

‘Real’ police culture – communicating the crime prevention message within the Queensland Police Service

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After graduating from her Bachelor’s degree in journalism Celeste completed her cadetship at a regional newspaper. She then joined the Queensland Police Service and served as a police officer for 14 years. She specialised in crime prevention roles including Neighbourhood Watch, School Based Policing and Officer in Charge of District (and Regional) Crime Prevention Units. She completed a Masters of Professional Communication in 2000. Celeste moved to Western Australia in 2005 and in 2007 she joined the Western Australia Police as Executive Manager of Strategic Communications at the Office of Crime Prevention. This move has allowed Celeste to continue her PhD studies in the field of crime prevention and communication, which she expects to complete in 2010. Celeste’s research interests include crime prevention, police culture, and policy implementation.

Abstract

A powerful communication tool, organisational culture has the potential to either reinforce or distort organisational messages. While the organisation can formally influence the stated culture, the actual culture is revealed through behaviour and actions of personnel. This paper considers the culture of the Queensland Police Service and particularly how it affects the receipt of key messages about crime prevention. Crime prevention is a field of specialisation in policing, which, historically, is not consistent with traditional “cop” culture. In a professional police organisation such as the Queensland Police Service, police officers and management are kept informed of the organisational strategic direction through a range of formal and informal organisational communication methods including policy documents; legislation; managerial briefings and performance reviews. Using in depth interviews this paper explores the impact of culture on the communication of messages. It finds formal communication methods must be consistent with the actual culture for the message to be received as intended by the organisation.

Caveat

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Queensland Police Service. The interviewees do not necessarily represent a true indication of events in Queensland.

Keywords

police; police culture; crime prevention; organisational culture; Queensland Police Service.

Introduction

This paper determines whether organisational messages are received as intended by the organisation, and how the organisation's culture can potentially distort these messages. This paper considers the organisational culture of the Queensland Police Service, specifically as it relates to the specialist section of crime prevention. Five in depth interviews with crime prevention officers were conducted and emerging dominant factors relating to organisational culture were summarised and analysed. Based on a series of interviews from ongoing doctoral research, the findings have been interpreted from an organisational culture perspective.

This paper provides a significant contribution to police culture research and is the first time crime prevention has been used to illustrate and understand the impact of police culture on organisational messages.

The analysis of the interviews revealed two dominant cultural factors impacting on crime prevention – the duties performed by the crime prevention officers and the measurement of these duties. These two themes are considered in detail in this paper. The organisation's expectations of crime prevention are communicated in the position descriptions of crime prevention officers and the use of official performance indicators. When position descriptions and performance indicators are compared to actual duties and the actual measurement of those duties, the degree of influence of police culture can be determined.

The paper finds that some police districts receive the crime prevention message and act on it as intended, while others do not. This difference is not inevitable. The police districts where there is managerial support for crime prevention are the districts where stated culture and actual culture are consistent. It is in these districts that the crime prevention message is clearly communicated and accepted.

Organisational culture

Culture is the widely held set of shared attitudes, values and norms that contribute to the day-to-day interactions of staff. It is shared by all employees and is expressed in a variety of ways, both subtly and overtly. Employees have a frame of reference by which they understand the organisation and determine appropriate behaviour or communication (Daniels and Spiker, 1994).

According to Clampitt (2005) organisational culture can be divided into the stated culture and the actual culture. The two are not necessarily the same and yet both combine to “be” the organisation. The stated culture is the organisational identity; how the organisation would like to be seen to its internal and external audiences. The organisation identifies itself through behaviour, communication, and symbolism. This includes policy documents, codes of conduct, codes of dress and organisational structure. The actual culture is that experienced by the individuals within the organisation, or those directly impacted by the organisation.

This is similar to Schein’s (2004) multi layered definition of organisational culture where he quotes three levels of culture. The first is the obvious and overt attributes of the organisation, such as uniform and visible interactions. The next level is the organisation’s beliefs and values often illustrated in vision and mission statements. Schein’s third level is the tacit assumptions of the organisation including unseen and implied interactions. Taboo to discussion within the organisation, this third level of culture can be difficult to determine.

