



## Of alligators and swamps

Recent conversations with divisional commanders in a number of police forces bring to mind the old saw about it being difficult to remember that the task is to drain the swamp, when you are up to your neck in alligators. In this context, the swamp is the magnitude, variety and complexity of the task facing operational policing operations, if their goal is the reduction of crime. The first variety of alligators is the myriad of performance indicators that create conditions in which it is often impossible to achieve success - in all the dimensions addressed by them. Of the second variety, more later.

None of what follows is in any way offered from the stance of an apologist for under performing police managers - far from it. In any case, a number of them appear to be quite proficient in the role of apologist themselves, and need little help from outsiders. Some, indeed, might just have developed that particular expertise in response to the demands of current so called performance indicators, and at the expense of other skills - the latter being rather more important and very much focused on the actual improvement of output results.

First, a brief skirmish around the edges of the swamp. To any outside observer, familiar with typical commercial operations or many other public sector organisations, policing is a highly complex business. Compare a divisional operation with, say, 500 staff with the vast majority of businesses out there employing similar numbers of people, and managing the business will acquire many of the characteristics of falling off a log in the comparison. Moreover, quite often, the policing 'business' is carried on in an environment on the hostile side of uncooperative, with 'customers' who are downright antagonistic to the success of the operation. The range of products and services provided is huge, and this is done within the constraints of highly complex and overlapping regulations and laws. Political interference runs at a much higher level than in the commercial world, and the scrutiny exercised by media and political masters alike is sometimes little short of obsessive. Add to this brew the twin issues of officers who have the power and duty to interfere in the lives of other human beings, with current uncertainties about how that power is properly to be exercised, and the brew starts to become heady indeed.

Overlaid on top of this scene is the reality of diminishing operational resources, whatever politicians may say publicly to the contrary. One last ingredient in the brew is about the uncertainties inherent in policing, and the effect these have on the implementation and accomplishment of strategies and their associated goals. With the best will in the world, a major incident can completely negate, at least in the short term, the effectiveness of an otherwise sound strategy.

The question that needs to be addressed is whether the plethora of PIs imposed from without on policing operations is enabling the delivery of higher performance, (which presumably is the intention), or if the effect is a disabling one instead. The thesis expressed here is that the real world effect is almost entirely negative. If the latter is

true and demonstrably so, that raises a very real question of the true motives of those who wish the police service to be accountable against the current excessive list of PIs and what is actually the intended effect. Not wishing to speculate on other peoples' motivation, that last question will be left for the reader to conclude, but the issue of whether or not the current set of PIs is enabling or disabling is reviewed below.

The first question concerns the sheer number of the things. As one cynic observed, if there are enough PIs, covering enough different facets of 'performance', then you can always catch the unfortunate commander on at least one of them. Moreover, with a little bit of care in the design of the PI set, it is quite easy to come up with a set containing mutually self-contradictory measures. As a somewhat-tongue-in-cheek example, tell a divisional commander that the window cleaning cost per officer (yes really!) has got to come down at the same time as the head count has to be reduced does present something of a challenge. Unless, as a wag pointed out, the quick route is adopted, which is all about bricking up windows. Sadly, that would tend to come up against a need to conform to existing regulations, and given the age of some police stations, the 'ancient lights' watchdogs might just start to object.

For what it's worth, the conventional wisdom in the commercial world is that about 6 PIs are about as much as any manager should be charged with delivering against. Successive teams of police officers have been presented with the challenge of coming up with a limited set of PIs that will effectively capture the essence of whether or not a police division is performing or not, and they have all failed to make the 'golden six' rule. They have, however, all achieved good working sets of PIs that are numbered in single figures which is infinitely better than their colleagues elsewhere in government circles. On inspection, the reason for their success appears to be related to their application of sound thinking rules about PIs, which have evidently not been applied by others. The thinking rules?

## **1 The Golden Six rule**

You may not make it, but at least adopt the target of not having more than about 6 PIs.

## **2 Separate issues of performance from conformance.**

It may be a statement of the blindingly obvious, for which apologies, but many of the so called PIs imposed are actually not PIs at all - they are CIs – that is, they are 'conformance indicators'. Given the nature of policing, the one thing that is easy to achieve is to come up with a lengthy list of CIs. There are so many laws and regulations to which police officers must, quite advisedly, conform, finding the odd hundred or two needs but a gentle afternoon's wandering through a few piles of printed pages to identify a similar number of CIs. But will these add value to performance? The first answer is a resounding NO, as that is not what they are about. The second answer is also a resounding NO, because their effect is almost totally negative.

This is not to argue that conformance to regulations is not important for police officers - of course it is. It is to argue that expressing that need as a long set of alleged PIs is not only nothing to do with performance, it will almost guarantee to support a blame culture and the sort of paranoia that has been much talked in the last year or so. That, by the way, is also a very good way to totally suppress the sort of innovation that many are demanding of the police service.

### **3 Separate PIs from diagnostic information**

A common mechanism for avoiding the excessive PIs trap is to reflect on the purpose for which PIs are collected. On the one hand there are performance data designed to indicate to managers whether or not a performance objective or standard is being met. On the other, there are those data designed to help the same managers diagnose why a performance objective or standard is not being met, if that is the case. The former requires very few numbers - the golden six rule - the latter may need a whole raft of data. The key, however, is not to confuse the two.

