

HOW CAN A POLICE ORGANIZATION, REQUIRED TO ENGAGE IN TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE, CAPTURE LEARNING AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL TO ENABLE IT TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY

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ABSTRACT

The role of organizational learning during organizational change has received critical attention. The precise nature of learning, and the type of change that results, is questioned. Citing weaknesses of naturally-occurring learning, authors have suggested the need to balance the informal processes with appropriate organizational intervention if change is to occur and be congruent to the needs of the organization. This paper focuses on a large police service organization, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), which underwent transformational change and now experiences constant change. During change the organization realised the need to share knowledge and best practices amongst front line officers and across policing districts. The perceived knowledge gap amongst officers has resulted in repeated efforts and mistakes. In response, a Knowledge Sharing Project was established to address these concerns. Drawing on direct observation and interview techniques, the project’s two final workshops are studied in this paper. Findings illustrate the PSNI’s attempt to balance naturally occurring learning processes, in this case storytelling, with the formal intervention of governed workshops and feed forward mechanisms. The outcomes highlight the effectiveness of the organizational intervention in facilitating change and improvements in policing practices within the policing service context. Furthermore, the case also illustrates how constant organizational change can have a negative impact on learning effectiveness.

Key Words: Organizational Learning, Organizational Change, Police

1 INTRODUCTION

Police organizations in the United Kingdom have experienced continuous change in the last decade. These changes have begun to reshape the nature of UK policing, which, prior to a Labour Government, remained immune from public sector reform programmes (Leishman *et al.*, 1995). Two interventions have had significant impact on UK policing: New Public Management, which introduced performance management and efficiency savings, and Neighbourhood Policing, which recommends a shift from reactive policing to community policing. Community policing is a philosophy by which the police and community work together to identify and address issues of concern (Seagrave, 1996). For the Police Service

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of Northern Ireland (PSNI), these changes have been in addition to an earlier transformation, following the 1998 Belfast (Peace) Agreement.

There is debate in the literature about the role of organizational learning and, in particular, how learning can be effective and, thus, congruent to the needs of the organization in the context of organizational change. This paper presents one aspect of a larger research project into how a police organization, required to engage in transformational change, can capture learning at the operational level to enable it to respond effectively. The research shadowed a knowledge sharing pilot project within the PSNI, which sought to address the need to acquire, share and create new knowledge on community policing, throughout the organization. Focusing on the project’s final two workshops, this paper illustrates the impact of the organization’s attempt to balance the social and emergent aspects of learning with that of deliberate organizational learning mechanisms.

The case study is significant for two reasons. First, the organization is considered to be an exemplary case of transformational change in policing (Office of the Oversight Commissioner for Policing Reform, 2004). Second, the project is recognised as a unique approach in policing practice by national policing bodies.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Policing in Northern Ireland

With the increase in terrorist violence in the early 1970’s the then police service, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), underwent radical change in an attempt to respond to the growing domestic threat. As a counterinsurgency force, the organization focused its resources on maintaining public order, curbing sectarianism and communal violence, and defending the state against subversive forces (Weitzer, 1996). This operational bias and subsequent practices invited numerous criticisms. The 1998 Belfast Agreement sought, in part, to address the criticisms, with the establishment of the Independent Commission on Policing. The Commission produced a report in 1999 (hereafter, Patten), with 175 recommendations, of which 174 were accepted by the UK government. In response, the RUC (reinstated as PSNI) embarked upon a transformational change programme; its scope and magnitude was such that every facet of the organization has had to be fundamentally altered to support their new role as a community-focused service. Facilitated by the decentralisation of policing services into District Command Units (DCUs), the central assumption is that effective policing constitutes a collaborative, problem-solving approach by empowered (or trained, decentralised, resourced and responsible) officers, resulting overall in a more accountable and better standard of service delivery (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2002). In doing so, front line officers are to seek long-term solutions to community problems by problem-solving alongside communities, of which some have never had constructive contact with the police. This is called ‘Policing with the Community’ (PwC). This new style of policing is overseen by a range of external performance accountability bodies at the Northern Ireland and local levels. As a consequence, the PSNI is considered the most accountable police service in the world (Oversight Commissioner, PSNI Website), with approximately 13 bodies proactively overseeing police practices. Their combination with national reforms, such as New Public Management, has prompted the emergence of a performance management culture.

