

THE BRIAN WILLIAMS MEMORIAL PRIZE 2011 - WINNING PAPER

REFORMING THE FORCE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE OPERATIONAL SUB-CULTURE ON REFORM AND MODERNISATION WITHIN THE POLICE SERVICE

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Abstract *This article explores the contention that the police service within England and Wales demonstrates difficulty in carrying out long-term reform and modernisation in response to criticism and critical case recommendations. It provides an exemplar in the form of the introduction of the Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) within the police service in 2006 as a means to provide the required initial education to new-to-role police officers. The argument is made that the specific sub-culture located in the area of the operational police response team acts to reduce the impact and effectiveness of reform and, in failing to take into account and mitigate such blocks to modernisation, provides a critical weakness in the change management processes of the police service. These contentions are briefly considered relative to the structures and operational cultures found within the Prison Service and the Probation Service. Work in these areas suggest possible conditions under which policy and practice reform within the police service may be more effectively delivered over the longer term.*

Introduction

Many commentators contend that the police service demonstrates an inability to carry out effective reform and modernisation in response to public criticism and recommendations from serious case inquiries. Loftus (2009, p17) argues that police culture remains 'virtually untouched by initiatives aimed at changing everyday assumptions and behaviour' and Savage (2003, p171) suggests that the police service within England and Wales has been the most successful organisation within the public sector at 'resisting reform and subverting modernisation' and, in doing so, tends to frustrate change and support the cultural status quo position. A case in point can be illustrated by the wide chronology of a number of serious case reviews whose

recommendations all include a clear focus on the critical core issue of information management and sharing within the criminal justice system and which highlight shortfalls within this area of police service activity. Time and again, such recommendations were repeated through inquiries such as the Woolf Report (1991), the MacPherson Report (1999), the Bichard Report (2004) and the Keith Report (2006), and the fact that each successive inquiry highlighted issues of poor policing information management strongly suggests an inability of the management processes within the police service to effectively deliver change and reform where expressly demanded. As recently as May 2011, with the release of the Independent Police Complaints Commission's (IPCC) report into the death of Fiona Pilkington in Leicestershire in October 2007 (IPCC, 2011), evidence was put forward that this inability to effectively manage critical information still remains a demonstrative feature of the police service. The impact of the growth of an influential performance management culture within the police service (Pollitt, 1993), an observed divergence between the strategic aims of police managers and the delivery of services by practitioners (Lacey, 1994) and what Holland (2004, p169) describes as organisational 'memory loss' and a 'short-termist' approach to problem solving may be contributing factors to the perceived inability of the police service to effectively reform and change over time. Arguably, these factors may tend to force the delivery of swift, disjointed and short-term organisational activity, which often does not cater for either cultural dissonance (Gordon and Yowell, 1999) or other forms of blocks to change that, if left unresolved, are likely to prevent long-term effective reform. This apparent lack of consideration of potential blocking issues within the change management process suggests a built-in problematic methodology in the way in which the police service manages its business over the longer term. This is a theme picked up by Berger (1976) in his examination of societal change and reform when he suggests that the 'viability of modern societies...will hinge on their capacity to create institutional arrangements that take account of the counter-modernising resistances' (*ibid*, 1976, p14).

Exemplar

In this respect the introduction of the IPLDP in 2006 represents a case in point and demonstrates how the police service has arguably failed to take into consideration and tackle potential blocks during the reform process. In 2002, the HMIC Training Matters inspection report concluded that within the training provided to new-to-role police officers up to that point 'the learning requirement does not accord with the needs of a police officer in the twenty-first century, nor are the means of meeting it effective' (Training Matters, 2002, p17). In response to this, the IPLDP was introduced to provide initial training for all new-to-role police officers in England and Wales, which reflects the context in which officers were expected to carry out their policing practice. The main thrust of the IPLDP consists of seven learning requirements developed by Elliott *et al.* (2003) at the behest of the government, which are designed to inform the student officer's learning, development and subsequent practice in the operational field. The seven learning requirement goals consist of:

- Enforcing the law and following police procedures

- Responding to human and social diversity
- Understanding and engaging with the community
- Positioning oneself in the role of a police officer inside the police organisation
- Professional standards and ethical conduct
- Learning to learn and creating a base for career-long learning
- Qualities of professional judgement and decision making

(Elliott *et al.*, 2003, p2)

The learning requirements were specifically designed to provide student officers with the skills and competencies to apply critical reflective practice, problem solving and effective decision making during their operational practice and subsequent practice development. These competencies were intended to be used against the backdrop of an understanding of social diversity and community engagement and aspired to deliver police officers into the operational field who could deal with members of the community in a way that provided a more considered and proportionate service.

The IPLDP attempted to reset the operational policing sub-culture by providing new-to-role officers with the knowledge, understanding and competencies to deliver 'society's validated expectation of what a police officer needs to know, to do and be disposed to do in the 21st century' (Elliott *et al.*, 2003, p2). This aspirational cultural shift was a departure from the hitherto reliance on experience alone as the major currency within the operational field and attempted to open up the decision making process so as to increase the opportunity of a bespoke response to individual operational situations, which more reflected the needs and requirements of individuals and communities.

Student officer knowledge and competency evaluation

An evaluation of the IPLDP provision for a specific East Midlands constabulary was undertaken in 2010 (Alcott, 2010). This looked to map the content of the taught course and the process of work-based competence assessment through to the aspired delivery of service to the public by student officers. As a result, it was possible to evidence that student officers who had undergone the taught phase of the IPLDP had received the required levels of inputs concerning legislation, policy, procedure and practice. By way of the required National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in Policing, it is possible to demonstrate that students who successfully completed the work-based NVQ qualification as part of the IPLDP would have demonstrated the aspired skill and competency levels in the areas of the seven learning requirements. In effect, this indicated that all successful IPLDP student officers within this particular Force were exposed to the appropriate learning materials and had satisfactorily evidenced the associated operational

competencies in order to deliver the aspired level of service to the public reflected through the seven learning requirements. Only when the evaluation examined the quality of service actually delivered to the public by IPLDP trained student officers did any issues emerge.

Student officer service delivery evaluation

As part of this particular Force's customer service quality assurance processes, members of the public who had been provided with a service by the Force were routinely re-contacted in order to seek qualitative feedback on the service they had received. The specific survey tool used was a government validated process, involving tightly structured telephone interviews with service users which sought information as to how initial contact with the police had been made, what service was provided, how well the particular service was delivered, how the service user was updated, and how they felt they had been treated generally. It was possible to identify which operational officer had dealt with which surveyed incident and, as a result, it was possible to attribute qualitative customer feedback to specific officers, both those educated through the IPLDP and their pre-IPLDP colleagues. It was evident through the evaluation of the qualitative feedback from members of the public that officers educated through the IPLDP performed at or about the same level as their pre-IPLDP trained colleagues. This suggests that the aspired seven learning requirements of the IPLDP appears not to have delivered the expected increased service to the public, even though the evaluation process strongly indicated that IPLDP educated student officers are capable of demonstrating the enhanced skills and competencies required to deliver this aspired level of service to the public. Taking these issues together, one could hypothesise that when student officers move from the initial taught phase of the IPLDP into the operational arena they, in some way, identify with their operational colleagues to produce performance which reflects that which is consistent with the prevailing culture. This prevailing cultural influence and its intersection with the initial operational development of student officers is at the heart of this work and provides a focus for attempting to understand why the aspired improved service does not appear generally to be delivered by IPLDP educated officers. A similar phenomenon is identified by Kauffman (1988, p198) who studied trainee Prison Officers who were moving from their initial training environment into the operational field. She suggests that, having made this move, many trainee Prison Officers not only take on the characteristics of the prevailing officer culture, which in many areas is contrary to their training, but are also cognisant of these changes and in many cases 'grieve deeply over the changes they saw happening to themselves' (*ibid*, 1988, pp198-199). The influences of the initial operational destination of all student police officers when progressing from their initial training phase, that of the operational response shift team, appears to be key in determining the type of service new-to-role officers ultimately deliver to the public. Here, student officers are exposed to a perceived unique policing sub-culture made up of experienced officers who, it is argued, display a distinct culturally impactful 'working personality' Skolnick (1994, p42). The existence of such a sub-culture is, in many areas, seen as a cause for criticism but there are those who would argue that a sub-culture located within the operational shift arena is a necessity (Waddington, 1999) given that it provides police officers, who apply a large number of discretionary powers, with an accessible context with which to identify and differentiate what is considered to be good and bad practice. Thompson

