

How to Transform Criminals and Gangs —corporate miscreants, too

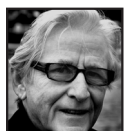
By John Wareham

From an address to the
New Zealand Law Society,
Wellington Criminal Law
Committee

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said ‘life must be lived going forward, but can only be understood looking backwards.’ Looking back I see that I’ve spent my life helping people make the most of theirs.

I began a human resources firm in Wellington, then expanded it to Auckland and Christchurch, then Sydney and Melbourne, then New York and London. So right now, let me try to make sense of the thirty-eight years I ran my little operation from Manhattan. Essentially I did three things:

- I selected chief executives for the likes of Norwegian American Cruises, American Airlines, Crane Co., and Saatchi & Saatchi, then helped them develop their corporate teams.
- Then my life took a turn. Two days a week I worked as an unpaid volunteer creating and leading prisoner development classes at New York’s infamous Rikers Island Correctional facility.
- In the weekends, I wrote about those two worlds. So let me share some insights into what I learned.



John Wareham is creator and chief executive of The Eagles Circle Foundation, a non-profit corporation whose mission is to develop community leaders. A noted writer, lecturer, and organisational leadership consultant, John has created and led leadership programmes for senior executives in most major world cities, and rehabilitation and development programs in New York’s toughest prisons. He also created and led weekend retreats for New Zealand gang leaders, the happy outcome of which the New Zealand Herald deemed ‘a miracle.’ After living in New York for thirty-eight years, John and his wife Margaret now split their time between their Kiwi home and the USA. John can be contacted via his Authors Guild web site, www.johnwareham.com

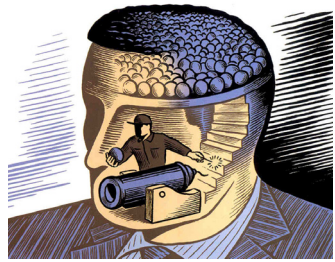
Corporate Miscreants

Unless he changed his leadership style, the British born chief of an international corporation was to be fired. His method of motivating non-performing subordinates was to grab them by the throat, pin them dangling from the wall, and yell that he wasn't getting the performance he needed. You might call him the choke-hold chief. My job was to help him soften that style. Mere weeks later, you might call him a warm, softly-spoken, inclusive pragmatist. Then he used that style to change the world. Really. He also retained me to share what he'd learned by running team-building programs for his staff in London and New York.

And he rewarded me with an insight I never forgot. "One of my managers has a special issue you might be able to help her with," he said.

"What needs to change?" I asked.

"She's one of those people who excludes herself," he explained, "and then complains she's not included." For now, just keep that in the back of your mind. First, let's visit Rikers.



Criminals

On my first day at Rikers I arrived like a wide-eyed man from Mars. Thirty-five guys, clad in olive-green summer uniforms, were seated classroom style in stackable red plastic chairs polka-dotted with cigarette-burns. They presented an eclectic mix of tattoos, beards, sideburns, moustaches, shaved heads and earrings.

What caught my attention, however, was the cultural mix: twenty-five were African-American, eight were Hispanic, and only two were white. Something was wrong with this picture, surely.

Even more to the point was the recidivism rate. At that time, eighty percent of newly released Rikers inmates returned to prison inside sixty

days. Yikes! If I couldn't work with these guys to reduce that regression, forget the whole thing.

In fact, I stayed for twenty years, and, with help from the New York participants, honed the Eagles programme. And, happily, as of today, during the past twelve years, Eagles graduates enjoy a single digit recidivism rate.

Gangs

Black Power life-member Denis O'Reilly invited me to create a weekend retreat for the Black Power and Mongrel Mobs, then fly to New Zealand and run it. The venue was a lonely, backwoods convention center. At twilight on a dusky Friday night, on condition that there'd be no police presence, thirty gang members arrived.

