

IDENTIFY WANTS

Introduction

All human behaviour reflects some kind of goal or desire: we act in anger or hunger, fear or pride. Even apparently mindless brutality is motivated by something: perhaps wanting to impress peers, look tough, or displace aggression. This insight reminds us to look for what's driving a prisoner's behaviour, rather than just writing it off as mindless. (We can accept that there's always some kind of motive for a person's behaviour without condoning the motive or the action.) To address conflict and de-escalate successfully, we need to find out what's motivating a prisoner's behaviour.

Identifying prisoners' wants can help us to do two things. First, we may find a solution. If a prisoner is angry because they've not managed to get to the shower two days in a row, we can often solve this. We might unlock their door first or find time to let them out later in the day. Second, we can frame solutions in ways prisoners can accept. For example, if we're breaking up a fight, a prisoner's pride might not allow them to back down in front of other prisoners. Asking them to calm down and walk away might not work. Knowing what's driving their behaviour, we might make space for a few seconds' more of shouted insults, before saying "You've said your piece, he's said his, that's enough." Letting prisoners maintain their pride may prevent further problems.

One way to find out a prisoner's wants is asking questions: "What's up today?" "What's driving this?" "What's the issue?" This sounds obvious, but in the heat of the moment, we may focus on telling, not asking: "Step back... calm down... stop shouting." Once the situation is under control, we need to switch rapidly from giving instructions to asking questions and actively listening to the prisoner's responses.

We can also identify wants using non-verbal cues. There are some things prisoners can't or won't tell us. They may not want to say "I'm afraid of him." They may not be aware that they're acting due to fear, anger, or pride. Observing their behaviour can tell us something about their wants and their emotions. We can learn from observing where they look, how confidently they speak, and what they shy away from. We can also assess the situation itself: what happened immediately before the incident we're dealing with? Who was where? Who talked to whom? This can help us to build up a picture of the prisoner's current situation, and what they want.

Identifying wants unlocks the remaining steps in de-escalation. It allows us to agree with the prisoner in some way (**Strategy 14**), to take account of the

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prisoner's intentions when we clarify expectations (**Strategy 15**) and to give the prisoner viable choices (**Strategy 16**).

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Ask questions:** When we encounter an incident, our priority is usually separating prisoners and calming them down. This often involves a lot of calm, forceful communication from us, emphasising what they can and can't do right now: "Step back, stop shouting, put it down," and so on. This is crucial: it stops the situation escalating. But it rarely addresses underlying causes or produces a solution. We need to change the dynamic as soon as we can, switching to asking questions and listening to the answers, using **Active Listening (Strategy 17)**. Just being listened to and understood may help calm a prisoner down, and we can begin to identify – and then address – the causes of the incident.
- B. **Keep asking questions:** If the prisoner is angry about the prison, or prison staff, they may tell us immediately. They may say less if the problem relates to other prisoners. They may feel angry or upset but not even know what's caused this. It's worth continuing to ask different questions in the hope of learning something: "Come on," we might say, "You're not usually like this, what's different today?"
- C. **Look for cues and clues:** We can also look at the non-verbal signals prisoners give, and the clues around us. The way they speak, look and stand all tell us something about their emotions. Further clues come from where they are, who they're around, and the time of day. We can use these, and the observations of other prison officers, to supplement what prisoners are willing to tell us.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Taking a prisoner's responses at face value:** As we've mentioned, a prisoner may not be willing to tell us what the issue is – they may not even know the issue. We need to be cautious about taking what they say at face value. If they intend to settle a dispute themselves, for example, they may tell us that everything's fine, it was just a misunderstanding. Alternatively, they may distract us by raising other issues. So, we should be careful about accepting a prisoner's initial response: if it seems too good to be true, it may well be.

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Case Study

Officer Davies supervising the exercise yard. They see a prisoner called Mark come onto the yard who they know well and have a good relationship with. Mark is a big character on the wing and is normally sociable with other prisoners. As they come onto the yard the officer notices that they have their head down and are shaking their head seemingly in frustration. As Mark is walking across the yard officer Davies decides to check in on the prisoner. They shout across the yard "Morning Mark, how is it going?". Mark responds with a sigh saying "Yeah gov, never been better. Living the dream." The officer nods and says: "That's funny I feel the same". Mark shrugs and makes his way back onto the wing.

This is a **non-example** for several reasons. Firstly, the officer doesn't create space to ask Mark some questions about how they are feeling. They also ask questions in front of an audience of other prisoners who are also out on the yard. This fails to give the prisoner a real opportunity to open up. Secondly, the officer fails to keep asking questions and takes Mark's initial response at face value. Finally, the officer failed to notice Mark's physical cues that would suggest that something was wrong.

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:

- How can you know whether to take a prisoner's response at face value?
- Is it always possible to create space when using 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?