

Case study
August 2014

Tackling the barriers to leadership

Thames Valley Police: balancing directive and
empowering leadership



WORK



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Championing better work and working lives

The CIPD's purpose is to **champion better work and working lives** by improving practices in people and organisation development, for the benefit of individuals, businesses, economies and society. Our research work plays a critical role – providing the content and credibility for us to drive practice, raise standards and offer advice, guidance and practical support to the profession. Our research also informs our advocacy and engagement with policy-makers and other opinion-formers on behalf of the profession we represent.

To increase our impact, in service of our purpose, we're focusing our research agenda on three core themes: the future of **work**, the diverse and changing nature of the **workforce**, and the culture and organisation of the **workplace**.

WORK

Our focus on work includes what work is and where, when and how work takes place, as well as trends and changes in skills and job needs, changing career patterns, global mobility, technological developments and new ways of working.



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Our focus on the workforce includes demographics, generational shifts, attitudes and expectations, the changing skills base and trends in learning and education.

WORKPLACE

Our focus on the workplace includes how organisations are evolving and adapting, understanding of culture, trust and engagement, and how people are best organised, developed, managed, motivated and rewarded to perform at their best.

About us

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. We have over 130,000 members internationally – working in HR, learning and development, people management and consulting across private businesses and organisations in the public and voluntary sectors. We are an independent and not-for-profit organisation, guided in our work by the evidence and the front-line experience of our members.

Thames Valley Police: balancing directive and empowering leadership

Case study

The CIPD report *Leadership – easier said than done* explores the barriers to leadership and good people management. This is one of a series of case studies that illustrates approaches to tackling these barriers in practice.

Thames Valley Police is the largest non-metropolitan police force in England and Wales.

It covers the counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, and serves a diverse population of more than 2 million, plus 6 million visitors who come to Thames Valley each year.

The meaning of leadership and management in the police context

'An added factor that can impact a police officer's behaviour is the increased level of scrutiny from the public because of the transparency of information.'

The leadership challenge in Thames Valley Police is in growing a culture of empowerment and independent decision-making at the front line against the background of the regulations around the behaviour of a police officer. Steven Chase, Director of People, says that discretion is essential in delivering service to the public, considering the variety of contexts and specific situations that front-line police officers may be dealing with. Therefore, while ensuring that they carry out the required processes in full and lawfully, they also need to exercise leadership in making context-appropriate judgements in doing 'the right thing'. Steven Chase says:

'We are a disciplined organisation. We have a set of police regulations. We have a set of policies. We have to abide by the law. There are some very detailed principles set out in terms of the way that things have to be done.'

However, we expect our people to deal with members of the public in a discretionary way, where that's appropriate, as quite often, there is no right or wrong way. When a police constable is out there, often on their own, their ability to have the confidence to deal with something in the right way, as opposed to the scripted way, is really important. /

A police officer adds:

'I've always said to my staff, 'If you go to an incident and you make a decision, and you make it with the best will but it's the wrong decision, I can cope with that. We'll deal with that afterwards. If you turn up and don't make a decision, that's not acceptable. Don't come back saying, "I didn't really do anything." That's not good enough. /

An added factor that can impact a police officer's behaviour is the increased level of scrutiny from the public because of the transparency of information. Fear of making a mistake in the public eye can lead to more risk-averse behaviours, where discretion on policy is required. Superintendent Andy Boyd explains:

'One of the things that I emphasise to our staff all the time is that they are in the public spotlight. Somebody's always got a camera on their phone. That can place quite a degree of pressure on individual officers.'

Because we are a disciplined force the need to adhere to policies and procedures can tend to make us cautious at times but it is important that this is balanced with an appropriate level of discretion which officers feel empowered to utilise. Because you, as a member of the public, should have confidence that when we turn up at your home address, not only do we try to solve your crime, but we also care about you as a victim of crime. /

Challenging rank-driven culture to enable empowerment

A culture of empowerment does not always come easy in an organisation that traditionally relied on directive rank-based and heroic leadership styles. Steven Chase explains that empowerment does not mean removing the hierarchy completely, but starts with developing individuals' understanding where applying discretion is appropriate. He says:

“Policies, for me, need to be lawful and sufficiently tight to allow people who don't have as much confidence to operate safely. But they also, for me, have to have enough opportunity for people to deal with things in the right way. But I don't think policies are the key thing with the latter bit. I think doing it 'the right way' is about individual behaviour, team behaviour and the way that people look at you.”

