Case Study

Towards a Society without Re-offending

By Lena Leong

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute of Leadership and Organisation Development (ILOD) promotes and supports the development of leadership and organisation development capabilities in the Singapore Public Service. Its research seeks to inform and sharpen practice of effective leadership and organisational intervention in public agencies.

ABSTRACT

After 10 years, the “Yellow Ribbon Project” (YRP) continues to create awareness, generate acceptance and inspire community action towards the rehabilitation and re-integration of ex-offenders into society. This case study traces the key milestones of the YRP and shows the vision and bold experiments of the Singapore Prison Service and its partners. It presents the intuition and commitment of individuals and organisations to create sustainable behavioural change in society, as well as the challenges that they faced and how they overcame these challenges. The YRP story is an example of how passionate individuals changed the mindset of society.

KEYWORDS

Governance, social, rehabilitation and reintegration, community programme, organisation change and leadership.

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Towards a Society without Re-offending

Introduction

In 1998, the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) was confronted with two pressing issues — an overcrowded prison that was straining infrastructure and resources, and a shortage of manpower due to difficulties in staff retention and recruitment. The situation was compounded by poor public perception of the organisation and its work. Prison officers were overworked and had low morale. The situation became so bad that SPS had to ask its parent Ministry, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), to slow down law enforcement. SPS was also seriously contemplating overseas recruitment of prison officers to address the manpower shortage.

Towards the end of that year, Chua Chin Kiat was appointed Director of Prisons. Chua felt that a mere increase in staff headcount would not address SPS’s problems and that they had to find new ways to reform the prison system. One of the first things that he did was to create regular platforms for his leadership team to meet. Every officer two levels down from Deputy Director of SPS would meet together with Chua every Monday and Friday over breakfast. These were informal chats for the group to educate him on running of the prisons and for Chua to share with them his principles, values and aspirations for the service. Wednesdays were set aside for more formal meetings to deliberate on issues raised at the breakfast meetings. Chua also set up a Research & Planning Branch to research, network with other research and correctional services, and co-ordinate organisation-wide initiatives. The Branch, with initially a Branch Head and two officers, scanned the literature on the practice of prison systems across the world. It tested and implemented many new ideas. Subsequently, the Branch instituted 3-year planning horizons and introduced an evidence-based orientation and approach to rehabilitation of inmates in SPS.

“... before I formally took over, I had already resolved to do two things. One, I would look deeper into the possibility of introducing a formal structure to deliver programmes aimed at creating positive change in the prison inmates. In order to tackle the problem of overcrowding, I must stop the revolving door. Two, I would introduce a forward looking element in the organisation of the service to take up research and planning, and ultimately to develop intellectual properties in the core competency areas of the Prison Service.”

Chua Chin Kiat
Director
Singapore Prison Service
(1999–2007)
The Ripple Concept

SPS was a secure and safe institution with a zero escape rate, but Chua questioned its value proposition if its focus was only on maintaining security and safety within the prisons. The recidivism rate then was high, at 44.4 per cent, which meant that almost half the ex-offenders returned to prison within two years of release. How was SPS creating a safer society if it did not do anything to reduce repeat offences? Chua saw rehabilitation, and not incarceration, as the way forward.

Even though rehabilitation had always been one of SPS’s guiding values, it remained a remote concept to prison officers, whose role was mainly custodial. Rehabilitation was considered the job of counsellors and volunteers. Efforts towards rehabilitation were fragmented and limited to work regimes, education and religious counselling. Prior to Chua’s arrival at SPS, pockets of staff were already disturbed by trends that revealed inter-generational prisoners, which meant the children of inmates were becoming offenders. However, SPS’s proposal to set up a Rehabilitation Division was rejected by the MHA. The reason being that the Ministry was concerned whether “the huge amount of resources requested for would produce any results”.1 Given the lack of a vision for the future, SPS saw itself as a high security ship with no destination.2

Ideas on the desired future of SPS were shared at its Work Plan Seminar in May 1999, where junior prison officers were invited to participate for the first time in SPS’s history. The concept of a ripple, which came from one of the pre-seminar work groups, was used to symbolise and explain how organisational change could be achieved (see Figure 1). Prison officers, at the centre of the ripple, must first be committed to the task of reforming inmates. They were the ones to set off the first wave. Inmates, who would respond to the actions of the prison officers, then set off the second ripple of change. To sustain the change in inmates, their families, the criminal justice system, and the community must be supportive. This ripple would then create a change in attitudes towards ex-offenders nationally and internationally.

Chua believed SPS’s vision had to be developed “by the staff for the staff” in order for it to outlast his tenure in SPS, so he invited all prison officers to give their views at focus groups and over online chats after the seminar. Although most prison officers embraced the idea of rehabilitation, many also feared that “better” treatment would encourage defiance in inmates and compromise security. Of those who gave feedback, 250 prison officers across the ranks who had the most interesting ideas were invited to a 2-day visioning retreat, where many more divergent views surfaced. SPS senior management pushed ahead to craft SPS’s vision.

