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**Probation Practice, Leadership and Effective Service
Delivery: A Qualitative Study of the Perspectives of
Probation Officers and Service Managers in the New
Zealand Probation Service**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

The primary goal of this thesis is to consider probation practice and the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery in the New Zealand Community Probation Service during a period of major change.

In relation to this goal, the objectives are: (a) to explore Probation Officers' and Service Managers' understandings of the political and managerial changes affecting the New Zealand Probation Service; (b) to ascertain Probation Officers' and Service Managers' views of probation values, knowledge, skills and practice; (c) to understand Probation Officers' and Service Managers' views of the assessment of service delivery; (d) to identify how Probation Officers and Service Managers define and what they understand by the concepts of leadership and effective service delivery; (e) to examine how the relationship between leadership and effective service delivery is perceived and acted upon by Probation Officers and Service Managers; and (f) to determine the structures and processes that are necessary to maximise the contribution of leadership to the achievement of effective service delivery.

The research participants comprised a purposeful sample of 27 Probation Officers and 8 Service Managers (front-line staff involved in service delivery) recruited from among those employed in the northern and southern administrative regions of the Probation Service. Qualitative data were collected via personal in-depth interviews and augmented by focus group discussions.

The key findings of the study are that:

- first, effective service delivery was not perceived to be limited to the reduction of recidivism alone, but to also include the client's broader social experience,

recognising that positive social benefit can extend beyond the simple measurement of offending behaviour.

- second, leaders must be seen to be credible if they are to create willing followers. This credibility rested upon the leader's possession of relevant practice knowledge and skills, their demonstrated commitment to professional practice, their ability to provide clear direction for practice and their ability to ensure that adequate resources are available to achieve service delivery goals;
- third, a positive association was drawn between a leader's professional experience, possession of personal power and ability to influence Probation Officer practice. In essence, the leader's experience and competence has a bearing upon confidence in the leader. Participants also posited a connection between positive leadership, the development of a 'team' culture, Probation Officer work performance and service delivery.

Overall, the linkage between leadership and effective service delivery was conceived of as being dependent upon the ability of leaders to enhance the practice of Probation Officers. From this perspective, five leadership challenges for senior managers in the Probation Service were identified. These included the challenges to: (a) establish the professional foundations of probation practice; (b) develop a clearer, integrated statement of purpose, values and beliefs that identifies probation as a distinct area of professional practice; (c) develop probation practice in a flexible manner, incorporating international influences while remaining responsive to features and events that reflect the dynamic character of the local environment; (d) to ensure that the integrative structures, processes and new roles/positions necessary to underpin and support probation practice are introduced or implemented, notably for the provision of professional supervision; and (e) to introduce a multi-dimensional approach to the assessment of service delivery that includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators of aspects other than recidivism alone. It is acknowledged that these challenges have significant resource implications.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
List of Tables.....	9
List of Figures.....	9
Chapter One – Introduction.....	10
Objectives and Key Themes.....	12
Thesis Structure.....	16
Chapter Two – The Probation Service to 1985.....	18
Probation Policy Development and Legislation.....	18
Construction of Practice.....	26
Conclusion.....	29
Chapter Three – Forces of Change – The Impact of Public Sector Reform Upon Probation In New Zealand 1985 – 2001.....	32
Forces of Change.....	33
Criminal Justice Sector Development.....	44
Conclusion.....	50
Chapter Four – The Construction of Probation Practice.....	53
Probation Purpose, Values and Beliefs.....	55
Concept of Best Practice.....	67

Contribution of Social Work.....	71
Contribution of Psychology.....	73
Practice Development.....	79
Processes that Support Probation Practice.....	84
Assessment of Practice.....	87
Conclusion.....	92
 Chapter Five – Leadership.....	 98
The Concept of Leadership.....	98
Leadership Characteristics.....	103
Leadership and Change.....	109
Leadership, Organisational Vision and Values.....	113
Leading Professionals.....	114
Conclusion.....	118
 Chapter Six – Research Methods.....	 121
Theoretical Perspectives.....	123
Research Design.....	127
Data Collection.....	137
Data Organisation and Analysis.....	139
 Chapter Seven – Knowledge of Changes in the Service Delivery Context...	 145
Change in Organisational Culture.....	146
Service Delivery Issues.....	151
Professional Issues.....	152
Discussion.....	155
Conclusion.....	161

Chapter Eight – The Participants’ Construction of Probation Practice.....	164
Probation as a Profession.....	165
Values and Beliefs that Inform Probation Practice.....	170
The Concept of Best Practice.....	183
Conclusion.....	209
Chapter Nine – Perspectives on the Assessment of Service Delivery...	214
Knowledge of Causality.....	220
Knowledge of Outcomes that are Appropriate for Assessment.....	222
Conclusion.....	228
Chapter Ten – The Participants’ Knowledge and Experience of Leadership..	232
Knowledge of Leadership.....	232
Experience of Leadership.....	244
Conclusion.....	257
Chapter Eleven – Leadership and Probation Officer Practice.....	262
Leading Professionals.....	262
Leadership and Influence on Probation Officer Practice.....	277
Future Leadership.....	285
Conclusion.....	300
Chapter Twelve – Conclusion.....	303
Findings Regarding Probation Practice.....	304
Findings Regarding Leadership and Practice.....	312
Implications of Findings.....	316
Future Research.....	325
Concluding Comment.....	330

Appendix 1 – Application to Human Ethics Committee.....	332
Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule – Arguments.....	361
Appendix 3 – Research Questions – Master.....	373
Appendix 4 – Focus Group Meetings.....	390
References.....	391

List of Tables

Table 1	Rationale and Principles for Probation Practice in New Zealand.....	93
Table 2	French and Raven's Power Typology.....	101
Table 3	A Comparison of Traits Associated with Leadership.....	105
Table 4	Potential Tensions for Professionals in Organisations.....	116
Table 5	Participant Recruitment.....	134
Table 6	Characteristics of Participants.....	135
Table 7	Outline of the Framework Approach.....	140

List of Figures

Figure 1	Community Corrections Service Organisational Structure to 31 December 1996.....	48
Figure 2	Organisational Structure from 1 January 1997.....	48