

Summary

Training of prison personell in “Verbal Judo”: plan and process evaluation

The research

“Verbal Judo” (Thompson, 1984) is a method in which people approach others in a calm and empathic manner in order to generate voluntary compliance and to avoid escalation of conflicts. The training method is widely used by personnel of the police and prisons in the United States. This is supposed to lead to a substantial reduction of complaints against the police and to fewer incidents in prisons. Since 2006, employees of prisons in the North of The Netherlands have also been trained in Verbal Judo. The most important goal hereof was to increase safety in the prison workplace.

In order to find whether the content of the training program can generate the desired outcome and whether the training can be implemented within the Dutch context, the Scientific Research- and Documentation Center (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice has asked Impact R&D to do a plan and process evaluation. A decision can be made based on this evaluation whether the training should be continued and implemented in prisons elsewhere in the country. The evaluation, conducted during the period of May-September 2007, is described in this paper. The document comprises of two main parts: the plan evaluation (chapters 1 through 5) and the process evaluation (chapters 6 through 10). In chapter 11 the general conclusions are presented and the feasibility of a possible outcome evaluation is discussed.

The research questions for the plan evaluation are presented in chapter 1; those for the process evaluation in chapter 6. In order to answer these questions information has been gathered from several sources: 1) relevant documents about the training and the implementation have been studied, 2) registrations of incidents and other relevant variables have been collected, 3) scientific research literature has been studied, 4) staff and inmates have been interviewed, 5) the researchers have observed a day of Verbal Judo training and a Verbal Judo day for managers.

Findings of the plan evaluation

The main purpose of the plan evaluation was to find what constitutes the Verbal Judo-method and whether it is based on theories and methods that support its effectiveness with results from scientific research. The plan evaluation found that Verbal Judo consists of several methods which aim to use an empathic manner in order to generate voluntary compliance from prisoners and thereby avoid escalation of conflicts. Verbal Judo is based on the principles of 'regular' judo, where the goal is to 'move with' the attacker in order to diffuse and gain control of the situation. The training institute of the Department of Prisons (Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen) has translated the American training program and has gained approval of the Dutch program from the American Verbal Judo Institute. The content of the Dutch training is largely the same as the American training. The 'Five-Step Hard Style' (in Dutch: GREEP) is the core of the training. It stands for the actions which have to be taken to generate voluntary compliance from prisoners: 1) ask (ethical appeal), 2) set context (reasonable appeal), 3) present options (personal appeal), 4) confirm (practical appeal) and 5) act (determination of appropriate action). Two elements are added to the Dutch training (Leary's Rose and the development of a safety plan by the team).

There is no theoretical basis available for the effectiveness of the training and it is not clear why the chosen methods were included and others were not. A number of elements from Verbal Judo can be found in scientific research literature about related methods: general aggression training (Markus, 2000), Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), handling resistance in childrearing situations and in therapeutic treatments by psychologists (Brehm, 1996; Lange, 2006). Research on these methods and their underlying theories (notably Brehm's Reactance Theory) shows that particularly the elements of showing empathy, the use of general rules of communication and methods for dealing with resistance can be effective methods.

The training is meant for all Penitentiary Institution Personell (in Dutch: PIW-ers) and their department heads; no selection is made. All PIW-ers are required to participate in the training. The training starts with a half day of preparation by the trainer and the department head and thereafter consists of a 4-day training program of personnel, during which the department head has the option of participating as co-trainer. Attendance and acceptance by participants and their supervisors are important. Additionally follow-up and quality control are necessary to ensure that personnel will start to apply and continue to apply the learned

skills in the workplace. Department heads are responsible for quality control.

Findings of the proces evaluation

The main purpose of the process evaluation was to find whether the method has been implemented in practice in accordance with the plan. At present this is not the case in the evaluated prisons. The process evaluation shows that neither the training nor the follow-up and quality control are implemented in accordance with the plan. Also insufficient measures have been taken to provide structural insight into the quality of the implementation. Also, some choices for the implementation of the trainingprogramme (teamwise-training and adding a safetyplan to the training programme) may have had less positive results, especially on resistance of personell.

The general opinion of the PIW-ers was that the training was especially useful for new personnel. For themselves they often thought the training unnecessary although many employees reported having learned new techniques. PIW-ers in general notice few changes in the workplace and in safety. Managers do notice improvements: a better approach of prisoners by personnel, and fewer complaints and lawsuits, absence management interviews and punishment reports. They indicate that Verbal Judo will be just one of the causes for the changes, besides for instance the training aimed at dealing with aggression between members of personnel, which was held shortly before the Verbal Judo training, or a different make up of the team.

Conclusions

Even though no extensive theoretical basis for Verbal Judo has been described by the developer, a number of the implemented methods can also be found in related methods aimed at dealing with prisoners and precluding aggression. Scientific research shows that these methods are based on theoretical foundations and can be effective. Based on this one might expect that the mentioned elements may also be effective in the framework of Verbal Judo. Because the combination of these methods, with this target-group, in this context, has not yet been tested, further research would be necessary to verify this. Herein should be researched whether the method –as stated by the developer- is equally useful for all types of personnel.

Before further research can be meaningful, it is necessary for the training to be conducted in accordance with the plan. This is not the case. Both the training and the follow-up are not implemented

in accordance with the plan. This does not per se mean that the desired outcomes are not produced. But because insufficient measures have been taken for quality control, there is insufficient insight into the quality of the implementation and there is a risk that intervention will not be possible when needed. Foreign research into different training programs shows that outcomes are highly dependent upon the quality of the trainers. The effects of training by trainers who are not competent and do not implement the program as planned can even lead to counter-productive outcomes (Barnoski, 2004). Quality control is therefore essential. Furthermore, if the content of the implementation varies between different trainers or different PI's, it will no longer be clear what exactly will be measured. These issues must be resolved, before an outcome evaluation will be meaningful.

In order to interpret these conclusions it is important to know that the implementation of new interventions in the field of justice is often met with difficulties, which has been shown through research (Miller & Rollnick, 2005; Hollis, 2007). It is apparently difficult to introduce new work methods into a relatively complicated and large organization in which a lot of stress is a part of every day. In that sense the issues which have surfaced in the implementation of Verbal Judo are certainly not an exception.