

Pitfalls of the Introduction of Community Policing

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In the 1970s, John Avery, now Commissioner of Police in New South Wales, began a masters thesis at Macquarie University. It was later published in a book entitled *Police, Force or Service?*. During the course of those studies he found theoretical and empirical support for the view that he had developed during his own 25 to 30 years of practical policing experience—that police generally could not operate successfully without the consent and active support of the community they served. He later noted that at that time he decided that 'if he ever got his hands on the reins' he would try to make policing in the state more responsive to and representative of the people.

With the benefit of hindsight, looking at developments from a 1990 position of advantage, this paper attempts to highlight some of the ways and means used to bring New South Wales Police and community into a fledgling partnership. And, in the process, to highlight some pitfalls identified.

Perhaps the first point to establish is just what is this 'position of advantage'. During the late 1970s Jack McNeill, a larger than life character, came from a very distinguished career in the CIB to a senior post in police headquarters. McNeill had been a person who drew respect from the toughest crimes to the toughest cops. He was a man who worked hard and played hard, gave no quarter and asked none.

When he arrived in a headquarters arrangement, he was peculiarly off balance. It really was not his scene. The way things operated in that environment, the area of policy and politics, all was strangely foreign to him. The tough hands-on operational sphere which he had dominated was not able to help him particularly, in this area.

However, being the sort of person he was, he adapted to the new arena and began to challenge traditional thinking in a whole range of areas. He authorised some and frightened others. The author was allocated to offside him and spent the next couple of years having ideas challenged and changed, and gaining experience that could not be bought. The experience mainly centred on looking at things differently. There was strong encouragement to question, rather than simply accept the traditional view. Equally, there was a requirement not to discard anything without proper evaluation. Activities were mainly identification of operational issues which needed reform within the existing framework, and exposure to planning and implementation of the operational change.

A pitfall in this approach is that bringing about change, particularly structural change, without identifying and understanding the fundamental direction of the organisation, is in

many ways akin to shifting deck chairs on the Titanic. That is the ship goes full steam ahead, possibly even travelling more efficiently, because of the changes, without noticing that the external environment has changed—that is 'icebergs' have appeared—which call for a fundamentally different approach or direction.

Nonetheless, McNeill's creative approach to problems and his capacity and willingness to innovate, despite traditional limits being applied to him, proved to be instructive as well as a source of quite some inspiration.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to be gained from working with Jack McNeill was to identify that he had authority in the organisation well beyond his rank. He was a Chief Superintendent supporting the Metropolitan Superintendent, but his sphere of influence well exceeded that which normally attaches to a person of his rank and position. It seemed that his power and authority came not from what he had, but from what people generally thought he had. No doubt his great personal knowledge contributed to his status. It was also apparent that he had exerted the same sort of influence in his previous role in the CIB and as a District Superintendent. In summary, the power and authority came with the person, not the position.

Regrettably when McNeill retired in 1982, much of his wisdom and insight went with him, because we, as an organisation, had not learned to record the experiences of people of his ilk for the benefit of future generations. In fact, one of the pitfalls of the whole change process has been the continuing inability of our organisation to record ideas and practice effectively, such that others may learn from them. Police officers seem to record matters required by rule or instruction faithfully, but not the organisational influences and nuances which prove to be more significant and powerful.

By this time, John Avery had assumed responsibility for training and development, as one means of securing a purchase on the reform agenda. He had figured that meaningful change required a solid educational base and has applied that notion to the organisation, for the past decade. He also used it quite effectively as his means of pole vaulting himself into the senior executive of the organisation. However, Avery's rise was part of his drive to apply the precepts of community policing in New South Wales.

As part of his plan to get hold of the reins, he identified a range of junior officers who might provide support for his ideas and may have future leadership possibilities. It was through his mentorship that the author gained a second position of advantage in terms of perspective on the organisational development. Another important lesson learnt was that while one person has the clearest view of where an organisation is going, progress towards the new position can only be made through effective alliances and partnerships.

The Reform Agenda

Having covered an apparent right to proffer a view, it is appropriate to identify and briefly outline the nature and breadth of the vision of reform. Already identified is Avery's work, *Police, Force or Service?*, which provided the philosophical or conceptual framework upon which reform might proceed. The cornerstone of the vision was a need to have public confidence in the integrity of the organisation and its membership. It was considered paramount that there be a set of operating values which were more than simply a framed set of words adorning the walls of offices. The central platform of the vision was that there was an ethical component in everything we do. This subsequently became enshrined in the Statement of Values of the Service, which require integrity above all.

