

Leadership and the Individual

MSc Policing (Operational and Strategic Leadership)

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Introduction

I have been a police officer for twenty five years, of which fifteen of these have been at a rank of Chief Inspector and above. Currently I am a Chief Superintendent which is a strategic leadership role.

This is a reflective review of a leadership situation that stands out as a significant time of development and learning for myself. I was deputy to a commander, whose leadership has significantly impacted on how I have tried to lead, due to his ability to motivate his staff and partner agencies.

I intend to use the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988) as my structure for this review.

Description

This example relates to a period where the area that I was responsible for was the subject to scrutiny from international and national media in relation to concerns around the vulnerability of young people, including a number of tragic deaths. Many of our officers were born and brought up in the area they were policing, and this period had a significant impact on their own wellbeing as they were determined to protect their communities which resulted in long hours and attending some impactful and harrowing scenes. *thought?*

Challenges during this period included some of the partner agencies feeling overwhelmed with the demand and were struggling with capacity and capability to deal with the incidents. They would not change their structures or ways of working, in order to adapt to the circumstances and were defensive of their current arrangements, being reluctant to share crucial information and citing data protection when this should have been overridden by clear threat to life issues. *thought*

There were some individuals that challenged what the approach of the commander and myself. A senior member of the management team questioned why we were taking the lead and taking on a role that partner agencies should have been doing. He was negative in his attitude and demeanour which could easily impact on the

morale and motivation of officers. He was an effective and competent leader but was very much an autocratic leader who was effective in a normal policing environment, but this incident needed a more democratic style and one where we needed to trust our officers, empower them, and gain the support of our partners. *Therapy?*

Some of the senior leaders in the partner agencies were difficult to deal with and inflexible in their approach, not wanting their organisation to be a focal point for the media or to face criticism, instead leaving it to ourselves and other agencies to take the lead and front up the response. They too were used to an autocratic style where the decisions only came from themselves, whereas the commander wanted the specialists, and those on the front line to be empowered to make decisions.

There were many transactional leaders within the police and partner agencies which Grobes describes accurately: *personal thoughts?*

With active management-by exception, transactional leaders specify the standards for compliance and punishment for non-compliance, as well as what constitutes ineffective performance. This leadership dimension emphasizes close monitoring of followers for any deviances, mistakes, and errors so that corrective action can be taken as soon as possible (Grobes, 2011, p. 513).

As will be described though, the leadership that was required needed to extend beyond simply a transactional style.

The command team also felt isolated at times from some members of our own executive team. There was little contact or support at times where visibility would have provided reassurance and assisted with morale, not only for ourselves as a command team but with the operational officers.

My commander and myself took the lead. We put in place governance structures, a multi-agency response and we chaired the strategic meetings. We met with key influential stakeholders to garner support and agreement to set up our new structure in order to deal with the situation and sign off a joint strategy. We also actively listened. We met with young people who had been affected by the tragedies,

where did you learn to do this?

listening to their fears and concerns and more importantly how we should adapt our policing style and respond accordingly. We ensured proper welfare support was put into place for our officers throughout and we as leaders were visible, ensuring that we were made aware of any traumatic incident and personally speaking with those attending officers. *style?*

The result was that there was an effective multi agency response that was able to concentrate on serving the communities and families affected, referring those who needed assistance into the right agency whilst dealing with the intense media scrutiny and ensuring the wellbeing of our staff.

Feeling

I was new in post in a senior management role. The scale of what we were facing would have been overwhelming if not for some of those around me, not just my commander, but skilled operational leaders such as an experienced detective inspector. My enthusiasm has always been viewed upon by my line managers and those I manage as a force multiplier. After the incident the commander commented on my "relentless enthusiasm" and how I was driven by public service motivation. However, this enthusiasm could only carry me so far. This was a complex series of events that needed skilled partnership negotiation and strong leadership. Outwardly I would appear as the enthusiastic and confident leader but inside there were fears about how I would lead during this unprecedented time and chair strategic partnership meetings with experienced and at times argumentative partners. *why?*

My motivation to serve our communities gave myself the determination to learn and commit to leading my officers as effectively as I could. My commander gave me that confidence. His style was one where he would encourage views and discussions about future actions and also empower myself and others to make decisions. When he asked me to chair the operational partnership meeting, the commander told me that my drive and energy and ability to negotiate with people because of my style was what the board needed. He had spoken to senior partners to put my name forward and talked about his faith in me to them, so that I had senior support before going into the meeting. He took time out to ask if I needed anything from him and *style?*

just being able to chat through what approach I was going to take, gave me confidence to go into the meeting with a plan.

