



Feeling responsible vs acting responsibly: contributions of a leadership programme

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the effects of a unique leadership programme, four years after its delivery: in a Dutch penitentiary organisation. This intervention was initiated because of a felt lack of safety in an organisation that was characterised by steep hierarchy, forceful authority, constant employee cynicism and indifference. The focus of the intervention lies on actually assuming responsibility and producing the intended, strategically relevant results.

Design/methodology/approach – First we sketch Hoebeke's ideas on "responsibility in one's own work system" (Hoebeke, 2004). We show how these ideas are related to the leadership programme. Next we illustrate the programme's effect with quotes from three in-depth group interviews with the penitentiary's governor, unit manager, four department heads and six employees.

Findings – The interviews show that acting responsibly has become a living concept in the sense that is now being explicitly used among employees in all layers of the organisation. Employees and managers have learned to translate responsibility into concrete and relevant results. A new strategy for the continuity of the organisation has been co-created with all management levels and the Workers Council and it has been implemented successfully. The intervention also defeated the cynicism and lack of integrity in the organisation.

Originality/value – This case shows that being trained in the ability "to be present with reality" and actually assuming responsibility for the relationship between one's own "way of being" and the results one produces had a lasting, positive impact on an organisation and its people.

Keywords Organisational development, Penitentiary organisation, Responsibility, Strategy implementation, Leadership development and training

Paper type Case study

"Ethics is about actions and behaviour, and much less about principles" (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 84).

1. Introduction

This paper describes the impact of a leadership programme, four years after its implementation in a penal institution. In this type of bureaucratic and procedure-based organisation with its steep hierarchy and forceful authority, employee cynicism

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and indifference are a constant threat. The leadership programme is related to theory, which is reviewed in the first part of this paper. It centres on Hoebeke's concept "ethical responsibility in one's own work system" (2004). In the second section, we show how this concept of responsibility is related to the responsibility aspects in the leadership programme. In the third section we describe the case. The question was: how can the culture of mistrust and cynicism in a penitentiary organisation be transformed into a culture of trust and acting responsibly? This was realised through the strategic organisational development intervention of the leadership programme. In the fourth section of this paper we will give the floor to the governor, unit manager, department heads and employees of the organisation themselves. From the three in-depth group interviews, held in 2009, four years after delivering the programme, it is made clear how the central concept of assuming responsibility for one's own work system has become a real life force in the organisation.

2. A human measure of responsibility

Throughout the in-company leadership programme "Working together" a human measure of responsibility plays a central role. This human measure consists of the personal responsibility for what someone says, does and thinks within the context of the work system of which one forms a part. We base ourselves on the ideas on responsibility of Luc Hoebeke here. Hoebeke himself describes them as follows: "Looked at from a systemic perspective I can only assume ethical responsibility for what I do and do not do, for what I say and do not say, and never for the consequences of those things [...] For me, ethics is about actions and behaviour, and much less about principles" (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 84). What appealed to us in this definition is that Hoebeke translates responsibility into concrete, daily human actions in one's own work system. Hoebeke distinguishes between traditional thinking about responsibility, based on principles and ethical responsibility, which expresses itself in concrete actions: acting responsibly or actually taking up responsibility (concrete and practical) versus merely feeling responsible (conceptual or analytical). Varela (1999) describes this as a distinction between "coping behaviours and abstract judgment" (Varela, 1999, p. 19).

Traditional thinking about responsibility

Hoebeke demonstrates that traditional thinking about responsibility assumes a linear causal worldview:

- (1) there is a clear causal relationship between someone's actions and the consequences of these actions; and
- (2) this "someone" can be unambiguously determined.

Subsequently Hoebeke shows how this thinking is no longer relevant in current society, which consists of complex network systems. It is no longer possible to point to one person as responsible for what happens throughout the whole network system. Assuming that this is so leads to avoidance behaviour, according to Hoebeke: everything is fixed in rules and laws, leading to bureaucracy and a form of "social infantilism." It is then better to do nothing, because life is full of unexpected risks. "Again and again, when something systemically unexpected occurs, people seek linear causality [...] and create rules and regulations, in order to prevent this from happening

in the future. In this way we create a mildly repressive society, in which real life is eventually made impossible – because real life is perilous!” (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 89).