Avoiding that confusion will help to provide a tool kit for managers that will reinforce the message to those managers that their job is to drain the swamp, not to thrash about in a probably vain effort to avoid all those snapping jaws. The key questions are:

- what information is needed that will tell us that, overall, the operation is doing OK in terms of meeting its priority business objectives and standards? If these indicators are all showing hoped for values, or thereabouts, (or at least moving in the right direction), we can be comfortable that all is well underneath the surface.
- if one or more of the (true) performance indicators is not at the hoped for value or thereabouts, (or moving in that direction), what information will be needed to help to determine the most likely causes of the shortfall in performance? This is information that itself is not an indicator of success or failure of the organisation, but may be used to identify causes and hence appropriate corrective management actions.

An example may help to illustrate the difference. The number and value of drugs seizures tells us nothing, in itself, about whether or not a police operation is being successful in reducing the level of abuse of illegal drugs. In fact, a high level is just as much an indicator of failure as it is of success. If drugs are not being imported into the area for distribution, how come any are being seized? If, however, there is evidence to suggest that the level of drug abuse is rising, a low level of drugs seizures may help explain why.

### **4 Separate outputs and outcomes from inputs and activities**

One of the more entertaining spectacles is that of organisations trying valiantly to achieve that which research over many years has proved to be unattainable. Examples that spring to mind are trying to use the standard selection interview as a predictor of performance, and trying to use a skills based appraisal package to drive improved performance instead of career development.

Latter day Canutes are trying to call skills competencies these days, but the challenge has not changed - skill may be an enabler of performance but it does not stand on its own. By the way, having been brought up in the school that separated knowledge [information that can be accessed in relation to a task] from skills [what the person is able to do, to achieve task objectives] from ethics and values [what drives a person's decisions about the task], can someone please explain what an individual competency is? Something that is different from knowledge, skills and ethics / values, that is.

The specific case here is perhaps best illustrated by the record of sales organisations' attempts to improve sales results by measuring and managing sales activity. The pattern is one of complete success - at achieving precisely nothing! Measuring activity,

it turns out, produces one thing and one thing only, and that is activity. Which, on reflection, is not very surprising - that which gets measured gets delivered. The only tactic that has ever worked, if performance improvement is required, is to measure and manage sales orders, their value and fit with strategy. On the face of it, the model would appear to come under the heading of 'that will do nicely' for police operations.

If performance improvement is the key, PIs should target those aspects of output performance which are strategically important, and forget the rest. This simple thought, however, will not be much use unless there is some sort of rational strategy in place to guide decisions about what is and what is not strategically important.

## **5 Structure PIs according to a practical model for policing**

A well established model for thinking about the delivery of policing services and hence the allocation and management of resources holds that there are three types of services that need to be delivered - response, reduction and prevention. The easy part is attaching PIs to response policing, and that is what charter standards are all about. The problem is that the better policing operations become at delivering response services, the greater the demand for those same services. It's a bit like the economist's theoretical infinite market. In other words, if PIs focus on response policing alone, then there is no way forward - demand will always grow to meet supply.

At the other end of the scale, attaching PIs to the final outcome of reduction and prevention services is equally easy but also fraught. The level of crime is what policing is supposed to be all about and it being low and / or reducing registers as a success, (if we can get beyond disputes about reporting and classification rules). The difficulty lies in the connection with drivers of crime levels which are external to policing operations and beyond their power or influence. As ever, this is not to suggest that measuring and managing the level of crime is not important - on the contrary it is fundamental. What is challenged is the concept that there are easy-to-identify causal relationships between what police operations do and the final end-out consequences. If the causal relationships are not fully understood, then diagnostics become doubtful as does the easy interpretations about success in the management of police operations so beloved by many of those not directly involved.

This thought leads straight to areas where there is too little attention by those who would impose more and more PIs from the outside. Perhaps there is also still not enough attention by those on the inside who are working an incomplete or not fully understood strategic model that can help to fight off the alligators. For example, if POP is a really useful tactic, what measures exist for problems identified, by whom, their 'value' and whether or not they have been cleared? If the key police resource is people, what measures exist that tell us whether or not those resources are being effectively utilised, and that the people involved find the experience satisfying?

What measures exist that tell us whether or not the nature of the interactions between officers and members of the public is such as to be regarded as representing a quality service? And if operational officer resource is so important, what measures exist to tell us that the management function is acting as a true enabler of their effectiveness or actually as a disabler? And, finally, what measures exist that tell us about the absorption of resources in actual policing operations as distinct from bureaucratic 'make sure we conform to the rule book' activities?

Meeting the requirement of the golden six rule may be difficult, but there is the outline of a PI set above that will get down to single figures, which is more than can be said the for current imposed set. And as for the second type of alligator, there remains one problem still to be addressed. There is a style of interaction between managers and their staff, (or officers and members of the public, for that matter), which is known colloquially as the 'angry alligator syndrome'. It revolves around not letting the other person finish a sentence, always knowing better than the other person, having a sublime ability to put them down and always being able to find fault with the other person's ideas.

If any analysis of results, set against imposed PIs is conducted using this style, then one more barrier is placed in the path of performance measures adding any value at all to anything, other perhaps than to the ego of the angry alligator. Slagging each off other in the House of Commons may be considered by politicians as a sensible way for (allegedly) grown up people to spend their waking hours, but it makes little sense to anybody else. Which is another way of saying that unless police forces train their managers in the skills needed to make good use of performance data, both from the point of view of design and analysis, as well as application, then little will be achieved except a different version of the blame culture. By the way, what skills do politicians think they are demonstrating when they 'perform' in the house at question time, or perhaps they are just true believers in their own individual competencies?