high expectations *and* show that we care.

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How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Hold prisoners to high standards:** Holding prisoners to a high standard is hard. It's always tempting not to. Every time we let things go – sliders on the landing, vaping, bad language, rudeness – we avoid confrontation, anger and hassle. We make the next few minutes a lot easier for us and the prisoner. But we also normalise the undesirable behaviour: if one prisoner can misbehave in front of us, so can everyone else. We also make future intervention harder – on this, or anything else. The sooner we enforce high standards, the easier it is to maintain those standards and bring out the best in prisoners.
- B. **Articulate standards gently:** There are many ways we can articulate those high standards. We want to choose the warmest, kindest, friendliest way possible, without undermining our point. We can choose warmer words: "Look, you're a reasonable guy, what I need you to do is..." We can listen and show we care: "Tell me how you see it, then we can talk about what's going to happen." We can use facial expressions and body language, like a thumbs up or a smile when the prisoner complies. We want to look at every interaction and ask; how can we make this warmer for the prisoner?
- C. **Shift and adapt:** We can make a firm point using warm words: "We all want to keep this wing a decent place, so I can't allow you to behave like this." We may make a firm point, then add warmth: "Stop that now, get off him!" then "Come on, you're better than this." We may need to sustain firmness for several sentences to make a point or investigate an issue, then switch back to warmth: "OK, I've heard enough, we'll say no more about it now, I want you to go back and be as positive on the wing as you are normally."

Potential Pitfalls

- **Being too harsh:** Firmness holds prisoners accountable for behaving well. Harshness is something different. We can be firm without being punitive and uncaring. Partly, this is about being warm in being firm. But it also means thinking about where firmness is reasonable, necessary and required. Firmness isn't a goal: it's a means to maintain order and bring out the best in prisoners. We want to make firmness an intentional choice for a specific purpose – we don't want to over-react to a prisoner's behaviour.
- **Letting warmth undermine firmness:** Attempting to be warm, we may not be firm enough with prisoners we know and like, or with prisoners we are intimidated by. This might mean overlooking small misdemeanours or breaches of the rules – particularly when those rule breaches have been normalised in the prison. But if we want to be able to keep enforcing rules, we need to be firm. Firmness is a necessary measure to build respectful

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relationships with firm foundations: don't let the temptation of warmth undermine this.

Case Study

Officer Blakeman is working in the visits hall. All the prisoners have been searched and are queuing up to enter the hall. The officer witnesses one of the prisoners walk in front of another prisoner called Mikey. Mikey reacts angrily and shoves the other prisoner and says: "what do you think you are doing you dickhead?". Officer Blakeman decides to intervene and speak with Mikey. This is how the conversation plays out:

Prison officer: Mikey, what are you doing?

Prisoner: He's in my way.

Prison officer: You can't act like that, stop there.

Prisoner: I'm going to my visit, I haven't seen my kids for a month.

Prison officer: OK, look, fair enough, but go easy alright.

Prisoner: Can I go?

Officer Blakeman nods and lets Mikey into the visits hall.

This is a **non-example** because the officer is simply too warm. They don't make it clear that they have high expectations of prisoner's behaviour and ultimately allow Mikey to get away with being aggressive towards another prisoner. As a result, this normalises bad behaviour. Mikey and other prisoners now have the impression that they can get away with poor behaviour around you.

An example in this situation would be if the officer was far more firm with the prisoner initially. The officer could say: "I understand that you want to see your kids and you will, but you can't behave like that. You can't push other people or use that kind of rude language". The officer would also give an appropriate consequence for the poor behaviour to reinforce that aggressive behaviour and language are unacceptable. Once the prisoner complies with the officer and calms down then the officer would become warmer in their tone, language and demeanour.

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:

Would you adapt how warm or firm you are based on:

- The prisoner you are speaking to
- The circumstances of the wing/unit (e.g. has there been lockdowns/limited activities in recent weeks)

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Which situations would you use this technique? When would it be inappropriate to use this technique?

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?