While critical to the maintenance of the vision, a set of values not supported by an array of other pillars was of little more value than the shifting of deck chairs referred to earlier. In this case, the other pillars of support were seen in the form of structures, strategies, skills,

systems, style and staff matters. The McKinsey seven-S framework, outlined in Peters and Waterman's (1984) *In Search of Excellence* became a very useful way of expressing the integrated relationship of each of these developments.

Subsequently, the administration identified more than one hundred issues and goals which needed to be dealt with or achieved in order to embark upon the road towards genuine community policing. Each of the matters to be progressed fell reasonably neatly into the established framework. The range and magnitude of the issues was wide and deep. It covered matters as diverse as massive structural change, the like of which had not been seen in the history of the organisation, undertaking extensive survey of police and citizens to establish any variation in outlook, and production of relatively simple manuals to guide activity and performance.

A difficult and complicated part of this process was the need to try to gauge which issue impacted on which other issue, as well as the extent of the impact. Experience has shown that it is much easier to make those sorts of judgments after the event. It is also obvious that there is no right way, because there are many moving parts and it is impossible to judge perfectly the effect of each movement. Another obvious feature is that the organisation cannot be stopped for the duration of change—the normal dynamics of the organisation make it both difficult and exciting to do anything other than hang on after precipitating a particular reform.

The Implementation Process

Once the vision had been given some, albeit sketchy form, it was a matter of research and planning. In this respect, the Avery administration followed a path of task forces to look at the multitude of issues. At one time there were some sixty odd multi-disciplined task forces from inside and outside the organisation operating on organisational issues.

Of course, the aim was to get as many of the people in the organisation as possible to think about, work on and be involved with the change, so it would be owned by many, rather than being the province of a few. However, not surprisingly, lots of people saw this as a waste of time, an indication of the organisation being out of control, as evidence of organisational issues being given preference over our real job of locking up crooks. Nonetheless, hundreds of people became involved in the development process and the organisation profited from that involvement.

A key part of stimulating interest in these task forces was Avery's invitation to Mark Moore, Guggenheim Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice Policy and Management and head of the Executive Sessions on Policing at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, to come and work with the task forces. There is no doubt that having available a consultant of world standing is important in gaining acceptance of reform, in granting status to issues which require research, and in reassuring people that the changes are encouraged from many quarters, both in and outside the organisation.

Much of the work referred to so far: the establishment of a framework, research of issues, the development of plans, the involvement of people and the recruitment of people of status from academia, can be done by most organisations. These are the sorts of things that many text books will guide you through. The more difficult and absorbing part of a change towards community based policing is how to actually get it done. This involves many more opportunities for matters to fall between the cracks, to get lost or side-tracked, to be sabotaged by opponents.

Understanding the Organisation

To proceed without extensive understanding of your organisation and its culture is a trap. To proceed in the belief that because you have been part of an organisation for a long time you understand it, is also a trap. An appreciation of just what has happened to your organisation over its recent history and why it has happened, is imperative to actually beginning the reform process. The world is littered with organisations which have brought in reformers to them only to find that apart from some changes to the facade it continues to run much as it has always done.

It is important to know and understand the people who work in your organisation. The New South Wales Police Service has some 16,000 employees, who range in age from about fifteen to sixty-three. Some fought in the Second World War, while others were born after the Vietnam War. Some were born before the Great Depression, while some are products of the lucky country era. Police officers of today are generally not looking for a cradle to grave occupation. They are looking for life's experiences, just one of which will be as a police officer.

Perhaps one of the most difficult, and therefore challenging steps which needs to be taken in introducing community policing is to achieve organisational change without losing the established 'reservoir of expertise'. That is, not to throw the baby out with the bath water. The New South Wales experience would suggest that this aspect has not been well done. It is extraordinarily difficult to convince a detective, for instance, that his or her skills and knowledge are highly valued in the organisation, as the Criminal Investigation Branch is dismantled. There is a natural propensity to associate structure with skills. To many, the CIB symbolises quality criminal investigation.