Both Clampitt and Schein agree the actual culture, or third level, contributes to the understanding of an organisation’s overall culture. This actual culture can be made up of unspoken rules and may even be unconscious by the individuals. A comparison of stated and actual culture can reveal an organisation which professes to one organisational norm, while at a deeper level encourages the opposite. If this unseen conflict occurs, organisational messages will be distorted, resulting in confusion and resistance of staff towards key organisational goals.

Police as a case study of organisational culture

Police are responsible for upholding the law, investigating offences and prosecuting offenders. They are tasked with the preservation of peace and good order, and the protection of life and property. Each state in Australia operates its own police service through the respective State Government. Operating autonomously, the various police services are bureaucratic organisations, formally structured with a quasi-military hierarchy. This structure has evolved from a history linked with the military.

When Australia was first colonised, keeping order was initially performed by the military but the number of free settlers soon grew beyond their scope and it was natural to turn to England for guidance where the concept of “police” was being revolutionised by Sir Robert Peel. The unique circumstances of colonial Australia encouraged a military-style police which was

reinforced through hierarchy, uniform style, recruiting practices and academy learning which incorporated drill. Police became one arm of the government (with the Commissioner answerable to the Minister) and its role was extremely broad. Initially focussing on public disorder and crime, police inherited a lot of government administrative duties such as collecting taxes, census taking and elections. Policing became centralised rather than localised, despite the huge areas involved in frontier policing. The expectation was that police were reactive and if necessary repressive (Finnane, 1994).

The modern day policing organisation remains bureaucratic and highly structured reflecting its military roots. In Queensland, for example, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) is made up of a number of regions and commands, each headed by an Assistant Commissioner. Overall command is through a Commissioner. A strict chain of command dictates the style of police functions (Queensland Police Service, 2008). Formalised through legislation, the policing role is primarily focused on community safety (Queensland Police Service, 2006).

Modern police culture lives in this reactive and statistics driven world of arrest and prosecution. Reinforced by police training, the creation of specialist operational divisions, focus on crime rates, and performance evaluation in a quasi-military promotional structure, the police culture promotes the enforcement side of policing over service roles, and the aggressive street cop dealing with criminals is the cultural ideal (Chan, 1997; Dixon, 1999; Eveline and Harwood, 2002; Paoline, Meyers and Worden, 2000.)

In Queensland, as in other parts of Australia, the strong culture stems from historical nepotism within the police “family”. All training for police was provided by police. Recruit selection, in-service training, discipline and accountability were all by other police. Initially this was because there were no other sources of support but police eventually became defensive about any “outside” involvement (Finnane, 1994). Also produced by problems encountered by officers in their working environment and the coping mechanisms employed to deal with these problems, police culture separated the police from the public, resulting in a “we versus they” mentality (Paoline et al, 2000). This mentality, combined with the unique coercive authority of the role of policing, reinforced the divide between the public and the police creating a strong and rigid organisational culture.

Crime Prevention

Crime prevention as a specialist section was formalised in the Queensland Police Service as a result of the Fitzgerald Inquiry, a Commission of Inquiry into corruption in Queensland

(Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct, 1989).

Initially labelled “community policing”, the Fitzgerald recommendations encouraged police to get out into the community and be seen. This was a deliberate strategy to attempt to restore public confidence in the police service. At that time, “community policing” was a new term and a popular style of policing being seen particularly in the United States. Community policing (in the United States) referred to a police officer working with their local communities to address a range of crime issues.

Fitzgerald recommended community policing be adopted as a primary policing strategy. However, instead of the role performed as it was in the United States, Fitzgerald’s community policing included proactive prevention strategies and community crime prevention programs. The term community policing evolved within the Queensland Police Service as a synonym with crime prevention.

The officers responsible for implementing Fitzgerald’s recommendations were Crime Prevention Officers. These officers formalised the public face of policing. Their brief was to interact with the community in order to promote crime prevention activities (such as Neighbourhood Watch) with the added benefit of improving the public perception of police, which had dropped to the lowest approval rating in the country because of the negative media surrounding the Fitzgerald Inquiry (Sced, 2004a and 2004b). A state-level Crime Prevention Unit was responsible for implementing state-wide crime prevention projects. One or two crime prevention officers were located within larger policing Districts, usually at the rank of Senior Constable or Sergeant. Known as District Crime Prevention Coordinators (DCPCs), the officers implemented crime prevention programs as required in their Districts, based on current crime trends and local issues (Queensland Police Service, 2007).

