



INTERVIEW

MARY TAYLOR

# I PREDICT A RIOT.

---

**As a criminal psychologist, lawyer and executive coach who started out in maximum security prisons, Mary Taylor has a unique perspective on leadership under duress.**

Interview: Alice Hoey  
Photography: iStock

On the surface, there might seem to be few parallels between the leadership challenges in sport and business, and those of the prison wings where Mary Taylor cut her teeth. In both environments, however, successful outcomes depend on leaders being skilled negotiators, confident and decisive under pressure, and capable of keeping themselves and those around them calm in the most difficult of situations.

The key to much of this is preparation, says Taylor, who started out in criminal psychology, and spent a year working in maximum security prisons as part of her degree. "Given there are normally only a limited number of scenarios that can occur in any one setting, it's possible to visualise each one in relative detail, creating a mental plan of how you might feel and act in each eventuality," she explains.

"In a high-security prison, for example, there might be a riot or a hostage taking. You might lose control of a wing and be faced with chaos. While these are extremely difficult, time-sensitive situations, they're not entirely unexpected," she says. "So while of course you have to adapt to each new circumstance, if you've mentally prepared then you have the backbone of what you

need to do and know where your focus needs to be. In the moment, you're not debating with yourself, you're simply executing the plan."

#### DECISION PARALYSIS

This mental readiness can help leaders be more decisive, even if they don't feel fully equipped to make the right move. Under pressure, people will often hold off making a decision, says Taylor, because they fear getting it wrong or hope that more or better information will come their way. "This, however, is the most damaging outcome of all," she says, "because everything stalls. When you make a decision, even an imperfect one, you create forward momentum, which enables you to get to the next decision.

"To take the example of a prison riot, what I decide to do in the moment will make a huge difference, but actually so will what I do in the moments afterwards, because these are cumulative decisions. It's not just the decision itself, but the consequences that flow on from that."

It's worth remembering too, adds Taylor, that while it might be tempting to wait for better information, few decisions can ever be made with absolute certainty. "Instead, we should

be looking to be more than 50 per cent sure," she says, "to ask 'what will achieve a better outcome than waiting and doing nothing?' The more that you do this, the better you become at it."

#### ARE YOU WITH ME?

Key thereafter is really owning that decision, and communicating the reasoning and logic behind it in such a way that people stand with you, even if they don't wholly agree. Do that in the right way, says Taylor, and it will ensure the success of your decision, because it's not just about what you choose to do, but how you go about it that counts: "If the team around you sees that you are confident, can justify your decision-making rationally and logically, and proceed with forward momentum, they're more likely to follow you with an attitude that brings about success.

"With 300 prisoners out of their cells rioting, I'd have 30 officers all looking to me for what to do and how to behave," she continues. "Should we get kitted up in riot gear and fight our way in or sit it out? If we send officers in, they risk injury or even death, but if we don't then prisoners not involved in the riot may be hurt. There is no perfect solution, but whatever we

“While it might be tempting to wait for better information, few decisions can ever be made with absolute certainty.”





choose to do, it will only work if everyone is totally behind me as the leader.

“I saw it so many times in the prison service,” she says. “Officers would literally put their lives on the line for a leader they had respect for. For others, they wouldn’t even change their shift pattern by half an hour.”

#### REASONING AND RESPECT

According to Taylor, to earn that trust and respect you have to lead with humility and honesty, building a personal connection with the people around you: “Let them know how you’re feeling, that you share their concerns, and explain how you’re going to move forward together, and why.”

Mastering this requires not only expert communication skills, but also high levels of emotional regulation, something that comes with both practice and experience.

Taylor admits that when she first found herself surrounded by dangerous criminals in a high-security prison, she was terrified. However, over time she became almost neutral to the events around her, able to choose how she was going to feel and respond, rather than allowing instinctive fear and anxiety to kick in.

“Officers would literally put their lives on the line for a leader they had respect for.”



#### About Mary Taylor

Now providing leadership and executive coaching, Mary Taylor started out in criminal psychology, and spent a year working in maximum security prisons as part of her degree. Fascinated by the prison environment, but keen to be more hands on, she joined an accelerated promotion scheme, which enabled her to move quickly through the ranks of prison management. Taylor later shifted career track onto corporate law, and after working increasingly with businesses and leaders, moved into executive, leadership and business coaching.

“Partly that’s repeated exposure, but largely it’s down to a constructive internal conversation,” she says. “To return to the riot analogy, as I’m sitting in my riot gear waiting to go into the prison wing, I have a choice. I can think about how I might be stabbed or hit, or that my officers are going to die, or I can recognise this as lazy thinking, and instead see the situation as a challenge. After all, the symptoms of fear and anxiety – the heart pumping, the sweating and feelings of nerves – are very similar to those of anticipation and excitement,” she says. “What’s more, the surge in adrenaline allows your brain to reach heightened levels of concentration and awareness.”

#### MIND GAMES

Taylor has found that the key to controlling her emotions is being able to purposely divert her focus away from anxious or unconstructive thoughts. Although she admits that this is neither quick nor easy to achieve, certain methods have proved useful over the years.

“I would practise all the time, working quite deliberately to shift my focus from one thing to another,” she explains, describing the process as similar to mindfulness. “I could never

just focus on an inanimate object, however. I found it most effective to choose something that was equally compelling or powerful as whatever I was trying to shift my thoughts away from. It became a powerful tool when I faced a situation where I needed to stay calm, rational and outcome focused.”

As with any skill, to improve emotional regulation it needs to be practised in a conscious manner, pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and maintaining that practice over time.

“That means deliberately putting yourself in challenging scenarios, where you might have to make decisions under pressure or duress,” says Taylor. “When you avoid a difficult situation, the scale of the challenge simply amplifies in your mind, whereas when you walk towards it, and tackle it repeatedly with increasing levels of severity, you become better at handling it.

“However bad things might seem, the reality rarely matches up to the expectation. With mental preparation, regular deliberate practice, and your team at your side, you’ll be ready for anything.”