

South Africa: Conflict Training in Prison

Victoria and the Center for Conflict Resolution



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The tough guys wait. They sit in silence on a long wooden bench, two dozen thieves and murderers. Their heads are shaven. Their overalls are fire-engine red. The word "Prisoner" is emblazoned across each man's chest along with a name: Ebrahim, Eric, Moses.



A foreboding stillness dominates the dust-gray room as the men take stock of Victoria Maloka, an attractive black woman in tight jeans and a bat-winged blouse. "I'm from the Center for Conflict Resolution," she explains. "We want to help you to solve your problems without busting each other's heads." She looks from prisoner to prisoner, laughing. "That means you should respect each other and value the human dignity of everybody around you."



Silence fills the room. Indistinct noise echoes through the barred windows, a medley of voices, footsteps, and yelling from 1,600 prisoners who live more than 20 to a cell. During the day, two hundred guards enforce order and peace, but as soon as the steel gates close in the evening, the gangs take over the jail.



Prisoners stab each other, kill guards, and guards kill prisoners. This is a world in which the terms "respect" and "dignity" have long been forgotten. Nevertheless, Victoria Maloka isn't afraid to enter the ring. "You get more from talking to each other than from striking each other," she tells their stony faces. "So we'll start by having each one of you tell me, is there a person in the world that you really like, someone you can really trust?"



Her gaze goes down the row. She nods encouragement, but the men are uncomfortable talking about their feelings. After a while a tall, solid black man, almost a giant, confesses that he is fond of his mother. His declaration breaks the spell. Opening one's soul to this attractive woman apparently has its benefits. Almost all the men like their mothers and are willing to say so. One names his wife, another, his little daughter.



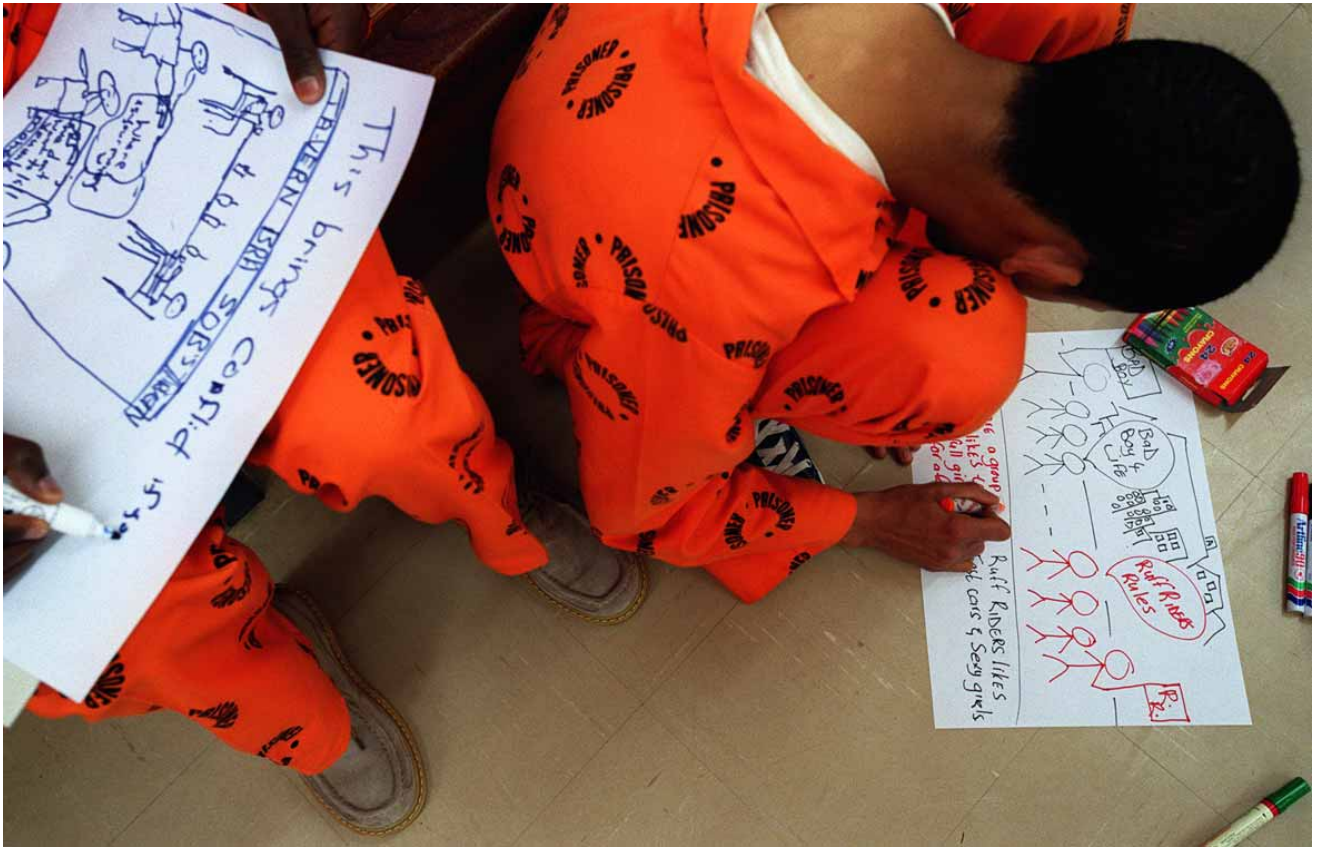
After the ice is broken, Maloka leads the first exercise, a sort of dance. She claps a rhythm and asks the men to follow her example, one at a time. The first adds a flourish. The second matches it. The third stands up, stretches out his arms, and sways to the rhythm. In the end the whole group are on its feet, swinging its hips, bumping into each other, and getting out of breath.