And yet, the mere existence of large centralised branches like the Traffic Branch, Licensing Branch and Criminal Investigation Branch, prevents the creation of a decentralised responsive command structure which is required to deliver community policing. At the same time, you cannot provide a multi-disciplined community based policing service without people with exceptional skills in those specialisations being available at the community level. To achieve structural reform without signalling a devaluation of critical policing skills and knowledge, is a profound and complex challenge for police executives.

Communication is Crucial

The challenge of reform is compounded if communication channels in an organisation are not well understood. Communication within any organisation, let alone one of the complexity of the New South Wales Police, is always going to be a difficult and time-consuming task. Quite apparently, the view people take of their world is shaped by their experiences in it. Rigidly hierarchical and centralised organisations further complicate communication. The challenge is to get people involved, to get them to own and buy into much of what needs to be done. This is not easy because there are invariably risks to becoming involved. It is much safer to sit back and watch than to get involved.

One is also confronted with the notion of 'no one told me about this, that or the other'. It is an interesting observation that for people who are doggedly persistent in the pursuit of information which might lead to an arrest or conviction, police officers become somewhat lame when it comes to seeking out information about the development of their organisation or careers. In the latter case, there is the expectation that 'someone' should tell them, personally. Another interesting feature is that when desperate efforts are made to inform, there is the catchcry 'why was not I told before'? So succinct, clear and timely messages are to be cherished in a changing environment. There is much potential for misunderstanding, both by design and default.

Perhaps it was cynicism or maybe a solid insight into the psyche of police officers which caused John Avery to comment that one of the best ways to communicate with a police department was to write out a document, stamp 'secret' on it and leave beside a facsimile machine!

What, in fact, took place in New South Wales was the conduct of over 450 workshops for all levels of the organisation from top to bottom. That is now being continued with training days, as well as allied subjects and discussions being built into all the courses conducted at the Police Academy. Many explanatory publications have been rained on the organisation, along with a weekly 30 to 40-page internal publication. Yet, it is true that the concept of community based policing and the organisational direction is still not well understood.

As the noted sociologist, Hugh Mackay (1989) has observed, it is important to realise we all live in 'cages', the bars of which are the nature of our life's experience. The bars effectively are barriers to our hearing or understanding messages which are being sent. Much responsibility descends on the sender to ensure the message is being received as intended. As well, we all carry excess baggage and have unfinished business which limits out capacity to take on new things. Perhaps even more importantly, it is critical to understand that organisations have the same limitations. When the organisation is as large, as complex and as diverse as the New South Wales Police Service, it is more important that these issues be understood and applied.

The Importance of Leverage

Often the best preparation and will in the world is not enough to launch a reform package. There is insufficient purchase or leverage to enable the agenda to take hold and influence a future direction. It is usually very difficult to bring about the leverage from within an organisation. It most often requires external influence of some sort. Leverage for the Avery administration came through a decided focus on corruption within the organisation. There was a public perception that corruption had not been confronted for some years, despite having had a series of 'honest' commissioners. The subsequent leverage had been provided through the stimulation of the corruption issue by interest groups, journalists and politicians and subsequently by the general public expressing its increasing concern.

Equally, the Fitzgerald Commission (1989) in Queensland has provided great leverage opportunities for the introduction of reform in Queensland. The Blackburn Royal Commission (1990) and Tribunal hearing into the Brennan Affair (1991) in New South Wales will provide other opportunities. Police unions also can agitate or campaign on issues which bring about leverage for change in legislation or working conditions or retirement benefits and so on.

Of course, not everyone sees these occasions as heaven sent opportunities. There is often much pain associated with their advent. The public airing of dirty washing can have catastrophic implications for morale and operational performance. However, if post-trauma opportunities can be seized great potential exists for bringing about significant improvements in productivity, performance and organisational satisfaction. The principal difficulty to overcome in these circumstances is the propensity to become consumed in the associated problems rather than identifying the emerging opportunities. Again, partners can be a major source of stimulation in this regard, especially if they happen to be remote from the fallout of the problems.

The introduction of positional appointment for people wishing to advance to supervisory or management positions is an important factor in bringing about change. It effectively forces people to at least learn the words of the new style, so that they can repeat them at interview. If successful, the person is then required to act out the behaviour in the job, despite any claims that the person is not committed to the direction being taken. The interesting thing is that if that is true, more people observe the conforming behaviour than

know of the deception. Thus, content of job advertisements is a vital component in spreading the word of change. Even those people who do not apply for and win jobs still often read the advertisements and learn the new language.

