

PRE-EMPTING PROBLEMS

Introduction

It's easy to spot someone solving a problem. It looks impressive too, when it's done well. We can admire a prison officer dashing in to boldly defuse a situation.

Pre-empting a problem is harder to spot, and less immediately impressive. But it's much more powerful. Prevention is better than cure. We can pre-empt a dispute, a fight, or a problem, using a quiet word, a distraction, or a change in the order we unlock prisoners. Better to prevent a problem than wait for it to happen, then have to deal with it.

This strategy builds on our use of radar and be seen looking (**strategy 1**) – our constant awareness of what's going on around us. We can combine this with our knowledge of prisoners, and relationships with them, to identify potential problems. Who's having a bad day? Who's upset, hasn't slept, hasn't been eating – anything which may lead to a short temper? Who's new to the wing and may need some guidance?

This allows us to tackle issues before they emerge. This might mean a quiet word or reminder to the prisoner. It could be something general: "We're on best behaviour this week pushing to get to enhanced, aren't we?" Or we might be more specific: "Remember, keep out of other prisoners' cells unless you're invited in, OK." We might model a desired behaviour, distract the prisoner with a task, engage them in conversation – whatever will keep them doing what they're meant to be doing. Or we might show our awareness or our suspicions, for example, spending time near a cell in which we suspect prisoners may be dealing contraband.

Finally, we often need to follow up. We might catch up with the prisoner later. We might need to pass on information. Or further action may be needed, for example, organising a cell move to split prisoners up, or helping a prisoner get onto a job which keeps them away from trouble.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Look for issues:** We've talked about the value of **radar be seen looking (technique 1)**. This means positioning ourselves where we can see everything and scanning the wing continually, so we know what's going on. To pre-empt problems, we combine this with our knowledge of prisoners as individuals, and the current problems they face. Who's acting out of character? Who hasn't had a visit for a while? Whose sentencing hearing is coming up? Who has had an application rejected? Combining

what we see with what we know allows us to identify who may need our attention, and what problems they're facing.

B. **Redirect:** When we see a potential issue, there are a range of strategies we can choose from. We might:

- Remind the prisoner of expectations, norms or rules. For example, we could remind them "No vaping on the landing." Or we could emphasise norms on the wing: "We don't swear at each other on D Wing."
- Revisit plans and commitments. Most prisoners are looking forward to or working towards something. We can revisit these goals to encourage them to act accordingly: "Remember you're working towards switching jobs, so best behaviour, OK?"
- Divert the prisoner, giving them a job, a task or an activity to distract them from an area or group which might cause trouble. For example, we could ask whether they want to play a game of pool, whether their cell needs a tidy, whether they have enough phone credit – anything which keeps them busy and away from potential issues.
- Model the desired behaviour. For example, if a prisoner raises their voice, we might speak to them particularly quietly, encouraging them to match our tone.
- We can use our knowledge of the prisoner to tailor what we say. The most powerful messages will be those which appeal to what they want and are working towards.

C. **Follow up:** One quiet word might be enough to address the issue. But we might need to follow up. This might mean a second reminder later on, an intelligence report, organising a cell move, or simply passing on what we've done to the officers who will be on the wing later.

Common Pitfalls

- **Being unclear about reminders or expectations:** Sometimes a broad reminder is enough: "Calm day today, OK Gemma?" But some prisoners may struggle to recognise what these broad reminders mean: "I wasn't making trouble – he owes me and he hasn't paid me back." We need to use our knowledge of prisoners to judge when a broad reminder is enough and when we need to offer much more specific guidance: "Calm day today OK Gemma, I'm looking forward to seeing you do something useful during association today, didn't you say you had an app you want to put in?"
- **Letting expectations slide:** It's incredibly tempting to let expectations slip. In the moment, it makes an individual officer's life a lot easier if they overlook vaping, sliders on the landing, bad language, or whatever it is. But once something slips, it's very hard to bring it back: "Everyone else is doing it, why

Unlocked

are you picking on me?" If we actively hold the line and maintain expectations, eventually, we make it easier for ourselves: prisoners push the boundaries less, because they know what they can't get away with. This also makes it easier for prisoners: if they know what's going to be enforced, they know how they should behave. It's not easy, but maintaining expectations is crucial to encouraging the good behaviour we want to see on the wing.

Case Study

Officer Reynolds is patrolling the landings during association. A prisoner approaches them and asks how they can apply to become a wing worker. The officer knows this prisoner well and wants to support them to get into purposeful activity. As they are talking another prisoner walks down the landing past the officer. They walk slowly and scowl. They seem to be angry about something. Officer Reynolds looks at them as they pass but says nothing. Twenty seconds later there's shouting from the far end of the landing, "Oi," "Get off me," "Help." The prison officer runs down the landing, shouting "Stop that now."

This is a non-example because the officer notices something happen on the wing that may escalate into a bigger problem but does not intervene. Over time through building "jailcraft" skills; officers get better at noticing changes on the wing that may indicate that something is going to happen. When officers notice these things, it is crucial that you react in some way and try to resolve the issue before it leads to a real problem. You need to think about how you can redirect the attention of a prisoner or remind them of a long-term goal that they have to prevent problems. Finally, it is important to offer prisoners any support that they need to prevent the problem emerging again in the future.

An example in this situation would mean that the officer went to speak with the prisoner immediately to find out what is going on. If they are angry it is important to redirect their attention onto something else and put any relevant support in place before the problem escalates any further.

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:

- Is it always possible to pre-empt problems? Could you sometimes misjudge a situation and make it worse?
- What if you can't follow up with supportive action for whatever reason? What might you do instead?

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?