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MARCH 1988

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A Case Study in Regaining Control of A Violent State Prison

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PRISON ADMINISTRATORS often have to develop solutions under extreme pressure and need higher political support. What follows is a case study of a problem-directed search for solutions to violence and administrative confusion at Walpole State Prison in Massachusetts. The ultimate adoption of Unit Management was seen as a way to achieve the goals of four prison groups. The (1) inmates wanted to live and live without fear, (2) the correctional officers wanted a say in the classification process, a safe working environment, and control over inmates, (3) the noncustodial staff wanted equity with the custodial staff and more information about and more consistent contact with inmates so that treatment could be imposed, and (4) the administration wanted to regain control.

The maximally secure Walpole State Prison (now called the Massachusetts Correctional Institution: Cedar Junction) began implementing a policy of Unit Management in 1980 in the wake of a 10-year history of violence, cost overruns, and general administrative turmoil. Unit Management is still operational at Cedar Junction and has been implemented at other Massachusetts correctional institutions including Norfolk and Gardner. The policy is well known within the corrections profession and is (and was before its appearance at Walpole) also operational at many other prisons around the country. The decision-making process and the circumstances surrounding it are reconstructed here through written record and recent interviews with nine people who

worked for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections at the time Unit Management was being considered. The two key individuals in the Unit Management decision at Walpole were the 1979-80 Commissioner and an NIC consultant. The latter was first a member of the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) team that was invited by the Commissioner to study Walpole and then was subsequently brought in by the Commissioner as a consultant. Participating were several other players such as a Deputy Commissioner in charge of a region which included Walpole, the Superintendent of Walpole, and his two Deputies: Deputy of Operations and Deputy of Programs.

Cooperation between administrators, politicians, and National Institute of Corrections (NIC) consultants cut through reigning chaos and reigning status quo at Walpole to facilitate positive changes. Although the tool was a multidisciplinary management approach (Unit Management) which is partly a control measure, the key was the personnel involved in the decision to adopt Unit Management and their identification of the major issues.

Walpole's Violent History

The history of events at Walpole loomed in the minds of the decision makers. Discipline ruled in the mid 1960's.

It wasn't harsh discipline. Inmates weren't beaten or chained to the wall. When the inmates screwed up, they were transferred to Cellblock Ten or to the segregation unit at Bridgewater for up to six months or longer. There were no exceptions to this rule, and the inmates knew it. Violence was not tolerated. It was discouraged through discipline. And discipline was enforced at all levels.¹

The past Deputy of Operations reminisced that staff walked down the middle of the corridor and inmates walked down the sides. Inmates had their names on the back of their shirts and shirt tails were tucked in. Not doing these things was a major infraction of the rules.

Several factors weakened this prevailing dis-

*The author wishes to thank Superintendent James Bender and Deputy Superintendent of Treatment Mike Walonis at NCCI Gardner, Massachusetts where he observed management for several months. He extends appreciation to all of the following who were interviewed in 1986 because of their knowledge of or involvement with the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Walpole: Commissioner Michael Fair; Peter Argeropoulos, Associate Commissioner of Administration; Norman Carver, Superintendent of MCI Concord; Gail Darnell, Director of Public Affairs; Tom DaSilva, Director of Security at MCI Bridgewater; Charlie Fenton, President of Buckingham Security Ltd.; Tim Hall, Deputy Superintendent at MCI Walpole; The Honorable William Hogan, Judge of Dedham District Court; and Joseph Ponte, Superintendent of Old Colony Correctional Center.

¹ Peter Remick, "In Constant Fear," New York: *Reader's Digest Press*, 1975, p. 175.

ciplinary posture. Beginning in the late 1960's inmates became restless over injustices they saw in the system. They began pressing themselves as a solid oppositional front and they had prison reform groups as an outside audience. At the same time, drugs flowed into the prison at a much greater rate than before. Inmate Remick wrote "The drug users and drug pushers have caused more of the turmoil within Walpole than any other single factor."² But the inmates were also changing; they reflected the anti-authoritarianism and rebelliousness of the times. Also transforming was the public and administrative attitude towards prisons.