At the same time, we note that those regulations and procedures often fail to solve the problems for which they were originally designed. For example, after the calamitous Schiphol fire of 2005 it became mandatory for all employees in penal institutions to follow a course on organisational first aid. The problem seemed to be solved: now that everyone had taken such a course, a similar situation could never again occur. But that something unexpected will happen, something for which this measure does not provide a solution, is of course still possible. This mode of thinking, in which a procedure is seen as the solution for a problem, is unrealistic; because where people act, the unexpected can always happen.

Personal ethical responsibility

Hoebeke offers an alternative view on responsible ethical behaviour: everyone is at the centre of a relational network, of which he is the ethical juncture. He brings responsibility back to a human measure. “[...] that every person can only be responsible on the scale in which he or she lives, be that as the president of the United States, or as the White House gardener” (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 91). In your relational network, you can only contribute responsibly in the context of your own relationships with the people around you, but never for the totality of all relationships. The measure of responsibility for what you say and do is, however, not always self-evident. Hoebeke discusses the employee who follows the rules and procedures exactly, but is actually a little lazy and carries out his work strictly by the book. If you look at responsibility from the perspective of the system, the rules and the procedures, everything is fine. But does this individual assume his personal ethical responsibility? Can he account to himself for what he does and does not do? It is important to remain awake and alert even while following rules and procedures.

“Facts and figures are never reality. Reality is how one deals with them” (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 94). This notion of responsibility does involve, on the one hand, a restriction: you are only responsible for what you do and say, not for the consequences thereof and for what someone else in the same work system does. On the other hand, it also introduces an extension: what do you do and say, and how can you change that? It requires that you see your worldview and your way of thinking as an image and not as the reality and, at the same time, assume responsibility for your way of thinking. It is important to realise that your perceptions are selective. “In fact the only world in which one can bring about change is one’s own worldview, one’s own perception. Perception is not the passive reception of signals from the outside world but the active (conscious and unconscious) selection of what we take to be true, by giving meaning to these signals. We change our behaviour by assigning different meanings to these signals” (Hoebeke, 2004, p. 96). Assuming one’s own ethical responsibility requires the observation of one’s inner world (thoughts and feelings) and the signals which one receives from the outer world, and reflecting on these. This forms the basis of our behaviour. Reduced to its essential core, our only ethical responsibility consists of “being as aware as possible of the interactions between these two worlds.”

3. The leadership programme

In this section we introduce the leadership programme “Working together, building together” as a strategic organisational development intervention. We describe what its key concepts are and how these are related to Hoebeke’s vision of responsibility.

The development of “negative capability”

In the course of the programme participants develop the ability to examine their own behavioural patterns in relationship to the outcomes produced, and to their own “way of being.” They internalise what French *et al.* termed “negative capability” (French, 2001; Simpson *et al.*, 2002). This is the ability to look, listen and feel, to become aware of the difference between what happens outside oneself and one’s own thoughts and feelings, without fleeing into activities, rationalisations or emotions. This ability to look in an unprejudiced manner creates the possibility of not falling into a fixed behavioural pattern (e.g. reacting immediately to “solve the problem”). One learns to look at what is in fact happening, where possibilities lie and how one can contribute to a future outcome or result. Negative capability is defined as “precisely the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty in order to allow for the emergence of new thoughts or perceptions” (Simpson *et al.*, 2002, p. 1211). At the moment of not acting and just observing, the reality and the facts can get through to the observer. One can see how one’s own attitude and behaviour contribute to a specific result. It becomes possible to distinguish between “what is” and what should be, according to one’s own apparently rational expectations. It is an important step in the direction of assuming responsibility for one’s own thoughts, for the way in which one perceives the world and for the way in which one acts. Only then, when one is aware of the difference between one’s own subjective perception of the world and the external realities, is there space to let go of fixed patterns of selective perception. This kind of responsibility is the first step in what Scharmer describes as shifting the state of awareness in order to deal with public and economic problems: from natural self-interest to operating with a mind that perceives concerns and issues of other persons and perspectives (Scharmer, 2009). This way, one becomes aware of the greater whole one takes part in.

