

The Game: Restorative Community Supervision for Adult Offenders

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

Grahame Chaseling, a 20-year veteran of corrections in New South Wales, Australia, critic of traditional criminal justice and restorative practices devotee for over 15 years, developed a unique model for supervising adult offenders in community-based programs. He calls it *The Game*.

Chaseling discovered the limitations of punitive justice when he began work as a prison officer. He was disturbed to see inmates stripped of responsibility and free will: "From arrest to release from the criminal justice system, whether gaol [jail] or supervision... decisions will be made for them. Things will be done to them, or required of them. In terms of fair process or meaningful engagement, the chances are that very little will be achieved."*

Chaseling believed in community reintegration for offenders. But he found that "the whole idea of gaol is to isolate offenders. Get them out of the community, away from those affected, restrict communication, avoid emotionality, remove choices and responsibility."*

On his quest for alternatives, including earning a graduate diploma in mediation, Chaseling met Terry O'Connell, a former Australian police officer, early restorative conferencing proponent and current director of the IIRP affiliate Real Justice Australia. O'Connell and his team trained Chaseling in restorative conferencing, a process that brings together victims, offenders and their respective families and friends to help repair the harm caused by crime or wrongdoing.

The basis of a conference is a script of questions for victims and offenders, such as: "What happened?" "How were



Graham Chaseling, creator of *The Game*, at Parklea Correctional Complex, New South Wales, Australia

you affected by the crime?" "How can you repair the harm?" These restorative questions are at the heart of Chaseling's work. He finds restorative conferencing to be "astonishingly effective at repairing harm and damaged relationships."

One day an inmate came into Chaseling's prison office in an agitated state. He was about to be charged for being abusive to an officer. "A normal response for an officer in my position would be to issue a direction to calm down and get out of the office. That response invariably made things worse. Applying a restorative approach, I asked him questions to try to develop insights into the decisions he'd made that had contributed to the offense, questions a prison officer might not normally ask."‡

The inmate told his story, and Chaseling asked him to bring his friends back to the office to support him. With the inmate's friends present, Chaseling asked again, "What happened?" The inmate's story changed, as his friends had witnessed the incident and wouldn't let him minimize his part in it. Chasel-

ing asked the inmate, "Who has been affected by your actions?" "His friends were happy to help him with the answer to that one," as they had been affected by his behavior through reduced access to facilities. When Chaseling asked, "What can you do to repair the harm?" the inmate's friends helped him again, suggesting that he apologize to the officer and get their restrictions lifted.

Minutes later the officer called Chaseling, asking what he'd said to the inmate, because he'd just apologized, "abjectly." The officer no longer intended to charge the inmate: "No, mate. Why would I?"

"All I'd done was got his mates in, asked a few questions and let them work it out," wrote Chaseling. "If you ask the right questions, you can confront quite strongly and it doesn't damage your relationship. Offenders must be made to look at the harm they've caused, but then there must also be a chance for them to make amends and take responsibility to do something."‡

Devising a program to implement these effective, informal practices called for an imaginative approach. It also required support from supervision, which Chaseling received as a parole officer at the District Parole Office in Windsor, near Sydney. He was given leave to develop *The Game*, a program for supervising men and women adult offenders on parole, good behavior bonds and community service sentences. Chaseling ran two groups of 10 offenders through the complete program—roughly 50 hours of activity per person over about 12 weeks.

The Game, which includes instructions, rules, a game master and playing board, aims to engage participants re-

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storatively rather than punitively. When Chaseling ran The Game, the players didn't choose to play; they were required to participate as mandated by their court orders, which directed them to accept certain supervision and guidance. But what makes The Game different from traditional criminal justice processes is that it was designed to be something offenders could "buy into." The introduction to The Game states: "The court has sent you here to discover what sort of issues led to your offence, and to deal with those issues so you don't re-offend. By playing The Game, you will be exposed to lots of different experiences. Your beliefs will be challenged, and you will be asked to account for yourself."

The first phase of The Game involves a series of activities for the players, including identifying a four-member "cheer squad" of family, friends and others who are affected by their offending behavior, attending AA or NA meetings, watching films that raise social questions and interviewing loved ones. "It's restorative practices by 'remote control,'" said Chaseling. Players then complete questionnaires, activity sheets and journals to reflect on their behavior and attitudes. Restorative questions are used throughout The Game, especially in an activity called "The Cave," where players ask their friends and loved ones how they were affected by their crimes.

"The thing that surprised me the most is that the offenders took some ownership," said Chaseling. "They would come back and say, 'I'm up to here now.' It gave them a history of success rather than a list of meaningless tasks."

The next phase of The Game, "The Eight Gatherings," has players meet once a week for eight weeks in facilitated conferences. Unlike in a restorative conference, friends and family are not present, but the process relies heavily on restorative questions.

The Game demonstrated the potential of restorative practices to empower offenders, rather than see themselves as victims, as they often do. "There was a higher retention rate than for other programs; less time went into making offenders attend, and families seemed to trust us more and were less likely to see us as adversaries," said Chaseling.

One of The Game's successes was Geoff. In his mid-20s, "just about every government department had had their hand up his back for years, but he was still fighting. ... He was the biggest mess ... the most resistant and argumentative. ... I caught him off guard with The Game. For a change, someone was asking him what he wanted for his life, inviting him to have a look at some stuff that might assist him to get himself there. ... Geoff went from being paralyzed by hopelessness to a blur of activity. ... For the first time in his life, he succeeded. He'd done it, not someone else doing it to or for him. This alone worked wonders ... and gave him great hope. ... Not only did he buy into The Game, he started buying into his parenting and relationship with his de facto [wife] ... He saw the approach of The Game as being one of decency towards him as a human being. He responded likewise. He went from being a sort of sneering victim ... to a sort of professional associate. Once he bought in, everything about our contact soon became man to man and in good faith."*

When Chaseling's supervisor at Windsor left, The Game pilot ended. Chaseling is hesitant to discuss its outcomes. "It's unreasonable to say there's reduced recidivism. All I have on The Game is anecdotal stuff, because it was something I came up with and was quite early in the development process."

Now Chaseling is launching a pilot program at the works release center at Parklea Correctional Centre, preparing offenders for release back into the

community. "I find restorative practices particularly helpful in engaging offenders and their families in planning robust and meaningful post-release supervision case plans," he said. "It's an opportunity for families to express any needs, concerns and fears they have about reintegration of their family members, and to forge positive relationships with staff from Community Offender Services (formerly known as Probation and Parole), who conduct parole supervision."

Traditionally, said Chaseling, "We only engage families when things are going wrong," but he believes that when you engage families in the process before the offender is released, they buy into the plan and view the parole officer as an ally, not an adversary.

Chaseling hopes to see restorative processes applied throughout corrections, from pre-sentencing to parole. "If we create opportunities to engage those significant to offenders in the justice process in a meaningful way, we are building networks of support around the offender." That's the kind of "justice" that drew Chaseling and others like him to criminal justice in the first place. Through efforts like his, the vision of restorative justice is becoming a reality.

REFERENCES

* Chaseling, G. (2005). *The Application of Restorative Justice Principles and Processes to the work of Probation and Parole/Community Corrections Officers.*

‡ Chaseling, G. (2005). *A 20 year Misguided Tour through Corrections—Background to The Game.*

Portions of the above two papers were submitted by Terry O'Connell to Australia's Legislative Council Standing Committee on Law and Justice for its inquiry into community-based sentencing options for rural and remote areas and disadvantaged populations (2005).