

LEAST INVASIVE INTERVENTION

Introduction

It's the middle of association; the wing is crowded and noisy. You walk over to check on a prisoner who looks a little unwell. As you reach him, a couple of other prisoners walk towards him, both talking loudly. You could:

- Raise a hand to stop them.
- Say "Give me a minute here could you lads."
- Say "Stop there – back to what you were doing."

Each approach tells the prisoners what you want. Each is likely to do the job. But whenever possible, the least invasive intervention is preferable.

The least invasive intervention is the one which feels least like a command or an intrusion to the prisoner. A gesture – a raised hand, or a point – is less invasive than using words. A request is less invasive than an instruction; an instruction less invasive than an order.

Psychologists describe autonomy – control over what happens to you – as a basic requirement for motivation and personal growth. Being imprisoned removes almost all your autonomy: over where you go, who you see, what you eat, what you do. The more control we can return to a prisoner, the better. If necessary, we can issue orders, and even use force, to ensure desired behaviours. Wherever possible however, we want to achieve desired behaviours without using force, without exerting control, perhaps with just a smile, a frown, or a raised eyebrow. So, the less invasive our approach, the more control, and responsibility, the prisoner is likely to feel over their actions.

The least invasive approach also reduces strain on prisoners and prison officers. We can only issue and enforce so many orders. Every time we invoke our authority, prison rules, and potential consequences, we create strain. We strain our relationship with the prisoner. We strain our authority. We strain our emotions. That's not a reason not to enforce orders. But it is a reason to limit this strain, by making interactions as 'uninvasive' as possible. If we can get the prisoner to do as we've asked without having to give an order – using instead a request, a quiet word, or a gesture – we avoid this strain. If the prisoner doesn't comply, we can step things up: a raised eyebrow to a word, a word to an instruction, an instruction to an order. But many prisoners will comply (particularly if they know we *will* follow up if necessary). Every time they comply with a request or a gesture, we reduce the strain on them and on us.

Unlocked

How can you pursue this strategy?

A. **Signal what you want:** In other words, prefer non-verbal communication to verbal. We can communicate many things wordlessly: calm down, quieter, stop, go that way. This has several advantages. It can be particularly helpful when verbal communication is hard: for example, on a noisy wing, with prisoners with limited hearing, or with limited English. Non-verbal communication can include:

- Gestures, like pointing to indicate where prisoners should be going.
- Eye contact and facial expression, like a raised eyebrow or a surprised look if you see a prisoner doing something wrong.
- Modelling: illustrating to a prisoner what they should be doing, like knocking gently on a door, rather than hammering on it.

B. **Emphasise success:** Think about how you can emphasise what is going well rather than focusing on what is going wrong. We can turn almost any negative statement into a positive one. For example, instead of “We can’t serve food until the last three of you are in the line,” we could say “We’ve got almost everyone lined up ready to eat.” This makes the same point, but without explicit criticism. It also emphasises that the majority of prisoners are doing the right thing, encouraging the remainder to join them.

C. **Prefer anonymity to naming prisoners:** If we need to highlight something that’s wrong, we need not name names. “I need three more people ready,” conveys almost the same message as “I need Frankie, Mo and G ready.” But it preserves their anonymity – and so avoids confrontation – while emphasising that compliance is the norm.

D. **Prefer private to public challenge:** When we challenge a prisoner publicly, they may try to save face by responding rudely or angrily. Where possible, have a quiet word first, either by asking them step aside, catching them away from other prisoners, or speaking more quietly.

Use these principles flexibly: These aren’t rules. If a prisoner is shouting, swearing and threatening others, a more direct approach may be appropriate. We can also switch between these principles as required: for example, beginning with a gesture, then a positive statement, then switching to a private word. Experiment with elements of this strategy to suit the prisoner and the situation.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Being unclear.** A less invasive intervention can be oblique. For example, instead of saying “Ali, I want you to stop swearing and get ready to go back to the wing,” we might say, “We’ve got a couple of minutes until we finish here,

Unlocked

let's all get ready." But Ali may miss the message. A gesture which is clear to us may be alien to some prisoners. We want to make our point clear, without being invasive. In this case, we might go on to say, "Ready means lined up by the gate," or "Ali, are you done?" or pointing where we want him to go. If prisoners are missing the point, try to make it clearer.

- **Escalate when necessary.** A less invasive intervention is preferable to a more invasive one. But there are times when a more invasive intervention is necessary, and perhaps unavoidable. If one prisoner is running towards another with a clenched fist, no amount of facial expression and polite reminders is going to solve the issue. It's up to you to decide when these strategies are appropriate, and for whom.

Case Study

Officer Jenkins is patrolling the landing during association. They notice that a prisoner leaves their cell and starts vaping on the landing. This is against prison rules. They make eye contact with the prisoner and try to show that they are not happy with the prisoner's behaviour through their facial expression. The prisoner continues to vape on the landing. The officer decides to approach the prisoner to challenge them on their behaviour in sight of other prisoners. Officer Jenkins says: "You saw me over there, why didn't you stop vaping?".

This is a **non-example** for several reasons. Firstly, the officer tries to use non-verbal communication to tell the prisoner to stop vaping in the first instance however they weren't clear enough in communicating their message to the prisoner. This leads to prisoners being confused and feeling like they are being reprimanded for their behaviour without any prior warning. Secondly, the officer doesn't challenge the prisoner anonymously or privately. In doing this this can help to escalate the situation and make things worse.

An example in this situation would require the officer to use a much clearer form of non-verbal communication. In this instance that might be difficult. Therefore, the officer would most likely need to challenge the prisoner privately on their behaviour.

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:

- Should you always challenge prisoners privately? Could doing this ever undermine your authority?
- Would you use this technique differently dependent on which prisoner you are communicating with?

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?