An era of permissiveness, under the rubric of prison reform, eased into Walpole in the early 1970's. Walpole was in turmoil. Action taken by guards against disruptive inmates seemed futile as guards perceived no support from their superiors. Policies that had previously been exercised to maintain control and discipline were revoked as either concessions to the National Prisoners' Rights Association (NPR) or as steps towards reform. Murders and riots were countered by shakedowns and lockups. Walpole was an unsafe place for inmates to live and for correctional officers to work.

The chief complaint of the staff was that conditions at Walpole made it dangerous for them to perform their duties. This created a breakdown in the organization; and within a short period, all control over inmates was completely lost. . . . Any attempt to enforce regulations ceased.³

Many attempts were made to tighten security at Walpole after the warden resigned. But a situation where "there had been a violent death at Walpole on the average of once every thirty-nine days"⁴ was very formidable to reverse. A series of interim Commissioners, well liked by the correctional officers, were ineffective in giving Walpole a safe and harmonious environment.

Politics and the NIC Report

In November 1979, Edward King had just defeated incumbent Governor Michael Dukakis after running a law and order campaign. The press and politicians were pushing for things to get done. When Edward King took over as Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in January 1980, he inherited Walpole State Prison.

Change made its debut at Walpole when Governor King asked a colleague to take over as Commissioner. Prior to being appointed on September 15th,

the colleague contacted another friend, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The soon-to-be Commissioner also gained permission to have a task force from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) sent to Massachusetts to study the Department of Corrections' organizational structure, the classification system, and, more specifically, Walpole. The NIC technical assistance report concluded that Walpole had many serious problems, mostly relating to the management of inmates. The principal cause was seen as the permissiveness forced into the system in the early seventies.

The environment at Walpole remained hostile throughout the 1970's, and Unit Management was to commence there in 1980. Persons working at Walpole or elsewhere within the Department of Corrections during this time agreed that the two major problems at Walpole were (1) a lack of control over staff and inmates and (2) the polarization between custodial and noncustodial staff.

None of the nine people interviewed for this study laid blame on the previous Superintendent. He was seen as having sufficient knowledge of the system but no support from it. The top administration at the Department of Corrections was content provided he maintained the status quo. But there loomed a general lack of accountability which could mostly be attributed to a lack of organizational structure and clear policy. The resulting lack of safety and poor working conditions drove the officers to fear for their lives and to be reluctant to enter dangerous sections of the prison.

The Guards' Union and Working Conditions

Another problem, recalled by both the Director of Public Affairs and the past Deputy of Operations, was that the relations between the policy makers, management, and the Walpole correctional officers union between 1976 and 1979 were horrendous. According to the Director of Public Affairs and the Deputy, the guard union leadership was viewed as radical and not representative of the rank and file. The union, however, signaled strength. Efforts by the administration and the union to join forces and clean up the safety issues were unsuccessful. Work stoppages and strikes continued and were doubtlessly at least partially responsible for the continued violence.

The violence involved both inmates and staff. Staff was continuing to be assaulted by inmates and inmates were still killing, stabbing, and assaulting each other. Five murders, eight assaults, at least three stabbings, and numerous beatings occurred in the 9 to 10 months just before Unit Management was implemented. This level of violence was an almost continuous feature of Walpole life during the late 1970's.

² Remick, p. 3.

³ Walter Waitkevich, "An Interview on a May 18th, 1973, Riot at Walpole" in Remick's "In Constant Fear," p. 122.

⁴ Remick, p. 172.

Schism Between Custody and Treatment

Prisons have historically served several different functions, such as custody, treatment, and classification, and the emphasis placed on any one of these has been a matter of public sentiment and state and national political climate. Methods of reaching these varied goals have usually been delegated to a specialized administrative branch within the prison where autonomy and territoriality have been the norm. In Massachusetts, for example, prisons have traditionally had two Deputy Superintendents: one for Operations (custody) and one for Programs (treatment or noncustody). The goals of these two departments had been separate and usually conflicting with no internal consensus.