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The initial vision proposals were met with scepticism by MHA. Security was MHA’s paramount consideration and “Ministry officials intimated that the bosses felt that the vision statement gave the impression that the Prison Service had gone soft.”\(^3\) Chua and his senior management team assured the Ministry that rehabilitation would be on top of what SPS was doing and they would test the idea as a pilot without additional resources. SPS’s persistence paid off. After several rounds of refinement, including a revisioning exercise with representatives from MHA, SPS was given the go-ahead to experiment with rehabilitation. Its new mission and vision statements were officially announced by the Home Affairs Minister at the ground-breaking ceremony of the new Changi Prison Complex in December 1999:

“I wanted the statement to be publicly unveiled to commit the Service and the government to the cause. The families of inmates and community at large also needed to be enrolled into the vision for it to work ... I therefore needed not only to persuade my parent Ministry to approve the mission and vision statements but also the Minister to unveil it.”

\begin{flushright}
Chua Chin Kiat  
Director  
Singapore Prison Service  
(1999–2007)  
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**Mission**

As a key partner in Criminal Justice, we protect society through the safe custody and rehabilitation of offenders, cooperating in prevention and after-care.

**Vision**

We aspire to be captains in the lives of offenders committed to our custody. We will be instrumental in steering them towards being responsible citizens with the help of their families and the community. We will thus build a secure and exemplary prison system.

The new mission and vision statements started a fundamental mindset shift in SPS — beyond security and safety to the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders into society. They injected a sense of purpose and urgency, and became instrumental in shaping many of SPS’s subsequent strategies, including the Yellow Ribbon Project.

**Becoming Captains of Lives**

Prison officers, at the heart of the ripple, were SPS’s agents for change. The participative nature of the visioning exercise was a turning point in SPS’s command and control organisational culture. A series of initiatives was further introduced to empower prison officers on the ground to voice their views, as well as encourage interactions and exchange of ideas across SPS in order to create a learning and more innovative work environment.

Even before the visioning exercise was completed, SPS had begun testing its ideas on rehabilitation. The Housing Unit Management System, a new approach to managing the prisons, was introduced in December 1999 to create a more inmate-centric management facility. Prison officers were used to keeping a distance from the inmates for fear that getting too close to them would heighten security risks. Periodic job rotations within SPS reinforced this divide. However, under the new system, prison officers were assigned to supervise a group of inmates, whom they had to know well enough, to work out rehabilitation programmes based on the inmates’ strengths, weaknesses and motivations. This went against prison officers’ entrenched belief that their duty was to give inmates a hard time in order to deter re-offence. The SPS leadership team recognised that a fundamental change in mindset was needed and launched the system as a pilot. Six of the 15 institutions within SPS volunteered for the trial roll-out of the Housing Unit Management System. The pilot was fraught with challenges as prison officers were anxious over their expanded job scope, potential conflict of roles and fear of loss of control. However, over time, operational efficiency, intelligence gathering and job satisfaction improved, raising the level of security and discipline in the prisons. As positive outcomes emerged, confidence in...
and support for the system grew. Even so, it took SPS another three years after the launch of the new system to scale the initiative up to the other prison institutions.

Another project, initiated before the launch of the new vision, was the Rehabilitation Framework. It was one of the first tasks assigned to the Research & Planning Branch when it was formed in 1998. The Framework would optimise resource allocation and enable SPS to take systematic steps towards rehabilitating the 15,000 inmates under its charge. One of the key components of the Framework was the Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R) instrument, an instrument used in correctional services in Canada, which SPS adapted for its needs. The LSI-R matched inmates to correctional programmes based on their criminogenic risks and rehabilitation needs. Using this instrument, prison officers could modify treatment plans, called Personal Route Maps, to cater to each inmate’s progress throughout incarceration. Adapting the LSI-R was a gruelling process that included norming it to the local profile, calibrating the system for use throughout incarceration and customising it for use by prison officers, who were not psychometrically trained. Prison officers were unhappy about having to test and learn the instrument on top of their heavy workloads. In particular, the older staff felt threatened by the new technology, which they feared would render their experience irrelevant. Nonetheless, the LSI-R was launched just in time for it to be used to assess and select inmates for admission into the new Prison School, launched in early 2000.

