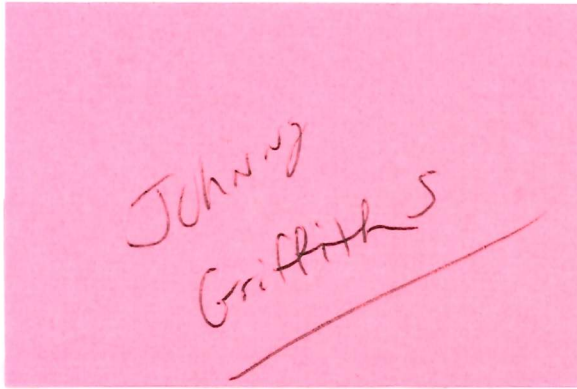




"A reflective review of my personal leadership successes and personal challenges"

Course Name: Policing (Operational and Strategic Leadership) MSc

Module: Leadership and the Individual (BMPO7005)

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This paper explores the leadership challenges I faced when leading a highly specialised policing air support operation and its transition from a local stand-alone unit to a centralised, national unit. The national unit, the National Police Air Service (NPAS) was to become the centralised combination of all of the individual units, effectively the largest police strategic alliance in UK policing. This would increase my responsibility both in terms of the numbers of staff that I would have to manage and the breadth of the operation in terms of covering a much larger area. I have utilised Gibbs's Reflective Cycle in order to examine my experiences and maximise the learning.

A large part of my police leadership journey was spent in the highly specialised arena of police air support, or police aviation. Initially this was as the Unit Executive Officer of my force's dedicated air support unit – a small team consisting of five police constables or tactical flight officers, one police sergeant and two dedicated civilian pilots, all housed at a purpose built, state of the art facility for our Agusta Westland 109e helicopter, strategically located within the force boundary.

Since the inception of police air support as a function of policing in the early 1990's, each force operated their own dedicated units, with a small number of strategic alliances allowing for small numbers of geographically linked forces to share assets. Following a national strategic review of police air support at the beginning of the 2010's it was argued that this model was unsustainable, with escalating costs and a lack of strategic direction highlighting a requirement for a different approach.

Thoughts
or
feelings
about
this?

What was your
thoughts?

Following this, legislation was passed that directed forces to join the National Police Air Service (NPAS)— a new dedicated national service, operated under a 'lead force model' out of West Yorkshire Police. The introduction of NPAS in to Policing in England and Wales was phased, with the first forces joining in 2013. My own force was scheduled to join in 2016 and would be the last of the 43 forces in England and Wales to transfer to the national service.

was this good?

Following the announcement, my force unit was to be disbanded, and assets diverted to the National Police Air Service — inclusive of buildings, equipment and staff. As a result, I was then appointed as the 'Base Manager' for one of the fifteen bases that were to remain. This was a colossal change in terms of the way myself and my team were to operate going forward — both on professional and personal levels — with our once small close-knit team now to form part of a much larger, regional base, made up of officers and staff from many other forces.

thought, was motivation a concern?

My new role would involve the management of all aspects of the base, a much broader role than the one in which I had left, both in terms of scope of the operation and the geographical area that I was responsible for. The nature of the role that my team and I undertook greatly relied upon knowledge of geography and terrain and therefore a move outside of force boundaries posed a significant challenge for us all.

On undertaking my new leadership role there were many challenges to overcome, not least the inheritance of a base that had been operated by another, larger force, for many years and my perception that I was coming in as an 'outsider' from a smaller rural force, with less experience and a crisis of confidence in myself to deliver. My team were impacted greatly by this change, with insecurities around their immediate futures and suitability's for new postings. As a result, two members of my team left

change theory?

the air support world and returned to response policing — a significant loss of skill and expertise.

Notwithstanding these challenges, I was able to overcome them to deliver, with my team, an efficient and effective air support function that added value to local policing priorities. In doing so I adopted elements of a number of leadership styles and along the way have reflected upon the successes or failures of aspects of each.