Teamwork and sharing of information at Walpole had been rare. Social workers, teachers, and other noncustody personnel had a reputation of being gullible, over-educated, under-trained "do-gooders." Their having more decision making authority than custodial people and more promotional opportunities spawned resentment. Unit Management was later perceived by both custodial and noncustodial personnel as a way to obtain that to which they both aspired.

In prisons, however, coordination depends upon standard policies and procedures that should be formulated at the top and directed downward. But Commissioners changed so often at Walpole State Prison that staff was confused. Policies of leniency were followed by strictness, liberalism by conservatism, and vice-versa. The NIC report stated that "there has never been a master plan, and, consequently, the Department has been like a rudderless ship."⁵ The report also stated that

Management has been in a defensive role, putting out brush fires and pursuing a policy of containment. Frequent and lengthy lockdowns in cellblocks were used as a partial means of control but inmates responded with verbal abuse to officers, threw urine upon some and generally hurled all manner of foods, debris, and fecal matter in unbelievable quantities in some cellblocks.⁶

Prison management was responding to crises with their traditional reflex.

Troubled Organizational Communication

An affinitive problem with communication generating much inmate and staff dissatisfaction and low morale centered on decisions affecting inmates being produced at the bottom of the organizational

chart by the guards or treatment staff. The decisions were eventually reviewed by the Deputy Superintendents who didn't know the circumstances surrounding them and who, in turn, were often reversing them. The custody and treatment arms were still clashing but with the additional factor of a chain of command that was too long. Unit Management would eventually allow for decisions to be made at the lower levels but the policies guiding them would be sent down from the top.

The Unit Management Decision-making Process

Unit Management commenced at Walpole State Prison between September and November 1980, when the new Commissioner called his friend, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, to ask about some technical assistance. A future Superintendent of Walpole, who was working for the Department of Corrections in Boston at the time of the swearing in, remembered puzzling over why they needed the report when everyone knew Walpole was in turmoil. The past Commissioner explained that he thought they needed experts from the outside with backgrounds in corrections to give credibility to what they already thought needed doing. The current (1988) Commissioner recalled that the strategy was to import people without a vested interest or history in the department—people who could not be accused of trying to protect anyone or soften the blow.

The NIC team of consultants made their preliminary visit on September 25, 1979, just 10 days after the Commissioner was sworn in. They concluded their overview noting that a return visit would include (1) the development of an effective classification system, (2) a review of the operations of Walpole and recommendations for improvements in security classification, inmate programs, food service, and other areas of concern, and (3) a review of the Central Office administrative structure.⁷ One of the individuals on the review team was then the Warden of the Federal Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Arrangements were completed for the team to return for their focused visit between October 15th and 19th, 1979.

The NIC report was in the Commissioner's possession by November 1979. The majority of the 167 specific recommendations were directed at Walpole with the prominent recommendation being the adoption of Unit Management. The two key parties involved in the decision-making process that eventually led to implementation were the 1979-80 Commissioner and the NIC technical assistance team, which

⁵ Olin Minton, "National Institute of Corrections Technical Assistance Report of Massachusetts Department of Corrections," Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections, 1979, p. 8.

⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

⁷ Minton, p. 7.

included the Lewisburg warden as the administrative specialist. After receiving the study, the Commissioner held a press conference at Walpole and released it entirely except for that part which would have compromised security. The major conclusions of the study were just what the Commissioner had requested, reflecting most of the historical and contemporary issues already of concern to he and the Lewisburg warden.

Although the Commissioner now had his expert's call for action, he needed additional help. Rather than looking within the Department of Corrections, he decided to get someone from outside of the Massachusetts system altogether. He called the National Institute of Corrections for a consultant. The Lewisburg warden, who had just retired and who the Commissioner had known prior to being sworn in, was sent.