(2006, pp26-27) suggests that the development of this form of internalised 'norming' provide a 'shared way of seeing, thinking and doing', allowing student officers a context in which to apply their learning alongside their more experienced colleagues.

Student officer perceptions

In order to examine the relationship between the identified shortfall in performance by IPLDP educated officers and the operational shift team sub-culture, I conducted a small scale qualitative research study which attempted to draw upon the experiences, thoughts, views and perceptions of a group of six operational IPLDP educated officers selected by way of a purposive sampling process (Alcott, 2011). The purposive sampling process was intended to mitigate any potential influencing variables outside those being studied. The participant group consisted of both male and female officers, made up of a range of ages and ethnicities. They were selected from one specific Cohort intake, which was chosen to ensure that the student officers concerned had completed their initial training and had been operational on shift for more than six months. These officers were selected from one specific policing area, such that they were each exposed to identical local management processes and performance regimes during their initial operational work phase.

Issues of ethics and power were identified early in the research design given that, as a serving police officer, I not only had to contend with the challenges faced by being an insider researcher (Alcott, 2011) but also had to deal with power issues due to my hierarchical position within the police service relative to the members of the sample group. Attempts to ameliorate these issues were made through evaluated planned actions set out in the ethical approval process and the research evaluation design of my work (*ibid*, 2011, p48). The experiences, views and perceptions of the individual members of the group were obtained by semi-structured interviews, which focused on the impact of the shift culture on their practice development. Analysis of the data identified a number of potential themes which uncovered an array of potential blocks that appear to have possibly hindered and frustrated the implementation of the IPLDP (*ibid*, 2011, pp38-48).

The student officers who were interviewed reported that, on arriving initially onto their respective shift teams, they all felt a need to be accepted by their peers and a desire to learn the role from those more experienced officers already on the shift. All of the respondents expressed good fortune at being placed on the shifts they had been allocated to, describing their individual shifts as a 'family' (*ibid*, 2011, p36). During our conversations, each of the respondents took this issue further by demonstrating a fierce protectiveness towards their shift teams and shift colleagues. This was demonstrated during the early part of each interview, where the level of current practice knowledge possessed by their more experienced shift colleagues was probed, with each respondent claiming that their shift colleagues had generally a good level of current knowledge. Later, when looking specifically at examples where the respondents' understanding of legislation, policy and procedure differed from that which they saw their colleagues carrying out, a number of examples were provided where the practice knowledge of more experienced shift colleagues was identified by a number of the participants as poor and

outdated. For the most part, in these cases the respondents jumped to the defence of their colleagues by providing reasons why their colleagues might have acted as they had.

A number of respondents described specific incidents, usually involving threats or use of violence against police officers, which they had dealt with and which they felt resulted in an expression of tacit acceptance of them by the other members of the shift team. One respondent described it as having to go through a 'watershed' in order to gain the confidence and acceptance of his peers. Taken together, this reported need for 'peer acceptance' within the shift 'family' represents a strong force, which arguably may push new-to-shift student officers inexorably towards the prevailing shift sub-culture and away from the aspired practice of the IPLDP. Together, these issues indicate a degree of shift sub-culture internalisation by student officers and could arguably reinforce and propagate the views, opinions and practices of existing shift members and may be a contributing factor as to why the performance of IPLDP student officers appears to norm with that of pre-IPLDP trained officers.