In 2008 the manner of crime prevention in Queensland changed with the introduction of a new strategic direction in the Queensland Police Service and a new crime prevention state-wide strategy. This paper considers the state of crime prevention as it was in late 2007, just prior to the introduction of the new strategy.

Legislation; Vision and Mission statements; and the Strategic Plan emphasise crime prevention and crime prevention elements such as proactive policing, developing partnerships and community involvement. These organisational messages are consistent and reinforced

each other. Crime prevention officers wear the police uniform indicating they are part of the police “team”.

The organisation is structured so crime prevention officers are a district resource, with a coordinating state-wide unit. Although accountable to their respective District Officers, the crime prevention officers are supported by the Crime Prevention Unit in Brisbane. The Crime Prevention Unit is responsible for overseeing the state-wide implementation of the crime prevention strategies as listed in the Operational Procedures Manual.

The Queensland Police Service is sending an organisational message that crime prevention is part of an overall policing response. This can clearly be illustrated through an analysis of two policy areas – performance indicators and positions descriptions.

Stated Culture

Operational Performance Review

The Operational Performance Review was introduced in 2001 as a formal means of making Districts more accountable to crime figures. The Review focuses on priorities as indicated in the Strategic Plan including personal safety; property crime; client service; planned and unplanned major and special events; unique and emerging issues; human resource management; financial management; and professional standards and ethical practice (Queensland Police Service, 2008).

District Officers are required to stand in front of the Commissioner and a panel of senior executives, explain the progress of their district and answer any questions about the District performance. District Officers can face questions relating to anything from crime statistics to media perspectives. The highest priority in the Operational Performance Review relate to personal safety and property crime and how these offences are being addressed at a District level.

The Operational Performance Review is statistically driven, and gives the District Officer the opportunity to explain responses to crime of which crime prevention is an element.

Position Descriptions

The general duties position description was last updated in March 2005 and the crime prevention position in October 2004 (Queensland Police Service, 2005a and 2005b). The position description for crime prevention officers is very broad and generic which affords the individual officer a great deal of freedom in determining their individual role, and the position objective is essentially the same as general duties. There are four principal responsibilities in crime prevention and six in general duties. Three are common to both. Two relate to administration of budgetary and human resources. The third relates to the implementation of community policing initiatives.

The principal responsibility specific to crime prevention relates to media representation. The additional responsibilities for a general duties officer in charge relate to proactive tasking, developing environmentally appropriate policing responses and communicating effectively with stakeholders, all arguably crime prevention elements.

The essential and key selection criteria (KSC) are the same except for the level of knowledge of legislation (sound for crime prevention officers versus thorough for general duties) and ability to research problems (for general duties) or complex problems (for crime prevention). The key selection criteria relating to communication emphasise media management in the crime prevention position.

The fact that crime prevention elements are strongly promoted in position descriptions implies crime prevention is so important it affects the officers' chance of promotion. Even within general duties positions, officers can not expect to be promoted without examples of crime prevention in their resume.

The organisation is promoting crime prevention as the domain of all officers, and not just that of the crime prevention officer. Overtly, this stated culture is apparent, consistent with organisational goals and easily recognised.

Actual culture

The actual culture is not so easily revealed. Individual actions illustrate behaviours that may be inconsistent with the messages communicated by the organisation. Often unconscious or not intentional, these behaviours form the actual culture – that is, the culture directly impacting message interpretation.

Interviews are an appropriate methodology to demonstrate the behaviour of individuals (Sarantakos, 2005; Van Riel, 1997). Although hesitant to use interviews as a means of establishing knowledge of culture, Schein (2004) acknowledges that individuals are aware of actions. It is through the analysis of these actions that the actual culture can be revealed.

Five in depth interviews with crime prevention officers were conducted in November 2007 as part of a series of interviews from ongoing doctoral research. All five officers were stationed in major centres outside Brisbane. The interviews were conducted at a crime prevention training course. Participants were interviewed individually in their own time after hours. The interviews were recorded on video, transcribed and coded into themes. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in a conversational style. The interviews each took between 20 minutes and one hour. Interviewees described actions and behaviours which affected their role.