The design of the leadership programme

The following three elements are central to the six-months programme design:

- (1) each participant carries out a real project, from the organisation’s strategic agenda;
- (2) each month, there is multi-day, plenary group-training: summing to a total of ten days; and
- (3) weekly telephone coaching of half an hour, focusing on one’s project progress.

Throughout the programme, one concrete project per participant plays the central role. This tripartite programme design is related to Revans’ (1998) action learning, in which the execution of a task is combined with learning from one’s own work experience. Seegers also demonstrates how learning from experience is appreciated by leaders; according to him and many others leaders or managers learn more through experience in their own work setting, than in more theoretical business courses or MBA’s (Seegers, 2009). Time and discipline play an important role in the programme. It extends over six months and is marked by weekly telephone coaching sessions. This design results in participants experiencing the programme as intense and essential (Karssiens *et al.*, 2009). During the monthly sessions participants are offered concepts, which they apply directly into their projects. Examples of these concepts are:

- (1) inquiry without judgement good/bad which creates space;
- (2) the triangle “way-of-being” – behaviour – result (for more on this, see below);

- (3) “Yes-but type conversations,” also called “the never-ending-games,” which in essence are power games on who has the last word (for more on this, see below);
- (4) creating space in these “yes-but type conversations” through behaviour so that one may experience ‘being possibility (for more on this, see the below);
- (5) recognising internal sentences (as “I want to win” or “I am not good enough”) by which many people are driven: and the freedom-enhancing feelings when trying to shake them off;
- (6) managing on the four attitudinal aspects of leadership: commitment, responsibility, being in relation and integrity (for more on this, see below);
- (7) creating a productive team; and
- (8) learning to think and create results “from the future.”

During the weekly half-hour coaching sessions, by telephone, attention is focused not only the results achieved in the projects. During these sessions participants are also asked about how these results relate to the attitude held by the participant and to the behaviour which he or she has exhibited. The whole programme is about gaining insight into the notion of personal responsibility, without immediately attaching judgements like “good” or “wrong.”

The delivery of the leadership programme was in the hands of experienced (at least five years) trainers with an academic education who combined that background with experience in group-dynamic and meditation training. They were not only experienced in leadings groups, but also in the facilitation of learning processes in one’s “way-of-being” in connection with behavioural patterns as well as producing results.

The weekly telephone coaching was given by coaches who, in daily life, are managers. They had been former participants in this programme. Also in their own daily work, they are well versed with the concepts used in this programme. Simultaneous to the delivering of this programme (for the department heads, in this project) these coaches followed a coaching programme: so that they recognized the concepts also in their own daily work again.

The programme design is geared towards making directly applicable in practice what participants have learned and, in addition, reflecting on this application during the coaching sessions. One could speak of a double embedding of the offered concepts.

The programme addresses a level other than the purely rational, namely that of experiencing and being touched in the heart. Kessels calls the moment of insight, understanding through the heart, the “poetic argument” (Kessels, 2006). “Only when you have been touched by someone or something, addressed at a different level than that of thinking routines, you can step outside your familiar, trusted perceptions. It is the being touched which opens eyes – the road to insight leads through the heart” (Kessels, 2006, p. 13). Suddenly a concept is no longer an abstract term, but something which is experienced in the here-and-now, something which one sees happening in oneself and/or in the environment.