They seated themselves in horseshoe formation, and I opened with a discussion of Plato's Cave. Yes, really. Fifteen minutes later, the glass doors flew open and



fifteen more Mongrel Mob members arrived. Most were sporting bulldog tattooed faces. A couple were waving chains. All seemed sullen and angry, and poised for confrontation.

After finishing the immediate discussion, I glanced to the new arrivals. "Gentlemen," I said, smiling in the direction of the giant who seems to be the leader, "I don't think you and I have been introduced." I strolled to that apparent chief and offered my hand. "I'm John, glad you could make it." He remained mute with his arms crossed against his chest. So I grabbed his hand and pumped it. He was still reluctant, but nothing bad had happened, so, to the horror of those in the semicircle, I good-heartedly bumped his chest with my shoulder. "Didn't quite catch your name," I said. Long pause. "Podge," he finally mumbled. "Hey, Podge! So glad you could join us. Now let me just say hello to your friends." I coaxed every last one of them to shake hands with me. Then we widened the horseshoe, and they sat and joined the discussion.

Word got out that good things were happening, and by Sunday more than a hundred gang members packed the hall. At the closeout, the Black Power and Mongrel Mob formed two concentric circles. In the ancient tradition of the Maori, those two circles seemed to spin as each and those gang leaders embraced and hongied as spiritual brothers. The next day, the *New Zealand Herald* proclaimed that happy outcome ‘a miracle.’ In fact, the so-called miracle was merely the last step in a process. Let’s think about that for a moment.

THE JOURNEY FROM CONFUSION TO LIGHT

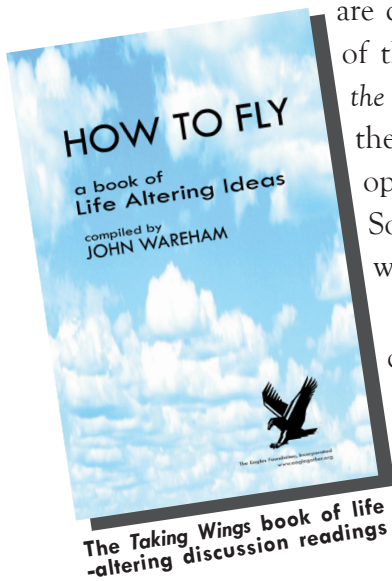
Change is a process. And, we only pay attention to things we discover for ourselves. So we need to go on a journey of self-discovery. But first we need to do some preparation.

When it comes to discussing their personal opinions most people are certain of what they think, and defensive of their negative behaviours. But *certainty is the enemy of clarity*. In fact, clear thinking is the ability to calmly and rationally explore opposing ideas that are cogent and credible. So the next step is to introduce a dollop of what I call *constructive confusion*.

So, in preparing for every retreat, we distribute a carefully customized set of pithy but contentious discussion readings.

As an icebreaker, we typically begin with a discussion of Plato’s parable of the cave. This 2500 year-old masterpiece details the journey to enlightenment. It shows why it

takes time for the truth to sink in; why we resist the truth, why those who have seen the light are disbelieved, and how clever rogues use that light to concoct clever lies.



The Message to be Delivered

Pioneering psychologist Carl Jung said that patients begin to get well when two things happen:

- *they gain an understanding of their predicament,*
- *then they see a way out of it.*

But truly understanding the true predicament can be problematic:

- prisoners imagine it to be that they got caught and incarcerated;
- bullies say their need to intimidate was caused by slow results from incompetent underlings;
- gang members imagine that it's because society excludes them.

But in all these cases, one layer of the predicament is what Freud called *repetition compulsion*; an irresistible *unconscious* urge to repeatedly engage in self-defeating behaviours.

Truly understanding one's predicament means *waking* to the realization of having been trapped inside a prison of the mind and heart.

The 4-Walled Prison

The deeper and truer predicament is that one way or another they're all inmates of the same four-walled penitentiary.