Providing inmates with an education was not new to SPS. Teachers from the Ministry of Education conducted lessons for inmates, but the curriculum did not include life or employability skills that would facilitate the inmates’ reintegration into society. Lessons were conducted in make-shift classrooms scattered across the prison institutes and there was little interaction between teachers and prison officers. Inmates were reluctant learners who saw the lessons merely as a welcome relief from prison confinement. MHA was initially hesitant to invest resources into establishing a school, a domain which they felt belonged to the Ministry of Education. Nonetheless, SPS persisted and eventually obtained approval to proceed. With the opening of the Kaki Bukit Prison School in January 2000, for the first time in SPS’s history, the prison environment was converted into an educational institution with an operating philosophy of “School First, Prison Second”. A new curriculum tailored to the social development, employability and motivational needs of inmates was created. Inmates were addressed by name instead of number, and they, themselves, were responsible for maintaining discipline in class. These innovations turned out to be powerful interventions in generating among the inmates a sense of ownership towards the school’s goals. The enthusiasm of the inmates began to rub off on some of the prison officers in charge of the project, whose initial doubts faded as they observed the transformation in their wards.

These initiatives changed the way SPS operated. They stretched resources and were often perceived by some as contrary to the fundamental objectives of prison work and the professional identity of prison officers. An organisational climate survey in early 2000 revealed that many officers were unhappy. They felt that the SPS management did not fully understand the challenges they faced on the ground. Nonetheless, the change champions pressed on to develop a 3-year strategic framework from 2000 to 2002. The framework mapped SPS’s stakeholder groups to primary functions and proposed 15 anchor projects,

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most of which were intended to improve SPS’s internal efficiency, and aligned its functions to its vision. Two of the projects, the CARE Network and Family Involvement, became pivotal in transforming the way inmates were rehabilitated and reintegrated into society.

**Changing Public Perceptions**

SPS realised that its efforts at rehabilitating prisoners would come to naught, with the chances of re-offence remaining high, if the community refused to give an ex-offender a second chance. In fact, a public perception survey in 2000 revealed that the public knew and cared little about SPS and its work. SPS’s past deterrent approaches to reduce re-offence had resulted in the public perceiving the prisons and inmates as scary. Besides, SPS’s poor public image was hindering staff recruitment. SPS realised that it had to change the community’s perception of SPS and ex-offenders in order to succeed in rehabilitation.

In 2002, when Chua was confident that SPS had created substantial systemic structures to help inmates reform and that the organisational culture had sufficiently shifted to support such an approach, he tasked SPS’s Public Affairs Branch to launch a media campaign to rebrand the organisation. The exercise would not only boost the morale of serving prison officers, but also help SPS to attract recruits with values that were aligned to sustain the organisation’s vision.

The campaign with the theme *Captains of Lives, Rehab, Renew, Restart*, profiled SPS as an effective and forward-looking organisation with professional officers, who sought to protect society by keeping offenders in secure custody and rehabilitating them (see Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prison is not just about imprisonment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Prison Service has embarked on a bold, new commitment to place greater emphasis on rehabilitation. We are already committing funding, focus and expertise within SPS to enable inmates to renew and restart their lives. We need your help because it is our firm belief that this will eventually reduce the burden on the community of repeat offenders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secure custody</th>
<th>Rehabilitation &amp; care</th>
<th>Recruitment</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure custody of inmates by SPS is our primary responsibility of keeping Singapore safe.</td>
<td>Rehabilitation is offered to inmates who are capable and willing. We have designed programmes to help them through in-care and after-care.</td>
<td>As Captains of Lives, we truly make a difference. We balance compassion with firmness, are well paid, have the opportunity for growth and can be certain that the skills we acquire will be in demand wherever we go in life.</td>
<td>Be bold with us. Be part of the move by Singapore to be number one by providing inmates with the opportunity to restart their lives and integrate into the community, thus reducing the burden of repeat crime-rates on the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Key messages of the “Captains of Lives, Rehab, Renew, Restart” campaign.**

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Everyone in SPS was involved in the media blitz. Superintendents, who were briefed on the concept, cascaded it to their staff. Senior management handpicked prison officers to be SPS’s voice and face to the world, as well as to be role models to staff. This helped to align internal and external messages. Three provocative television commercials with catchy taglines anchored the campaign (see Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of television commercial</th>
<th>Tattoo</th>
<th>Circuit Board</th>
<th>Witness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of the commercial</td>
<td>A tattooed chef carving a watermelon in a restaurant.</td>
<td>An inmate working hard at a computer assembly workshop.</td>
<td>A lady driver looks anxiously at a tattooed man approaching a little girl but breaks into smiles when the man and child walk away hand-in-hand with the mother of the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Who says ex-convicts cannot serve society with conviction.</td>
<td>We believe, with rehabilitation, doing time is not a waste of time.</td>
<td>Whilst it is easy to see the flaws in people, it is also important to see the good in them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: An overview of the television commercials.

With its new focus on working with families and communities, SPS was able to interest the media to run stories on reformed inmates in newspapers, over radio and television, and on billboards. Reporters were given tours of the prisons to help them understand and write about SPS’s rehabilitation programme. Subsequent television commercials featured prison officers sharing about their experiences in rehabilitation work.