Provide Ways Out for People

The advantage of this process in providing leverage for change is apparent. However, the downside is that while generally getting the right people into the right jobs at the right time, the introduction of appointment to position in place of a seniority based promotion system leaves many disaffected and disillusioned. One can easily imagine the confusion which would follow the conversion of a game of rugby league to Australian rules at half time. No doubt some would adapt their skills and quickly carry on with the game, while others would stop, disbelieving, as they watched someone continually knock-on and be admired for it.

Thus, it is imperative that avenues be found for all the people involved in the change to either quickly adapt or retire from the game with dignity. Viable retirement or disengagement options must be provided for those who do not want to make the conversion, as well as major education and training programs for those who either want to adapt to the new circumstances or who have no choice. Most people can operate successfully and with satisfaction if they know what they are expected to do, know the standards to which they are expected to perform, and receive feedback and recognition of their efforts. However, at a time of large scale change there is great capacity for some of these factors to be overlooked, or at least paid insufficient attention.

Diffusing the Heat

A further crucial factor in introducing community based policing is to avoid linking its success or failure to one person. This aspect is a fine judgment, because there is no doubt that such a change requires a champion, as all the best texts highlight. So, it is necessary to have a collection of champions to avoid the potential of the champion becoming a martyr to the cause. If a single person carries the issue, then his or her departure can effectively signal the end of the issue. This encourages opponents to target and isolate the person. The champion in this case can be organisationally assassinated, alienated or simply burnt up.

The heat and energy which someone in taking on a reform position attracts is potentially very destructive. Politicians use this tactic all the time. How many times have you seen or heard of a person being appointed to 'solve the drug problem' or similar impossible tasks. Time frames and expectations are quite unrealistic. These people are being set up to fail. Outcomes of this nature are well beyond the influence or province of any one person. However, when the problem is not 'solved', then there is a ready scapegoat. The trick is to share the heat and energy with at least a cadre of people, if not a sizeable chunk of the organisation.

Look for Partners

In the early days of reform, look for partners who can share the heat and energy. Learn to cherish those who join the cause early, regardless of competence. Those who come early are those of commitment. Others who join after reflection are also to be valued, but recognised as people whose commitment is not as strong, at least at the outset. Fundamentally, supporters of the cause are needed in just about every area of the organisation. Those who stand to gain from the change are obvious targets. But involving

people generally is the key. That is being given an opportunity to participate and to play a part is all that many people ask, and are often denied. The result can be either the empowering of many supporters or the alienation of many potential supporters who become cynical and rigid in their opposition.

The extensive use of task forces in New South Wales, referred to earlier, was seen as a means of involving a cross-section of the vast wealth of talent available in the organisation, as well as a way of sharing responsibility and ownership for the reforms. That is, a better more informed result can be achieved with a real sense of ownership and commitment, through maximising involvement of people.

Partnerships are also worth their weight in gold when the going gets tough. When unforeseen obstacles are encountered partners can be a source of support, suggestion, inspiration and defence which is invaluable. It is easy to get diverted or lose sight of the objective—partners can help to get thinking straight and bring targets back on line. Such partnerships require mutual confidence and candour. There may be as many partnerships as there are issues.

Timing

Timing is everything. It comes when preparation meets opportunity. The Kenny Rogers song which goes—'know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run' and 'never count your money while your sitting at the table' can be very instructive. These are fine judgments, requiring precision. Too fast, and people are overpowered. Too slow, and momentum is lost. There is also another element—consistent or constant pressure—do not let up. There is a great temptation to stop and rest, to reflect on achievements. There are many calls for consolidation in New South Wales, but the fact is that all the energy so far has been in getting into a position to carry out community policing, so rather than being a time for stopping and resting it is a time for a new surge of action and implementation. The tough structural reform is almost in place, but that is only the means to the end, it is not the end.

At the same time, it is equally important to take time out to have fun, to enjoy the experience, to maintain strength and to reflect a while. The key issue here is how long should be taken and at what point and when. Again, there is no right answer. These are matters of fine judgment, which will some times be spot on, while others will be way off. The crucial factors are recognition of the need and search for opportunities to give effect to it.