- *The first wall is Emotional Damage.* Or as Max Phillips observes in his poem Snakebite: '*a lash of this catches you off guard in childhood*'; in an unguarded childhood moment a snake '*plies her fangs of venom through your heart*' and though you don't know it, poisons your life; '*you will not understand but will endure, / snakebit and never dreaming of a cure.*'

- *As a result of that snakebite, a second wall of Imprisoning Beliefs is formed.* Among the most common of those beliefs would be, 'I cannot get what I need from life unless I cheat.' Or, 'knocking a few heads together is perfectly acceptable way to get results.'

- *Now those imprisoning beliefs become Self-Defeating Behaviours.* They may work short term, but soon that person winds up in jail or on the street.

- *The fourth wall is the 'Illusion of Choice.'* The inmate of that mental

prison thinks he knows what he's doing, but in fact has no idea: again, *'you will not understand but will endure, snakebit and never dreaming of a cure.'*

The first challenge is to help anyone trapped inside those walls to realize that he or she is not just a perpetrator, but also a victim.

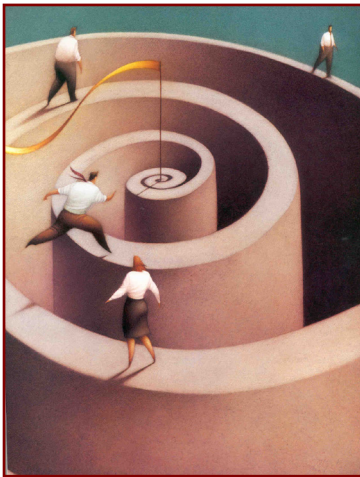
How to Escape

Inevitably, the answer is buried in the past. As playwright Eugene O'Neill observed:

None of us can help the things that life has done to us. They're done before you realize it. And once they're done, they make you do other things. Until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you have lost your true self forever.

That unhappy destiny typically begins with a bad emotional climate in the home, followed by a snakebite incident. Consider for example:

The chokehold chief finished 40 incomplete sentences on a form I use to jump-start one-on-one discussions. His response to *'Most people think of that I...'* caught my attention. Executives typically respond, *am an achiever, am a leader, or, am a team player.* In this case, however, the fellow had responded, *Most people think that I am frightening.'*



am a leader, or, am a team player. In this case, however, the fellow had responded, *Most people think that I am frightening.'*

'Why do you want to frighten people?' I asked. "I don't," he replied. "But you've already said you know that people find you frightening, I said: "So the thing for us is to discover why you like to scare them. My hunch is that the answer is buried in your past somewhere, so let's explore that."

The issue turned to be his ten year-old highly intelligent self, living in a council house with an alcoholic mother, and having to operate the iron lung on which his father, cursing the British class system, lay dying.

‘I never got one of those snakebites in my house,’ said Andre. He paused, thinking. ‘Well, maybe ... when I was eight years old ... I came home from school a couple of times ... and a bleeding body was on the kitchen floor.’ Ah yes. Desensitized as an infant, but now in his late-twenties, Andre was serving time for pushing two people to their deaths from the top floor of an apartment building.

“Did you ever suffer any emotional damage, Podge?” The startled eyes of the group are telling me to stay away from him. I hold his gaze. “Yeah,” he finally says. “Wanna tell us what happened?” I ask. He twists in his chair. “When I was eight years old I got kicked up the arse by my dad,” he says. “But I deserved it. And I got over it.” The atmosphere is charged. A rival gang member, breaks the silence. “I got kicked, too,” he says. The confession becomes a chorus. “Did any of you truly ever get over getting kicked?” I ask. Podge steps into the silence. “You never do,” he sighs.

Reinforcing the Message.