At around the same time in 2002, Jason Wong, previously Deputy Director of SPS, was seconded to the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) as its Chief Executive Officer. A self-funding statutory board under MHA, SCORE was in charge of prison industry, employment and skills training for inmates. Its concern with the availability of funding and business sustainability often ran into conflict with SPS’s push for more attention to rehabilitation. SCORE embarked on its own transformation journey and adopted the following mission and vision statements:

**Mission**

We rehabilitate and help reintegrate offenders to become responsible and contributing members of society.

**Vision**

We build bridges of hope for offenders and their families.

We contribute to a safe community by successfully reintegrating offenders.

We exemplify and lead in creating a more compassionate society
Wong, a firm believer in the power of storytelling, mooted the idea of producing a movie that would not only entertain but also spread the message of giving “second chances” to ex-offenders. Undeterred by the lack of funds, Wong broached the idea with a media company, which agreed to jointly produce a movie. In 2003, SCORE launched its first community movie, *Twilight Kitchen*, which chronicled the journey of an ex-offender. The film was released in phases to different segments of the community to optimise the effects of each outreach exercise (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Phased release of SCORE’s community movie: “Twilight Kitchen”**.

The combined media outreach efforts of SPS and SCORE were a success. SPS’s advertisements became the talking point at public places. In 2002, SPS won the Singapore Creative Circle Award (Bronze) in the Television & Cinema category, as well as the Institute of Advertising Singapore award for Television Campaign of The Year. About 250 employers stepped forward to offer employment to ex-offenders. Qualified and highly motivated individuals who wanted to do their part for society applied to join the Prison Service. The external affirmation significantly lifted the spirits of SPS and SCORE officers. They felt proud to be part of the Prison Service, and internal support for SPS’s rehabilitation and rehabilitation efforts surged.

**The Yellow Ribbon Project**

With an already strong focus on in-care for offenders, SPS realised that it had to strengthen the after-care support in order for its rehabilitation efforts to be effective. Earlier, in May 2000, SPS had officially set up the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders (CARE) Network to optimise resources and integrate in-care and after-care support for ex-offenders. It comprised eight members in the after-care sector with six representatives from the social and

| Phase 1 | • Target Audience: Employers  
• Objective: Encourage employers to employ ex-offenders. |
| --- | --- |
| Phase 2 | • Target Audience: Community Partners  
• Objective: Rally key community partners to support reintegration. |
| Phase 3 | • Target Audience: General Public  
• Objective: Generate mass awareness and strengthen community partners for rehabilitation of offenders. |

**The Yellow Ribbon Message:**

1. Every offender encounters two prisons — a physical prison, and a psychological and social prison.
2. Offenders’ families, friends, neighbours, employers, colleagues, and the community hold the keys to unlock the second prison.
3. Help unlock the second prison.
security sector. The Network held annual retreats and met every quarter to set direction and co-ordinate efforts in the after-care sector.

In 2004, the CARE Network capitalised on the public’s overwhelming response to SPS’s and SCORE’s publicity blitzes to launch the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP), a public education effort to raise awareness, generate acceptance and inspire action for the cause of giving ex-offenders a second chance at restarting their lives. The name was inspired by a 1970s song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree”. It described an ex-offender’s request to his wife to tie a yellow ribbon round an old oak tree as an indication of her forgiveness and acceptance.

The CARE Network had overall responsibility for the project. It was supported by YRP steering and sub-committees comprising mostly SPS and SCORE officers, who were responsible for the implementation of its programmes. YRP was funded off SPS’s and SCORE’s operating budget. Additional funding support came from Tote Board only for the organising of subsequent campaigns. A separate Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF) was set up with an Institution of Public Character (IPC) status, to provide financial support for reintegration and family support programmes.

The YRP started with the aim of changing the public’s perception of ex-offenders by sharing with them SPS’s and SCORE’s rehabilitation programme. The theme for its inaugural campaign in 2004 was “Help Unlock the Second Prison”. The campaign comprised a series of activities anchored around a key event, a charity concert graced by then President S. R. Nathan and Mrs Nathan. Prison tours were organised to help policy-makers and potential volunteers better understand life behind bars and the part they could play in supporting inmates’ rehabilitation. About 200 employers attended a demonstration of inmates’ skills at SCORE. 320,000 hand-made yellow ribbons were distributed to the public to raise awareness of the YRP cause.

The enthusiasm at the YRP launch surprised SPS and SCORE officers. The 7,000-strong audience at the concert broke into resounding applause when ex-offenders stood up to perform. Advocates wrote to the newspapers to support the YRP cause. Employers expressed interest in hiring ex-offenders. YRP’s message of acceptance, renewal and hope was starting to shift society’s view of inmates and ex-offenders. The success of the first YRP campaign gave the organisers confidence to embark on more ambitious programmes in succeeding years. The YRP became an annual event every September spawning new activities with different themes but the same message — give ex-offenders a second chance (see Figure 5).