Whilst I have summarised the move to the National Police Air Service in a few sentences above, the reality of this venture at the time was deeply divisive for us all and a period of great uncertainty, over a number of years. There were members of my team who had spent upwards of 20 years in their role and had a deep connection and affiliation to our home force and its communities. The current multimillion pound building that we operated out of was less than three years old and the team had been instrumental in its commissioning, participating in its design and function, taking great care in its upkeep, and making it a 'home from home' — under the proposals to join NPAS this building was to be written off. At the time I felt a deep sense of frustration about this and wanted to support my team by resisting change. This presented itself as an 'us versus them' scenario, and at the time I remember being buoyed by this. I recall this feeling to me to be displaying loyalty to the group and this is a value that I had always (and still do) put in very high regard. I was later to reflect upon this and understand now that this was perhaps not entirely constructive and have learned that I can achieve similar outcomes without becoming somewhat blinkered on one goal.

good detail but where is theory?

Although this was 'planned change', when the decision was finally made to transfer across to NPAS, the timeframe to make this happen was only a few weeks. Therefore,

there was an element of chaos with NPAS communicating the plans for change, via Twitter, ahead of my own force discussing it with those officers involved – I recall this being very frustrating at the time but also a valuable lesson around the importance of communicating with staff. My thoughts were that, at a minimum, it would have only taken a few phone calls to inform those involved. This is backed up by Walsh and Vito (2019, p. 120) who stipulate that the need for change should be relatively easy to communicate with a useful rule of thumb being that if the reasons for change cannot be communicated in five minutes or less and succeeds in getting a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, then the communication phase has not been completed. In our case, it didn't even begin.

→ feeling about this from the team?

With the news of my force removing the local air support and joining NPAS came significant community concerns with views being aired that the lack of a police air support footprint in the force boundary would see a reduction in the service provided to communities. These community concerns were shared by officers within the force who were vocal around their scepticism of the ability for NPAS to deliver a service, given the competing demands of larger forces and lack of footprint within the force. Following our secondment to NPAS, this issue presented itself as a source of resentment as my team perceived this to be criticism from their peers, with feelings that change was imposed on them against their will and the resulting change now made them part of the problem (from those who preferred local ownership over national collaboration). As their leader I was aware of the motivational impact, and barrier to change that this could have.

good, what style did you do to lead them?

The politics of change are summed up in Roe (2020, p. 337) who, quoting Machiavelli says,

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order.

Personally, I had spent several years canvassing support for my force air support unit to remain self-contained and made arguments to chief officers and our Police and Crime Commissioner against joining NPAS. At the time this felt the right thing to do – in doing so I felt that I was supporting my team, who were strongly against any changes to the operating model and looking after the best interests of the community as I was concerned that response times would be adversely impacted – I felt passionate about this and put a business case together to support the arguments made. On reflection I clearly was not on board myself in terms of the change process. Walsh and Vito (2019, p. 126) argue that change is constantly accompanied by resistance as people often resist change as they fear what will happen to them and what they may lose. Throughout all of this process, the secondment option had not been open to myself, due to my rank. On reflection this is likely to have had some impact on my reasoning and arguments against joining NPAS, and certainly fuelled my own lack of enthusiasm for it, hampering the initial change process, as ultimately, I was set to lose my role.

leadership concern here, a missing trait?

However, it became apparent that due to a number of issues around discipline, NPAS were looking at replacing the 'in-post' base manager, hence the opportunity for myself

good reflection
wouldn't this also be true for the team?

to move across. These discipline issues were to form part of the challenge ahead in terms of my leadership task.

At this time I felt apprehension around taking up this post, both in terms of the personal commitment in way of 180-mile commute and the operational challenge around my lack of 'local knowledge' of geography and terrain. My role would involve management of the unit, together with forming part of the operational aircraft crew as a tactical flight officer. The job of a tactical flight officer very much relies on their ability to direct ground resources with confidence and efficiency. I have always prided myself on operational competence and I strongly argue that in policing, the best leaders are those that have demonstrated competence operationally and therefore have operational credibility. This is supported by Chng et al (2018, p.65-70) who argue that the two critical elements to leadership credibility are perceived competence and trustworthiness. I had real concerns around my abilities to operate at a national level. Therefore, I had a decision to make at this point, plough on and pretend I knew what I was doing, or reach out to the new team for help and support.

*could you quit?
what did you do
and why?*

The team of officers who were to accompany me shared this concern – not least because the new base operated an entirely different helicopter – an Airbus EC135. There was also a general feeling between us that there was an element of parochialism within the new unit and as outsiders a perception that our skills were not 'up to scratch'. As a leader, I felt at the time that this would be a significant challenge to overcome, in terms of instilling the tight knit team ethos that I had been used to. Whilst I did not feel there was any resistance to change from my team in terms of learning new skills I have since reflected and draw comparisons to the argument put

forward by Walsh and Vito (2019, p. 127) who highlight competence, or the fear of the loss of competence as one of five main factors for employee's resistance to change.