This leadership inspired me and gave me the self-belief. I followed the commander as did others not only because of his authenticity but because of his charismatic leadership and presence:

Charismatic leaders differ from other leaders by their ability to formulate and articulate an inspirational vision and by behaviors and actions that foster an impression that they and their mission are extraordinary. As such, individuals choose to follow such leaders in management settings not simply because of the leader's formal authority but out of perceptions of their leader's extraordinary character (Conger, 2000, p. 748).

By keeping those we were trying to help in my mind throughout, I was relentless in making sure that we put in place structures that supported our communities. This incident also showed that I genuinely cared for my staff, and I felt guilty that I was not experiencing what they were having to deal with on the frontline. However, I had to acknowledge that this was not my role, I was now a strategic leader, and my job was to make the officers feel safe, support their decision making and when they may have not made the correct decision, to give them my full backing if that decision had been made for the right reasons.

heavy?

I met with young people who had been directly affected by the incidents, and who had lost loved ones. This was tough and very emotional listening to their trauma. I was advised against doing it by some senior leaders who were scared this may lead to criticism of our response or lead to difficult questions, but I remained adamant that we needed to hear the voices of those affected and how we can improve. This session was so impactful and added to my resolve to assist those who needed us.

I did feel frustration at times in the lack of support that the executive team gave us, and a lack of visibility within our division. I felt that our commander was being left without support and was being asked to deal with complex strategic issues when some of the executive team should have given him the support he was giving to

others. This made me more determined to give him support. I was also frustrated at times with some partners who were not stepping forward and doing their part as leaders or being inflexible in their approach. However, I was able to overcome these inward frustrations by building strong working relationships with those partners that were positive and that genuinely cared in making a difference and making bold decisions.

This incident also gave me one of the warmest feelings in my career that I always reflect on when considering my purpose as a leader in public services. After a long week I was made aware of a community meeting that an Inspector and his team were attending. He reassured me that there was no need to worry as he would deal with any issues and no need for myself to attend. As I started to drive home, I made an instinctive decision to turn around and attend the meeting. I trusted him and his team, but I wanted to show support. As I walked through the door, the Inspector showed relief that I was there as it was clear he had underestimated the strength of feeling in the meeting. It was a difficult hour where we were posed testing questions as this community had suffered tremendously. I was honest about where we had made mistakes but along with the team listened and promised we would act on their words and advice. At the end of the meeting, we were given a standing ovation with community leaders thanking us for the support we had given. This was an incredibly powerful lesson for myself in about doing the right thing and I am pleased I gave that visible leadership.

where did this thought come from? Learning?

Evaluation

The ability of my commander to unite officers from different departments and galvanise a partnership response with some reluctant partners has influenced my own leadership since. As Mullins and Mclean comment:

style?

The form of management and style of leadership adopted are major determinants of group cohesiveness. Teams tend to be a mirror image of their leaders. Cohesiveness will be affected by the manner in which the manager and senior staff give support, guidance and encouragement to the group (Mullins, 2019, p. 303).

It was his ability to empower and allow others to make decisions, showing utter trust in their decision making whilst being supportive when needed. He made everyone, no matter what their role feel special. This built up trust with his team and allowed honest conversations including officers having the confidence to give feedback to the commander, no matter what rank they were. I was in the commander's office with a Detective Inspector, three ranks below the commander. It had been a difficult week with a number of tragic incidents. The phone went and we were informed that we had had another incident. For only a second the commander's head dropped. The Inspector told him a stern voice never to do that again, as if his head dropped then this would impact on everyone. The commander apologised and promised this would not happen again. This showed to me a leader is being watched for their actions continually by those that they lead.

Account
of this
situation

theory?