By the fourth year in 2007, 94 per cent of respondents of a post YRP survey indicated that they were aware of YRP’s objectives. Regular networking forums involving both local and overseas professionals in correctional work, policy-makers, the academia, community partners and employers emerged to discuss issues on the rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. More professionals and corporate groups started to volunteer in the prisons to develop inmates’ artistic, musical and culinary talents. Inmates and ex-offenders themselves

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5 The six representatives from the social and security sectors were: Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Social & Family Development, Industrial & Services Co-operative Society Ltd (ISCOS), National Council of Social Service, Singapore After-Care Association, and Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association.
began to participate in YRP events such as performing on roadshows and sharing their testimonies. The media gave extensive coverage of these events.

By the sixth year in 2009, YRP went beyond raising awareness to engaging the community to take action. Political leaders continued to participate in YRF fund-raising events. Community groups collaborated to run YRP related events. Some even initiated their own projects. For example, SPS’s Tattoo Removal Programme, a critical component of its zero tolerance policy towards gang-related activities in the prisons, was made possible by GiGATT International Marketing Pte Ltd, a distributor of medical technologies. The company called the YRP hotline and donated laser equipment that enabled inmates to remove their tattoos and renounce their affiliations to gangs. The Board of Visiting Justices and Board of Inspection also initiated iCare, a matching dollar scheme that encouraged inmates to remit their prison work allowance to their families instead of spending it on food items in prisons. iCare enabled inmates to take responsibility for their family, and hence enhanced their self-esteem and resolve to change.

By 2013, the number of YRP volunteers had grown from 76 in 2004 to 2,625 in 2013. Together, they contributed resources and ideas that augmented SPS’s rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year &amp; theme</th>
<th>Key initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004    Creating Awareness : “Help Unlock the Second Prison”</td>
<td>The Yellow Ribbon Project was launched:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Charity Concert (2004, 2006 and 2008) was graced by then President of Singapore Mr S R Nathan and attended by 7,000 people.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The movie, <em>Coming Home</em>, on three inmates preparing to reintegrate into society after serving their sentence was launched. The movie premier was attended by 6,500 people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005    Engaging the Community: “Give Ex-offenders A Second Lease of Life”</td>
<td>The YRP message of acceptance and support for ex-offenders was extended to a wider audience:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Conference gathered partners in correctional work to share best practices and research. It became an annual event to develop better integrated rehabilitation and reintegration approaches.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Job Fair, co-organised with North East Community Development Council, offered 660 vacancies to pre-released inmates.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The movie, <em>One More Chance</em>, on the difficulties faced by three ex-offenders after their release from prison was launched. It attracted 150,000 viewers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006    Engaging The Ex-Offenders: “Widening the Reach, Deepening the Message”</td>
<td>The YRP began to mobilise inmates and ex-offenders to contribute to society through community service:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The Yellow Ribbon Concert was broadcasted over local television.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Creative Festival comprising poetry and song-writing competition was held in Changi Prison to give inmates an opportunity to express their hopes and appreciation to those who had helped them.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
|         | • MediaCorp produced and broadcasted, *Turning Point*, which featured the...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year &amp; theme</th>
<th>Key initiatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
<td>Struggles of four ex-offenders on national television.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Giving Back: “Extending the Reach, Inspiring Action in Inmates & Ex-offenders” | The YRP profiled inmates and ex-offenders as responsible members of society with gifts, talents, and acts of service:  
- Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was the guest-of-honour at the annual Tie-A-Yellow Ribbon Walk.  
- The Yellow Ribbon Community Service Project was introduced in prison.  
- The Inaugural Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition (2007-2013) was launched, where works by inmates were sold to raise funds for YRF.  
- Other events such as the Yellow Ribbon Culinary Competition and the Yellow Ribbon Appreciation Dinner, and the Yellow Ribbon Fund Charity Gala Dinner. |
| **2008**    | The YRP focused on encouraging family members, employers and volunteers to take action to help ex-offenders reintegrate into society:  
- Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratam was the guest-of-honour at the Yellow Ribbon Journey Exhibition, “Our Crossroads” that showcased the real-life stories of three ex-offenders.  
- The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Fund, Fund-raising Golf Tournament & Dinner (2008, 2010 and 2012) raised funds for programmes to strengthen family ties of inmates and ex-offenders.  
- A local film director produced, The Days, which depicted the relationship of two brothers involved in gangs. |
| **2009**    | The YRP focused on encouraging inmates and ex-offenders to give back to society:  
- The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Run (2009-2013) was flagged off by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. Among the participants were 80 ex-offenders.  
- The Tattoo Removal Programme, supporting SPS’s zero tolerance policy towards gang-related activities in the prisons, was launched with the sponsorship of GiGATT International Marketing Pte Ltd. |
| **2010**    | The YRP focused on fostering partnerships with the community:  
- 11 ex-offenders and 250 community members, comprising ex-offenders’ families and students formed the YRP contingent at the Chingay Parade.  
- North East Community Council launched the Rekindle Programme that helped inmates from the Reformative Training Centre reconcile with their families. |
| **2011**    | The YRP encouraged small acts of kindness and support for inmates and ex-offenders:  
- ISCOS led ex-offenders and volunteers to serve lunch cooked by inmates to residents of a home for the aged. The event raised funds which were matched by the Southeast Community Development Council.  
| **2012**    | The YRP encouraged inmates and ex-offenders and their families to work towards a better future with the support of the community: |
Year & theme | Key initiatives
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tagoffenders to take charge of their own rehabilitation and contribute to the society.” | • An individual, 53 year-old Mdm Jenap ran 12 hours in a self-initiated “Dusk till Dawn Challenge” to raise more than $130,000 for YRF in 2012.
• The Yellow Ribbon mobile application was launched to update smartphone users on the latest YRF news.

