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Power and Control Tactics Employed by Prison Inmates —A Case Study*

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THROUGHOUT THE COURSE of my 31-year career as a correctional mental health professional, I have worked with countless prison inmates, both male and female, whose sole mission in life appeared to be the domination, exploitation, and/or humiliation of staff members. The tactics employed by inmates in the service of these objectives have ranged from the primitive and overt to the sophisticated and subtle. Sadly, many correctional employees have been victimized by such predation, and have incurred severe personal and professional losses in the process.

Elliott and Verdeyen (2002) suggested that inmates' efforts to con and manipulate staff are motivated by the *power orientation* (Walters, 1990), one of the eight primary thinking patterns underlying the criminal lifestyle. The power orientation is best described as the criminal's preoccupation with attaining a sense of dominion over others and absolute control over his or her environment (Elliott & Walters, 1997). This cognitive pattern consists of two crucial elements, first identified by Yochelson and Samenow (1976). When criminals are not in control of events and people in their immediate environment, they experience a *zero state*, in which they feel like failures, losers, or nobodies. In order to free themselves of this intolerable self-perception, they engage in a *power thrust* through which they reassert their sense of omnipotence and control, often at the expense of others (Walters, 1990).

In his chapter entitled "Getting Over the Shrinks," Samenow (1984) illustrated the different ways in which inmates try to deceive and outsmart counselors and other mental health professionals. Likewise, Sharp (2000), Cornelius (2001), and Allen and Bonta (1981) have described a host of ploys executed by criminals to control or obstruct staff. Elsewhere (Elliott & Verdeyen, 2002), I have catalogued 12 specific power and control tactics that I have frequently encountered in my clinical work with both state and federal prison inmates. Some inmates tend to prefer one tactic over another, while others are remarkably versatile in their attempts to deceive and manipulate staff. Likewise, the relative sophistication with which inmates engage in such gamesmanship is highly variable.

Over the course of a five-year period toward the end of my career with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, I enjoyed the challenge of working with an inmate whose versatility and creativity in seeking to exploit and manipulate staff have become legendary. He is, in my estimation, the

quintessential “con man,” whose “success” at outwitting and embarrassing prison staff resulted, at least in part, in his transfer from a state correctional system to the Bureau of Prisons. In the vignettes that follow, I will demonstrate how this inmate, hereafter referred to as “Larry,” employed each of the 12 power and control strategies. Several of these scenarios reflect my direct observations of or experiences with Larry, while the others are based on his own verbal or written accounts of his exploits. Each vignette is prefaced by a brief definition of the predominant underlying power and control tactic. More detailed descriptions of the 12 tactics can be found in the Elliott and Verdeyen article (2002).

TESTING refers to an inmate’s attempt to gather information about a staff member’s likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, tendency toward leniency and gullibility, or anything else that points toward susceptibility to manipulation. Such information is usually “filed away” for strategic use at a later date.

For a short while Larry was confined in the “Special Programs Unit” in a state prison. It was customary to hold a “community meeting” every Monday morning at which time inmates would share any grievances or other concerns regarding the operation of the unit. Confrontations of staff or fellow inmates were strictly prohibited, however. It was also understood that inmates were not to solicit personal information of any kind from staff members.

A brand-new housing unit officer was in attendance at one of the meetings. Larry decided to test the new officer’s gullibility and/or malleability. Larry noticed that the officer had brought a nice looking briefcase to work, and asked the staff member if it was a Christmas present. When the officer answered in the affirmative, Larry asked if he could take a look at it. The officer replied, “Sure, why not?,” and handed the briefcase to Larry.

Larry set the briefcase on the floor and proceeded to jump up and down on it. All of the inmates in attendance, and even some of the staff, erupted with laughter. Larry picked up the briefcase, returned it to the officer, and casually remarked, “I guess the commercial is true: A gorilla can jump on Samsonite without damaging it.” The unit officer, whose face was as red as an apple, quietly excused himself from the meeting while muttering obscenities under his breath. He was unable to live down the embarrassing experience for months.

DIVERSION refers to the attempt of an inmate or group of inmates to distract a staff member from the task at hand in order to engage in nefarious activity. Escapes, assaults, and other serious acts of misconduct often occur when an employee falls prey to such a ruse.

For two years, Larry had lived in the shadow of a high-profile inmate also housed on Death Row. (Larry had been sentenced to die by lethal injection after he murdered his cellmate in another prison.) On the eve of the high-profile inmate’s execution, Larry, a diabetic, took a syringe containing 95 units of insulin out of the hands of a physician’s assistant and injected the insulin directly into his veins. As a consequence of rapid and effective treatment by prison medical staff, Larry suffered no major physical damage.