Key concepts of the programme

“Way of being,” behaviour and result. The most important assumption underlying the programme is that responsibility is specified as the relationship between the results which someone creates and his or her “way of being.” The notion of “way of being” is

comparable to Carl Rogers' idea of "being human," (Rogers, 1980). "Way of being" is the source from which we act, the place in which our intention and attention resides. It is about the quality of attention and concentration and finds expression in the way we look, listen, feel, speak and act (Karssiens *et al.*, 2009). In other words, responsibility for one's own attitude, for what one does and says, is central in the leadership programme. One cannot disconnect oneself from one's "way of being" and the result which one creates. The "way of being" translates itself into a person's behaviour, which, in turn, determines the result created (see Figure 1).

"Never-ending game" and "being possibility". The second central concept in the leadership programme is the "never-ending game." This is a constantly recurring form of discussion marked by patterned behaviour and a fixed "way of being." A person's "way of being" takes on many different forms. We distinguish between two of these. On the one hand there is a "way of being" based on the judgements, opinions and convictions which every person builds up in the course of a lifetime. These are convictions or beliefs about oneself, the other or the environment, like "I don't do it well enough," "I don't belong," "I must keep everything under control" or "I must always be the winner" (also known as "scripts" in transactional analysis, see e.g. Harris, 1975). When ruled by such convictions, one perceives selectively and exhibits routine and defensive behaviour. The world is seen in terms of a duality, as subject and object, as "perceiver-independent" (Varela, 1999). This "way of being" leads to what Argyris called "skilled incompetence." "The ability to get along with others is always an asset, right? Wrong [...] And it's the very adeptness which is the problem. The explanation for this lies in what I call skilled incompetence, whereby managers used practiced routine behaviour to produce what they do not intend (incompetence)" (Argyris, 1986, p. 74). In this "way of being" everything centres on gaining power and being right. One manifestation of this power game is the "yes, but" conversation: it costs a great deal of energy, creates irritation and is highly unproductive. The "never-ending game" is marked by this type of "yes-but" discussion and is essentially a power struggle which begins with a persistent negative judgement. Kahane calls this kind of discussion "downloading": it is like reproducing the same file over and over again without changing it and without listening to other people (Kahane, 2004). In an organisation focused on command and control with strongly hierarchical relationships, this unproductive form of discussion occurs with great regularity, in the form of verbal fights and resistance to authority.

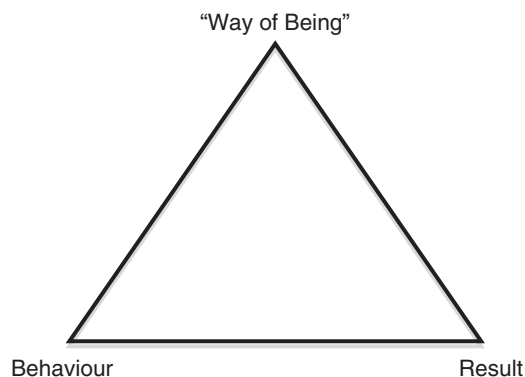


Figure 1.
The relationship between
"way of being," result
and behaviour

Once one is aware of one's fixed opinions and is able to look at these opinions as being "the truth" only in specific situations, one can step away from routine behavioural patterns and assume responsibility for oneself and one's thoughts. When one is able to let go of one's fixed "way of being" and look, listen and feel in a situation in an open-minded manner, a "way of being" evolves which, during the programme, is called "being possibility." From this angle the future is seen to offer opportunities instead of potential threats, and room is created for trust, creativity and imagination (see also Adler, 2011 and *Appreciative Inquiry*, e.g. in Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). "Being possibility" can also be described as "generative listening" or "presencing": being connected to something larger than oneself and allowing for the future to emerge, while maintaining an "open will," "open mind" and "open heart." Then it is possible to see a situation from the whole and act accordingly (Senge *et al.*, 2004; Scharmer, 2007). From "being possibility" a leader can inspire employees and move them into action to create results. It is an invitation to assume responsibility and apply one's talents in order to contribute to the organisation.