The change in policing style means officers (and the community) will “face novel problems with no clear cut answers. [And so, they] need to learn their way out of problems rather than apply known solutions to them” (Baldwin *et al.*, 1997: 47-58) – and then be held to account for their efforts. The community and the police are, therefore, required to learn about each other’s circumstances and capabilities, set other’s expectations and develop trust, if long-term solutions are to be produced. Overall, the change “amounts to a profound shift in police thinking and community thinking” (Patten, 1998: 7.4). Therefore, the subsequent challenge facing the PSNI is how to facilitate inductive or feed-forward (Crossan *et al.*, 1999) learning within DCUs, in context of the organization’s tall hierarchy and deductive structures of command.

2.2 Realising the need for Learning in the PSNI

Patten and subsequent reports failed to encourage debate amongst senior management on organizational learning issues. However, in 2005, following an external and internal review of the PSNI’s patrol effectiveness, i.e. street level policing, it was recognised by senior police management that, due to a lack of knowledge sharing, a significant knowledge gap existed between DCUs, with efforts and mistakes being repeated at the expense of ever decreasing resources. The service needed to better share (and create) best and good practice amongst its front line PwC officers. According to the PSNI Deputy Chief Constable (DCC), a solution was not just about sharing best practice solutions; it was also about fundamentally supporting changes in work practices and the officers’ outlook:

I suppose, one of the major things we are trying to do at the minute is spread the good practice, make sure people understand what problem-solving is, how they can go out there and do it, and realise there is more than one way to solve a problem.

PSNI DCC and Steering Group Chair (006, p. 7)

This perceived knowledge gap was exacerbated by a drain of organizational knowledge; the service has lost, and continues to lose, several hundred experienced officers, as a result of a Patten recommendation to retire officers with over 25 years’ tenure.

A Sergeant, with 25 year’s community policing experience, referred to here as Colin, volunteered to address the knowledge sharing issue and, in April 2006, established the Knowledge Sharing Project (KSP). The project ran seven Knowledge Sharing Workshops, of which the final two produced the most significant outcomes.

Focusing on certain elements of an organizational learning framework, the following review of literature attempts to highlight the need to balance naturally occurring learning with formal learning mechanisms to increase organizational learning effectiveness.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Organizational learning

Organizational change and organizational learning are closely coupled in the literature (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Mintzberg and Westley, 1992). Organizational change can challenge organizational norms thus producing new learning, which may manifest in new culture, processes, routines and practices. Paradoxically, learning can produce the potential for a change in behavior (Huber, 1991). However, this coupling is often assumed and

unchallenged. As such, Child and Heavens (2001), and Lipshitz *et al.* (2002) suggest that one should not assume learning leads to effective change. Our wording should be more careful (Child and Heavens, 2001). First, to achieve effective organizational change, or change that is beneficial to the organization, organizational learning should be congruent with the needs of the organization and continuous. Second, organizational learning leads to the realisation or potential for change and not change in itself (Huber, 1991). Popper and Lipshitz (2000) suggest a definition of effective organizational learning, as ‘learning *by* the organization’, which is distinct from ‘learning *in* the organization’. The latter concept describes individualistic learning, which is fragmented in nature or limited to isolated pockets in the organization. Alternatively, ‘learning *by* the organization’ assumes that an organization learns as an organic entity. The learning, and retention of learning outcomes, is greater than the sum of learning by individuals (Dixon, 1999). Ideally, the whole organization is actively engaged in learning (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000).

Although there are several studies of change in police organizations, there is a considerable lack of organizational learning studies. Studies tend to focus on information management or technology initiatives – which may suggest that police organizations are not pursuing organizational learning strategies. However, a few studies (Riley, 1999; Collier, 2001; Tan and Heracleous, 2001; Brown and Brudney, 2003; Harris *et al.*, 2004) provide precedence for police organizations adopting organizational learning, especially where community policing (Tan and Heracleous, 2001) and problem-solving approaches (Riley, 1999; Harris *et al.*, 2004) are a strategic focus. In addition, they serve to highlight that front line officers informally learn as communities of practice (Brown and Brudney, 2003), and that technology is not a sufficient solution to the continuous development of problem-solving methods (Brown and Brudney, 2003). Overall, research studies support the premise that without a deliberate effort to learn in police organizations, performance will suffer (Riley, 1999).

3.2 From individual to collective learning

Crossan *et al.*'s (1999) 4I framework provides structured insight into the interplay between individual and collective levels of learning. Four processes “glue” (Crossan *et al.*, 1999: 524) this tiered structure together: 1) Intuiting, and 2) Interpreting, at the individual level; 3) Integrating, at the group level, and 4) Institutionalizing, at the organizational level. This paper focuses on the *Interpreting* and *Institutionalizing* processes. The framework considers an iterative process by which learning can flow bottom-up (feed-forward) or top-down (feedback) through these levels.