Inmates themselves drove home the principles of the Eagles programme with public speaking, parliamentary debating, and movies on related topics. Every week we supplemented that by creating and delivering poems on similar themes. Here’s just such a chilling illustration of a moment of awakening from the Illusion of Choice. It’s by a twenty-five year-old who, like everyone else in the class, had never previously penned a poem:

*Who am I,
What have I done?
I can’t believe I did that.
What have I become?
Why are those guys oozing red?
That one looks just like he’s dead.
They’re staring at me, everyone;
Wherever did I get this gun?*

CREATING A BETTER SOCIETY

Corporate Miscreants

The best way to treat corporate miscreants—or anyone for that matter—is to involve them in a team-building program before bad habits becomes too hopelessly ingrained. Unfortunately, most so-called team-building exercises merely address the need for quick fixes for burning corporate fires—which, paradoxically, all too often seems to permit and reinforce miscreant behaviors. So, as noted, the secret to developing teams is to treat the heart and soul along with the mind and behavior. Emerging leaders discover their best true selves; the confidence that comes from authentic enlightenment does the rest.

The next-best solution for individuals who torpedo team performance, is a series of one-on-one sessions.

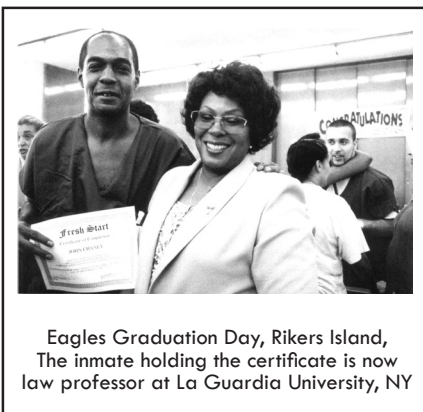
Criminals

Looking at a sea of colored faces in New York or New Zealand prisons, you might think that complexion causes crime. But look again:

what you're seeing—be it white, or black or any shade in between—is a gathering of hope and skill deprived citizens from broken homes, all stuck on the bottom rung of a socioeconomic ladder where unskilled jobs have disappeared, and semi-skilled workers are being replaced by robots and algorithms.

The issue is *not* race or colour. It is *need*. To survive these citizens turn to crime. Or, to ease their strife and shame they shoot drugs. So what we call 'addiction' is mostly a symptom, not a condition.

Rikers taught me to take race and religion out of the equation, and create a secular program based on modern psychology.



Crazy for Conspiracies

Excerpt from a poem by Kenny Johnson, which he delivered at a protest rally on the steps of the New York State Capitol building, shortly before he died.

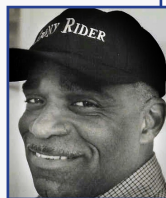


Photo by John Wareham

You might not agree with me,
say I'm crazy for conspiracies,
but if education's the key
to what a person needs to be,
why aren't we building schools
instead of penitentiaries?

Yeah—those concrete cookers breeding villains;
kids come home with stigmatism,
short on skills and stoicism,
left to cope, with little hope,
and in their palms a wad of rope
to hang themselves,

as tucked into society's unforgiving shelves
shamed and lost and left to delve
into what they know best
—and you or I could guess, more or less—
what that might be;
drugs and crime and the old paradigm,
of doing time to end up doing more time.

And if you can't see that, you have to be blind.

Alas, to my eye anyway, race, religion and retribution underpin our current Kiwi prison programs. So, the current parole system can seem akin to pushing angry, needy, reentering citizens from a cliff to an ambulance staffed by narcoleptic officialdom.

If the goal is to reduce recidivism, the infinitely better way is to run programs that help prison denizens to (a) *understand* the predicament of serial incarceration, and (b) teach a *marketable skill* so they can survive without breaking the law.

We can't do everything at once, of course. But happily, at next to no cost, we could run a 13-week pilot program for thirty lost souls currently languishing in prison.

Gangs

A great New York friend, Federal Judge Richard Owens—a hanging judge by reputation—said to me, “Oh, John, you’re such a bleeding heart liberal.”

“Not at all, Judge,” I replied. “I’m a dedicated pragmatist. Just show me what actually works. Offenders should get *you first, then me later*.”