One explanation for this state of affairs may be the existing power differential within the operational shift team makeup. The respondent student officers observed a definite hierarchical structure within their own shift teams, the order of which was generally determined by the length of service of officers within the shift. Other factors, such as an officer's level of police vehicle driving authority, specific courses they had attended, and their level of knowledge concerning active individuals within the Local Policing Unit (LPU), also had a bearing on their position within the shift 'pecking order', although these factors very much reflect the currency of operational 'time served experience'. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007) would describe the knowledge and skills held by these more experienced officers as a form of 'capital'. This concept of 'capital' identifies the factors that are sought and collected by members of the group in order to improve their group standing and influence. Those reported to be high on the shift 'pecking order' were those who were generally listened to and were able to influence opinion within the team on matters which were discussed. This clearly equates 'time served experience' with a degree of influence as to the views, opinions and practices of the shift team.

Observed hierarchical issues

The respondents identified two main issues relating to the observed shift hierarchy, which impacted directly on their learning from the IPLDP. First, they reported that many pre-IPLDP trained officers demonstrated a resistance to and dislike of the IPLDP, especially the concept that officers should be required to be educated at university as a prerequisite of becoming a police officer. One respondent reported a conversation during which a pre-IPLDP trained officer was 'scathing' about the IPLDP, with other respondents reporting that humour was used as a means to denigrate the IPLDP process. This reported cultural dissonance suggests a degree of fear on the part of many experienced shift officers. It could be contended that when IPLDP student officers initially join a shift team, they represent something of the unknown and a possible threat to the more experienced pre-IPLDP trained officers. It could be considered that IPLDP educated student officers may have been provided with their own 'capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007) by way of up-to-date practice knowledge and having been educated under this new perceptually

improved process. This may generate a feeling of fear in these more experienced officers, who perceive new-to-shift student officers as representing a threat to their already established position within the shift team hierarchy. In real terms, the ambivalence towards the IPLDP by many established shift officers is likely to prevent the developmental of an environment that will foster the changes aspired to by the IPLDP. The second issue relates to a point made earlier, that of reports from the respondents that many experienced time served police officers demonstrated a lack of current and up-to-date knowledge concerning legislation, policy and procedure. The respondents described a perception of an inverse proportionality between time served experience, which is valued and supports the development of skills such as problem solving, investigation and decision making, and current up-to-date practice knowledge required by an effective officer. Accepting the undoubted benefits of experience in any working environment, it could be argued that experience which uses ill-informed and outdated knowledge provides a distinct vulnerability for the organisation in which it operates. This issue identifies a lack of opportunity for continual professional development on the part of many experienced officers as they progress through their careers, an issue which, it could be argued, is a basic organisational responsibility and requires clear leadership and direction given the apparent ever-changing nature of the policing environment. The IPLDP learning requirement seeks to resolve this issue through the competency of 'learning to learn and creating a base for career-long learning' (Elliott *et al.*, 2003, p2) but, given what is reported by the respondents, it is likely that the earlier identified sub-cultural power differentials may frustrate and dilute this aspiration.

Experience of other criminal justice agencies

Stout and Knight (2009) in their work, which looks at probation and offender management training within the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), pick up this theme of continual professional development, linking it to the issue of a Probation Circular in 2008 (PC, 15/2008) that required, amongst other things, that initial training for Probation Service Officers (PSOs) should be extended to provide refresher training for experienced PSOs. This not only supports the tiered approach to the levels of practitioner responsibility but also ensures a consistency and development of practice for all staff. This came as a result of major structural changes within the makeup and working practices of the Probation Service, where the need to change the working culture and 'capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2007) distribution within the service was identified at the senior organisational management level and translated into change management action as a result. This focus and engagement with continual professional development appears contrary to the experience of the Police Service, as evidenced by the IPLDP and the Prison Service, demonstrated by Kauffman (188, p198), where it is suggested that the operational culture ranks time served experience 'capital' over up-to-date practice knowledge 'capital'.