2013 Celebrating 10 years of Second Chances: “The Road to Acceptance” | The YRP celebrated its 10th anniversary with a stronger focus on empowering more Singaporeans with the opportunity to be part of the YRP movement:
• Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean participated in the Yellow Ribbon Run.
• A record 1,230 participants formed a Giant Human Yellow Ribbon to commemorate YRP’s 10 year anniversary.

Figure 5: A broad overview of Yellow Ribbon campaigns.

Moving forward, SPS and SCORE hope to do less of organising YRP events and more of facilitating ground-up initiatives by creating and connecting networks of like-minded individuals and organisations across the community sectors. They also planned to increase the engagement of youths in the tertiary institutions and secondary schools and seek their views on reintegration issues. Besides raising awareness through talks in schools and learning journeys to prisons, they would partner community groups to facilitate youth-led volunteering projects and research. This would ensure that society in the future continued to embrace an inclusive society where ex-offenders had equal opportunities.

The Ripple Effect of YRP

What started off as the conviction of a group of SPS officers that inmates could be transformed grew with the support of their colleagues and society. YRP impacted staff and inmates, inmates’ families, the criminal justice system, and the community and beyond.

**Staff** Reframing their work in the context of YRP goals, gave SPS and SCORE officers a sense of shared purpose and focus. A lot of their work suddenly “made sense”. Their view of the world was expanded and their aspirations were unleashed to do more for inmates. For example, they overcame employers’ scepticism and doggedly grew a pool of employer advocates. They trained workplace supervisors and developed on-boarding programmes to ensure that employers were successful in inducting ex-offenders into their workforces. Without an additional budget, they sought partnerships with institutions and corporate groups such as the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) to build new training facilities, e.g., a fully equipped kitchen and computer laboratories. It also obtained funds from WDA to expand employability skill training, which used to be limited to electrical works and hair-dressing, to include generic work and supervisory skills, as well as progressive levels of trade certification in a range of areas such as landscaping, laundry operations, culinary skills, food preparation, IT, and logistics. The number of inmates trained increased by 65 per cent from...
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3,567 in 2009 to 5,896 in 2013. Once the in-care infrastructure was in place, they worked on strengthening the after-care support for ex-offenders.

Inmates Initially, the inmates themselves had no faith in the ability of the YRP to help them and cringed when approached to share their testimonies as YRP ambassadors. They did not realise they could paint, sing, compose songs and pass examinations. The YRP gave them hope, helped them channel their voices to the world, and restarted their lives. With the community more accepting of e-offenders, more of them found employment and the recidivism rate had dropped significantly, from 44.4 per cent for the 1998 cohort to 27.4 per cent for the 2011 cohort.

Inmates’ Families The YRP’s help reached the families of inmates and ex-offenders. In 2006, the Yellow Ribbon Emergency Fund was set up under YRF to disburse cash within 48 hours to dependents of inmates to tide over urgent needs. The YRF-ISCOS Fairy Godparent programme was also started in 2006 to provide bursaries, tuition and mentoring to ex-offenders’ children. In 2010, MHA initiated the Yellow Ribbon Community Outreach Project (YR-COP) as a pilot, where grassroots volunteers were assigned to families affected by incarceration to understand their needs and link them to community support avenues. By October 2014, 65 grassroots divisions were on YR-COP. More than 620 grassroots volunteers were trained to provide community support to assist needy families and about 2,100 inmates’ families had been assisted.

Criminal Justice System In 2005, the Government amended the Criminal Registration Act to strike out criminal records for minor offences, a move that gave a second chance to some types of offenders. With society more accepting of inmates and more open to giving ex-offenders a second chance at restarting their lives, SPS was able to implement Community-Based Sentencing such as the Short Detention Order and the Day Reporting Order in 2011. Both were extensions of the Home Detention Scheme introduced in 2000, where offenders of minor crimes serve the tail-end of their sentences at home tracked by electronic tagging devices. These amendments in legislation enabled offenders who have not committed serious crimes or developed criminal lifestyles to access community resources for their rehabilitation. They also minimised disruptions to inmates’ families and employment while punishing them for their offence.