Management Team

The next important step in the decision-making process centered on weighing the value of replacing the incumbent Superintendent of Walpole while the consultant was starting his work. This Superintendent had been "a good man" whose problems were not his fault. Political officials only dealt with him in crisis situations and then it was critical rather than supportive. Desiring to make a clean break with the past, the Commissioner and the consultant, along with the Deputy Commissioner, chose a man with limited experience but deemed to have great potential. The assembled team consisted of the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, newly appointed Superintendent, and the consultant.

According to the consultant, this management team was only an administrative device through which his plans could be disseminated. He was stationed at Walpole to assist the new Superintendent, and the team convened every Friday and made weekly, monthly, and long-range plans. Generally, they endeavored to carry out the recommendations of the task force. The Superintendent was publicly in charge of Walpole and the consultant anchored to give advice.

Crisis Goals

Despite having the NIC report in hand, they had little time to consider it in light of the pressing and immediate problems which confronted them. By dint of circumstance, their major goals at this time were (1) to wrench Walpole away from the inmates and correctional officers and place control back in the hands of the administration and (2) to depolarize the friction that demoralized the custodial and the non-

custodial staff. According to the consultant, the question was not how they would regain control, but whether they would. Regaining control and depolarizing the friction were two goals that could only be achieved by chipping away at the numerous issues one at a time. Unit Management was ineffectual if the institution was unsafe or if the inmates and staff lived and worked in fear. It couldn't even be instituted if there were no accountability of staff or firm authority at the top. Unit Management could be used to maintain control once control had been regained, but it wasn't the solution to the regaining process.

Quick, Decisive, and Intimidating Intervention

Several things were done at Walpole between September when the Commissioner was appointed and November, when the NIC task force report was sent to him. He clearly assumed the position that Walpole was not going to operate as it was. The costs in terms of continued violence, budget overruns, and poor morale were not in the public or inmates' interest. He initiated regular meetings with union officials and he proceeded to clean up the institution. The litter and feces were remembered as a significant enigma because resistance erupted from the correctional officers who believed the inmates should clean up their own mess. The Commissioner had only been on the job for a week when an inmate at Walpole went on a hunger strike. The Commissioner recalled a staff meeting when a doctor said he could not guarantee that the inmate would live. "He said the vermin would cause the inmate to die of infection in a filthy cell. I said, 'No, he's not. That Block Ten is going to be cleaned out.' And it was."

On two occasions inmates almost took over the prison. The past Commissioner recalled that the first threat menaced soon after the management team had been established. Officials discovered that a riot was to take place within 24 to 48 hours, that the inmates had over 200 weapons and a hit list with seven names on it. The Superintendent observed a practice of making himself and other key staff available at the noon lunch hour in front of the chow hall. The inmate leaders hoped to hand out free drugs to the inmates at noontime and then kill every block officer and the seven administrators standing out front.

The Commissioner remembered that his staff identified about 20 ring leaders and decided that the easiest way to relieve the threat was to bus the leaders out of Walpole. He called his Deputy of Operations and arrangements were made to remove 10 inmates at about 3 A.M. Walpole was still as a mill pond on Monday. This was a major turning

point. The administration was beginning to take control of the prison. The Federal Prison system had given them an option they hadn't had before: the option to move inmates out of Walpole to another prison. The threat of shipping an inmate to the isolation of Oxford, Wisconsin was key to increasing inmate order and compliance.

Increasing Certainty

It is easy to understand why Unit Management took so long to come to the forefront. A reversal of the long history of administrative confusion, inmate control, and violence was prerequisite to the implementation of long-term order, safety, and maintenance strategies. This signal of authority showed the inmates that their disruptive behavior would definitely get them shipped in the Federal bus to the Oxford, Wisconsin prison. The administration was posturing so that it could guarantee the certainty of its policies going relatively unchallenged. By demonstrating to the correctional officers that the administration would support them on some of their concerns, the administration was increasing the certainty that the guards would be backed up; the critical certainty of no back up was the norm prior to this. Management was also making it more certain that the staff would be held accountable for its behavior; gaps in rules and policies were being filled and training was being provided. These changes were calculated decisions aimed at increasing the chances of success for the Unit Management option now looming in the mind of at least three of the management team members: the consultant, the Commissioner, and the Deputy Commissioner.