*good but
what did
you do?*

It was important to me at this time to reflect on my leadership style from the outset and I was aware that what previously worked elsewhere may not be the right fit at the new base. The group dynamics were different, the ability and experiences of the team differed, the resources available and environment in which the team operated were markedly different, all factors identified by Finch (2019) as being key external influencers to leadership style. There was also an increased focus on 'performance' under NPAS, and this had not previously been a feature within my force. The addition of performance metrics, and my responsibility to focus the teams' attention to that also presented different challenges. These were measured against the fourteen other NPAS bases which in itself created pressures for me and the introduction of performance metric is another external factor that could have determined my leadership style. I'd like to think that as a leader I always promote team wellbeing and function over performance, and I believe that, in achieving strong levels of wellbeing, performance looks after itself. This is supported in a UK Government study, Worker Wellbeing and Workplace Performance (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014) which found significant evidence that workplace wellbeing and job performance are directly correlated.

*How did
you do
this?*

For many years in my original role I had experienced close friendship with my team. This was formed through an evolution of close working ties, work experiences and shared interests. During those times I hadn't set any parameters as such and had confidence that I was able to maintain fairness across the board when considering my leadership responsibilities to the team. I also knew my team would tell me if I was acting to the contrary. My leadership style, certainly at this time was an evolution, one

I would describe as largely democratic, which I believe further facilitated close bonds and the confidence of team members to appropriately challenge me. I had worked with leaders who promote their own self-interest and didn't like it, I was perhaps overly self-conscious to ensure this didn't happen with me. Upon my secondment to NPAS I gave little thought to this aspect and on reflection could have perhaps factored in the impact this may have had on the new team members, given my leadership role and the duty upon me to be seen to be consistent with everyone. This is certainly something that I reflected upon in more recent roles and share the thoughts of Daskal (2015) who talks about the fine line between friendship and leadership, albeit I am not of the view that they have to be independent of each other although agree that leadership can be a lonely pursuit (Myers, 2016), and my experience is that this is increasingly true the higher up the management chain you go.

In 2015, the Harvard Business Review ranked Lars Sorensen, CEO of Novo Nordisk, as the best performing CEO in the world for that year. When asked what brilliant strategy he utilised, or how he diligently executed a proven leadership style to make him successful he simply replied, 'Luck' (Lamster and Tunstall, 2018).

On taking up the role at NPAS I now had responsibility for 20 staff, made up of police tactical flight officers from five different forces, civilian tactical flight officers, police pilots and engineers. The first change agent that assisted me, was luck.

I was somewhat lucky that the previous base-manager appeared to have been universally unpopular, had been subject to disciplinary action and had set the bar very low. Whilst those in very senior leadership positions may have to own the mistakes of their predecessors (Blum, 2021), at lower levels of leadership I do not feel that there is necessarily the requirement to do the same, largely due to the external scrutiny that

why?
learning

why?

Thought on this?

Team Building Motivation?

such matters would have if you were a CEO but are not prevalent in lower-level management. Whilst the teams experience of poor leadership had clearly been difficult for them to work through, it presented me with opportunities to make immediate improvements to morale, particularly as I was keen to seek to understand the team's experiences, a vital part of the argument put forward by Blum, (2021).

why?

The creation of NPAS and final amalgamation of the bases was the biggest change in police air support since its inception. A major source of resistance to change is often a departments culture – the shared system of beliefs, attitudes, values, traditions, and modes of behaviour Walsh and Vito (2019, p. 109).

Thoughts?

My role was to define the culture, creating the conditions for work and motivating the workforce. In doing so I had to take note of individual factors, group factors, management and organisational factors and leadership process factors. This in turn directly impacts the organisational effectiveness and the quality of working life (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2019, p313).

To achieve this, on day one, I got the full team together, not an easy feat whilst trying to maintain 24/7 response but something I believed to be vital to get off to a good start – short term pain for longer term gain. This was an informal gathering and a platform for us all to get to know each other. As a leader I believe that leadership ego is an ill that prevents a group to enjoy cohesion and as Hougard and Carter (2018) argue, Ego is the enemy of good leadership, it makes us susceptible to manipulation; it narrows our field of vision; and it corrupts our behaviour, often causing us to act against our values. As such, I choose to leave any ego I may have, at the door. One of the ways in which I demonstrated this, was to expose my vulnerabilities.