Larry initially told staff that his action resulted from an impulsive decision to kill himself because he’d rather die by his own hand than “let the government take me out.” Larry was then placed in a special camera-equipped observation cell which had housed the high-profile inmate prior to his transfer to the lethal injection chamber. Larry was later overheard bragging to another Death Row inmate that he was now the “number one attraction on the Row,” and that he would do whatever he needed to do in order to remain in the cell that conferred that status.

EXTORTION refers to any measure employed by an inmate that is intended to threaten, intimidate, or otherwise coerce a staff member into doing something which he or she should not or does not want to do.

While residing in a maximum security state prison, Larry established and maintained a reputation as a “broker” who could “acquire” virtually any item that he or another inmate might desire. For example, he managed to secure marijuana, handcuff keys, and even a .22

caliber pistol and shells. Not surprisingly, he relied heavily on certain staff members to bring in many of the illicit items he sought as well as to provide personal services such as taking his mail to a local post office and affording him unrestricted access to a telephone. One staff member even brought in federal tax forms, which Larry used to file bogus returns, thereby allowing several inmates to receive income tax refunds.

To guarantee the cooperation and loyalty of these carefully chosen prison employees, Larry maintained detailed records of the dates, times, locations, and amounts paid or received for all services rendered by his “agents.” He even paid for each staff member to use a long-distance calling card that was issued to a telephone number on the outside, thereby creating another device for tracking his “employees’” activities. Consequently, no one who “worked” for Larry could afford to steal from him or fail to follow through with an assignment. To do so would result in losing their jobs or facing criminal prosecution.

DISREPUTATION refers to an inmate’s attempt to undermine a staff member’s authority and/or discredit his/her professional stature by impugning the employee’s competence and expertise. Usually, the inmate hopes that the staff member will lose status in the eyes of peers or supervisors.

Larry managed to escape from a state prison shortly after the 6:00 a.m. count had been taken and cleared. He knew that no one would know he was missing for at least a few hours. Around 9:00 a.m., he called the institution and informed the Captain that he needed to conduct an emergency count. The Captain regarded the call as a prank and hung up the phone in anger. Larry proceeded to call Department of Corrections headquarters and report that a prisoner had escaped from the prison and the Captain had been notified but was uninterested.

Following his apprehension a few days later, Larry learned that the Captain had been severely reprimanded for failing to conduct an emergency count immediately after receiving the anonymous call. Larry proudly announced that he was the “anonymous” caller and was immediately transferred to a different institution in order to protect the Captain from allegations of retaliation against Larry in any way.

NEGOTIATION refers to an inmate’s offer to exchange information or something else of value to staff for some kind of accommodation or dispensation desired by the inmate. This ostensible quid pro quo arrangement rarely turns out to be as beneficial to staff as it is to the inmate.

One day Larry announced that he was embarking on a “hunger strike” to protest the lack of time and privacy he was offered during a recent visit with a Catholic nun with whom he had been corresponding. After several discussions with the Unit Manager, Chaplain, and Warden, it was decided that Larry would be permitted to meet with the nun in a room normally reserved for attorney visits. Larry agreed to resume eating and the first of several visits was scheduled.

Several weeks later, Larry announced that he wished to convert to Catholicism and presented a letter from the nun indicating that she would be willing to make arrangements for a local priest to perform the conversion ceremony. The request was approved and the ceremony was scheduled. However, less than a week before the event, the Warden received a call from the archbishop of the major metropolitan area closest to the institution. The archbishop stated that he would personally perform the ceremony for not only Larry but for another Death Row inmate as well.

RUMOR CLINIC refers to an inmate’s dissemination of information, or more frequently misinformation, in order to malign a staff member’s character. Such “gossip” spreads quickly among the inmate population and, unfortunately, is sometimes perpetuated by other employees.

Most federal prisons have a small cadre of staff who investigate potentially criminal activities such as homicides, serious assaults, escape plots, drug distribution, and incidents involving weapons. As a consequence of his entrepreneurial and often criminal exploits in state prisons, Larry was frequently a subject of interest to the investigator in one particular federal prison.

Larry was often placed in segregated housing while the chief investigator followed up on information or suspicion that the inmate was engaging in criminal behavior "behind the walls."

Larry soon reached the point at which he had "suffered" enough at the hands of the investigator. He managed to gain access to a typewriter, obtain a copy of a memo from the Captain to the Warden, and alter the memo to read as follows:

"It has come to my attention that Lt. _____ [the chief investigator] was recently arrested in the _____ club, a well known gay bar in _____ Missouri. Lt. _____ is a member of the well known militant gay activist group "Act Out." It is my opinion that his actions have created embarrassment and damaged the reputations of men and women employed here. Staff morale is at an all time low. Immediate disciplinary action should be taken against Lt. _____."