Four attitudinal aspects of leadership. A third concept consists of four so-called "attitudinal aspects of leadership" which participating leaders are offered. These are four aspects with which they can practically and effectively direct employees towards assuming personal responsibility (delegation):

- (1) *Commitment*: choosing for a specific result and at the same time not being overly attached to a specific way of reaching it. Choosing is something different from deciding, one's heart is involved.
- (2) *Responsibility*: knowing what one's contribution is to the achievement of a result. Responsibility is about being aware of the facts and acknowledging how these may differ from one's own expectations, feelings or opinions. In the leadership programme, the attitudinal aspect "responsibility" has the character of a practical concept, a working concept. This should be distinguished from Hoebke's more theoretical concept of "responsibility in one's own work system," which is being discussed in this case study.
- (3) *Being in relationship*: independent of the task at hand, being in relationship with one's staff means that one is in touch with these people and is aware of what is going on in the interaction.
- (4) *Integrity*: being true to your word. Sticking to your agreements. Integrity means: acting consistently with one's commitments (see (1)) within a specific time frame.

4. Case: leadership programme in a penal institution

The organisation we present in this case concerns a Dutch penal institution. It is a half open institution for male convicts. This means that prisoners work outside the prison during daytime. The organisation hierarchy consists of four layers:

- (1) the governor (or director) of the organisation;
- (2) unit managers who lead several departments;
- (3) department heads who manage their own department; and
- (4) employees who execute concrete tasks, for example guarding prisoners.

A penal institution is a closed society with strict rules concerning safety. This kind of organisation's culture is usually characterised by steep hierarchy, bureaucracy, forceful authority and relationships based on power differences. Cynicism and indifference are constant threats, as is finger pointing. This was also the case in the penal institution we introduce.

In this organisation the notion of personal responsibility had little meaning for the employees. Cynicism, indifference and a growing feeling of an unsafe working climate caused a situation which asked for an intervention. In 2005 the governor of the penal institution saw as a possible answer to the endemic employee cynicism: the programme "Working together, building together." "I found the concepts [of the leadership programme] to be the most fitting answer to the rampant cynicism in the organisation," he says now. "A good example of this cynicism is that jokes were always being made about everything – which only resulted in people not feeling the need to assume responsibility. Responsibility was always being placed outside oneself; concepts like leadership and so on could never be the subject of any fruitful discussion. Even your own behaviour was never the subject of discussion; it was always about the other guy, about your colleague. So an ever less safe climate began developing, a climate which also lacked integrity." The governor wanted to create a more positive and a safer working climate, in which trust would replace cynicism as the dominant factor. "A safe organisation is an organisation which permits one to learn from one's mistakes [...] if mistakes are not permitted [...] that is what dominates the entire process of policy-making [...] then you trigger a quest for zero percent risk, and you can never find that zero." The focus of the governor on creating a strong organisation with honest leaders can be compared to what Collins calls "level 5 leadership," in which personal modesty is combined with a strong professional will and commitment to build a viable organisation (Collins, 2004).

The strategic implementation of a culture of acting responsibly in the form of the leadership programme took place in 2005. The governor himself (we name him L in this case) was familiar with the programme, since he had taken part in it six years earlier. The unit managers of the organisation also had taken part in this programme in earlier years. In 2005, there were ten department heads. Five of them participated in the leadership programme in that year, on a voluntary basis. The programme was not meant for non-managerial employees.

Table I illustrates the career movements of L in this organisation. In this paper we describe only location A, with L as the governor: from 2006 onwards. Until 2000, L had

	1999-2000	2000-2005	2006 and onwards
Location A	L as unit manager		L as governor. In this function, he faced the threat of closing location A in 2006; he co-created a new, effective strategy together with his unit directors and department heads
Location B		L as governor. In this function, he initiated the leadership programme for locations A and B	

Note: At the time of the case in this paper he is the governor of location A

Table I.
The career movements of L, as of 1999, between locations A and B

been a unit manager in location A. Then he became the governor of location B: from 2000 until 2005. Here, L initiated the leadership programme for both locations. The programme took place in 2005 and the interviews were held in the beginning of 2009.

