

Introduction

In this review I reflect upon my experiences as a leader during my career in the police service, focusing upon some of the challenges I have faced and the approaches to leadership I have adopted to deal with them. The academic theories which underpin these reflections are considered, along with the approaches taken by other leaders I have worked alongside, the impact of these and lessons learned for the future.

Context

As a leader in the police service, the business of management does not happen in a vacuum. There are more factors taking effect than simply the relationship between a manager and their staff. These interactions take place in a cultural setting that has been described as akin to a 'complex social system comprising the individual, the group, the organisation and the environment' (Mullins, 2019).

Another relevant variable is that within the police service, individuals may be volunteers for a role or have been appointed to it without choosing to do so, and as such a range of skills, experiences and attitudes may be present within and across teams.

These personal and group-based factors interact with the organisational structure, and considering how these apply in context, I can reflect upon my experience in taking on a new role as the leader of the partnerships department in Cardiff. This area of business focused on crime prevention and the building of cohesive, resilient communities alongside numerous partner agencies including the local authority, health, universities and businesses.

These partners were in many cases statutory bodies, publicly funded and accountable to their stakeholders in similar ways to the police. Others were private companies, with their own agenda and commercial considerations and we also worked with third sector organisations; charities and voluntary groups. Being familiar with the individuals and the dynamics of their organisations was important in building positive working relationships.

The partnership manager role which I adopted had, however, been occupied over the previous two years by seven different people. Some had known they would be performing

an interim role at the time they were appointed, others moved on suddenly and unexpectedly. As such, this turnover was not by design; illness, retirements and changing operational needs had combined to create a backdrop of instability in a department which demanded close working relationships with partners both internally and externally.

Departmental reform

The situation which I inherited was undesirable for a number of reasons – not only had the necessary external relationships been neglected, but service delivery and the development of staff were also failing short of expectations. The issue of unstable leadership has been demonstrated (Moore, 2018) to require both planning and sustained effort to resolve, considering the necessary competencies of staff, the tasks and demand of the business area and predicted future needs. ✓

Dealing with the first requirement, I ensured that I would be in place for long enough to implement reforms by securing the support of my own managers to invest in my oversight of the department for at least two years. I then communicated this fact to my team, demonstrating my commitment to understand, improve engagement and build a positive relationship (Rogers and Smith, 2004).

This was important, as I needed to distinguish myself from the 'caretaker' arrangements that staff had become accustomed to and make it clear that I would be in place to support sustained improvement and every member of staff would have a vital part to play in the whole team's success.

Second, I undertook a review of personnel. There were a number of vacancies and temporary arrangements in place which had not been attended to and reduced the department's capacity as well as building a perception that this was a business area which wasn't invested in or cared about. This view affected the value that staff attached to the importance of their jobs and impacted negatively on motivation.

I noted that there was a particular need to reform the licensing team. This unit's responsibility was to support public safety at planned events and in pubs, bars and clubs through regulation and enforcement of licensing laws. They had, however, recently had a senior member of their team dismissed for a number of serious misconduct matters and needed to rebuild their confidence.

Good start, but some opportunities to explore your feelings of events, how the team may have felt and why things occurred and why you choose your approaches

why? and what were your feelings about this?

good, did you learn this somewhere?

This was to be achieved by new direction and investment (Stoddart and Wyckoff, 2009) and departing from the old ways of working. Selecting a new supervisor for this team required a consideration of both person-group fit and collective fit (Kristof-Brown) and so an experienced Sergeant was appointed who was known to be fair, decisive and even-tempered in order to bring stability and ensure that performance and morale were improved. Again, it was important that the person selected would remain in post for a long enough period to achieve this.

One of the practical changes I implemented was to align the licensing team's working hours to their demand, with more evening and weekend cover. This had the effect of moving them closer to their partner agencies and gave them the ability to operate proactively through early engagement with pubs and clubs. This built their skills, profile and confidence, which allowed them to move on from their past experiences.

Looking to the third requirement I conducted an audit of the department's activities and determined that a great deal of work was carried out individually and in isolation from others, resulting in limited interaction with operational colleagues. As such I directed that the department would reduce its reliance on standalone internal recording mechanisms and instead utilise the same IT platform as frontline colleagues. This has been shown to improve understanding and accessibility (Rothwell, 2010) and successfully broadened the horizons of staff who could now see what their colleagues' needs and demands were.

Alongside these initial actions I recognised that there was a need to transform the department's attitude to its work. The continuous turnover of managers during recent years had resulted in staff lacking acknowledgement or appreciation and becoming demotivated. As such their focus was in many cases only on completing their own immediate tasks to avoid blame or criticism.