After purchasing photocopy cards from the prison commissary, Larry made 100 copies of the memorandum. With the assistance of other inmates, copies were posted on each housing unit bulletin board and on every table in the dining hall. Although the allegations against the investigator were found to be spurious, he was nonetheless subjected to stressful and time-consuming scrutiny by Internal Affairs officials.

REVENGE refers to an inmate's effort to retaliate against a staff member because of perceived mistreatment or neglect. Although revenge can assume virtually any form, it often involves an inmate's submission of a formal grievance or initiation of a lawsuit against an employee.

At some point during his first year of confinement on Death Row (at the prison where I was employed as a psychologist), Larry asked me if he could receive a copy of a routine mental status report I had recently completed on him. (Such reports are required for all inmates who are confined in a "special housing unit" every 30 days.) Consistent with agency policy, I provided Larry with a copy of that report, the content of which was utterly unremarkable: No psychopathology was noted and the inmate's attitude and demeanor were assessed in generally favorable terms. However, Larry vehemently objected to my failure to cite his positive contributions to morale in the unit as well as his availability to speak with officials who tour the unit. I explained to Larry that 1) I had not directly observed the behavior for which he wanted "credit," and 2) such matters did not fall under the purview of the "30-Day Review" report.

Several days later I was summoned to the Associate Warden's office. The "AW" informed me that I could no longer utilize the standard monthly review form. Larry had pointed out to the Warden that the form was explicitly designed for use in conventional special housing units (e.g., disciplinary segregation, protective custody, administrative detention, etc.). The Warden agreed that a separate form should be used for inmates on Death Row. Accordingly, I was directed to develop such a form, submit it to central office for review and approval, and, in the meantime, write considerably more extensive narrative reports on Death Row inmates in lieu of the 30-Day Review form.

INGRATIATION refers to a ploy whereby an inmate attempts to endear himself or herself to a staff member by doing or saying something for which the employee feels a sense of gratitude and possibly an inclination to reciprocate in some way. However, the inmate is always careful not to explicitly ask for such reciprocity.

During our first meeting following his admission to Death Row, Larry chronicled his history of contacts with mental health professionals. He spoke at length regarding his involvement in "regular therapy sessions" with a psychologist at his previous institution. Larry stated that he had learned more from Dr. _____ than he had from "all the other shrinks put together." I told him that I was glad that he found his working relationship with Dr. _____ to be so meaningful and productive. However, I advised him that "regular" counseling sessions were highly unlikely at this time and place.

A week or so later, I received a call from the Death Row unit manager who reported that Larry

was most anxious to see me. Upon my arrival, he told me that he had received a letter from Dr. _____, who indicated that I was “one of the most highly respected psychologists in the Bureau” and a “stand up guy” as well. Larry further stated that Dr. _____ had suggested that I “would do the right thing by him (Larry),” and the “quality of sessions” with me would more than compensate for their in- frequency. As I started to respond with an expression of gratitude for Dr. _____’s comments, Larry asked, “So when can we have our first private session?”

SPLITTING refers to a maneuver whereby an inmate pits one staff member against another in an effort to curry favor or undermine one or both employees. It is a manifestation of the classic military strategy known as “divide and conquer.”

At any given time, up to three psychologists, including me, made regular rounds in the Death Row unit where Larry was housed. During a routine mental status check conducted by a female psychologist, Larry informed her that he knew that she was assigned to work with family members of victims of another Death Row inmate whose execution was imminent. The psychologist neither confirmed nor denied the information, and redirected the conversation to Larry’s mental status. The inmate, undeterred, commended Dr. _____ for providing an “important and much needed service to those poor souls.”

Later in the same week, Larry asked to speak to a male psychologist who was interviewing an inmate in a nearby cell. Larry remarked, rather indignantly, that he found it “outrageous and inappropriate” that Dr. _____(the female psychologist) was permitted to make rounds in Death Row. He asserted that “there’s no way that she can do right by the guys in this unit since her loyalties are to the “other side” (victim’s families). Besides, most of the guys want you to be the unit psychologist since you’re going to be with us the day of the execution. Plus that, you seem to be less judgmental about us than Dr. _____(female psychologist).” The male psychologist replied, “I see your point. I’ll take this up with the chief psychologist.”

BOUNDARY INTRUSION refers to an inmate’s attempt to establish a personal relationship with a staff member. The goal of this type of power-based maneuver is to neutralize the employee’s status as an authority figure and “level the playing field” with the inmate.

During a stint in a state prison, Larry’s job assignment was that of “head clerk” in the kitchen. His duties included assigning jobs to other inmates, scheduling kitchen officers’ hours of duty, ordering supplies from the outside warehouse, and preparing purchase orders for outside vendors. The kitchen supervisor signed the paperwork, but otherwise left the operation to Larry, thereby offering him untold freedom and perquisites of which he took full advantage.