Unit Management

The issue at this point was how to maintain the regained control. The consultant pressed Unit Management as the answer. Unit Management, which had been brought to violence-marked Lewisburg, would have a little different appearance at Walpole due to the different facilities and staffing.

Unit Management has been described by Levinson and Gerard as "a Functional Unit (which) can be conceptualized as one of a number of small, self-contained 'institutions' operating in semi-autonomous fashion within the confines of a larger facility."⁸ The concept is operationalized by housing between about 50-100 inmates together in one physical area (preferably) and keeping them together for as

long as possible. The composition of these groups usually only varies as inmates' sentences and release dates vary. The inmate groups (units) are supervised by a preferably group-specific, multidisciplinary management team normally composed of at least a (1) unit manager, (2) caseworker, (3) secretary, (4) correctional counselor, (5) correctional officer, (6) educator, and (7) psychologist or other mental health worker. The Unit Management teams have discipline, classification, and programmatic authority and are guided by sets of common policies and procedures.⁹

A few irksome problems complicated bringing Unit Management to Walpole. Sergeants would lose much of their traditional everyday influence over the inmates on their block. Staffing the unit manager positions lingered as a potential issue. Plenty of sergeants were available but they would have to work longer hours and they might have to take action against their peers. It was believed that the unit managers should be in management positions. The right people had to be attracted. There was also the dilemma of physical space. Walpole was an overcrowded cell block type facility and there was no room for unit manager offices.

Other Tactical Steps

While the consultant began explaining and pushing Unit Management, he was also contriving with the Superintendent and the other members of the management team to create other features at Walpole. They developed orientation and training programs for new and seasoned staff and instituted new prison procedures. These included the reinstatement of stand-up counts, removal of blankets from the cell bars, creation of Internal Perimeter Security (IPS) teams trained in criminal investigation methods, and restriction of inmate movement within the prison. Nonetheless, serious problems still remained.

What Else Unit Management Could Do

Unit Management had the potential of solving the remaining problems of staff and inmate morale, polarization, and equity of treatment. The consultant believed that, from his experience with it, Unit Management would not only eliminate these problems but would also serve as a future deterrent to

⁸ Robert B. Levinson and Roy E. Gerard, "Functional Units: A Different Correctional Approach," *Federal Probation*, December 1973, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 8-16.

⁹ The goals of Unit Management are really prison-specific, but the following article provides valuable insight on the topic: W. Alan Smith and Charles E. Fenton, "Unit Management in a Penitentiary: A Practical Experience," *Federal Probation*, September 1978, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 40-46.

issues of the same kind.

The major dilemma faced by the management team was the demoralizing rift, or depolarization, that still existed between the treatment (program or noncustodial) staff and the guards (correctional officers or custodial staff). The demoralization could be solved with the communication and cooperation between these two groups which was inherent in the Unit Management process.

Unit Management also offered a way of bringing fairness to the inmates. The units would be much smaller than before, and the unit staff would get to know the inmates much better. Policies could be enforced more consistently and since a unit manager was given authority, accountability was added. This would decrease overtime since permission for that would now be the responsibility of the unit manager and he would be told to keep that within the budget.

Separating the Population

One final barrier to regaining control of Walpole remained. Unit Management could never succeed without the prison administration having the ability and authority to separate the population. The staff at Walpole had been using its own unofficial and crude brand of classification. According to the Superintendent, they had been simply assigning inmates to cell blocks based upon general staff agreement as to the degree of aggressiveness. They were dividing the inmates into four groups at Walpole: (1) Suffolk, (2) Bristol, (3) Essex, and (4) Orientation unit. But inmates were becoming increasingly litigious and the administration had to protect itself from lawsuits. Prison personnel are quite familiar with the Quay system. Quay was a new, scientific system of classification that came into Walpole simultaneously with Unit Management. It legitimated the separation of inmates by personality and their degree of aggressiveness.

