

TACTICAL AGREEMENT

Introduction

You're increasingly frustrated. You've waited half an hour for your food, perhaps. Or you've exchanged a product, only to find the replacement doesn't work either. You're not a complainer – normally you would let it slide. But this is getting silly. You mentally rehearse a polite way to express your irritation and try to solve the situation. You approach the counter and start talking. The manager – Tina, her name badge says – apologises. It's a good start – but it could go anywhere. Then she adds: "I completely agree, this isn't good enough." You're lost for words: the arguments you were prepared to make are no longer needed. You quickly agree a solution, and leave all smiles, feeling like you've made a new friend. Prisoners face more frustrations than most of us. A prisoner may be struggling to make a call to a family member they're worried about. They may not have made it to the showers today. They may have just been locked up for too long today.

When we get fed up, we can ask for the manager, walk out of the café, or resolve never to shop in the same place again. When prisoners get fed up, there's far less they can do. Worse, we may not be able to fix things straight away: if the wing is locked down or the boiler is broken, they may not get a shower today. So, when a prisoner comes to you with a concern or complaint, taking Tina's approach – expressing agreement and understanding – can make a big difference to how a prisoner feels and responds.

When someone is angry, they try to prove their point. They try to convince others that they're in the right. That's why agreement is so powerful. Having prepared for a battle, it seems there isn't one to be fought. They've pulled back the bowstring, ready to shoot an arrow, but the target has disappeared. They have nothing to aim at, and they gradually release the string. Tactical agreement is a powerful step towards de-escalating and resolving a situation.

How can you pursue this strategy?

Pursuing this strategy means attending and responding to the prisoner's concerns. We need to show that we're listening, that we care, and that we want to solve things. At the same time, we need to maintain awareness of the wider situation: the potential for violence from the prisoner, the actions of other prisoners, the locations of other officers. There are four steps to pursuing this strategy:

- A. **Listen carefully:** you want to start by listening carefully and trying to pinpoint why the prisoner is upset and what they want. We aren't looking

to offer them platitudes or advice right now: we want to achieve a meaningful de-escalation. We can only do this if we can understand what they want and what they're upset about and communicate our understanding.

B. Identify something you can agree with: As you listen, watch out for something you can agree with the prisoner on. Ask yourself what can I agree with from what the prisoner has said? This might mean agreeing:

- **With the facts:** When a prisoner states a fact, we can agree with it. If a prisoner states they haven't had a shower for two days, we can agree. "Yes, I know that you didn't get the chance to make it to the showers."
- **With the principle:** When a prisoner states something that should be the case, we **can** agree with the principle. For example, if a prisoner complains that no one listens to them, we might say, "I get it, everyone deserves to be listened to."
- **With the odds:** Where a prisoner makes a statement, we can agree that it is possible or debatable. For example, imagine a prisoner who says: "Anyone would be angry if they'd be treated like this." We might agree that "I guess a lot of people would be angry about that."
- **With their reality:** A prisoner may make statements which are at odds with reality – which you can't possibly agree are true. For example, a prisoner you frequently struggle with might tell you they are the best-behaved prisoner on the wing and deserve to be on an enhanced regime. If you can't agree with the truth of the matter, you can agree with their interpretation. In this case, you might tell them: "I get that you see your behaviour as exemplary."
- **To disagree:** If there's really nothing you can agree on, you can always agree to disagree. This might sound obvious, or futile. But it can represent a valuable way to close off an unproductive line of conversation, affirm that everyone's being reasonable, and move on. For example, consider a prisoner who didn't eat yesterday and is now angry at having missed a meal. We might say "I appreciate that you feel we should have brought you a different meal, but I think we're going to have to agree to disagree on this one."
- Where a prisoner has a reasonable grievance and a sense of the pressures on prison staff, it's easy to agree with the facts and the principles. For example, when a prisoner is upset that the wing smells, we can easily agree. Where a prisoner has a less reasonable grievance or an inaccurate sense of what's possible, we may not be able to agree with the facts or the principles. For example, we may not agree that a prisoner should be able to move cells at will. But we can still agree with their view of reality and agree to disagree about what can be done.
- It is rare that a prisoner doesn't say anything that you can agree with.

Unlocked

- C. **State your agreement:** Tell the prisoner what you agree with them on. This shouldn't be a big thing – too much emphasis may make it seem false or contrived. Instead, our words should feel like a natural part of the conversation.
- D. **Move on:** Agreement establishes common ground, shows both parties are committed to reasonable discussion, and allows us to go on and solve the underlying issue. So, take advantage of the agreement and (hopefully) the moment of calm it creates to move forward with the discussion.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Agreeing with the wrong thing.** Prison rules and expectations exist for a reason. Let's go back to the example above of a prisoner who hasn't managed to have a shower. We can easily agree that not being able to wash is unpleasant, and that, on principle, prisoners should have access to the shower every day. That's not the same as agreeing, for example, that the current regime is wrong. Agreeing with this weakens your position and authority with prisoners. If prisoners know you believe they deserve to get to the shower, they know you're human and empathetic. If prisoners know you believe the wing or prison is being poorly run, they might hope you'll break other rules for them. They might also repeat what you've said to other officers, undermining your position.
- **Undermining colleagues.** In a similar vein, a wing and a prison run most effectively when officers work as a team. Agreeing that a situation is, or feels, unfair, is fine. Agreeing that officers on the previous shift treated the prisoner unfairly undermines your relationship with them, and the united front that officers should present. It encourages prisoners to try to play officers off against one another: "Mr Andrews thinks you treat us unfairly." We can agree with the principle – "I think officers and prisoners should always be polite" – while avoiding discussing our colleague's actions.
- **Failing to challenge prisoners.** Tactical agreement is a powerful *step* in the *process* of de-escalation. It's not enough on its own. Imagine a de-escalation conversation that ends with tactical agreement. We haven't addressed the underlying problem. We haven't encouraged change. We may have left the prisoner thinking they're in the right. Use tactical agreement as a step, then move on to clarify expectations.

Unlocked

Case Study

Officer Buchanan is trying to get prisoners locked up in their cells. They approach a prisoner who is still out on the landing. The conversation plays out as follows:

- PO: Alright Danny you were supposed to be locked up ages ago. Let's get you locked up now alright?
- Danny: I am not locking up gov. My cellmate is a fucking weirdo man... I am not locking up with him.
- PO: I agree it must be difficult to not be getting on with your cellmate but you still have to lock up now I am afraid.
- Danny: Gov. You don't understand. I don't feel safe around this guy. He's fucking gay as well. Who knows what he might do.
- PO: I agree that it must be tough if you don't feel safe.
- Danny: Well, do something then gov.
- PO: I will but you need to lock up first and then I can see what I can do. You'll be alright for now
- Danny: Fine gov.

This is a **non-example** because the officer doesn't challenge Danny on his homophobic views. Making a tactical agreement doesn't mean that you don't challenge prisoners on their inappropriate comments or behaviour. Danny might leave this conversation thinking that he is right in his belief that he should be fearful of gay people.

An example in this instance would be if the officer challenged the prisoner at the moment that they expressed homophobic views. The officer could have used **the code switch technique (technique 6)** to challenge the prisoner at this point. A code switch would also allow the officer to hopefully bring the conversation back round and allow the officer to return to the casual register and continue the original conversation. It would also be important to formally document the conversation following local procedures given that the prisoner has made a derogatory comment about a protected characteristic.

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 find something to agree with from what an officer says?
- Would finding a point of agreement always calm a prisoner down? Is there a chance that things could escalate?

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?