

ROLLING WITH RESISTANCE

Introduction

Sometimes, we'll make a request, give a suggestion or issue an instruction, and get the desired reaction from a prisoner. Other times, we'll encounter resistance. This could be anything from quiet refusal to active hostility. Maybe we approached things the wrong way. More likely, the prisoner is having a bad day, has had a row with their cellmate, or feels ill. Instinctively, we might respond by:

- Repeating ourselves: "You need to get over there now."
- Emphasising ourselves: "If you don't get over there now, you won't pick up lunch today, or breakfast tomorrow."
- Threatening consequences: "I'll write you up if you don't get over there."
- Getting frustrated: "Stop messing me around – over there, now."

Each of these reactions may be understandable. Some of them may work to get the prisoner to act. But, with a little time and space, we can probably do better.

Let's think about a context in which we have some time to talk to a prisoner one-to-one. Imagine a key worker meeting with a recently arrived prisoner. We've discussed various issues, and we ask about visits and contacting home. The prisoner says there won't be any. You ask a follow-up question, and the prisoner says, "Why are you poking your nose in my life? As if you care anyway. Leave me alone." We might respond angrily or justify our interest. We could move on. But given how important support from outside is, it may well be worth pursuing. Rather than rising to the provocation, we ask a follow up question. For example, we might say, "I didn't mean to rile you up – can you tell me why my question bothered you?"

Let's imagine a more hostile response, and a more pressured situation. We unlock a cell door and say "Good morning," to a prisoner. "You all set for court today?" The prisoner tells us where to go, announces that they're not going to court, and says that anyone trying to make them "will get banged up." We still have the rest of the landing to unlock. We could tell them to fix their attitude, threaten to write them up for their language, and remind them that they'll end up on the transport one way or another. More usefully though, we could let the insult and threats wash over us, and respond with a Socratic question: "OK, have a think about the pros and cons of what you're planning. I'll come and have a chat with you once I've got all these doors unlocked."

In neither scenario is our response sure to work. In both examples, prisoners may remain angry, unwilling to talk, and committed to their path of action. But in both cases, getting angry or emotional, or immediately threatening

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punishment, would shut the conversation down. It would leave the prisoner angry, and make them less likely to say more. Rolling with the resistance we've encountered allows us to keep the conversation going, and may prompt the prisoner to rethink their choices and options.

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. **Set aside your emotions:** You're a professional, doing a job as best you can. Prisoners may be resistant and rude. It's not about you, it's about their situation and the system. So set your emotions aside in your response. Try to stay neutral: in tone, in posture, in choice of words. Focus on systems and principles – not your feelings. For example, an instinctive reaction might be to tell a prisoner, "I'm really frustrated with how you're responding, there'll be consequences if you keep doing this." But this lets them know they've got to us, and it makes the consequences feel personal. This is the opposite of **purpose not power (strategy 6)** the prisoner may conclude we wrote them up because we were annoyed – not because they broke the rules. More productively, we might say "That response isn't going to get us anywhere, and you know what the policy is on this." The message is the same but conveyed in more neutral terms.
- B. **Meet resistance with surprise and curiosity:** It can be useful to convey surprise and curiosity in what we are hearing from the prisoner. Surprise – even feigned surprise – is powerful, because it is a way to tell the prisoner that their response isn't what other prisoners usually do. "Are you sure you meant that?" or "Do you want to rethink that?" in the right tone, might encourage them to change their approach. Curiosity is a way to show that we want to understand the prisoner's point of view (and that we care about them), and work towards a resolution. So rather than immediately telling them that they're wrong, we can show that we're interested in finding out why they feel like this.
- C. **Ask open questions.** Even if you think you know what's going on, park that (along with your emotions!), and try to hear it from the prisoner. We might ask: "What's driving your reaction?" or "Why do you feel like this?" or "How do you want to resolve this?" We're echoing what we've said previously. Think back to the **active listening and socratic questioning techniques (17 & 18)**. Where it's most tempting to respond instinctively, it's most important to recall these strategies.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Being too open-minded about resistance.** We can understand a prisoner disliking their work, being frustrated with their family, or finding their cellmate's snoring annoying. We can explore their views and wishes gently.