Those interviewed for this study disagreed as to whether Unit Management might have worked without Quay, but Quay was a legal necessity and it was only marginally and scientifically different from past procedure. What is important here is that without the combination of Quay and Unit Management, which is the method the consultant used in Lewisburg to turn a good treatment tool on its head to get control, all the goals for Walpole wouldn't have been reachable. Quay, the legitimate method of replacing fear with safety, was a necessary outside input.

Weighing the Benefits

The problem-oriented search for solutions at Walpole was quite clearly focused on the avoidance of a return to the prison turmoil and violence which had characterized the place in the past. The consultant assured the Commissioner and the Superintendent that Unit Management would (1) allow inmates to live without fear, (2) give correctional officers involvement in classification, a safer work environment, and inmate control, (3) increase the parity between custodial and noncustodial staff and provide the latter more inmate contact, and (4) give the administration a control mechanism. The Commissioner, Superintendent, and the Deputy of Programs weighed these benefits against the problems associated with adopting Unit Management.

As they were perceived, the reservations regarding physical space, staffing, overcrowding, and sergeants' loss of influence over the inmates did not outweigh the positive consequences. The alternative to Unit Management was the continuance of status quo, administrative chaos, violence, and the demoralization that accompanied it. Unit Management was new and different for Walpole. Doing something different made sense and Unit Management had a successful Federal model that could be followed. It was not very likely that Walpole would be hurt by the adoption of a similar model and it might just work as another step towards the regaining and maintaining of control.

Conclusion

The Massachusetts Correctional Institute (MCI) at Walpole has had a very violent history coupled with an administrative record that, between 1972 and 1979, has best been characterized as "rudderless." In 1980, the prison administration began to implement Unit Management after a decision-making process that began with a newly appointed Commissioner in September 1979.

The hostile conditions at Walpole have been all but eliminated, and it is a much improved facility in which to live and work. Although Walpole (MCI: Cedar Junction) is still overcrowded, there is much less violence and fear. Correctional officers and noncustodial personnel share control over the inmates. Treatment activity is facilitated by noncustodial personnel having access to the prison population. The top administration in the Department of Corrections maintains amiable relations with the supportive Dukakis gubernatorial administration, and prison

policy is specific, written down, and issued from the top.

The use of Unit Management since 1980 has made these conditions possible. This management policy encourages and depends upon continuous communication between administration, correctional officers, noncustodial personnel, and inmates. Misunderstandings and polarization between these groups are greatly reduced due to the sharing of information and responsibilities. The emphasis on team work and resultant feelings of unit ownership of problems and successes facilitates cohesion in crises. The constant assessment of the prison behavioral and attitudinal climate prevents complacency and the infiltration of cancerous tradition which obscured the call for change in the past.

Change is prepared for in Walpole's Unit Management system which mandates clear, written, and decisive policy. Each Unit team works cooperatively in a participatory management style which has resulted in higher morale and commitment to purpose. Decisions are made more openly in the flatter organizational structure. Under the old traditional system the prison officials spent most of their time

reacting to crises. With Unit Management, the seeds of discontent are identified early and problems are prevented.

As can be seen from this case study, however, prisons cannot be converted to Unit Management overnight. Several factors facilitated the adoption of Unit Management at Walpole. First, there was the pressing urgency, political pressure, and support for immediate action. Secondly, the Governor and Commissioner were committed to change and succeeded, through their determination, in fostering cooperation towards this end. Thirdly, outside experts in corrections (the NIC team and the consultant) brought strength and credibility to these convictions. And finally, visible change came quickly and decisively in the form of (1) certainty of safety for inmates and staff, (2) clear, equitable, and enforced policy from the top administration, and (3) administrative support for staff.

The Department of Corrections clearly succeeded in reversing Walpole's historic brutality and lack of direction and simultaneously met the goals of inmates, correctional officers, noncustodial staff, and administration.