

Leadership WA Tailored Solutions

Australian Red Cross Prison Program

In 2020, Leadership WA was approached by the Red Cross to collaborate in developing and running a Leadership Program for a select group of prisoners within the prison system. Leadership WA had never worked in this space before, but we were excited as few leadership organisations are asked.

Our Leadership Development Managers began the design process around the specific components which the Red Cross felt were required for the group. Content was designed to introduce participants to:

- effective listening skills
- good communication amongst diversity
- the essentials of resilience
- transferable leadership skills

Our goal was to help participants acquire leadership skills and knowledge which would enable them to be better equipped for the workplace and community once they left the prison environment. We also aimed to help participants become leaders within the prison system.

Program design and development

Challenges

One of the challenges designing this program was differing literacy levels within the group. Several participants had very low literacy rates (could not read or write), some had basic literacy skills (could read and write to some extent but required help) and at least two participants were studying for or had attained their MBA. This meant the program would need to meet all literacy levels at the same time without allowing room for boredom or disinterest.

Another challenge was not treating these participants as different to any other person for whom we would conduct our programs (eg managers or team leaders), even though the learning environment was very different. Training packages often talk about 'reasonable adjustment' of a program, and even though Leadership WA does not run competency-based programs, this concept was at the front of our Managers' minds.

For example, on many of our courses and programs we use Harvard Business Case Studies. Could we still use these Case Studies given the literacy levels of the cohort? What could we do to ensure we presented content at a high yet understandable level?

How our Facilitators approached the brief



Gene Howell
Leadership Development Manager



Brenda Woollard
Leadership Development Manager

Gene: "We summarised the Case Study, breaking the content into smaller units which could be presented and talked through. As we presented the Case Study, we gave everyone the page numbers so that those who wanted to read the Case Study could."

Brenda: "The important thing here was that everyone understood the Case Study, no matter their literacy level. We had identified that those participating in the program were proud to be a part of it, so whether they could read or not wasn't what was important to them; rather, being able to show this document to others around them, to show they were participating in something on leadership, that was a matter of pride and we had to take that into account."

Gene: “We looked at the key conversations between the two main characters in the Case Study and wrote our own dialogue and then acted it out in front of the group. The debrief which followed showed us that the participants were able to very quickly identify why the protagonists were having trouble communicating with each other.”

Brenda: “This led to a deep discussion within the group as to how each of them thought and communicated differently, and the importance of trying to identify where others are ‘coming from’.”

Our Facilitators also used video clips and more impactful visual approaches to engage the group.

Program delivery

Understanding the environment

A prison environment is a challenging context for developing leadership. There are restrictions on what can be taken into our prisons. Laptops have to be registered weeks before the program, National Police Clearance Certificates have to be obtained, Prison Security has to vet the Facilitators and content well beforehand, and no mobile phones, USB sticks, etc can be taken in.

Time was also a challenge. The program might start at a given time, but there are constant interruptions for medicines, participants may go in and out for differing reasons (not feeling comfortable, etc), or lockdown over lunchtime. The program delivery was four days over three weeks to accommodate the participants’ stringent timetable within the Prison.

Outcome

The feedback from all participants on the program was rated Excellent and Useful. According to the Red Cross, this was the first time any program within the Prison had been rated by every participant.

Many commented on the colour quadrants of leadership:

- I know that I am task orientated
- I liked that I was red. I am a people person
- Interesting to know what each other’s colours were
- I liked the colour exercise the best

Other comments included the following:

- I learnt that I can be a leader, even if it is just for my family
- I never thought about my values before
- I felt a sense of direction (goal setting)
- I soaked it up like a sponge. It was all good
- It was a great program

Participants said of Kim Collard's talk: ‘Interesting to hear how he won against his upbringing; he runs a huge business now’.

“I have taken in quite a few external facilitators over the last year and it is always interesting to see how the team reacts. It is not always a given that they will ‘bond’ with the facilitators and I have had one incident for a 2-day training that the team just did not want to interact = wasted training. Though they trust that the Red Cross will bring in people that are supportive there is always that initial ‘we will just check them out first’. Gene and Brenda both immediately put them at ease (initial gentle interaction, modest and humble, evident expertise in topic).

I appreciate that you adapted easily to the challenges of working in a prison – time delays, long lunch, late arrivals, medication rounds, a couple lack of interest, and possibly a totally different cohort than you are normally used to working with. I know that the team really enjoyed the training and appreciated you both very much.”

Kirriy Clarke, Community Based Health and First Aid Project Officer, Australian Red Cross



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