Performance or conformance?

The transformation that is implied in a shift from conformance to performance-with-conformance can be troublesome, difficult to achieve and worrying for some. And yet that is the trick that police forces are faced with working, and there are already many successes to report, as well as some issues yet to be addressed.

To understand the nature of the transformation, it may be as well to define - loosely - the terms used here, and to illustrate them with a real life example. Conformance is about sticking to the rules of the game, be they written procedures and protocols or driven by internalised ethical standards. Either way, the output or outcome of the activity in question is lower down on the priority scale.

The development of a performance culture requires that the key driver of behaviour is the need to get a result - to generate a measurable output or outcome, but 'performance-with-conformance' stipulates that this must not be achieved at any cost, and specifically at the cost of non-conformance or breaking the ethical ground rules.

To illustrate the former, this weary traveller arrived at the same hotel, in the USA, every month for over three years. To be greeted by the same waitress in the restaurant, evening after evening, with the same old cheery "Hi! and how are you this evening", followed later by the inevitable "Have a nice meal". So, 10 out of 10 for conformance, but the lady in question failed to recognise the diner as a regular in what must have added up to more than 125 encounters over the period.

The result? Frustration and anger at being treated like a cipher, instead of a human being.

And therein lies the rub. Conformance on its own is useless, and performance without conformance is not likely to produce good results either, except in the very short term, and is downright dangerous as well. So the challenge is how to achieve excellent results, in the long term as well as the short term.

In spite of all the increasing demands on the service, which have created and continue to create an imperative for action to improve output and outcome results, there are very few guidelines emanating from the sources of those demands on how the trick should be worked. Some of them, notably, do not even define what is meant by the term 'performance'. But we need more of it, whatever it may be. Sounds like the old tactic of "We'll recognise it when we see it!"

The Organisational Competency Approach

Importing lessons learned from industry can be risky, because the observed reality is that managing any aspect of a policing operation is more difficult than it is in industry. Managing performance in policing adds an additional order of magnitude to the demands placed on industrial managers, for those in the service. But many insights are valid and can be imported quite easily in an approach to managing performance in policing.

There is, for example, an interesting method for modelling organisational competencies, along four different dimensions. The concept simply demonstrates that to achieve excellence, any organisation must first identify the key or core competencies it needs, and then invest in their development so that excellence is achieved in all four dimensions. The four dimensions are:

- **Resources** (people, time, money, information, equipment etc.)

- **Skills and knowledge** (what we know and are good at doing)

- **Processes** (the way the work is organised and gets done)

- **Ethics and values** (that guide our decisions and behaviour)

The service has major challenges in all four dimensions. In the first case, there is some way to go to achieve a proportion of resources aligned behind the delivery of operational policing in the field, (or at least its very direct operational support), that would be acceptable in the commercial world. Resource management is sometimes more honoured in the breach than the observance, and resource planning has more than a touch of lip service paid - from the planning process onwards.

As in all large hierarchies, the drift is always from 'earners to spenders', unless very specific attention is paid to reversing it. In the main, manpower utilisation is not measured at all, let alone managed. Which is odd, since there is a very well researched relationship between resource utilisation, service delivery and cost effectiveness. Interestingly, it is management levels that complain most about lack of resources - people in operational jobs tend to be more concerned with how existing resources are distributed throughout the organisation – and how they are utilised. It is also often the officers working on shift that recognise the need for a change in shift patterns, to support improved performance, although their own middle managers do not necessarily understand this.

Police expenditure on training, as a percentage of budget, exceeds the level that would be regarded as normal in commerce by a factor of 5 to10. But quality problems remain, and at least some of the training provided seems to be more closely related to conformance or career development than being a prime driver of improved performance. As one individual remarked, perhaps it's about time that the service was run for the benefit of the community instead of its officers - excessive perhaps as a comment, but insightful nevertheless.

A perhaps somewhat less controversial way of expressing the same insight is to note that many years of trying to prove that improved performance can be generated as a

by-product of career development have produced little to justify the proposition. A move towards generating career development as a by-product of excellent performance is probably worth a try.

And then there is the question of education versus training. If the former is more about imparting knowledge and understanding, then the latter is more about developing behavioural skills. The education without training will never be a prime driver of performance. Which is another way of saying that so called training which is mainly about 'chalk and talk' is never likely to reduce levels of crime.

Under 'processes', the service has real problems, partly of its own making, and largely because of the high level of interaction with other agencies. Excess paper, poor process design, delays, lack of decision authority and accountability abound. In several different forces, process maps of the CJ process defy logic and the reality is that it is only heroic efforts by many operational practitioners that get any results at all.

Compare many processes (e.g. CJ) in the service with the 'golden rules' of process design -

- Fewest possible interfaces and hand over points

- Fewest possible activities

- Fewest possible people involved

- Operators make the decisions

- Fewest possible backward facing movements

You see what I mean?

And finally, there is the question of ethics and values. This is generally the most neglected dimension of all. Which is not to suggest that the service is populated with officers lacking in the right ethical standards - far from it. In fact, to this observer at least, quite the reverse is true. The issue is more about some senior officers and managers not understanding value systems, as distinct from individual values, and, specifically, how the design of structures and processes, as well as the actions of key individuals can produce very damaging consequences. The heavy symbolic content of the messages conveyed by what are regarded as ordinary, everyday decisions and behaviours often escapes attention. And all the posters on the wall, education sessions and statements of purpose and values come to nought in the face of contradictory designs and behaviour by key individuals.