I feel the same way about gang members. Yes of course, as with any other person who commits a crime, send miscreants to prison, and sentence the worst offenders to serious sentences. With time on their hands, and with any good luck, they might sign onto an Eagles prison program.

But don't declare a war on *all* gangs. The plain truth is that given their druthers, most gang members would like to earn a decent legitimate income and win social plaudits. So, apply some leadership jujitsu instead. Accept gangs as a culture of decent citizens, and make the patch a symbol of citizenship. *Think*



globally but act locally: embrace the diversity of our cultural inheritances, but identify as equal citizens of this global village that sustains us. §

BOOKS THAT REALLY DO ALTER LIVES

HOW TO BREAK OUT OF PRISON

JOHN WAREHAM

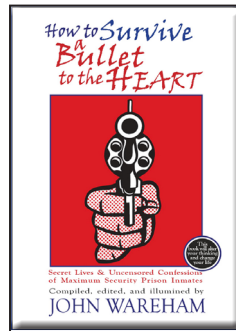


“Invigorating , bold ideas that will result in a fresh and energized perspective.”
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“A savvy, inspirational almanac for chiefs and saints, charlatans and convicts, and everyone in between.”

Prof Eli M. Noam,
Columbia Business School

“Showcases John Wareham’s gift for unlocking the mind and showing how to live the best life we truly can.”
Kevin Roberts, CEO
Saatchi & Saatchi



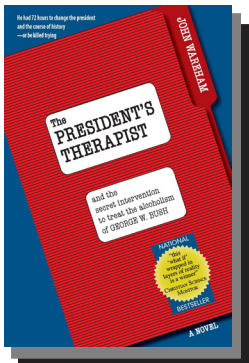
**Real lives—
and real changes**

**Secret
Lives and
Uncensored
Confessions
of Maximum
Security Prison
Inmates**

“To pen a prison poem is to unlock the cage along with the heart. This deft collection sparks a potent reciprocity of spirit as one harkens to the sound of wings in the night.”

Professor Jess Maghan—Director, Forum
for Comparative Correction, former
Director of Training, Rikers Island Prison

“John Wareham has the cool, clear eyes of a seeker of wisdom and truth”—*The New York Times*



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He had 72 hours to change the president and the course of history—or die trying.
Amazon Bestseller
for 6 months

“Another Wareham winner! A ‘what if’ thriller wrapped in layers of reality, offers an unnerving “case study” of alcoholism in the White House”
—*Christian Science Monitor*



The Secret to Developing Teams and the mistake that too often thwarts the mission

by **Dr. Jess Maghan**, Wareham advisory board member,
former director of training, New York City Police Department.

The mistake that thwarts most so-called team-building and leadership programs is fixation with organizational housekeeping, operational excellence, and quick fixes.

In fact, obsession with technical mastery merely hobbles the most promising achievers. They become technocrats not leaders.

Leading harmonious, high-performing, new era teams requires a centered heart, not a iron will. It calls for infinitely more insight and understanding than information and intelligence. It demands a way

"The Wareham development program should be a rite of passage for every leader, and anyone who aspires be one."

Jack Butler, founder and
CEO, Municipal Bond
Investors Association

with words, not a whip. That's why the secret to developing leaders is to address the heart, the soul and the tongue, not merely the mind.

And this is exactly what the *Wareham 3 plus 3* teambuilding symposium does. Delegates are exposed to the biggest ideas of the world's most influential thinkers—the worst as well as the best. The program challenges the mind, arouses the heart, and creates the exciting state of evolutionary change that unleashes true potentialities. In my experience, whether in the

private and or public sector, no other leadership symposium is so satisfying or enriching.

The Wareham Leadership Program

may be customized to fit particular client needs, but classic, proven modules include:

- The 3 plus 3 Leadership Symposium ♦
- Leading Inclusive Teams for Profit ♦
- How to Recruit Winning Executives ♦ Corporate
- Values and Business Ethics ♦
- Communicating Your Way to the Top ♦