The Community & Beyond The YRP helped to significantly reduce the stigmatisation of ex-offenders. Members of the public had gone beyond the act of wearing a yellow ribbon to providing funds, jobs and expertise to help inmates and ex-offenders. The number of employers in SCORE’s job bank doubled from 1,381 in 2004 to 3,876 in 2013. More

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employers were also prepared to mentor and develop ex-offenders and were proud to associate their companies with YRP as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility.

More importantly, people at workplaces had become more accepting of ex-offenders as colleagues. The number of inmates securing jobs before they left prisons more than doubled from 951 in 2009 to 2,114 in 2013. More schools involved their students in activities with inmates and ex-offenders. In 2013, 15,000 students, an increase from 10,000 students in 2011, participated in YRP activities such as street sales, fund-raising and packing of YRP goodie packs. With societal acceptance, ex-offenders became more confident about confronting their past and sharing their journeys to encourage others, while inmates gained hope of a future beyond prisons and the motivation to change. The YRP crossed national boundaries and cultures — its concept of harnessing all of society to give ex-offenders a second chance served as an inspiration for the emergence of similar movements in Fiji, Nigeria, Mozambique, the United States, Australia and the Philippines.

Shifting from Prison Service to Correctional Service

SPS’s framing of its mission in the context of societal goals enabled it to see new possibilities, identify new partners and create space for others to contribute. These improved the outcomes of SPS programmes and moved the results up the value chain. As talented recruits and community resources became available, SPS and SCORE were able to shift their focus towards new areas of work and building new capacity.

First, SPS strengthened its in-care strategy. In 2012, SPS implemented the Enhanced Supervision Scheme for Long Term Imprisonment repeat drug offenders, who would undergo regular urine tests, stricter monitoring, and intensified counselling with SPS Correctional Rehabilitation Specialists to reduce their chances of re-offence. It started the Pre-Release Centre, where inmates were put through more intensified rehabilitation programmes during the final 10 months of their sentences. These were intended to develop self-confidence and social skills and to prepare inmates for life upon release.

Second, SPS shifted more attention to close gaps in after-care. Internal research showed that re-offending rates significantly dropped when ex-offenders were able to stay in their jobs for the first six months. Hence, SCORE assigned Career Vocational Officers to assess inmates’ motivations to put them on the appropriate industry training track, and help them secure a job before they left prison. SCORE Employability Case Managers would then help

“We underestimate the difficulties ex-offenders face in transition. They can work three days a week as bookies and earn as much as $3,000 a month. Loan-sharks pay them $100 for splashing paint on one door. This is “easy money” compared to 10-hour shifts as cooks in a restaurant. The temptation to return to their former ways is very real and great.”

Patrick Lau
Chief Operating Officer
Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises
(2001–2013)
(Source: Interview conducted by Lena Leong, 2014)
newly released ex-offenders navigate the transition for the first six months upon their release, such as ensuring that they were on time for work, related well with their team and settled into their new work routines. SPS further expanded its after-care role in January 2014 by amending the Prisons Act to subject inmates to conditional release, and to mandate inmates, who were assessed to be at higher risk of re-offending, to come under the aftercare of SPS. These schemes aimed to support ex-offenders and deter them from re-offending.

Third, SPS expended efforts to build the capacity of its partners. In 2010, SPS introduced the Halfway House Service model to enhance the programmes and professionalism of halfway houses. More structured programmes were introduced to train volunteers such as on inmate subculture and counselling so that they could take on more complex work. More time was also invested into forging collaboration within CARE Network and with other partners to find joint solutions, identify opportunities and break the cycle of offending early. SPS’s Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) framework, which promoted an evidence-based and integrated approach to in-care and after-care, helped to create a shared language among stakeholders within and beyond SPS, and galvanised their efforts (see Figure 6).6

SPS and SCORE had been invited to share its work in rehabilitation and reintegration with correctional institutions across the world at conventions like the United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (UNAFEI).

![Figure 6: The rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R Framework).](source: Singapore Prison Service, The Courage to Believe: Unlocking Life’s Second Chances, 2013)

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Sustaining Social Change

The YRP began as a clarion call for help — an appeal to everyone in society to give ex-offenders a second chance at restarting their lives. Each handmade yellow ribbon produced by an inmate symbolised his or her hope for acceptance. Out of nowhere, people came forward to support and give. What caused the shift?