The interviewer is a former police officer and has a detailed understanding of the role of crime prevention officers. She was personally known to three of the participants. This knowledge of policing and crime prevention allowed the participants to speak as they normally would without concern they would be misunderstood. Police jargon and acronyms were used extensively by participants and the flow of the interview was not disrupted by pauses to explain policing structure, procedure or jargon. Direct quotes have been taken from the interview transcriptions.

Anonymity of the officers was assured in the informed consent prior to interview. Some officers indicated they did not mind being identified, however others indicated they did not want to be identified. To ensure the anonymity of those who did not wish to be identified, officers have been identified by a number, and not a name. Further, the geographical locations of the officers have not been revealed.

Operational Performance Review

Not all crime prevention officers were included in preparation or presentation of the Operational Performance Review. Officers 2, 3 and 5 were not included in the OPR process.

Not asked for anything, not measured by anything. I s'pose all of those statistics on how good we're doing with crime and that sort of thing just come from the crime manager.

Officer 2

The District Officer is looking to get the DCPC actually involved in [OPR], but it hasn't got to it, it's more in just the planning stage, and it's all discussion, so we actually haven't got to that stage yet.

Officer 5

Astute District Officers would include a crime prevention component in their OPR as a means of showing they were planning for future crime reduction.

They're always looking at [crime prevention], it's an area that they see more and more that they can stand their District alone from the others [for OPR].

Officer 4

I think that because the service now has got those priorities, and because of OPR, when the superintendent and the AC [Assistant Commissioner], and the District Officers have to go before the Commissioner, and have to say what they've been doing, you know, part of that is crime prevention. And I think that therefore has made all of the Officers in Charge be aware of what crime prevention is and take some responsibility there.

Officer 1

The use of the OPR process showed the Districts operated differently to the way the organisation anticipated. There was scope in the OPR to use the performance of crime prevention officers to promote crime prevention as part of an overall policing response. The Districts containing Officers 1 and 4 did this, but the Districts containing Officers 2, 3 and 5 did not.

The organisation promoted crime prevention by stating primary organisational Outputs in the Strategic Plan. The OPR reinforced this message by measuring the Outputs. Yet within Districts, there was no consistent recording practice of crime prevention activities amongst the officers. There was no policy relating to the measuring of crime prevention officer duties, so officers had developed their own recording practices. Officer 3 kept a log but it was not used by anyone for anything. It was not submitted.

I could rationalise my role a lot better if I could measure it somehow and I would be able to at least present to morning readouts and say as a result of going to all places that sell [volatile substances], break ins have been reduced 89 percent.

Officer 3

[The Crime Manager] gets a copy of my monthly return because he's my boss, but that's all, he never discusses anything that comes out of that. He doesn't really want to know.

Officer 2

There was a common frustration crime prevention was a difficult concept to measure and communicate.

At least as general duties you can say I've written 12 tickets this week and arrested people, but in this role I'm not quite sure how to- That's my mission, to try and- I don't know actually, how to answer that.

Officer 3

The duties performed by some of the crime prevention officers were considered after the fact in some cases. This meant the crime prevention officer felt like an afterthought in District policing.

Occasionally, it's not being utilised enough, but occasionally we get requests from the OCs [Officers in Charge] which is a direction coming from our District Officer for the OCs to utilise us for crime spikes.

Officer 4

Only when something is wanted, I suppose the, the guidance or tasking is if we have a major hot spot of crime and they want the VIPs [Volunteers in Policing] to go out and do a letter drop or something like that. I go and ask daily is there anything that we want done, but often it's nup, nothing.

Officer 2

And yet, Officer 1 felt included, valued and well utilised.

Gone are the days where I personally believe that crime prevention is viewed as kiddie cops and, officers that go and have cups of tea and scones with the CWA ladies. I think that that's a very important part of it but I can see it being valued more on the big scale of things.

Officer 1

Officer 1 made it clear she was supported well by her District Officer. She was also well informed about the Strategic Direction of the Queensland Police Service, more so than any of the other participants. The actual culture experienced by Officer 1 was the same as the stated culture of the organisation.