“How do you feel?” Maloka calls out. Danood, a lifer tattooed up to his ears, gets a laugh as he tap-dances across the floor and cries, “I feel free!” It’s a good start for the next exercise, which will introduce the notions of respect and dignity in an understandable way.



At the end, they turned up a ghetto blaster, Marumba filled the room, and Victoria began to dance rhythmically and smoothly to the music. The men stare at the woman with her pearly white teeth behind her red lips. She snaps her fingers and looks like she would prefer to be nowhere in the world but here. She looks around the room encouragingly "Let's go!" she said. The heavy men start to move – stamping rhythmically. They turn around and all start to dance. A brief word of conclusion: "Conflicts are inevitable," said Victoria as the men make their way to the exit. "Even more so in prison. But you can learn how to solve them halfway peacefully."



This playful mental training in respect and dignity will go on for a long time. Week after week, she will ask the men to dance and role-play, but more than anything, she will encourage them to talk to each other. She is aware of the risk that one might attack her if he feels provoked. Most of them have nothing more to lose. But she is successful.



Her employer, the CCR, has a good record. It has been sending peacemakers into the prisons for five years, and the murder rate has sunk significantly. It's an amazing process. The mediators, as the course leaders call themselves, deal with unrepentant criminals. "They have grown up in a world ruled by the law of the jungle. They haven't been to school. They're unemployable," Maloka explains. "The only social bond they have in prison is the gang. It's like a family. In these surroundings, it's essential for survival."



Maloka, 32, has two children. She knows what an important role social bonds can play. She comes from the country, 60 miles north of Pretoria. Her home village has just got telephone connection three months ago, but still has no electricity.



But despite poverty and isolation, life there was good. Her father played the role of the village patriarch – mayor, judge, and mediator. Petitioners, plaintiffs, and defendants took turns knocking on their door. Her father was constantly busy healing neighborhood rifts, deciding what punishment was appropriate for a chicken thief, or promoting the expansion of the school.



“With this job, I’m walking in his footsteps,” says Maloka. Even as a teenager, Victoria had to learn to take responsibility. When she was 19, she was already the mother of two children, but she still managed to begin to study law. After a few years, she began to work for the government as a mediator at the Center for Conflict Resolution in Cape Town.