✓
This strategy is supported by Murphy (2020) who argues that employees want a leader who's willing to discuss their challenges and that leaders who are comfortable admitting that they don't have all the answers are vital in terms of earning trust and buy-in from employees.

Humanistic

I explained my concerns to the team, I explained that I was worried my skill set was not at the level required to do the operational job the existing team members do, I reached out to them and asked for their help so that I could improve. This proved to work well, it quelled any concerns that any of the team may have had that I was going to lead in a more authoritarian manner that they had recently become accustomed to. It also settled the concerns of the new team members, who I already knew were sharing similar worries about their new, broader role. Additionally, I was displaying my authenticity, and as Goffey and Jones (2005, p.86-153) state, leadership demands the expression of an authentic self. In this case, I had real concerns about the technical capabilities of the new role, and whilst this wasn't to be my primary role, as I have argued earlier, good leaders need to be competent.

How did you feel?

It was also apparent that there had been a lack of training opportunities, additional roles or achievable goals that the team could have benefited from. It is vital that individuals have goals that they are motivated to achieve. I utilised the PESTLE analysis tool in order to inform the actions that were to be undertaken, in what was significant organisational change. This worked well as I was able to evidence my findings and use them to successfully argue for additional training and equipment, highlighting trends that were taking place elsewhere in aviation (safety management systems). As I got more confident in the role, I did find that I didn't need to rely on detailed business cases or analysis tools, such as PESTLE, quite as much in order to support arguments, certainly for lower-level requirements.

Learning?

Feelings about this?

My natural participative style was useful as I was in my comfort zone when involving team members in constructing standard operating procedures, training needs analysis, safety procedures and other practical day to day functions. From very early on in my leadership journey I recall reading a quote that resonated with me, so much so that I have a framed picture of it that has been on the wall of each of the offices I have resided in:

why?

"It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit" - (unknown – many attributed).

Holding an open meeting with the team was a great way for them to understand a little bit about me and where my values lie, together with some cues around my prospective leadership style. In the weeks and months to follow it was evident that what I hadn't captured were needs, concerns or expectations of individual team members, or issues that they perhaps didn't want to share in an open environment. The result of this was that I failed to capture a broad and full picture of the team, skillset and particularly any reasonable adjustments that were required.

Feelings & missing this?

I had also set out my stall in terms of managing the team's performance and framed this around our base becoming the best within NPAS. Whilst this was effective in some key areas, there were some unintended consequences around inter-base rivalry which were not particularly constructive, although is explained somewhat in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, set out in his Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943). Maslow argues that we have nine innate needs, one of which, the need for Esteem highlights the need for recognition, reputation and appreciation. The unintended consequence displayed itself as arguably in the form of the pursuit of some unethical

what?

procedures whereby 'rival' bases would be less motivated to respond to calls outside of their normal operating arena. This phenomenon is supported by Jain (2018) who agrees that performance comparisons between peers can lead to unethical behaviour.

Whilst I have argued that a participative leadership style was useful in order to achieve certain aims, and to build team cohesion, there were also occasions where this style did not work. I was given feedback by one team member that highlighted to me that as individuals we are all different, and whilst some team members enjoyed participating in decision making processes, some were much more comfortable in the clear boundaries of command and control more akin to a transactional or authoritarian style.

Whilst the wider team were relatively plentiful in numbers, a working crew consists of two officers and a pilot. It is therefore incredibly important for there to be harmony within these crews as the role is reliant upon crews working together to achieve appropriate outcomes. One team member, who was a particularly difficult individual appeared to be increasing alienated from the team and this was replicated repeatedly when working across multiple crews. The issues had been left to fester prior to my appointment and it was important for me to address them positively from the outset.

In setting clear boundaries and giving direction it was clear that the individual lacked the motivation to change. On reflection and reviewing Maslow – I have drawn comparisons with the individuals need for prestige, recognition and attention (Esteem) – the individual was very frequently posting 'action photos' of themselves in a police helicopter and painting a picture to followers of the prestige of the role, but in reality, was performing very poorly, often lazy in terms of the way in which they conducted

themselves at the unit. This riled other team members, and it was important that I addressed this. It is vital for policing legitimacy that poor performance is addressed, and I did this by sitting down, one to one, with the individual. Whilst it can be straightforward to address some performance issues (work output), it is less so when part of the issue revolves around personality. I did this by seeking to understand motivations. At the time this was not a scientific approach, but I was trying to establish what the individuals' needs were. On reflection, and having touched on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and also researching alternative 'content theories such as the Self Determination Theory developed by Deci and Ryan I can see that there is evidence supporting my approach. I can also reflect upon the fact that I now have a greater experience when it comes to managing teams and am aware that different individuals are motivated by different outcomes, supported by arguments put forward regarding 'process theories' by Buchanan and Huczynski (2019, p288).

