

PRECISE PRAISE

Introduction

It's been a noisy, rowdy morning, with cell searches and a mobile phone found. Getting prisoners locked up in time for moves took all your charm, wit and skill – but you did it. As you start to unlock prisoners for lunch, the SO walks along your landing. They might say, "OK? Good." Alternatively, they might say, "Good work this morning, well done." Most officers would prefer the latter. Having our efforts and successes appreciated feels good. Having them ignored feels frustrating. But – more usefully still – the SO might say something like: "Your choice of words made a big difference in getting everyone away just now, well done." This is far more powerful praise. First, it seems more credible. Anyone can say "Good work" – whether they mean it or not. Praising something specific suggests they really mean it. Second, precise praise tells us what we're doing that's making a difference. We now know why we're succeeding, and what to keep doing.

The same principles apply when working with prisoners:

- Prisoners want to feel that their successes and efforts are recognised, as anyone does.
- Praising something specific makes our praise more sincere and more credible.
- Precise praise tells prisoners what they should keep doing.

This is a way to reinforce the successes prisoners are having and the changes they're making, and encourage them to keep going.

We probably praise others less than we could, or should. Giving praise can feel awkward. We tend to notice things going wrong more easily than we notice things going right. Or we simply expect things to go right, and stop noticing prisoners' efforts to make this happen. But praise can have a powerful effect. We want prisoners to feel their efforts are paying off. We want them to feel that their good behaviour is recognised, appreciated, and worth continuing. If we highlight good behaviour, it may become something prisoners increasingly see as part of their identity, and pursue further. So, however much praise you gave on your last shift, try to double it – assuming it's deserved – on your next shift.

How can you pursue this strategy?

The first thing to emphasise is that as a prison officer much of our attention is spent keeping an eye out for problems. Try to catch prisoners being good as well. As we scan our landing, we might look for prisoners helping out on the

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landing: we might spot a prisoner helping someone new to the wing, helping with a job that isn't theirs, or doing something for a prisoner who isn't feeling well. Through spotting prisoners doing good we find opportunities to praise prisoners. So how can you give precise praise? We are now going to go through each of the steps for this technique.

- A. **Personal praise:** If a group deserves praise, we can praise them. But this is less powerful than personal praise. Individual prisoners may discount general praise as not applying to them. Wherever possible, praise the actions of individuals, not just the group.
- B. **Immediate praise:** The sooner we give praise, the better. The longer we delay, the less relevant the praise may seem. (That said, delayed praise is better than none whatsoever.)
- C. **Earned praise:** We should only praise things the prisoner has actually done well. Praising a half-hearted effort tells the prisoner they've done enough. The prisoner may appreciate it – but they now know that a half-hearted effort is enough. We want to be generous in giving praise – while only giving praise when it's really due.
- D. **Specific praise** Say exactly what the prisoner has done right. "Great work, well done," doesn't convey what they've done right, or what they should do again. "Great work, your effort really paid off in completing that course," highlights a desirable behaviour they can repeat. Try to be as specific as possible about what the prisoner has done well to get their praise.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Prisoners may reject praise:** Prisoners need to maintain their standing in front of their peers. They may avoid accepting praise – for example, not acknowledging our words – even if they appreciate it. This isn't a reason to stop giving praise. We can offer praise in private, rather than in public, and hope that prisoners get used to it, and come to welcome it.
- **Praising a poor effort:** It can be tempting to offer praise when anything goes right, or to use unearned praise to build a relationship. But to be meaningful, praise must reflect additional effort, or significant progress. For example, if we praise a prisoner for going back to their cell on time or joining a queue in an orderly way, we imply that our expectations are low. We can thank prisoners for good behaviour, but we should reserve our praise for when they truly deserve it.

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Case Study

Officer Graham is on duty supervising the serving of the evening meal. There's been trouble in the lunch queue. One prisoner, Jake, raised his voice and started pushing Mo, the prisoner in front of him. Only two officers were immediately available to help, and it took both of them to deal with Jake. While they did so, the next nearest prisoner, TJ, put his arm around Mo, nudged him forward in the queue and asked him calmly what he was going to choose for lunch. This channelled Mo's attention away from Jake's provocation, preventing him from retaliating. As other officers take over with Jake, the officer Graham goes back to the lunch queue. They decide to use this opportunity to give some precise praise to TJ. They say:

- Officer Graham: OK lads, come on, get your lunch and get away to your cells. [Quietly] Cheers for that TJ.
- TJ: No worries gov.

This is a **non-example** because the officer has simply not been precise enough in their praise for TJ's actions. They simply thanked him for his behaviour. Rather they should have offered praise with the PIE acronym in mind namely: Personal, Immediate, Earned and Specific. **An example** in this instance would be if Officer Graham said to TJ: "Thanks for helping to de-escalate that situation TJ. Your calm tone of voice and quick thinking really helped keep Mo out of trouble there. I will make sure to write up a positive entry".

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:

- What can you do if you can't give the feedback immediately?
- Would you adapt your standards for giving praise dependent on the prisoner?

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?

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- 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?