When asked, the research respondents generally reported that, following their initial work-based phase, they had developed their own policing practice through observing and listening to colleagues and deciding on the correct practice in the light of their own experiences and learning. This appears generally to be an adequate practice but it does come after the initial socialisation phase that shapes practice and its development. Much

of the reported sub-culture making up a typical operational shift team may, by this point, have been internalised by student officers such that their emerging practice reflects and carries on the prevailing shift team sub-culture, unchanged by the interventions of the IPLDP. Over the past few years, changes in the initial training of probation and offender management staff within NOMS in response to the development of the Offender Management Model (OMM) appears to have paralleled many of the issues that have been identified as impacting on the introduction of the IPLDP. Bailey, Knight and Williams (2007, p114, 130), as part of their work, identified a number of likely positive impactful issues on the effective implementation of the OMM. These issues included the need for an effective management of the change process in a non-prescriptive fashion, which involves engagement and discussion with practitioners and the need to provide continual professional development for staff at all levels. Berger sees engagement with practitioners as an essential part of reform, suggesting that 'Every human knows his own world better than any outsider (including the expert who makes policy' (Berger, 1976, p13). Pragmatically, one could argue that the conditions for change and reform identified by Bailey, Knight and Williams in their work would appear to support the type of practice change required in a strong and engrained cultural work environment where challenging levels of cultural dissonance may be found.

Conclusion

The arguments presented within my research study use the introduction of the IPLDP within the police service to identify an organisation that proactively aims to carry out reform and modernisation but, on many occasions, has stumbled in doing so. In many instances, this failure can be directly linked to an inability to consider and act on the potential blocks that are likely to impact on the success of reform and modernisation initiatives. This appears to locate a major fault line within the police organisation as a whole, making reform difficult to achieve, especially where it involves cultural change over the long-term. Berger suggests that 'policies for social change are typically made by cliques of politicians and intellectuals with claims to superior insights. These claims are typically spurious' (Berger, 1976, p13). He appears to accord with the views of Bailey, Knight and Williams (2007, p114, 130) in suggesting that those subject to change and reform should be provided with the opportunity to participate in the identification and resolution of change policy in what he calls 'cognitive participation' (Berger, 1976, p13). This arguably draws our attention to the traditional hierarchical 'top-down' problem identification and solving processes, the focus of which may represent a profitable area of critical reform. This attention may be even more apparent given the rise in the importance at all levels of decision making within the police service of the National Decision Making model, with its reliance on up-to-date, relevant and accurate information as the bedrock of good decision and policy making. An example of work in the area of practitioner engagement within organisational change and reform is the Nexus project, which took place in Victoria, Australia (Wood, Fleming and Marks, 2008). Here, rank-and-file police officers were provided with the opportunity to participate in an action research project aimed at developing critical areas of policing practice. The Nexus project research evaluation demonstrated good feedback from those practitioners who participated, identifying clear benefits in engaging with policing practitioners who are in a practical position to contribute to the identification of problems and the formulation of

problem solving options. This could possibly point the way for future reform and modernisation projects, where problem identification, problem solving and solution application involves those subject to and who engage with the day-to-day lived experience of the situation, rather than those hierarchically far removed from the issues.

My work, relative to the IPLDP, has provided a number of recommendations, some of which are currently being implemented in an effort to impact on the issues identified by the respondents. In reality, mine is a small-scale project that requires a more in-depth exploration of the identified themes in order to provide a greater confidence that the relevant issues have been satisfactorily located. Work in this area is currently ongoing and seeks a better understanding and application of change and reform decision making processes within the police service and more widely throughout the Criminal Justice system.

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