Consider the chief officer, for example, who banged the drum endlessly about equal opportunities, and then picked his new staff officer from a self-nominated short list of one. Not surprisingly, subsequent protestations about equal opportunities being the rule (for everyone else) tended to fall on deaf ears.

The Ghost in the Machine

And as if all this was not enough, there is one final issue that needs to be addressed - what one observer referred to as the 'ghost in the machine'. Police organisations, as well as the communities they are intended to serve, are populated by human beings, not machines. This raises the issue of management style, because the fact remains that if all of the four dimensions are at a level of excellence, a handful of poor managers, interacting with their colleagues with what has become known as the "... interactive skills of an angry alligator ...", can ruin the entire scheme.

The key question is "If we have achieved excellence in all four dimensions of all of our core organisational competencies, will our people have the emotional, intellectual and physical energy to deliver excellent performance?" How much of this, as a concept, is covered in supervisor training, together with the skills required by supervisors and managers to enable people to release and channel the high energy levels they undoubtedly have?

The shift in management style required is one that is long overdue, and is starting to happen the world over. It is about giving up outdated concepts of manager as command and control, and moving towards manager as facilitator and coach. 'Coach' is about helping develop people to their full potential in their jobs, and 'facilitator' is about taking on the responsibility of identifying and removing the blockages to performance for the organisation's people, at least 95% of which are normally created by the organisation!

The need for integration and an action check list

Once again, in case the wrong impression has been created, the record is quite clear. Many forces have done excellent work in some of the four plus one dimensions of the required organisational competencies. There are some excellent process design improvements, evolving resource management practices, and more sharply focused and needs-driven training programmes. There is certainly some excellent work being done in the aspect of value systems, and an equally large amount on individual ethics.

The proposition advanced here is that there are still some gaps, namely two. How many forces, for example, have identified their critical core organisational competencies, and sharply focused their investments on those, and nowhere else? Any force that tries, and comes up with 137 core competencies had better think again. Such numbers simply can not be managed. Any more than 5 or 6 will result in lack of focus, and a stretch of financial resources such that nothing will be achieved at all.

To illustrate, working with four separate forces on the question of force strategy, has come up with the same, three core organisational competencies, every time. Interestingly, working on one project with a bunch of operational officers and staff resulted in the same core organisational competencies being identified by them. The organisational competencies in question were investigation, managing information and negotiating. In all cases, the chief officers doing the work concluded that their forces were far from excellent in all three competencies.

Before we move on, to explain that last observation, two comments are needed. First, 'investigation' includes investigating major crimes, but not exclusively. It includes investigation as an operational policing skill for ALL operational police officers, and it was here that a major worry emerged. The consensus was that most uniformed officers actually did little if any investigation at all. Moreover, investigation also included identifying the causes of organisational and performance problems, and that was an even bigger departure from the standard of excellence.

Second, the topic under discussion here is organisational competencies, and has nothing to do with individual competencies. There is no suggestion that police forces do not have legions of highly competent officers and staff. In fact, the contrary is true. The issue is more about the organisational structures and processes within which the individuals and teams have to operate, and the resources they have to enable them to do their jobs and achieve their performance targets.

The second gap is indicated by the research that suggests that to focus on one or two competencies, and then on only one or two dimensions of them will simply dilute the benefits obtained. Half a skill set, or skills without adequate resources, or highly skilled people operating broken systems for that matter, all add up to the same - mediocre performance. Truly excellent performance will only come about as a result of a relentless search for excellence in all dimensions of all core competencies - nothing less will do.

To end on a practical note, here is a brief check list that will indicate whether or not excellent performance is a realistic goal, or just a pipe dream. Have we got:

- Individual accountability and performance measures, not just for teams?

- Two way feedback, and supervisors who are as accountable for their people's performance as their people are?

- The right PIs for individuals, teams, organisational units and the force as a whole? (More than 6 or so is yet another route to losing focus)

- Supervisor and manager skills to support the PDR process? (This includes managing with information, and giving and getting feedback)

- Management time that is focused on performance and improving it? (This is all about values, and getting the symbolic messages right, and that in turn is all about leadership - check the symbolic messages contained in the diary! If the routine is meetings on more meetings on more meetings, which are more about conformance, administration and the budget ...)

- Good management information, that gets down to the individual?

- A focus on the police equivalent of the bottom right hand corner, which is outcomes? (But don't forget resources, quality all the way through the system and values)

- Effective post profiles? (On one sheet of A4, that support a negotiating approach, and that enable people to know how they fit in to the policing plan - that drive training only when identified as required to improve performance)

- Policing plans that are about resources and performance and that is about outcomes

- Resource allocation and management that matches the needs of the policing plan, and that must be about excellent performance? (Do we even know what our utilisation is?)

- Away from the "hostages to fortune" syndrome - targets that depress performance? (The division that would not accept a tough target, in case they missed it, adopted a 5% reduction in crime, achieved nearly 15% and thought that was a success - one wonders what they could have achieved if they had set themselves a challenging target?)

- Top management which is visibly part of the performance improvement programme? (More symbolic messages)

- A management style that is truly about recognising the inestimable worth of our people, their skills and knowledge, and providing them with the opportunity and means to deliver on their full potential?

Which takes us back to where we started. Truly excellent policing performance will never be achieved without a lot of hard work and focus - by everyone. Traditional work practices and processes that block performance will have to be faced up to, and fixed - fast. And old management styles that have long since had their day will have to be cast out and replaced by a more negotiating style of working. Which will be very uncomfortable for some, and fun for others - and, who knows, the community might quite like the results as well.