Applying social exchange theory to this example, it was apparent that I would need to create trust in my leadership (Gould-Williams, & Davies) in order to build commitment and empower staff. This would mean overcoming the legacy of years of previous turmoil.

I achieved this by taking a number of steps; one of the first reforms was the creation of a recognition programme that would identify and celebrate the contributions of individuals, holding an annual award ceremony to which family and friends were invited. This had the effect of developing the relational aspect of the psychological contract between the

individual and the organisation, which is credited with creating a greater sense of belonging and appreciation (Dabos and Rousseau).

Furthermore, I considered the working environment, in which my staff were widely distributed and organised incoherently. They were located in separate offices at best, and in some cases in different buildings across the city. This had fragmented the department's identity, and as a recent study (Lee, Brownstein, Mills and Kohane) has demonstrated, the proximity of working relationships can be a predictor of the team's success.

As such, it would have been easy to insist on relocating everyone to the same place but recognising that trust in my leadership would be best served by taking the time to consider individual circumstances, I visited and spoke with staff to understand the reasons supporting their current base.

In some cases, their location was a consequence of the department's acquisition of different functions over time, meaning there had never been any consideration of how these distinct business areas would function alongside others at the strategic level. These roles were identified as suitable for integration into the common workplace, but in other cases there was a need to co-locate with partner agencies, so these staff were instead required to divide their time between sites to improve visibility and engagement.

By taking the time to engage with staff and understand their values I was demonstrating the characteristics of an authentic leader (De Vita) and creating a sense of shared involvement and personal commitment which creates greater energy, investment from staff and sustained performance.

This also required emotional intelligence in managing the transition for staff who in some cases had been working off site for a number of years. These arrangements had become entrenched to the point where some police officers were having time off authorised by managers in the local authority as they had become subsumed within the resources of their host organisation.

The actions that I took to unite and acknowledge the team helped to shape an improved sense of departmental identity through clear membership, group consciousness, shared purpose, interdependence, interaction and the ability to act in a unitary manner which allowed staff to see themselves as a single group (Adair).

why was this not good?

motivation Theory?

why did you do this, did you learn it from past experience?

why change?

My aim in implementing these changes was to develop and improve the department's delivery of its functions, benefiting the organisation and our communities. This can be considered in the context of group development theory.

Given that the partnerships department had been established for many years, when I took on the role of leading the group, they were at the 'performing' stage (Buchanan and Huczynski). At this point, the group's working structures were well developed, along with collaborative activities, and my interventions served to enable greater productivity and a stronger commitment to problem-solving. *why*

There was not an option to dissolve and reconstitute the department from scratch as we had continuous statutory responsibilities to meet as well as safeguarding considerations. Had it been possible to design the department afresh, my commitment to operate as an authentic leader would have necessitated the involvement of staff, partners and communities in shaping structures and responsibilities to ensure the widest range of needs were met.

Leadership development

Having established myself in my new leadership role and implemented the initial reforms that were required, I was then able to direct my attention to longer term cultural changes. The lack of consistent leadership caused by the department's recent reliance on short-term managerial appointments had resulted in an insular, transactional approach, which can be considered to stifle creativity (Afsar et al).

This stagnation was not a surprise, as staff had become conditioned to focus on their own tasks as individuals, without wider engagement. This had the effect of settling much of the department into a stable routine so that necessary tasks were conducted in line with expectations but there were limited examples of dynamism. There is evidence (Rea and Parker, 2012) that transactional approaches can create the expectation among staff that generating ideas and thinking entrepreneurially is the sole responsibility of the leader and I was keen to move on from this. *why*

why? I recognised that being the leader of a department with a diverse range of functions that it was not possible for me to achieve expertise in every aspect of the business area and it was not desirable that I micromanage individuals. I considered instead that our objectives would be better served by relying upon the expertise of practitioners, trusting

why did you want this

and empowering them to do their jobs and find creative solutions. This represented a move away from a transactional approach which is traditionally based on quantitative measurement and incremental improvement (Bass).

Although a vital role is played by leaders in encouraging and supporting the development of new ideas, it would not be fair to say that there had been no initiative demonstrated by staff, or that there was a lack of innovation across the whole business area. The characteristics of the organisation and strength of individual personalities had in some cases fostered an appetite for change, and there is evidence (Ma and Jiang) that this generation of momentum from within teams can happen spontaneously, and has been identified across a range of cultures. *what was it?*

This intrinsic motivation that was present among a number of staff was a valuable commodity and an important starting point. My focus then became to harness the capacity that existed within the department, but which was currently untapped by creating a cultural change and adding extrinsic motivation.

As a first step, highlighting the contribution of exceptional individuals through the reward and recognition programme had created a platform for this to be further developed. I saw that as a number of self-motivated people had already been identified, this presented an opportunity to implement a transformational leadership style.

