



## The power of positive thought

by Garf Collins

From the window all that could be seen was subway trains covered with graffiti. David Gunn turned to the senior railway police officers and said,

“The first thing we have to do is clear up this graffiti.”

“But sir,” one of them replied, “we’ve got a filthy unreliable mass transit system for which no son of a bitch pays. What difference is cleaning up the trains going to make to all that shit.”

“A lot. Change the small things and you change people’s perception of the whole system. We’ll start with this.”

David Gunn had been hired to oversee a multi-billion make-over of the New York Subway system. He was determined first to raise it from its decrepit condition.

They decided that the best way to defeat graffiti was to remove the shop window for the kid’s art – the operational trains which showed their work to millions of commuters. So any train arriving at a turn-round point was only allowed to continue if it could be cleaned up before it was due to leave.

One hotspot was a Harlem Yard. There the kids would spend three nights on their masterpieces. First night they white painted the wagon. Next night they would trace the outline of their design. On the third they painted it in full colour. The clean-up guys would wait until they had finished and immediately paint it over with undercoat. Often kids broke down in tears. Rapidly the message got around that it was a mugs game. This technique was applied line by line until after 6 years the whole network was free of graffiti.

This success was followed by the appointment of William Bratton as head of the subway police. His first statement to his assembled senior officers was,

“To start with we’ll eliminate fare dodging.”

“But sir,” came the inevitable reply, “that’s impossible. The fare is only \$1.25. It takes a cop all day to arrest a guy, take him to the station house, fill in the forms and wait for them to be processed.”

“Well we’ll see about that. But one thing I’m convinced of is this. If you set the small things right we can change attitudes throughout the whole system.”

Bratton set about his task with vigour. He had offenders handcuffed and keep in line until there was a group worth processing at a mobile station house. To the cops surprise, as a bonus, a significant number of these were wanted by the police anyway or were carrying a weapon. Very soon criminals and muggers realised they were on a loser and the whole subway system became safer and more profitable. Within a few years by continuing rigorously to right the seemingly small things the subway system was again trusted and commuters returned in large numbers.

Bratton then became Chief of the NYPD and by applying a similar crackdown on minor misdemeanours he achieved the major effect of changing a hot bed of crime into the safest large city in the US.