Due to the rank structure and culture of policing, senior leaders do have legitimate power and there are those who rely solely on this legitimacy. Culturally at this time policing was sometime heavily reliant on coercion, where there was a fear of making a mistake and performance was measured monthly by a compstat process, where emphasis was placed on figures. This kind of use of power would have been ineffective for this situation as officers needed to feel they had the freedom to make hard choices involving threat to life issues and to be supported if things didn't go well with that decision.

why?

Before the incidents started, I had built up a rapport with the operational teams, and worked night shifts, patrolled the town centre, and gained an insight into what they faced daily. One of the investigative teams that became pivotal to the investigation of this operation had come to respect me due to some difficult decisions I had made in supporting them regarding a murder investigation. I had gained their respect and trust and seen as a credible officers and leader. I could now influence and motivate officers using this referent power.

theory?

I could not use this referent power with partners as I had not built up a strong enough relationship with them due to a short time that I had been in post, however my strong belief in protecting our communities, meant that I was able to gain their trust quickly.

Options for
referent
expert?

I was also assisted by the commander's referent and moral legitimacy with the senior partners.

The partnership meeting that I took responsibility for and chaired became best practice across the country. By speaking to some of the more challenging partners on an individual basis, understanding their viewpoint and trying to ensure decisions that I made as chair would support the partners approach and not just the police, I was able to make the group effective. I did have to make difficult decisions that brought me into conflict with senior leaders. In one village that had been badly affected, the agencies and police had placed a lot of resources into the area. Due to relationships, I had built up with community leaders, I was contacted to say that the extra visibility was making young people more frightened, and could we scale back our resources. A senior manager in a partner agency disagreed and insisted on continuing our response escalating the matter to the Chief Executive of the organisation who in turn contacted my commander to complain. He backed my decision. It was difficult having conflict with very senior partner agencies, but I had built up relationships with the communities that they hadn't, and I was doing what was right for the public that we serve, which gave me the confidence to make these decisions that not everyone agreed for. Leadership is about remembering our purpose.

feedback?

A lack of support from our own executive team was disappointing. The commander, his senior management team and myself were giving support to our teams but we were being affected emotionally and physically as well, working long hours, and dealing continually with trauma. There was very little contact from the executive support and no visibility. A weekly contact, regarding reassurance and offering any support would have been a tremendous boost. I am pleased that this attitude from executive teams has changed considerably over recent years. In 2021 I dealt with a very sensitive public order situation lasting a number of days. Throughout, I had phone calls and a visit from a senior member of the executive team, making it clear he was not interfering with my decision making but instead was checking on my welfare, asking if he could support in anyway and saying thankyou. This gave myself a tremendous lift and confidence to keep doing what I was doing,

→ motivation
theory?

The commander and myself worked long hours during this time, often seven days a week for a period. Whereas we were looking after the welfare of our officers we were neglecting ours. This was partly down to the culture within policing at the time but both of us believed in leading from the front and being the first in, last out and showing an example to others. This was a bad example to set our staff and I have no doubt at times, we were burnt out and needed some rest to refresh ourselves. Again, the culture has changed, and wellbeing is emphasised for everyone within the organisation including senior leaders. I should have put in place some resilience for myself to ensure my decision making was not affected by tiredness or emotion.

where was this learned?

Analysis

During the whole series of events, we were able to maintain community confidence and trust. We were able to investigate properly all the fatalities and put into place support and intervention for a number of vulnerable people, preventing further deaths.

Authentic and credible leadership was the key to this, alongside understanding the communities' needs and being passionate about public services. Our commander cared about his staff and his communities and showed that:

Authentic transformational leadership provides a more reasonable and realistic concept of self—a self that is connected to friends, family, and community whose welfare may be more important to oneself than one's own (Bass, 1999, p. 186).



I was of a similar ilk as were some of our partners.

Transformational leadership worked, as our officers and responders needed to know their extraordinary work was valued, they were being supported and they were inspired to perform, as the commander and myself were clear in what we had to achieve as a team. When empowering the teams and trusting them, I learnt the need to ensure the balance was there between giving officers freedom to act, whilst ensuring they were disciplined and working within parameters that I set them. This is where I evolved as a transformational leader by learning both from the commander but also whilst leading through this incident. A more laissez-faire approach would have led to a perceived lack of responsibility and ownership and the issue was so

complex it did need some command and control. A transformational leader can still maintain that overall grip whilst being democratic and supportive.