Position Descriptions

The duties performed by the crime prevention officer also reveal whether the actual culture influenced the message promoted by the stated culture. A general duties officer in charge had as many references to crime prevention in their formal position description as a crime prevention officer.

The actual culture distorted this level of importance for crime prevention. All crime prevention officers were expected to perform duties beyond the scope of their position descriptions. Some officers felt crime prevention had become the jack-of-all-trades of the police or the place where tasks were given that did not belong anywhere else. This had the disadvantage of implying crime prevention officers are expendable from their primary role.

I was given another task just because that's what happens. That crime prevention gets thrown lots of other things. I was given the weapons audit to do for six months, with no assistance as well, so trying to learn a crime prevention role, and having what turns out to be almost a full time job doing weapons stuff, that are not related at all, is not terribly great. Adds to a lot of stress. And that just comes down to certain bits of politics on well you're my staff because you're relieving there; therefore I'll load you up with this work. And they expect you to do it.

Officer 2

Most officers also performed duties as the recruiting officer. Some were also the Domestic Violence Liaison Officer. Officer 5 was relieving as the Domestic Violence Liaison Officer and School Based Police Officer (both full time positions) as well as performing his duties as crime prevention officer. Most officers did not have anyone relieve in their positions when they went on leave. This implied the position of crime prevention officer did not need an officer in the position all the time, or if the officer was away it didn't matter. Sometimes the officer was called away from their duties and in a quasi-military style organisation such as the police, there was no question officers would obey their superiors.

I can't get a Saturday unit to do Blue Light Discos, but they will roster me on a Saturday to do a watchhouse shift or as shift supervisor. I mean I know what I'm doing but it's so not my role. They can't have me both ways.

Officer 3

If [my superiors] say this needs doing, then that gets done. So I have to value their judgement that they're a higher rank and obviously there are going to be times where that does happen. There might be a priority that I'm directed to address. And I do it.

Officer 1

An example was we had just done the two security audits on the politicians, the state politicians, and just after finishing those ... there was a threat made at the federal politician's place. So it was a case that I was dragged out of a meeting, go down and do the security audit straight away. ... I had to come out of a meeting and go and do that for the rest of the day.

Officer 2

Conclusion

Organisational culture within the Queensland Police Service is strong, reinforcing a policing ideal that is reactive and statistics driven. The organisation communicates messages through this culture; messages which can be interpreted by analysing policy documents and individual behaviours.

The Queensland Police Service formally supports crime prevention in its stated culture. It is openly endorsed in the Strategic Plan, Vision and Mission statements and in legislation. An analysis of performance indicators and position descriptions reinforces, overtly, the message that crime prevention contributes to an overall policing response.

In depth interviews provided the insight to determine the organisation's actual culture. Stated culture is consistent across Districts, but actual culture is not. It was revealed the actual culture in some Districts distorted the message relating to crime prevention the organisation had hoped to communicate. While the Operational Performance Review gave District Officers the opportunity to showcase the work of crime prevention, some District Officers did not do this. The position descriptions clearly indicate the importance of crime prevention, yet in some cases crime prevention officers were not encouraged in their duties, some being relegated to perform duties beneath their scope.

Whilst this analysis has shown that the actual and stated culture can vary, distorting the overall message of crime prevention, the variation is not across the Service. In two of the Districts analysed, the actual and stated cultures were consistent, resulting in a clear message about crime prevention. In these Districts, there is managerial support for crime prevention. The District Officers use crime prevention measurement astutely and strategically. The crime prevention officer performs functions as intended by the organisation, provides performance indicators as required, and is accepted by hierarchy and peers. The organisational message that crime prevention contributes to an overall policing response is well received.

It is clear that managerial support is a key factor in the appropriate use of crime prevention officers. Without endorsement and active support by their superiors, crime prevention officers will struggle to compete with an actual culture that contradicts their role, despite organisational messages to the contrary. As part of an overall response to policing, the crime prevention officers can contribute to positive policing performances within Districts, if their role is used as intended.

These findings are significant. This is the first time crime prevention has been used to illustrate and understand the impact of culture on organisational key messages in policing. This can provide the Queensland Police Service, and similar policing organisations, with the knowledge of how to address identified conflict with the stated culture; more efficiently use personnel in this cultural environment, and therefore more effectively achieve organisational goals.

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