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We can't be so generous if a prisoner is refusing to return to their cell, or threatening violence. It's neither possible, nor desirable, to roll with resistance to basic norms of safety and behaviour. Elements of this strategy might still be powerful: "I'm really surprised to hear you say that given how positive your behaviour is normally, what's up?" But we also need to use strategies which establish safety and de-escalate conflict, such as strong voice (**Strategy 3**) and giving effective consequences (**strategy 11**).

- **Rolling with resistance when prisoners aren't willing to 'roll' themselves.** This strategy can be effective if a prisoner is willing to discuss their actions and feelings, consider new ideas, and make changes. It's less worthwhile if a prisoner is set on their actions, unwilling to talk or reason with you, or unwilling to change. That's not to say it's not worth trying: you never know when you may prompt a prisoner to think in new ways. But it's not worth investing substantial time in a conversation when a prisoner isn't willing to listen and learn. We might consider:
 - Is the prisoner being reasonable?
 - Do I have time and space to talk to them properly?
 - Is this important enough to tackle?
- **Knowing not doing.** In situations like this, we often know what we should do, but struggle to do it. At the start of a shift, it's (relatively) easy to approach resistance calmly, neutrally and curiously. When we are dealing with resistance for the tenth, or hundredth time, it's much harder. We can offer just two bits of advice. First, pick a 'trigger' and an opening line for using this strategy. For example, you might decide: "Whenever a prisoner refuses an instruction during association, I'm going to breathe deeply, and start with the words, 'Let's think about this.'" This will help to form a habit of responding in this way. Once it's a habit, you'll keep doing it, even when you're tired and frustrated. Second, tell supportive colleagues what you're working on, and ask them to remind you of it. For example, as you go to talk with a tricky prisoner, they might remind you to "be curious, not frustrated." We discuss this challenge further in the book's coda.

Case Study

Officer Chamberlain approaches a prisoner to talk to them about how they haven't been using the phone system. They approach the prisoner on the landing and start to chat.

- Prison officer: Hiya, have you got a minute?
- Prisoner: What do you want?
- Prison officer: There's no need to take that tone with me, I just want a quick chat.
- Prisoner: Go on then.

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- Prison officer: You've been with us a month, and I realised that we've not yet got anyone on the phone system for you to call. I wanted to check if you needed some help with it.
- Prisoner: I'm not a moron, I know how to use the phone system. Why are screws always getting involved where they're not wanted? Are you angling for promotion or something? Or just trying to feel good about your dead-end job?
- Prison officer: Look, I'm just trying to do you a favour here alright. Is there anyone you want added to the phone system?
- Prisoner: Do I look like I need a favour from you?
- Prison officer: I'm not going to answer that one. Have a good day alright.

This is a **non-example** because the officer fails to delve into why the prisoner doesn't have anyone on their phone system. They presume that the prisoner doesn't know how to use the phone system without asking them the reasons why they haven't added anyone yet. To roll with resistance effectively in this instance, the officer would have to meet the prisoner's resistance with curiosity and look to ask a series of open questions to help the prisoner to open up. See below for an example of how the conversation could have gone better:

- Prison officer: Hiya, have you got a minute?
- Prisoner: What do you want?
- Prison officer: Just a minute of your time for a quick chat if that's OK.
- Prisoner: Go on then.
- Prison officer: You've been with us a month, and I realised that we've not yet got anyone on the phone system for you to call. I wanted to check if you needed some help with it.
- Prisoner: I'm not a moron, I know how to use the phone system. Why are screws always getting involved where they're not wanted? Are you angling for promotion or something? Or just trying to feel good about your dead-end job?
- Prison officer: OK, so if you know how to use it, is there a reason you haven't added anyone yet?
- Prisoner: Yeah, there is. 'Cos no one cares, no one's gonna want to talk to me this time.
- Prison officer: Can you be sure that no one's missing you now?
- Prisoner: I can't be sure 'cos I haven't talked to them, obviously.
- Prison officer: Why don't we get a couple of numbers added in case you want to give it a try. You wouldn't have to call them, but at least you'd have the option.
- Prisoner: Go on then, I've got them written down here.

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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 safe to roll with resistance?
- Would you adapt this technique based on which prisoner you are speaking to?

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?