



## **CPS Gives Aboriginal Inmates a Second Chance** **By Ken McCluskey, Dave Place, Andrea McCluskey and Don Treffinger**

In 1992-93, a program called Second Chance was offered to a number of aboriginal inmates in Manitoba (Place, 1994; Place & McCluskey, 1995). Since Creative Problem Solving (CPS) training was an integral part of the package, we thought we'd take this opportunity to share the findings and implications with the team from Buffalo and the readers of the Communiqué.

All participants were aboriginal (from the 21 First Nation Reserves served by Human Resources Development Canada in Selkirk, Manitoba), and all had run afoul of the law and served time in provincial jails. All 31 inmates (27 male and 4 female), ranging in age from 19 to 46, had served sentences for theft, fraud, breaking and entering, assault, physical and sexual abuse (of women and or children), or murder (as a young offender).

Participants of Second Chance had served their sentences and been cleared for release to half-way houses or on their own recognizance. All had expressed a desire to "go straight." The program gave them an opportunity to receive pre-release support before reentering the community. During the life of the project, and for one year afterward, participants were monitored by the Department of Corrections. At the same time, a control group of 31 inmates from the same 21 reserves were selected and matched by computer search to be monitored as well. The control group was released without preparation or direction of any kind. We view them as representative of the majority of inmates who are "warehoused" and summarily deposited back into society, without intervention, after serving their sentences.

The reason for the development of Second Chance is the distressingly high recidivism rate for inmates leaving prison. Some estimates suggest that recidivism rates of 50%-70% are not unusual (e.g, Correction Services, 1991; Gendreau, Madden & Leipziger, 1977). Despite some questions as to who should be considered "native" in their sample, Canfield and Drinnan (1991) suggested that recidivism may in fact be higher among aboriginals. (Of the 31 participants in Second Chance, 18 had previous convictions and these participants were chosen from those who wanted to improve their lot in life.) Considering the lack of opportunity and the social plight of our native people, it would make sense for the recidivism rate to be higher among that population. Therefore, we decided to explore this further and intervene if possible.

There were two phases to Second Chance. The first was an 11-week life skills (classroom activities) component, the second a four-week supervised work experience. Participants were also monitored for one year following the program with no further intervention taking place. During the follow-up year, the ex-inmates could either "go straight" or re-offend.

To begin the life skills portion, we ran each inmate through a battery of inventories (interest, learning style, academic, and vocational), and used that information to help plot direction and develop individual growth plans (Feldhusen, 1995). Emphasis was placed on career exploration and employment skills (including resume writing, interviewing, and job search). To get ready for CPS, a variety of other topics were covered, including verbal and non-verbal communication, groupthink, self-concept, self-fulfilling prophecy, and conflict resolution. (McCluskey, Treffinger, Isaksen & McCluskey, in press).

Moving to CPS (Isaksen, Dorval & Treffinger, 1994; Treffinger, Isaksen & Dorval, 1994), we started out by teaching the participants several tools in rather direct fashion following the Creative Learning Model (Treffinger, Isaksen & Dorval, 1994). Our intent was to help the inmates begin to organize problem-solving strategies and ensure that they could learn to apply the tools not only in the sheltered classroom situation, but later in real life settings as well. In a typical classroom day, participants were encouraged to identify concerns, paradoxes, and challenges, to think about the other point of view, to examine different alternatives, and to consider new approaches and ways to handle their frustrations and problems.

It was essential for the participants to recognize creative thinking as a divergent process and to use it to generate new alternatives. Equally important was the need for them to learn to think more critically - to narrow the focus in convergent fashion to identify pragmatic, realistic solutions to their dilemmas. To make their way in the larger social setting, individuals must select alternatives that not only meet their own needs, but also fit within the prevailing norms. We suspect that recidivist inmates are not especially skillful in this regard.

Many participants appreciated specific tools such as CARTS (evaluating Cost, Acceptance, Resources, Time, and Space of alternatives). For many of us, it's second nature to consider these criteria, but it became apparent that most of the inmates had not assimilated these sorts of skills early in life. Instead, their impulsive, unsystematic styles consistently created more problems than they solved. Fabiano, Robinson and Porporino (1990) and Ross and Fabiano (1985) proposed that offenders often act out in impulsive, egocentric fashion which, not surprisingly, interferes with decision making, employability, and general functioning in society.

The inmates then took a more active role by practicing problem-solving skills in the supportive, non-threatening lifeskills classroom. Gradually, they became comfortable with the tools and processes, and eager to have the opportunity to work with real-life problems in on-the-job situations. The month-long job placement enabled us to monitor and receive feedback about the participants' performance, and to support them in fine-tuning and building their skills.

Group interaction during the job placement facilitated bonding, provided a support system (the first for many), and encouraged participants to listen,

empathize, and help each other find innovative new solutions to old problems. In group sessions, participants explored promising possibilities, examined potential directions, and developed practical action plans.

The program also encouraged the inmates to start giving some thought to their actions. For many, conforming blindly to the will of peers had led to poor decision making and a life of crime. Several of the CPS tools had shown them how to overcome this barrier and move toward a positive, productive lifestyle. At the conclusion of the classroom portion of the project, most ex-inmates were able to identify their own style of problem solving.

For the month-long work experience portion of the program, participants were placed in a job setting. Eighteen employers volunteered to serve as workplace hosts, and ex-inmates were placed in a variety of positions (e.g., in warehouses, construction, fast food restaurants, furniture factories, hair styling, offices, photography studios, grocery stores, recreation centers, the fishing industry, etc.). There was direct, intensive monitoring of the participants' performance on the job site. Participants also returned to the classroom on a regular basis to discuss their progress. This gave each person a chance to seek feedback and advice from the facilitator and from peers.

Second Chance had a tremendous impact. The extent of the recidivism problem among native inmates was highlighted by monitoring the non-treated group (i.e., those who did not participate in the training program). After a year, 90.32% (28 of 31) of these individuals faced additional charges since release. The alarmingly high rate of recidivism in the control group is something of an indictment of our prison system which releases criminals, without any preparation, only to have them re-offend time and time again.

In contrast, only 38.71% (12 of 31) of the Second Chance participants re-offended. This recidivism rate is still far too high, but it certainly represents a marked improvement. These data indicate that a blended program of life skills, CPS, and on-the-job training can significantly reduce recidivism among native inmates. We are not so naive as to suppose it will be possible to cut the actual dollars spent in our prisons by 51.61%, but a pronounced reduction could well become realistic through this type of intervention. The Second Chance results suggest that it is definitely worth exploring the possibilities further.

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