

Made in prison: turning weaknesses into organizational strengths

The setting is a women's prison in southern Italy. The context is challenging, to say the least. Yet "Made in Carcere" is successful as a social enterprise because it fosters development via four processes that address stakeholders' key vulnerabilities, this research finds.



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Managing the growing prison population is a huge global challenge. Overcrowding and poor living conditions are rife, making it more difficult for convicts to experience good health, self-worth and positive relationships. And, once sentences have been served, re-entering society presents its own challenges, with failures to reintegrate bringing on higher social costs. Yet

most prison systems are not adequately preparing released prisoners for the outside world. In Italy, for example, two-thirds of released prisoners end up committing new crimes.

Made in Carcere is working to change that. In the Southern Italian city of Lecce, this social enterprise employs female convicts at the San Nicola prison via an entrepreneurial project. Now the business's prominent "Made in Carcere" label is found on handbags, bracelets, clothing and other accessories with colorful textures and contrasting materials made by prisoners. Made in Carcere is a success story on many levels, helping not just the prisoners but society at large.

Professors Luca Mongelli, Pietro Versari, Francesco Rullani and IESE's [Antonino Vaccaro](#) analyze Made in Carcere as a successful example of fostering integral human development, even in a dehumanizing setting, for the key stakeholders: female prisoners. By creating a safe space for training and interaction and also acting as a bridge to the outside world, Made in Carcere essentially turns weaknesses into the social enterprise's strengths. That is the conclusion of the co-authors, who conducted in-depth interviews and quantitative analyses of the enterprise since its founding in 2007.

Below is an overview of the two macro-processes (and four micro-processes) identified by the co-authors:

1. Creating a safe space: training and interacting

Made in Carcere's workshop offers prisoners an alternative, protective space where they can temporarily detach from the harsh realities of prison. Here they learn new skills which, in turn, helps promote self-worth and responsibility. More experienced workers teach new arrivals the techniques and maintain an ongoing mentor role, for leadership development and social support.

In addition to the training itself, social interaction is key. The authors note that the workshop provides a different forum to connect with other prisoners. Convicts interact freely as they work and during breaks, and they collaborate to achieve results. As one prisoner says, "working together creates this friendship, this family," fulfilling deep psychological needs.

2. Bridging with the outside world: building responsibility and rewarding work

Made in Carcere makes its workers feel they are not only prisoners, but also workers with

rights and responsibilities in wider communities outside the prison walls. The organization encourages prisoners to regard themselves in their role as core stakeholders in the enterprise, emphasizing that their work is important to the business as a whole.

In return for taking on this responsibility, Made in Carcere workers receive a regular salary, with bonuses when the company does well. On top of that, workers' special achievements are recognized in award ceremonies. They are continually updated on how the brand is performing, and the founder makes a point of expressing gratitude for their work.

After being part of this successful enterprise, some workers plan new ambitious projects for after their release. So, by investing in prisoners while running a business, Made in Carcere offers its workers a chance at a better future.

This study shows that organizations can have a positive impact with processes that help their employees' overcome obstacles to growth. In this extreme case, a dehumanizing environment and marginalization were dealt with head on. In less extreme cases, integral human development is still key.

Methodology, very briefly

This study quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes Made in Carcere, a social enterprise working with female prisoners in San Nicola prison in Lecce, Italy. The authors studied the organization via media reports and internal documents from the founding in 2007 through June 2017. They also conducted in-depth interviews with Made in Carcere's prisoner employees and other workers and prison wardens, as well as observing working life at the company. This involved entering the prison many times, dealing with administrative authorizations, personal safety issues, and convincing prisoners to answer difficult, personal questions.

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