In 2006, a year after the intervention, the organisation[1] faced the threat of closure because of empty cells. A new strategy was needed. The development and execution of a new strategy was co-created with the department heads, who had developed a sense of responsibility and had become sparring partners for the governor. Employing people with the right attitude – and at the same time keeping an eye on the hard facts – are essential for being able to adjust to a changing environment (Collins, 2004). The governor was able, in close cooperation with the unit managers, department heads and the Workers Council, to first downsize the institution for male convicts. Then he enlarged the organisation by creating accommodation for young offenders, a completely new “market” for this organisation. This new strategy offered a better opportunity for safeguarding the continuity of the “business.” In the process, new job opportunities were created: the security department saw a growth from 20 to 60 employees. This strategy shows that the situation the organisation faced was approached from a perspective of choosing out of abundance, meaning acting from trust and possibilities, instead of acting from a perspective of decision making in scarcity (Jansen and Jägers, 2007; Hoebeke, 2004).

In 2007 a one-day training was offered to all employees of location A. This training was initiated as the result of an employee engagement survey and it was not related to the leadership programme “Working together, building together.” Everyone (all layers of the organisation) took part in this training. It turned out that there was fertile ground for this training: despite its short duration, it had a lasting effect. Its theme centred on “Speak, Discuss and Agree”; the term “SDA” was coined. The governor was able to ensure that this initiative meshed well with the “Working together, building together” programme. This short programme also contributed to the transition from a culture of cynicism and gossiping to one marked by responsibility and results.

In 2009, four years after the leadership programme, we held three in-depth interview rounds with the following persons:

- (1) The governor and one unit manager.
- (2) Four department heads who had participated in the programme in 2005, which amounts to 57 percent of all the department heads in 2009. In 2009, there were seven department head, of whom five had participated.
- (3) Six non-managerial employees who had not been involved in the training at all.

5. Department heads and employees tell

In this section we give the floor to the governor, the department heads and the employees we interviewed. They describe how the concept “responsibility” is alive in their organisation and show how certain key concepts from the “Working together, building together” programme still play a role in their daily conversations at work.

We do not pretend to be able to offer a direct link between the 2005 programme and the work practices in 2009, when we held the interviews. In the following we wish to show what assuming personal responsibility with regard to thinking, doing and acting looks like in the everyday practice of an organisation.

Responsibility for “way of being” and result

From the interviews it becomes clear that both the governor and the department heads really put the offered concepts into practice: by assuming responsibility for their own “way of being” and for the relationship with the results they produced; responsibility for what they say and do within their own work systems. The governor tells how he applies the concept in order to stimulate department heads to assume their responsibility:

One of my departments was performing well below par. Department head H did not deliver the results which were expected of him. I said to him, you are going to have to do something about it. If you don't, your department will come to nothing and you won't get the desired results. I demand results, and that also has to do with your attitude, your 'way of being.' If you simply want to be friends with everyone, then you will never tell people that they have to achieve results. Then you will only seek to be 'nice'. [...] So results and 'way of being' could become the subject of discussion. I took someone away from him, which forced him to assume his responsibility. At first he didn't understand, but I said, I did that because I want you to act responsibly (Governor).

Because department head H had followed the leadership programme in 2005, it was possible to discuss personal responsibility and the relationship between “way of being,” behaviour and result.

When the governor moved from location B to location A, he also noticed that these subjects were still being actively discussed throughout location A, even a year after the leadership programme:

We [in location A] also talk about that triangle. That it is about “way of being,” that it is about behaviour and that it is about results and that you have to involve your own ‘way of being’ in that. So you cannot separate yourself from the produced results. And that was a subject they were willing to discuss in location A, I must say. They were willing to discuss things like “don't exclude yourself,” “make yourself responsible for what happens here,” instead of always placing the blame on The Hague [the government] or the governor. That sort of thing is always a threat in prison organisations. I did notice that in location A they were actively working on these topics, and that therefore a discussion about it was possible (Governor).