I am aware of the many types of leadership styles and throughout this example have utilised many of them. I sometimes use a transactional style – when discussing safety related matters around the aircraft – I would argue that an overly democratic style can be unsafe – an example being when formulating take-off or landing procedures – they are in fact what they are, and are designed to ensure crews are kept safe. However, in the vast majority of my work I employ a more transformational and democratic style – this is largely based on my personality, which through 360 feedback has been described to be as relaxed and easy going.

Having taken part in some structured feedback sessions such as this I have been able to reflect upon this and am careful to ensure that people do not mistake this for some

of the negative traits of a Laissez-faire leadership style as although this style can make employees feel empowered, it can be seen as cover for bad leadership.

I could also argue, based on the above that I employ the Full Range Leadership Model (Roe, 2020, p. 139). The Full Range Leadership model supports the theory that leaders can employ one of, or a combination of transformational, transactional and a laissez faire approach, depending on the requirements of the situation. ✓

In analysing the bigger picture around the NPAS merger and in trying to understand why certain things may have happened I have reflected upon the work of Tuckman (1965) and his Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing phased-based change model. This model implies that a team evolves through a series of steps as time progresses, beginning at a fixed point (Formation), then on to establishing team expectations (Storming), leading to development of the rules (Norming), which in turn allows the team to perform the required task (Roe, 2020, p. 309). On reflection, the chaotic speed and process at the beginning of the transfer to NPAS didn't allow for the initial formation or storming steps to complete, with an expectation remaining that the team would perform. It is then, understandable why this was not initially, the case.

In the senior management positions, there were also issues around the display of leadership power. This was perhaps hampered by this being a national organisation and the core messages were often delivered remotely, which can perhaps introduce an element of aspects being taken out of context. Nonetheless, it was not uncommon for a chief operating officer to use the words "you will be managed out of the organisation if you don't like it." Given the specialist nature of the job, and the privilege that came with undertaking such a role in policing, many officers were left with the

feeling that they either 'toe the line', and accept things as they were, or they return to response policing – a demonstration of coercive power, somewhat of a carrot and stick approach to achieving compliance. This is often used by leaders who will effectively punish individuals for not adhering to standards or rules that have been set (Roe, 2012, p. 280). This coercive power is certainly at the opposite end of the scale to a leader who employs perhaps a more referent style which is an ability to exert influence based on an individual's belief that the influencer has desirable qualities (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2019, p.762) – not dissimilar to cooperation's using a famous celebrity being to advertise their latest products.

Conclusion

As I have progressed through the ranks, and obtained more senior leadership positions, and together with my leadership experiences above I am now more tuned in to the importance of looking at issues through a wider lens. In the example above, from an early stage, I was set against the NPAS move and made my arguments around that. Had I had taken a more balanced view, it is likely that the initial phases of the transfer would have been smoother, and more time afforded to instil credible change management techniques, such as that proposed by Tuckman or outlined by Mullins (2019, page 580). This may have also created an environment where the two members of my team who left the air support world, could have remained and flourished.

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I can also reflect on the feelings I now have around the issues of leaders needing to be leaders, and not friends. In my case, this did present itself in the example above as clearly, I had spent considerable time with a small number of people in a close working environment over many years, and on transferring to NPAS, those team members were to follow me – although this did not ever give me any specific challenge it focused my mind more clearly on the need for me to display fairness and impartiality across the board.

Overall this was a very positive learning experience for me. There is nothing so sure as change, particularly in policing, and my experiences above had stood me in good stead and this further reflective exercise will assist me implementing change in the future.

Learning
theory?

I would recommend that when teams such as mine go through any significant change processes, a reflective analysis is commenced in order to capture their views. This could be alongside 360 feedback to really give a valued insight. ✓

As a consequence of the above, the organisation (NPAS) made changes to the way in which they communicate change, specifically by changing the way in which they use social media, such as Twitter. Whilst only a small aspect of the example, poorly managed communications can derail even the most detailed of plans – our people are our most valuable asset.

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