When relating to Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) it was straight forward to motivate many of our operational officers, as the reward for performing well was saving lives, and many of the officers lived in the communities affected, so this meant a great deal to them. I had a role in ensuring that they had the right skills when attending the calls, so I ensured that there was relevant training provided, some of which was undertaken for us by specialist partner agencies. This gave the officers extra confidence, as did ensuring I met with the teams to say a thankyou and reassure them that they were doing an excellent job. I also invited operational sergeants to partnership meetings to show partnership managers the effectiveness of their multi agency approach, which led to increased motivation from some of these partners, as they could see they were making a significant impact.

was there motivation from sergeants?

This positive approach was vital in overcoming some of the challenges that we were faced with from other senior leaders from partner agencies and our own policing senior management team. There were those that retreated into silos and cited barriers such as data protection rules. I believe that much of this reluctance to engage and take action was due to wanting to protect reputations of their organisations or themselves and being risk adverse.

A member of our own management team was also critical of the method that we were adopting, stating that we were stepping into the arena of what some of our partners should be doing and that we were doing far more than we should have been. This individual was transactional in style and was very competent at his role but saw policing in a traditional light. This highlighted to me the differences between a leader and a manager, and summarised by Buchanan who states:

Leaders are thus often seen as visionaries who drive new initiatives. Managers simply maintain order and stability. The leader is prophet, catalyst, mover-shaker, strategist. The manager is technician, administrator, problem solver. The leader influences others to sign up to their vision, inspires them to overcome obstacles, and generates positive change (Buchanan, 2015, p. 612).



Spending time with this individual, it was clear he we concerned about all the other functions that we had to perform outside of this incident and worried about a decline in performance. For me this incident was absolutely the priority, and I was not worried about performance indicators in other areas. However I could see his point of view and he was the one who would be held accountable for some of the indicators, as was the police culture of performance then. We negotiated on allocation of resources and agreed protocols which ensured that his concerns were allayed, and I could concentrate solely on the incident, and he looked after the rest of the operational demands. This helped to ease his concerns and he was less vocal in expressing his concerns around what we were doing ensuring for a more cohesive command team.

However, understanding our communities and being able to convey their fears and needs in meetings with some of these reluctant leaders was powerful. The meeting with young persons who had been badly affected meant I could bring their insight into the partnership boards, impacting on the attendees. To have leaders such as the commander and myself who were passionate about doing what was right and would stand up to face the media and any subsequent enquiries, meant that it was very hard for some of those who were reluctant, to then not work with us. Initially it was a small but powerful coalition including myself who recognised we needed to act fast. Some of our initial plans were not successful but it was better that we put a plan in place, albeit that needed improvements than nothing at all. This coalition overcame the intransigence of others and won wider support.

This transformational leadership of a few impacted significantly on operational practitioners in both the police and partner agencies. Idealised influence was a key factor, "the key is the widespread appeal and recognition by followers that a leader stands for something that they aspire to and that influences their behaviour towards the same goal" (Murphy, 2004, p. 3). In seeing leaders that cared for them, and their communities, officers reacted magnificently, with many examples of individuals going over and above what was needed including assisting when they should have been off duty. They felt safe and supported in what they were doing and what appeared

small acts from ourselves, such as meeting with a night shift to thank one team, reverberated around the division.

Rewards?
(Walsh, 2018) notes four styles of leadership that ensures effective direction. The commander used a mixture of all four styles which I also tended to use. We paid attention to Supportive and Participatory leadership, putting the welfare of staff as a priority, and ensuring that we involved many of our officers in the decision making, no matter what the rank. A detective inspector and a local policing inspector were continually consulted with, to seek their specialist advice and feedback. These two leadership styles were at the fore, but we also used a Directive style, being clear about expectations of the duties of officers when attending incidents. I had to be direct in the operational partners meeting that I chaired, as many seem to be overwhelmed with what we were facing and actually many wanted clear direction. Due to our desire to protect our communities we also adopted Achievement orientated leadership, setting high standards of the service that we expected our officers to deliver and explaining what our purpose was, motivating our officers to keep the communities safe.