The department heads in the interviews also show how they are aware of their own responsibilities for their “way of being,” their attitudes and what they set in motion as a result. One department head used the next metaphor:

[...] if you come to the conclusion as a truck driver that you are responsible, that you can load your truck yourself, determine your own route and that you can complete it between 8 and 5, that you have to live up to expectations and complete your assignment, but that in the end you can make all the decisions yourself, then you can sit behind the steering wheel whistling cheerfully [...] And if people in my team are resisting, do not want to accept change, then I say for example: one aspect of reducing the number of repeat offenders is that you confront a prisoner with his own behaviour, his own responsibility [...] “You are responsible for the consequences of the decisions you make. Not the district attorney, or your upbringing, your neighbour, your wife, your children; no, you are responsible.” But how can you ever convey that if you yourself, as staff member, are not prepared to undergo that change? (Department head, followed the training in 2005).

The employees describe how they have also experienced what it is to assume responsibility for their own attitudes and their contributions to the working climate. The term “SDA” has contributed to a better climate in which there is no room for

gossiping. In one department “SDA” has become a permanent agenda point. Some employees relate:

The core was, they wanted to root out gossiping a bit [...] I think they largely succeeded in their mission, because now you can say what you need to say every week.

It is also recognizable because it is a standard agenda item [...] the silent type, who sits back and says nothing, he is also asked: why aren't we hearing from you? Don't you have anything to say, or doesn't this concern you? “It always comes out during a team meeting. Then our department head helps us by saying: ‘Yes, SDA’” (Employees, did not follow the training in 2005 but they did take part in a one-day training in 2007).

Giving and assuming responsibility

In the programme “Working together, building together” leadership stands for giving and assuming responsibility. An example of assuming responsibility (and acting accordingly) is revealed when the department heads tell how they dealt with the arrival of the new governor in location A in 2006. Note that this governor was already familiar with location A, as he had been a department head there until 2002. Not all department heads looked forward to his return. They managed his arrival in a productive manner anyway and now work well together:

He [the new governor] was first seen as a threat by some department heads in location A. They asked us, the new people [who didn't know him] to have a chat with him, as a way to get acquainted. If the programme had not taken place, I think they would have gone themselves. They think that they shouldn't go there, but that we, the new people, should do that. Because we go into the discussion with an open mind (Department head, followed the training in 2005). In other words; the department heads who already knew the new governor were able to look at their own selective perceptions and then to step away from them.

The governor describes how people enjoy taking up their own responsibilities:

You can see how you are the cause and effect of things and that you can create success and that is of course a lot of fun. Once people have tasted freedom, you can generate a lot of enthusiasm. And then they said to me; “Oh, is that the way it is.” Yes, that is the way it is. And it is much more fun to do things this way. Instead of sitting around moaning about a colleague who isn't okay (Governor).

Together responsible for the organisation

The interviews revealed further that employees and department heads are aware of their own responsibilities within a greater whole, their responsibility to ensure that the penal institution is run well. A department head relates how the so-called “attitudinal aspects of leadership” help him to deal with someone with opposing vested interests, but who also contributes to the same greater whole:

[...] but it is essentially about those attitudinal aspects, communicating, being in relationship, integrity, responsibility. For example from my role, towards Security, functionally we appear to be at odds with each other. I have an open section, I have to take all kinds of people outside to allow them to reintegrate into society, and he wants to have procedures. Operationally I have contacts with his coordinators and then I must say, if you really use those attitudinal aspects, it all works very easily even when it is difficult because you actually have different vested interests (Department head, followed the training in 2005).

The employees amongst themselves also demonstrate that they feel jointly responsible for a smoothly operating organisation:

[I am responsible for] maintaining peace and order, in the entire process. So not only in my own department, but also outside it. It isn't the case that in a prison I am responsible in one department, but at the moment that he [a prisoner] walks through the gate towards his work station outside prison, I think: okay, now it's up to Security. It is everyone's responsibility (Employee, did not follow training in 2005 but did take part in one-day training in 2007).