Watch the Meal Room Orator

A major pitfall is the great temptation to become absorbed in the negative aspects. The loudest voice will most often be the negative one, which must be heard and responded to, but not permitted to divert. The feeling is that Pareto's principle has application here—eighty per cent is achieved through twenty per cent of the total effort, while the final twenty per cent of the issue will drain eighty per cent of the energy. The remaining twenty per cent is more than likely dominated by negative aspects, which can easily cause direction to be lost through becoming preoccupied. Do not forget what you came to do. At the same time look

for opportunities to convert opponents to the cause—converts can be very powerful allies and can bring many people with them.

You Need Supporting Systems

The New South Wales experience would suggest that implementation of systems to support and provide evaluation of activities is more crucial than initially thought. It is easy to become absorbed in the planning and implementation phases and forget all about putting in place supporting systems and doing realistic and valid evaluations. There is sometimes an inherent assumption that something new implemented is naturally right and good. The absence of effective indicators of success at the beginning of an implementation process is a severe weakness in a reform strategy. Of course, identification of such indicators is rarely easy and therefore apt to be avoided. Such avoidance can prove costly in the long term.

The other element of the implementation phase is that of follow-up. It is very common in our Service for people to produce significant and valuable reports, which draw appropriate kudos and then gather dust for want of a follow-up system to ensure implementation. Is anyone ticking off recommendations from the Fitzgerald Report, or is there a real prospect of significant recommendations 'falling between the cracks' as time passes?

It is my view that the single most important aspect overlooked in New South Wales to date has been the implementation of systems to support the move to community policing. It may simply be a question of timing. However, there is a distinct absence of formal guidelines in place, so far, to guide people in areas of problem solving, analysis and interpretation, as well as sets of standard operating procedures, which might provide an effective means of recording good practice. Equally, although a lot of development work has gone into computerised systems, few if any are up and going in support of community policing.

Part of the reason for the absence of these systems is the evolutionary nature of the change and the wish by the administration to avoid prescriptive responses to every issue. The desire not to be caught up in the notion that you have to have the answer to meet every occasion is also a major determinant of this current situation. There is a very strong desire in the Avery administration to develop an environment where creativity and innovation are valued as highly, if not more highly, than any other attribute. As such, it may well be that new appropriate operating procedures and systems will come if the space is kept open for them to occupy.

Being able to keep a situation open to provide a chance for the answer to emerge is probably one of the most difficult things for leaders of reform to do. There is great pressure to provide a response, when it is distinctly possible that the response will be less adequate than what is needed; whereas capacity to remain silent in such situations may provide the person with the best response and an opportunity to come forward. Silence sometimes builds up great pressure in a room or in an organisation. That pressure can bring out better solutions.

Conclusion

Finally, the issue of leadership. It might seem peculiar that police officers, who exercise extensive power and authority on behalf of the community, should be quite so disempowered within their own organisation. However, in most cases when exercising the power granted by the public, police officers' authority is not questioned, but presumed and acknowledged. Whereas in the internal organisational circumstance relationships are far less

specific and deliberate. All sorts of nuances prevail, such that people tend to become paralysed by the internal workings of the organisation.

To give effect to community policing, leaders of police departments are required to provide the circumstances whereby it becomes apparent to their charges that any sense of disempowerment is purely a reflection of self-imposed restrictions. Leaders have to show their people that they can expand their boundaries, not by external influence, but by personal application and challenge to the status quo. The notion of bars on a cage referred to earlier has to be understood as something put in place largely by the individual as a result of exposure to the world and the bars can be bent or removed at will.

The capacity to provide people with authority within themselves, as opposed to authority granted by a community, in a highly structured, hierarchical, rule bound organisation is no small challenge. Yet, there are signs of just such an authorisation taking place in New South Wales. There have been incidents such as the Blackburn affair which, by their very nature, cause people to retreat into themselves. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the membership of the New South Wales Police Service is more empowered and has a greater sense of freedom in dealing with its many communities than has traditionally been case.

The pitfalls to be confronted during the introduction of community policing into contemporary police departments are many. This paper has explored a few of the main pitfalls encountered in New South Wales during the period 1984 to 1990. The major traps have been shown to lie in the way reform is introduced, rather than in the content or the planning of the reform.

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