The characteristics of transformational leadership have been defined as the encouragement of individuals to take risks, and to stimulate proactivity and innovation (Yukl). I considered that I should adopt this approach as the existing focus of staff on short-term and often repetitive goals did not lend itself to the problem-solving purpose of the department.

In order to ensure that staff were empowered to take ownership of problems, it was necessary to establish a clear strategy for the department so that everyone could understand my intent as a leader and exploit opportunities they were presented with. In this way, the transformation I was seeking to deliver was to decentralise leadership, moving away from a narrow focus on compliance and quantitative measurement to a more agile approach that pursues outcomes aligned to broader objectives. *why?*

This model has its origins in a military context, where it is described as 'mission command' and is itself based on the German philosophy of *auftragstaktik*, in which commanders

specify their broad aims to the frontline and then allow smaller units to exercise their own judgment and creativity in meeting them (Shamir). By doing so, this creates a relationship of trust and allows small and flexible units to pursue targets of opportunity and seize the initiative.

This approach first came to my attention as a young officer undergoing initial police training. While most of the group were, like me, in their early twenties, some were older and had changed career. One of my cohort was a former Major in the British Army whose perspective was extremely valuable, and gave him both authenticity and credibility. His experience underlined the importance of adaptability in unpredictable circumstances.

It has been often stated since the nineteenth century that no plan survives first contact with the enemy (Moltke) and so it is vital that those charged with delivering a strategy understand how they can support its objectives with flexibility and initiative. On this basis, I established a plan for the partnerships department that was concise and focused, with three clear principles.

First, our role was to prevent crime and disorder, second, we were to do this in partnership with other agencies, and third, these outcomes were to be of public benefit. In implementing change (Wilkins) organisations may attempt to follow an existing example, import a new culture, or foster a revolution. In each case, though, it is important to note that blind imitation is unlikely to succeed given the distinct dynamics of individuals, groups and organisations.

As such, I undertook the implementation of this approach gradually, allowing staff the opportunity to ask questions, adapt and become familiar with the changes. This again underlined the importance of my investment in my leadership of the department over the long term rather than seeking quick fixes.

This departmental strategy delegated decision making to a less senior level and allowed my staff to move more quickly in pursuit of our shared objectives. It was accompanied by specific goals (Locke and Latham) that were tailored to each team within the department, for example the Youth Offending Team were tasked with reducing reoffending among young people they had engaged with, while Hate Crime officers were measured on victim satisfaction.

good learning has happened then used in future

why did you do this?

why did you do this?

was this good?

In order to have the effect I desired as a transformational leader, it was necessary for me to not only create a compelling strategic vision, but to project enthusiasm, strength and confidence to my staff so that I could overcome any attachment to established processes (Malloch) and create a supportive working environment where opportunities could be effectively exploited.

why is this important

In doing so, I consciously moved away from providing answers and direction on every tactical issue that arose, encouraging staff to think about problems themselves and how they might solve them. My aim was to develop leadership skills in my staff and reduce the expectation that I would always need to be the decision maker. This approach aligned with the concept of distributed leadership (Chatwani) in which the traditional model of hierarchical command and control is replaced by a decentralisation of authority in accordance with the guiding strategy I had established.

any personal worries?

It would be fairer to say, though, that rather than replacing the traditional model entirely, my approach supplemented and improved upon it with a distributive approach. There were necessarily some transactional functions that had to be retained such as granting time off, approving spending and accountability for performance measures as the department was still required to engage with the wider organisation's policies.

As such I saw part of my role as being an intermediary between more senior management and the day to day work of the department, absorbing and deflecting some of the demand, while translating what was necessary into a consistent context.

Approaches in practice

With a number of key reforms now embedded, after around six months in post I was in a position to review what had been achieved and broaden my focus to consider how the work of my department fitted into the wider partnership arena.

good

The partnership landscape at the time had experienced the effects of reduced real-terms funding for a number of public sector organisations over several years with widespread effects apparent (Harrison) and so services were under continuous scrutiny for necessity and value. As a leader that had made a commitment to being transformational and authentic, two of the departmental principles I had already established applied directly in these circumstances; namely collaborative approaches and public benefit.

what happened?

Also of relevance were the developments in organisational dynamics centred upon the leaders that I was accountable to. I had been given the security of being appointed in the partnerships role for the long term, and eventually remained in post for more than two years, but the autonomy I had initially enjoyed was gradually eroded by more intrusive oversight by my own commanders.

personal thoughts and feelings?