Looking at why this incident has impacted on my leadership style and why I have taken the learning forward, is down to the fact that my values and style were similar to that of my commander. I had a strong sense of public duty, looking after the wellbeing of my officers and being a positive individual. He had the same morals and outlook as myself but also had something extra and had a presence in the room that is hard to define. The Albert Bandura social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) would apply to myself as the commander was a role model that I could resonate with;

The functional value of the behaviors displayed by different models is highly influential in determining which models will be closely observed and which will be ignored. Attention to models is also channeled by their interpersonal attraction. Models who possess interesting and winsome qualities are sought out (Bandura, 1971, p. 7)

I wanted to ensure I learnt as much as I could, as he led by example during this event. This did not mean I agreed with all of his decisions and his style meant I could

disagree with some of his proposals and give him alternative options. Observing a credible leader and learning from mistakes and good decisions that we both made during the incident has proved to be the most impactful way for myself to learn and improve my leadership skills.

Conclusion

I was extremely fortunate to have learnt from this inspiring individual and although I had many of his traits, they were far less developed than him. He gave me the confidence that my preferred way of leadership, focussing on the transformational and people aspects as opposed to transactional, was the way that I should approach my leadership. There is no doubt that in line with contextual leadership theories that his skills came to the fore during this unique period "Organizational leaders appear to be more likely to use charismatic rhetoric in crisis situations than in noncrisis situations and thus appear more charismatic in the eyes of their followers" (Oc, 2017, p. 225) but having then worked with him during calmer times his style and ethos remained consistent. ✓

I showed to myself early in my strategic leadership days that I had an ability to make officers feel safe and supported and that they follow my direction as I would listen to views but more than anything I cared for their welfare and doing the right thing. I saw the ability that a small group of like-minded people from across the agencies to make a difference has, that will overcome the reluctance of others to engage or to take risks.

I would have liked to have challenged more some of the senior leaders in other agencies as I tended to acquiesce at times and instead, I concentrated on working with those who were supportive. I could have gained the support of those who objected more quickly and effectively if I had been resolute early on and spending more time on convincing them.

Although it was a different culture within my own organisation compared to now, I should have also assisted the commander in requesting our executive team to show more visibility and support to our command team and the officers. I would have the confidence to do this today, partly because of the culture that our executive team

have now introduced but also as a leader, my staff and officers would rightly expect me to do all I can to support them.

Action Plan

I have continued to apply learning from this experience as I have progressed through to my current strategic leadership role. A recent challenge that I have dealt with was in relation to negative national media scrutiny on a city centre. There were many differing views of partners as to how we should approach this, with some believing there was not even an issue. Other agencies who provided support to those who were vulnerable believed that their clients were being unfairly singled out and were opposed to assisting the police. I wanted to understand the issues, so I spent many hours with some of these support agencies and the people that they were trying to help, such as a drug support agency. I identified a like minded senior leader in another organisation and between us we devised a plan on how to engage with senior stakeholders and build a multi-agency response that delivered for the needs of the communities. This included attending a meeting where I was able to present with credibility a powerful message of why we needed to act, based on my experiences spent with those who need our help. We built a small powerful coalition of enthusiastic strategic influencers who put into place some effective quick wins resulting in growing support from others and an effective action plan.

The way that the commander and to some extent myself communicated with our staff, understood their fears and supported them has continued to impact on my style. A recent challenging public order situation meant that I had to balance the use of proportionate and reasonable force, which would usually be used in such incidents with the escalation of long-term community tensions due to the background of the incident. I had to ask officers to show extraordinary restraint in the face of verbal and physical threats. I ensured throughout that there was clear communication as to why we were doing what we were and met and spoke with those on the frontline to give the rationale and listen to their concerns as well as providing extra welfare support. They carried out my requests and although not all agreed they accepted my strategy and rationale.

How does this impact the organisation?

Which is?

Motivation?

Our officers and staff are highly capable and want to serve their communities, it is my job as a leader to learn from experience and protect them, support, and ensure any barriers are removed to maintain their public service motivation.

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