

# The perils of persuasion

IN JANUARY 2013 American prisoner Tavon White bragged to a friend, "This is my jail ... I am the law."

As *THE BULLETIN* has learned, this was no idle boast. White was a gang leader and Baltimore City Detention Centre inmate and the conversation was captured in a wire-tapped phone call during an investigation that uncovered his vast influence over other inmates, prison employees and even management.

During the time he spent awaiting trial in Maryland for attempted murder, he and his Black Guerrilla Family gang members orchestrated the smuggling of contraband such as mobile phones and narcotics. And they did it with the help of correctional officers, who received payments, gifts or a share of the profits.

White, who fathered five children with four prison officers, claimed to earn more than \$US15,000 a month and bought a Mercedes Benz and a BMW while imprisoned. He held 'town hall' meetings with staff who deferred to the gang leader on how to keep the peace at the prison.

The investigation into racketeering at the prison resulted in 44 people being convicted, including 24 correctional officers. One officer received a sentence of six years for smuggling drugs and other contraband. After agreeing to co-operate with authorities, White was sentenced to 20 years to be served concurrently with a conviction for attempted murder.

## The great manipulator

On arriving at prison in 2009, White quickly rose through the ranks of the gang and was promoted to leader during a prison cell conference-call made on a contraband mobile phone. While testifying at a murder trial in 2016, he was referred to by



*Master manipulator: US inmate Tavon White ran a prison contraband racket that led to 24 correctional officers being convicted.*

a defendant's lawyer as a "master manipulator".

Such power and influence by one inmate in a prison is uncommon but manipulation of employees by inmates on a smaller scale should not be underestimated.

CSNSW Director of State-Wide Programs Danielle Matsuo says White would have used the same strategies to gain confidence of the gang members and prison staff alike.

"One of the things we know about criminal behaviour is that it's learnt and gets reinforced by reward," Ms Matsuo says.

"Power and control are the driving forces. If you look at a lot of backgrounds of our offenders they've had very little control over themselves, over their sense of the world.

"So it's exactly the same in terms of manipulating the staff in order to gain power and control in an environment where their liberty is removed; their choices are removed; they're told when to wake up; when to use the bathroom, all those things."

Prison can provide the ideal breeding ground for a manipulative

relationship: the average length of time needed for the instigator to win over a target (this process is called 'the set-up') is 19 months, and an inmate has plenty of time to plan the best approach.

## Report, record, report

With such a long set-up time, there should be many opportunities for any such plan to be thwarted. And yet, there are as many reasons why it can succeed.

Maybe an employee lacks confidence. Maybe they are over confident. Maybe a warning sign goes unreported. Maybe the employee feels it's already too late or is afraid to admit to their colleagues that an inmate may have got the better of them.

The inmate understands all of this very human behaviour and capitalises on it. Ms Matsuo says trust between colleagues is paramount.

"What's really important in this space is that you don't isolate yourself; that you have people around you, whether it's your direct line manager, or a mentor or it's someone else who has had experience with this who can actually provide that support and won't reprimand you for coming forward."

She says that reporting is crucial, even if incidents seem minor: "People often feel that a small piece of evidence is not going to amount to anything, they don't see how putting it on paper is going to have any weight.

"But with these types of offenders, lots of different people might have one piece of the puzzle so until it all comes together you don't see the full picture."

## A lot to lose

The game is heavily weighted in favour of the inmate as it's the employee who has the most to lose: a career and income; perhaps even



*MRRC inmate being assessed in one of the maximum security pods.*

criminal charges if contraband is involved. And such a process can take a huge emotional toll, not just on the employee that is directly involved, but on their team.

Ms Matsuo says she has seen these ripple effects firsthand: "The colleagues that work with that person feel betrayed. The levels of deceit that people go to can be quite high, and it undermines the whole

team, the organisation and the goals we're trying to promote."

Tavon White undermined the entire operation at the Baltimore City Detention Centre, America's oldest, continuously-operating prison. In 2015, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan ordered the men's section be closed, citing unprecedented levels of corruption and poor conditions.

White, now 40, is serving

the remainder of his time in an undisclosed location after he became a key witness in the trial for the 2013 racketeering investigation. Last year he gave evidence in an unrelated murder trial because, he said, he "wanted to better himself".

Whether these are the words of a master manipulator or an offender genuinely trying to change his ways remains to be seen.

## Don't let yourself be manipulated

- **Don't be over-confident.** If you think "It can't happen to me" you're wrong. Experienced employees can be as vulnerable as rookies.
- **Be professional.** Never do anything with an offender that you would be ashamed to share with your colleagues or manager.
- **Be firm, consistent and objective in dealings with all offenders.** An inmate can use perceived favouritism against you.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** If you are unsure about protocol, seek advice.
- **Do your homework.** Be aware of who you are dealing with. If the behaviour is raising a red flag with you, someone else has probably noticed it too. Check the inmate's file.
- **Write it down.** File reports, no matter how minor. If it isn't in writing, it didn't happen. A report can protect you in the present and go on file to help others in the future.