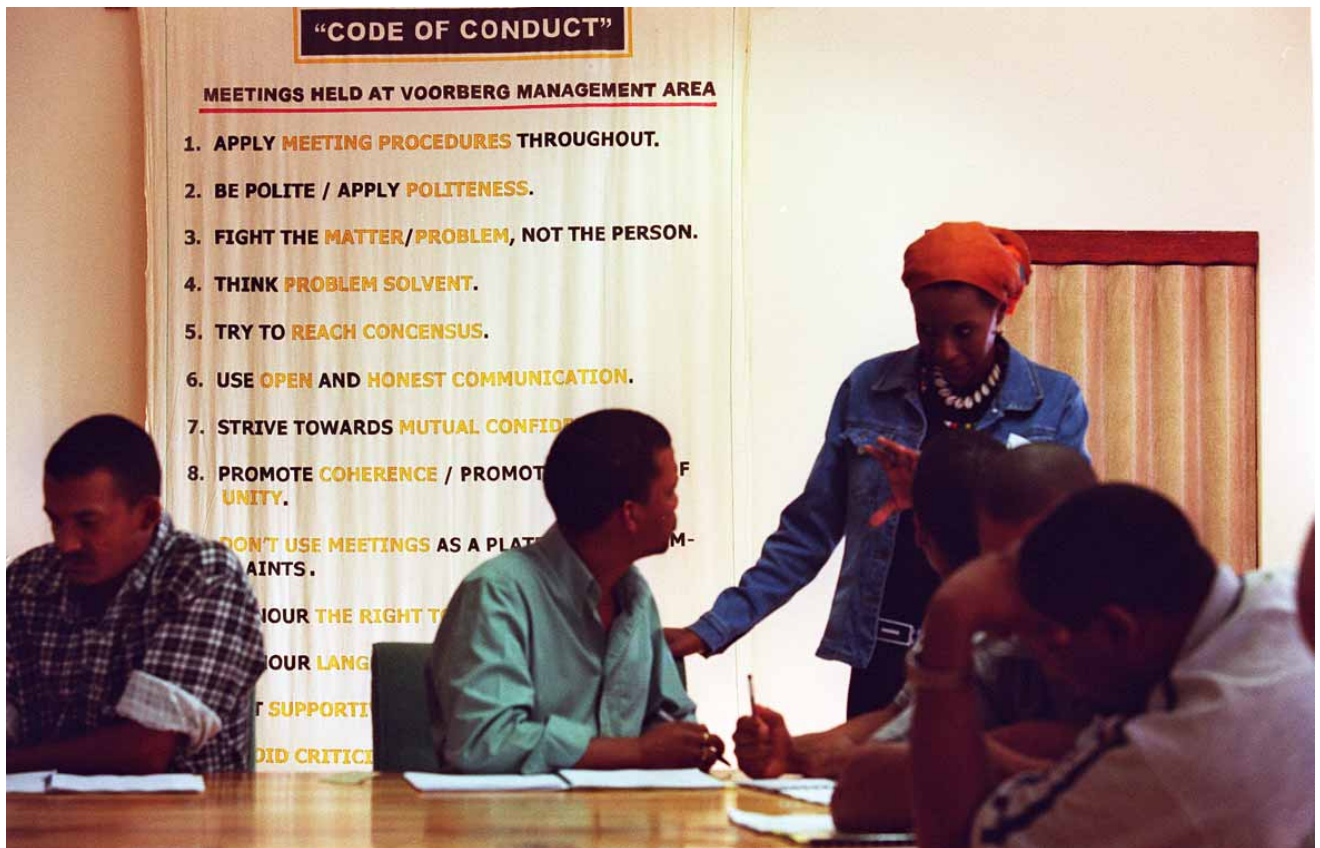


The “Bertram House” is a historical landmark at the University of Cape Town and now houses the Center for Conflict Resolution. Laurie Nathan was director of the Center for many years. Nathan is white and upper class. He spent his first 18 years “in a white cocoon” in Cape Town, encountering black people only as household help. At the university he met black students and activists. A year after graduating, he traveled to Munich and visited the concentration camp in Dachau. “On the way back I thought, you know, that’s what’s happening in my country.” He avoided the draft by becoming a conscientious objector, joined an opposition group, and spent two years in hiding. “I wasn’t too afraid of getting caught. I was young and enthusiastic.” Smiling bitterly, he said: “Besides, it was only the black activists that got tortured in prison.”



Not much has changed after ten years without apartheid. White privilege remains, “as do the problems facing the black population,” Nathan says. The majority of blacks live in extreme poverty without access to medical care, money, or education. The police are brutal in their reactions to even minor crimes, when blacks are involved. “They were oppressed for 300 years,” Nathan says. “You can’t turn that around in just ten.”

But what has been done is a start. When the CCR started, Laurie Nathan had 11 white colleagues. Now he has 40, mostly black. The annual budget has increased tenfold, largely through donations from national governments including those of Holland, Belgium, Sweden, the UK, Norway, and Finland. German money comes from the Konrad Adenauer and Friedrich Ebert Foundations, which sponsor individual workshops.