A police community support officer adds:

“When you're on your own, there is an element of having to think quickly. [If I stop someone] I can either be really, really by the book and go, 'Right, I'm going to get an officer. You're not going anywhere' and be really difficult.

Or I can use my common sense and think – what intelligence do I have on this person? Would this be the best use of a police officer's time considering what I know about this person?”

Several aspects of the organisational practice enable the balance between discipline and empowerment. One is the clearly defined behaviour framework,

outlining expectations. 'Serving with pride and confidence' includes doing things ethically, the values of the public service, as well as leadership. Even more importantly, the behaviour framework is aligned with the appraisal system, as part of the overall performance. This includes performance management, but also recruitment and promotion.

Secondly, line manager behaviours are key to embedding the behavioural framework and expectations about applying discretion confidently. The rhetoric of empowerment has to be supported by real delegation of the decision-making process, a no-blame culture in case of genuine mistakes, as well as an ability of the senior leaders to admit making a mistake and to ask for support. Andy Boyd explains:

“In the policing context it's easy to say in hindsight things that you might have done differently. But it's down to the managers to support people who make sensible decisions on the spot. Actually our organisational view is as long as you can provide a rationale for why you made that decision, and it's a sound rationale, you'll be supported. I've personally talked to every single member of staff in the team to reassure them.”

Some areas of policing are quicker to transfer to the value-based assessment of their performance, particularly as the messages from the senior management reinforce confidence in applying discretion to do the right thing. On the other hand, 'response teams' – those dealing with serious crime – may be challenged more often as the

implications of their actions are more grave and are also likely to have a greater impact on public perceptions of the force. One police officer explains:

“Neighbourhood police officers have the same performance frame as a shift officer, but they've also got the added bit about the community work. For example, they could be showing they spent two hours showing clubs of scouts around.

I think it's important for the police and I know it's something our superintendent values.”

The role of people management

‘Those responsible for managing others are now expected to demonstrate how they support discretionary decision-making of their team members and coach them to develop the ability.’

Changing how standards of performance are viewed in the organisation and embedding mechanisms of empowering front-line staff required a change in the people management approach. Those responsible for managing others are now expected to demonstrate how they support discretionary decision-making of their team members and coach them to develop the ability, rather than simply being accountable on performance targets in accordance with their rank. Steven Chase says:

‘One of the difficulties in a rank-structured organisation like ours is that the only way to progress is up the structure. But if you do that, the most significant change you make is that you become responsible for the lives of others rather than responsible for your own life.’

We see ‘managers’ as holders of the standard. As you go through the organisation, you can’t achieve consistency everywhere, purely because of numbers. But we run promotional workshops, we train the assessors who do the promotion boards and we always have an HR person alongside them. They are looking to deliver the same sort of person through that process.’

Currently the force is working on signposting line managers to resources that can help them with techniques for adopting a coaching or transformational people management approach, as this style may be different from what they have been used to in a rank-driven culture. While in the operational environments

individuals of a higher rank will have to make directive decisions about the course of action, using coaching and empowerment to build respect between the manager and the team member during ‘downtime’ is seen as an investment in a ‘pool of trust’ to draw on in critical contexts. A senior police officer explains:

‘When I started this was a very disciplined organisation then, almost like armies, the rank structure. Now the training teaches the student officers that they should be asking ‘why’ all the time.’

People have got all different characters, and I’ve got to try to understand how I can develop their people management capability from their own skill set. One officer gave an example of leading a junior member of staff in his PDR, saying he was leading by example, but actually, he’d done it all himself. So I had to challenge him through the PDR on that.’

An HR business partner adds on the balance between targets and behaviours:

‘Of course, ultimately, we are in a performance-driven organisation. You need to reduce, detect, and prevent crime – that is the whole purpose of our existence. It will be those things that line managers will ultimately be judged on.’



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