

## CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS

### Introduction

We're halfway to solving the situation. We've listened to the prisoner, found out what they want and used tactical agreement. Calming them down is essential, but de-escalation needs to go further. The situation isn't resolved until the prisoner knows what needs to change – what to do, and what not to do – and agrees to act accordingly. First, we must clarify expectations: we need to convey exactly what the prisoner should be doing, and not doing, and why.

The clearer and more concrete we make expectations, the easier we make it for prisoners to follow them. It's easy to give vague requests and instructions: "Stop," "Don't do it again," "Pull it together." But what does "Pull it together" mean? Let's say we want the prisoner to be calm, polite and respectful. The prisoner may believe that avoiding a fight is enough. Ambiguity leaves space for misunderstandings, whether accidental or intentional.

We need to make our expectations as clear as possible. This means making expectations:

- Specific: "Pick up all the mess and get the floor mopped" rather than "Get this cleaned up."
- Concrete, rather than abstract: "Stand still, don't move," rather than "Hang on there."
- Observable, rather than invisible: "Give me a wave to show me you're done," rather than, "When you're done, wait there."

Expectations may land more effectively if we add empathy, or a rationale. We've discussed the importance of prisoners feeling control over the situation (**in Strategy 8 – Least invasive intervention**) and the value of emphasising the purpose of an instruction (**in Strategy 5 – Purpose not power**). We can make our behaviour less controlling if we offer a purpose for the expectation – "This matters because otherwise we can't keep you safe." We can also use empathy: "I appreciate you must be fed up with this, but there is no other way to make this work."

### 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. **State clearly:** We cannot expect prisoners to know what's expected unless we tell them. Expectations may have been different in their last prison, their last wing, or last week with different officers. The more clearly and concretely we articulate expectations, the easier we make it for prisoners to follow them. "Take it easy today," is ambiguous: a prisoner can interpret it in many ways. "If you see Jake walking towards you, walk away, and towards an officer," makes the desired behaviour unambiguous.
- B. **Say exactly what you want to see:** A behaviour is observable if we can see the difference between someone doing it and not doing it. For example, if we ask someone to "concentrate," "be careful," or "be reasonable," we can't know – for sure – whether they are doing as we asked. But we can take a word like "concentrate," and ask for observable behaviours which demonstrates concentration. For example, we might say, "When I'm talking to you, I'd like you to look at me so I know you're listening." We can't see "concentration," but we can see whether a prisoner is looking at us. We can't see "being careful," but we can see "take one step at a time on the stairs." This small tweak means the prisoner knows what we want them to do, and we know whether they're doing it.
- C. **Offer a purpose, empathy or both:** People often resent being told what to do. We can make the expectation seem more reasonable with empathy and purpose. For example, if we want a prisoner to step away from another, we could say, "He'll need more room than that to get past you," or "I know there's not much space, but..."

## Potential Pitfalls

- **Overloading prisoners with multiple expectations.** When a prisoner has done something wrong, we may be tempted to set out everything that needs to change. But people can't hold multiple things in their heads at once. For example, a person can't multiply 17x42 while also listening attentively to a conversation: we can only focus on one thing at a time. Nor can people change multiple behaviours at once. For example, if a prisoner is concentrating on giving other prisoners personal space, they probably don't have the mental bandwidth to also use kinder language. Pick the single most important thing you need the prisoner to do, and emphasise that.

# Unlocked

## Case Study

Officer Lee approaches a prisoner who is walking down the landings. The prisoner is clearly angry and looks to have lost their head over something. This is how the conversation pans:

Prisoner: This place is a f\*\*king joke man. They can't even get the basics right.

Prison officer: Stop Danny. Pull yourself together man.

Prisoner: What the f\*\*k do you want?

Prison officer: Don't swear at me. You need to show me some respect. I just don't want you to do anything stupid. Just stop shouting. Tell me what is wrong.

Prisoner: Yeah, whatever guv. I'm not listening to you. [Danny turns to leave, walks a few steps, then starts shouting again.]

This is a **non-example** because the officer wasn't specific in his initial request asking the prisoner to pull himself together. It is likely unclear to the prisoner as to exactly what that means. Also, the officer overloads the prisoner with too many requests asking him to stop swearing, shouting and to tell him what is wrong. **An example** in this instance would be if the officer was far clearer and more succinct in his instructions saying exactly what he wanted to see the prisoner doing. Also, the officer could have showed more empathy it was clear that the prisoner was aggravated by something but the officer didn't try to find out more.

## 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 have to clarify expectations?
- Would you use this technique with all prisoners?

## 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?