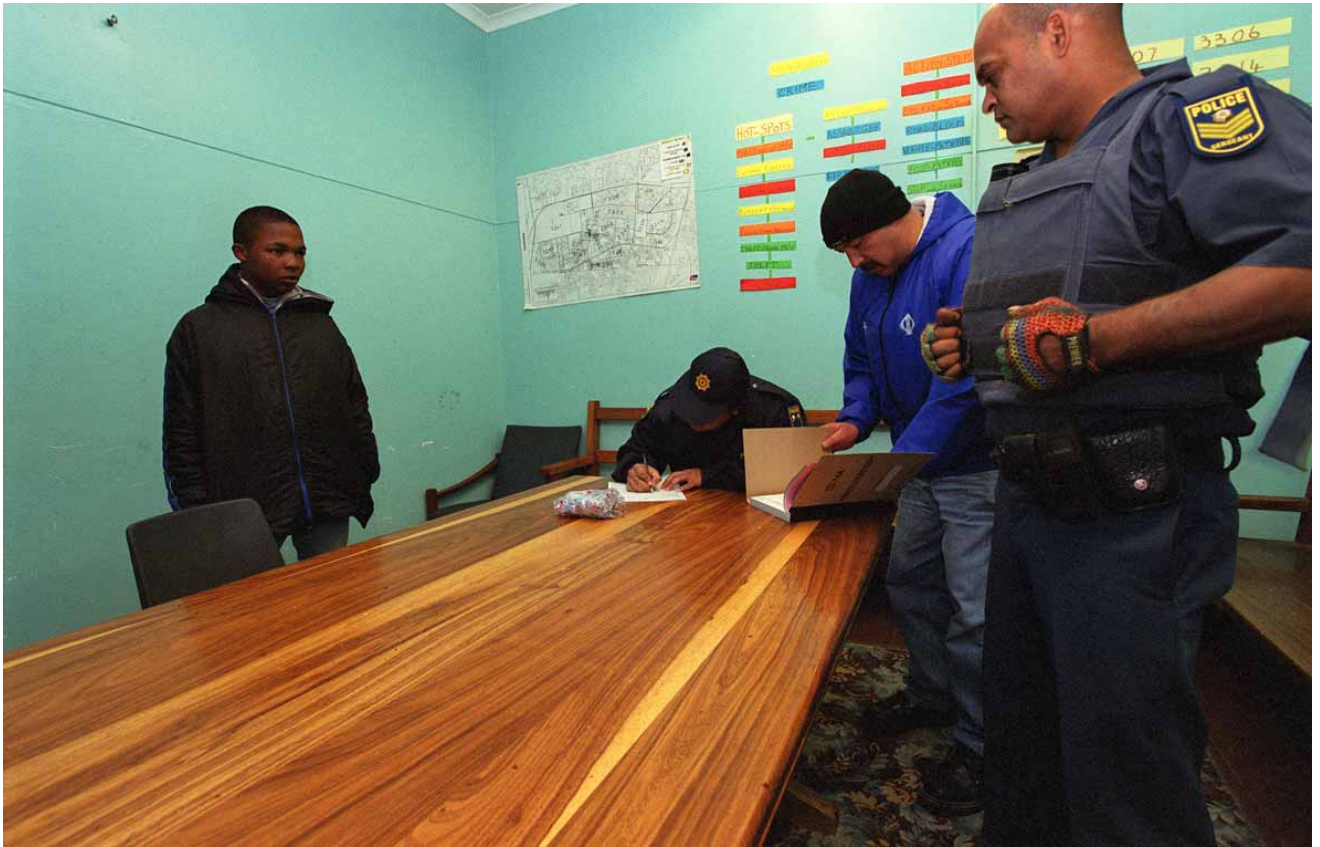
The Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cape Town attempts to solve conflicts with long-term programs. Its trainers work systematically with schools and teachers as well as with police, prisoners, and prison guards. Its mediators advise high-ranking officers, including defense and foreign ministers, in Malawi, Burundi, Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. Nevertheless, southern Africa is the most important area for the Center's work.



The success of CCR can be traced in part to its training of the trainers. In the prisons, trainers like Victoria choose guards who will attend classes for three months. In these seminars, they practice solutions for conflict resolution. At schools, people are similarly trained.



For ten years, the Center has tried to train police in workshops and role play. These workshops teach them that violence is not the best way to solve a conflict. Actually, the opposite is true. "Violence provokes and creates a backlash," said Victoria, who will accompany a police commando unit on a manhunt today. "We experience this phenomenon all the time."



She is as popular at the police station as she is in the prison. "Hello, heroes!" she calls out as the men surround her. Kevin, built like a refrigerator, gallantly helps her into her bulletproof vest and is rewarded with a brilliant smile. Everyone then jumps into police cruisers to investigate a reported shooting between neighbors.



It is the end of another exciting workday. It is already late when Victoria Maloka drives home to her children, who she will soon wake up and take to school. Then she'll prepare for a strategy meeting with colleagues on the topic of human rights and conflict management. It is not so easy for her, as a single mom, to juggle so much.