One day the “boss” (kitchen supervisor) disclosed that his wife suffered from a chronic illness and needed someone to look after her. However, he revealed that he didn’t have the money to pay for a companion for his wife. Larry promptly stated that he knew of an agency that handled legal immigrants who, for room, board, and a small stipend, would perform housekeeping duties and provide companionship for the elderly or infirm. He offered to find the agency’s phone number and give it to the boss, who eagerly accepted the offer. Two weeks later, a 25-year-old Hispanic female, highly recommended by the agency, moved into the boss’s home.

Within days, the boss told Larry that things were starting to go missing, people were calling for the new housekeeper day and night, and his wife reported considerable discomfort with the situation. He stated that he had decided to cancel the arrangement, but no one ever answered when he called the agency’s number that Larry had given him. The boss further indicated that his next step was to call the Better Business Bureau. Larry suggested that the boss might want to think twice about doing so. He informed his supervisor that there was no agency and that his wife’s caretaker was the girlfriend of one of the other inmates working in the kitchen.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE refers to an inmate’s exploitation of political, financial, or other personal resources to undermine staff authority or circumvent established policy and procedure. Such resources can be located either inside or outside the prison.

One day Larry informed the Unit Manager that an execution date had been set for one of the inmates on Death Row. The Unit Manager responded that he was unaware of this development, and questioned the accuracy of Larry's information. Nevertheless, the Unit Manager, who had found Larry's "news reports" and predictions to be uncannily accurate, called the Warden to see if he had heard anything about the establishment of an execution date. The Warden replied that he had not.

Several hours later, the Warden called the Unit Manager and told him that an execution date—the one cited by Larry—had just been announced by the Justice Department. At the Warden's direction, the Unit Manager went to Larry's cell and asked him how he knew in advance about the execution date. Larry smiled and replied that he learned of the date during a phone call with a friend who managed his website. The Unit Manager, utterly incredulous, asked Larry what he meant by "my website." The inmate retorted, "Oh, yeah. You didn't know that I have my own website, which deals with all kinds of information about capital punishment? Let me give you the web address so you can check it out."

SOLIDARITY refers to an organized attempt by a group of inmates to compel staff to undertake a course of action considered favorable, or abandon an initiative deemed unfavorable, to the inmates. Solidarity is often based on the inmates' geographic origin, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or gang membership.

For approximately two years, Larry was one of only three white inmates housed in the Death Row unit. Larry quickly convinced the other two that their survival would hinge on the extent to which they "hung tight together." In reality, racial conflict was never a problem within the unit since most if not all of the inmates were preoccupied with filing appeals and/or establishing comfortable daily routines. Larry, however, perceived and sought to exploit an opportunity to enhance his status and reputation both within and beyond the Death Row unit.

First, at Larry's suggestion, all three inmates alleged that they were the subject of discriminatory treatment by the Justice Department, which was being criticized for the disproportionate number of minority inmates sentenced to death. The three white inmates argued that they were "sacrificial lambs" in the sense that their appeals for mercy or clemency would fall on deaf ears; according to Larry, the Justice Department would "have to kill us to prove that it's not just the Blacks who are getting the needle." Larry made sure that this concern was prominently featured on his web site. Unit staff, quite understandably, found themselves "walking on egg shells" around and "going the extra mile" for these inmates.

Second, and again at Larry's behest, the three inmates entered into an agreement to "tell their stories to the world." This initiative culminated in the publication of two books incorporating autobiographies, accounts of experiences living on Death Row, and even an alternative explanation for why one of the three had committed the crime which led to his death sentence. Although one of the inmates was not listed as a co-author of either publication, he was both a source of information for and primary subject of both. The management of telephone contact and correspondence between the inmates and publishers became a major problem for staff. For example, it became necessary to house the three inmates close to each other due to their need to communicate with one other as well as attorneys, agents, and others concerned with the publications .

Summary and Conclusion

This case study was intended to illustrate 12 common expressions of the power orientation, one of the eight primary criminal thinking patterns identified by Walters (1990). The subject for this study is an actual prison inmate that I knew over a period of five years. Although he serves as an exemplar for the 12 power and control tactics, correctional staff are sure to encounter various manifestations of these ploys regardless of the inmate population and individual prisoners with whom they work.

Through the identification and exemplification of all 12 power and control-seeking maneuvers, it

is my fervent hope to protect correctional employees from sacrificing their careers or personal lives by succumbing to such tactics. In earlier publications (Elliott, 2002; Elliott & Verdeyen, 2002), I have outlined both prevention and intervention strategies that correctional staff can use to effectively combat these and other manifestations of the power orientation.

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