The change started with a small group of SPS officers who believed that inmates could be transformed. They had big audacious goals of rehabilitation and after-care, with families being strengthened and society playing its part. They intervened at multiple levels of leadership, organisational culture, mission and strategy, and concurrently attended to operational needs, shifting of mindsets and engaging vision. Often, they were learning on the go, sometimes setting off in directions different from their plans when experiments failed or opportunities struck. Their journey was fraught with tensions, obstacles and setbacks. Empowering leadership gathered early adopters, tested and pushed through ideas, and generated quick wins. Once there was success, confidence and followers gradually gathered, and the change momentum grew.

Most of the breakthroughs came only when SPS and SCORE officers were emotionally connected to the cause. Once they saw how repeated incarcerations detached offenders from society, destroyed families and put children at risk, and how their work could make a difference, they were motivated and began to perceive their relationships with inmates differently. The officers discovered new partners, created new structures and developed new capabilities that opened up opportunities beyond prisons. Many innovations were a result of officers on the ground seizing opportunities, taking risks and trying out new ideas. Change was facilitated by collective ownership of a compelling shared purpose.

Similarly, when inmates became emotionally connected with how the consequences of their offences affected their loved ones and the possibilities of a new future, they became motivated and learnt to make different life choices. Likewise, when stakeholders and members of the public connected with the stories of inmates and ex-offenders, and saw them as someone’s parent or child — ordinary people who made mistakes and needed others to give them second chances — their perceptions of inmates and ex-offenders changed, and they offered help.

YRP was successful because most people believed in second chances, since people do make mistakes and would need others to believe in them again. SPS recognised this universal truth, branded it, and made it the galvanising force for its work. Change happened when

“The most important achievement of all was not systemic or infrastructural, but cultural ... the critical mass of prison officers believed in rehabilitation and they put that belief into action.”

Chua Chin Kiat
Director
Singapore Prison Service
(1999–2007)


Behind Every Inmate You See, There is a Family

To strengthen family bonds and motivate change, the women prisons obtained special approval for the children of inmates to visit their mothers on Mother’s Day. The sight of the children crying and hugging their mothers as they parted at the end of the day moved the prison officers and changed their view of rehabilitation. A video clip of the event went viral in SPS. Soon, prison officers in the male prisons also wanted to organise a similar event for Father’s Day.

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people were moved by what they saw. It was sustained when mental models shifted and people began to choose to act differently and collectively commit to the cause.

**Towards a Society Without Re-offending**

SPS embarked on its transformation journey 15 years ago. Since then, its ties with SCORE have been strengthened through the sharing of resources such as space, manpower and budget towards a common cause in YRP. Setting early the conditions for internal culture shifts has also helped to sustain organisational change. The Prison School has since doubled its student intake and moved to new premises with upgraded facilities. Its research team has also developed new tools to assess inmates and published papers in journals to share the SPS experience. SPS now has about 180 trained rehabilitation specialists attending to the in-care needs of inmates and aftercare needs of ex-offenders. In 2012, SPS won the Singapore Quality Award with Special Commendation for organisational excellence.

More importantly, SPS has been able to attract the next generation of prison officers with values that are aligned to its vision of transforming the Prison Service into a respected profession. In an online survey that was part of its re-visioning exercise in October 2012, 90 per cent of prison officers responded within two weeks. Of those who responded, 75 per cent felt strongly that SPS should take on a leading role in offenders’ aftercare and prevention of offending, 90 per cent strongly felt that ensuring the safety and security of inmates was one of SPS’s core roles, and 80 per cent felt that facilitating the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders was one of SPS’s core roles.

SPS and SCORE are at a tipping point of transforming society. Through the YRP, they succeeded in creating societal awareness and cultivating advocates for rehabilitation. Nonetheless, as Teo Tze Fang, former CEO of SCORE, said “It is for the Yellow Ribbon spirit – the spirit of given second chances – to become spontaneously the spirit of Singapore within the next 10 years.”

At the SPS-S Core Corporate Advance in 2013, SPS under the new Director of Prisons, Soh Wai Wah, launched its new vision statement to further challenge staff to work towards a society without re-offending.

**Vision**

As Captains of Lives, we inspire everyone, at every chance, towards a society without re-offending.

Inmates can be a very difficult group of people to manage and prison work very demoralising and demanding. SPS’s and SCORE’s challenge now is to build on the

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momentum, uphold the sense of purpose, pride and ownership in its officers, and keep sight of what matters. Their ultimate goal is for “the reintegration of ex-offenders to be initiated by the community than by any government agency or non-profit organisation”.8

***END***

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were the high leverage actions that SPS took in rehabilitating and re-integrating inmates? How did they manage to grow and sustain their results? What are the key take-away on leading social and organisational change that you can bring to your organisation?

2. In what other areas can government do more to engage citizens and involve community to co-create public results? How might doing so lead to higher quality outcomes, stronger institutions and a more resilient Singapore? What might be some challenges and enablers?

3. What new capabilities do government and public officers need to have to co-create public outcomes with citizens? What shifts in mindset and enabling infrastructure are needed? Where is a good place to start?

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