A pleasant working climate

What becomes apparent in all the interviews in 2009 is that people work with pleasure in location A:

You very quickly forget how it is to work elsewhere [...] do you remember how it was in construction, or in the office? People have a sense of, it's good here. The climate, at all levels. You can always just sit around a table together (Employee, did not follow training in 2005 but did take part in one-day training in 2007).

The pleasant climate also impacts on inmates and visitors:

Criminals actually like to come here. They are permitted to indicate where they want to go [...] That's what I hear from the boys: 'Yeah, I heard it was okay here, so I asked to be placed here.

We also hear from visitors that they are treated normally when coming in, like people, not as wife or husband of a criminal [...] You have to treat people with respect (Employees, did not follow training in 2005 but did take part in one-day training in 2007).

6. Reflections and conclusions

We started this case study by describing the old culture in a Dutch penal institution. The organisation was characterised by steep hierarchy, forceful authority, rules and procedures. A lack of employee responsibility, finger pointing and cynicism were constant threats to its organisational health. For the governor this was the reason to request an intervention: the leadership programme "Working together, building together," for department heads. In this 2005 programme, acting responsibly and looking at one's own contribution to concrete results were central themes.

Four years after the delivery of the programme, we interviewed employees, department heads, a unit manager and the governor. It became clear that the concepts of the leadership programme were still alive and had defeated employee cynicism, the lack of integrity and the unsafe working climate. Important terms like "never-ending game," "attitudinal aspects of leadership" and "assumed threat" were even frequently used. Both leaders and employees in the organisation do seem to act responsibly now, and together create a cooperative working climate. One of the interviewees said "You have a greater sense of safety with relationships than with a locked door," in other words, you benefit more from mutual trust and a positive working relationship than from rules and procedures. Also, a far-reaching new strategy has been implemented based on responsibility, trust and cooperation between the governor, unit managers, department heads and the Workers Council. This resulted in a great sense of long-term continuity for the organisation at large. On a practical level it resulted in flexible types of prison cells, for adult and youth delinquents, and it had expanded the various job opportunities.

The interviews make two more things clear. Department heads see the relationship between their own “way of being” and the results they produce, and how these results can impact the organisation and its working climate in a positive way. They now experience meaningfulness and satisfaction in the context of a bureaucratic organisation full of rules and procedures. The programme turned out to be an effective antidote to employee cynicism, complaining and gossiping, because people are now proud of what they do.

Second, department heads (and to some extent also employees) have developed the ability to look at themselves and their own actions, without judging what one does, without opinions and “funny” remarks. This creates “space” in the minds of all employees in which one can clearly see what is going on, and also, what is needed and effective in a specific situation, apart from one’s own judgements, parochial interests and opinions. In other words, the level of intra-organisational power play, prototypical in a setting like this, had been greatly reduced.

What makes all the concepts of the leadership programme last in people’s minds, even after four years? We think it is because of the fundamental approach of this programme: the focus on one’s “way of being” in relationship with behaviour and results. Behavioural patterns and automatic reactions are examined at their roots: one’s way of being, which is rooted in one’s fundamental convictions and attitudes. A change in these convictions and attitudes can have an enormous impact on one’s behaviour, the result one produces and the relationship one creates.

Working with the rules, and therefore with the relationships with one another, that is what a bureaucratic, hierarchical organisation constantly has to wrestle with. The kind of programme we described in this case, which offers to regain assuming responsibility in one’s own work system, could probably also have a positive influence on other bureaucratic or hierarchical organisations. Why? Because it contains a collective training that appeals to people’s need for a productive and human approach to working and personal accountability: responsibility for one’s own daily work system (Hoebeker, 2004).

Note

1. From now on, when we mention ‘the organisation’, we mean location A (= the subject of this case study).

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Further reading

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