This was characterised by two key developments; first, a growing expectation of direct personal ownership and second, a reduced appetite for risk. Both of these requirements emerged in response to a number of incidents which attracted adverse media commentary and associated political attention, increasing the volume of working activity during evenings and weekends, eroding the volume and value of time off which has been demonstrated to have a negative effect on wellbeing (Magnavita, Tripepi and Chiorri).

My concern as the department head was to avoid simply transmitting these demands directly to my own staff and undermining the ethos of distributed leadership. This, I felt, would represent not only a backward step from the culture I was engendering, but also run counter to the credibility and authenticity as a leader I had worked to establish.

good thought

The first issue, the advance of direct ownership, was usually described as 'grip' and quickly became associated with publicising success as a personal achievement rather than a team effort. The second, risk aversion, became more prominent in the desire to avoid being blamed for failure, which was seen as damaging to a leader's personal brand and their career.

what did you do?

Both of these concepts have been considered to be among the traits of toxic leadership (Milosevic, Maric and Lončar) which has attracted growing academic attention over recent years. While a leader may need to exhibit sustained hostile and abusive behaviours to truly be considered toxic, destructive effects can be detected when only some of these negative verbal and nonverbal actions are present (Krasikova et al.) while the leader appears superficially to be successful.

As such, toxic leaders can be particularly dangerous as they may be charming and persuasive on the surface; attracting followers and presiding over apparently impressive achievements while their staff are subject to abusive and exploitative practices (Grijalva and Harms).

In the partnership environment, the fiscal pressures and risk aversion manifested themselves as pressure on my department to minimise police responsibility for providing resources or adopting the role of lead agency. In some cases this was an appropriate and overdue position, especially when dealing with partners who had become accustomed to committing a token level of investment in issues that occupied more of their remit than that of the police.

It was important for me to ensure that the correct balance was struck – protecting our relationships, reputation and service delivery to the public while ensuring that the parameters I was instructed to operate within were observed. In a similar way I ensured that I applied influence upwards to my own leaders, reminding them of our commitments to policies that supported wellbeing and legislative provisions such as the right to disconnect from work (European Resolution 2019/2181 (INL) [43]).

How did this go?

As such I adopted a situational leadership style, balancing the commitments I had to authenticity and distributed approaches while responding to a more authoritarian mechanism of supervision from my own leaders. This called upon skills in negotiating and influencing along with organisational knowledge in 'managing upwards'.

Future Challenges

One of the aspects of leadership I have always valued is visibility, whether as a characteristic I've demonstrated myself or something I have appreciated in those leaders I am accountable to. It can be shown (Hernez-Broome, McLaughlin and Trovas) that high-performing and successful leaders use visibility to enhance engagement with their staff and drive shared commitment. It is this component of visibility that I anticipate being harder to maintain in a post-Covid setting as we experience a more flexible working environment.

In my experience, a leader's visibility can bring with it both benefits and consequences. Some of the most effective leaders I have worked for have not made themselves visible constantly; the drawback of having an office door that is always open is that it can deter individual self-reliance and encourage self-promotion as a string of staff present themselves for decisions or acknowledgement. As such, the best leaders I have encountered have taken steps to manage their visibility effectively by controlling access through diaries or scheduling specific one to one time.

Learning by trial

Given visibility's connection to the development of a leader's 'brand' and the opportunities this presents for the creation of a cult of personality, it is important for leaders to guard against narcissism (Nevicka et al) where negative behaviours can have an even wider effect.

Considering how toxic leaders may actively seek exposure to satisfy their need for praise and recognition, it is interesting to consider how this interacts with their traits of dominance and aggressive response to criticism (Barry, Chaplin and Grafeman). A number of senior leaders I have encountered during my career have displayed both an enthusiasm for visibility and a thin skin in response to challenge; they enjoy contact with staff on their terms – happy to be venerated, but bristling when the same direct contact results in awkward questions.

Of course, looking ahead, visibility is likely to take a different form. For the whole period of my police service and the entirety of my time as a leader some things were universal; I would have an office in a police building, I would share a space with my team and most of our connections would be face to face.

This was the case until the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the shift to remote working that accompanied it.

In truth, the advent of flexible working did not take place suddenly – it was enabled by a change programme which commenced in 2017 and provided laptop devices to officers and staff alongside a move to shared office space and greater home working.

Culturally, however, the transition was slow to gain momentum, but the requirement to isolate generated by the pandemic enforced a sea-change in the organisation's approach as managers who had been previously opposed to permitting employees to work from home were compelled to allow it.

Given this revolution in how colleagues work together and interact, a significant challenge for leaders will be to maintain visibility and connection with their staff. It will doubtless (George) be necessary to adapt their approach in line with these new dynamics to ensure that they remain key enablers of their teams' effectiveness.

challenges
do happen

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