Following the individual’s discernment of patterns and possibilities in his or her environment (*intuiting* stage) is the development of a structured understanding, or conceptual map (*interpreting* stage). This is both a cognitive and social process, which may be achieved through trial and error activities (*Ibid*). Similarly, “Problem-solving, even by a single officer in a given incident, is usually performed by trial and error” (Mastrofski and Parks, 1983: 478). The interpretation stage may spill over to the third stage, *Integrating*, during which conceptual maps further develop “through the continuing conversation among members of the community and through shared practice” (Crossan *et al.*, 1999: 528). The social process results in a shared understanding or collective mind. Finally, *institutionalising* is the transfer of learning into organizational memory. As an iterative process, the learning may then flow down, or feed back into the organization as

policy, organizational processes, routines, or systems. Overall, integrating and institutionalising processes result in a collective body of knowledge (Kim, 1993). The body of knowledge is greater than the sum of learning by individuals. This means that, regardless of employees leaving the organization, the learning remains.

3.3 Dialogue: Creative Discourse and Storytelling

Central to the *integrating* process is dialogue (Isaacs, 1993), which may be ‘creative discourse’ or storytelling. Creative discourse is critically reflective in nature,

Conflictual and creative argument is also essential in critical decision-making situations where, especially at times of crisis, there is a danger of ‘groupthink’

Coopey and Burgoyne (2000: 878).

Without creative discourse, a group may develop a particular consensus without critically reflecting on its appropriateness (i.e. group think) (Crossan *et al.*, 1999) or the organization may become ‘stuck’ with irrelevant skills.

Storytelling is “an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience” (Boje, 1991: 111). Stories are part of organizational or collective memory (Boje, 1991), and, as such, are cultural artefacts (Martin and Meyerson, 1988). They are considered “the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships” by which actors can make sense of the environment (Boje, 1991: 119). A good story will feature a plot, underlying moral, and be attractive to listeners, who can identify with the characters and message, and will regard it as authentic or believable (Bell, 1992). Connectedness is a key feature. Stories are co-produced (Boje, 1991: 107). Listeners, for example, construct their own interpretations of the narrative based on their own unique skills and experiences (Crossan *et al.*, 1999) and the degree of engagement in creative discourse. The sense-making process creates a shared understanding (Dennehy, 2001) and experience (Taylor *et al.*, 2002) of the event recalled. Consequently, stories are more likely to be remembered, especially when they are repeated (Taylor *et al.*, 2002). Another key feature is their role in sharing experience across the organization (Huber, 1991). They make implicit knowledge explicit (Swap *et al.*, 2001), and are cited as central to learning within communities of practice (Seely-Brown and Duguid, 2001) and experiential learning (Bell, 1992). Finally, stories can empower people to “accommodate new precedents for decision and action” (Boje, 1991: 124). However, this power (Gabriel, 1998) can also exclude minority groups (Fletcher, 1996). The literature’s focus on management’s ability to control, manipulate, influence, and empower using storytelling (Boje, 1991; Swap *et al.*, 2001) is at the expense of non-management applications.

3.4 Communities of Practice

Crossan *et al.*’s (1999) four processes are inherently social. Communities of Practice help to illustrate these processes, including an understanding of dialogue as a learning process. Communities of practice interactively develop a body of knowledge that one person alone does not possess (Cook and Seely-Brown, 1999). They differ from formal teams because they emerge naturally from a need to solve problems or to gain new knowledge. They may operate independently of a formal setting (Nonaka, 1988), made up of individuals who share the same expertise or practices (Seely-Brown and Duguid, 2001). Shared practices

mean members can more easily understand each other (Wenger, 2000). As such, Communities of Practice are considered effective at knowledge sharing (Berthoin Antal *et al.*, 2001; Seely-Brown and Duguid, 2001).

Dialogue in community interaction is strengthened by convergent membership, as Communities of Practice can span internal and external organizational boundaries, accessing to knowledge beyond traditional confines:

“without these differences there would be no progress in learning... [suggesting] that bringing together people from disparate organizational roles, specialities, and backgrounds should enrich the learning process”

Child and Heavens (2001: 318).

However, open and creative discourse requires a degree of Psychological Safety (Edmondson and Woolley, 2003): an environment where members freely accept and offer help to each other, whilst not feeling threatened by making, admitting, or highlighting mistakes (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000). In Popper and Liptshitz’s (2000) example of ‘After Action Reviews’, the Israeli Air force facilitated this temporarily by removing rank and encouraging constructive feed back between its pilots.

3.5 Weaknesses of Social Learning

Communities of Practice, however, have certain weaknesses. First, communities of practice may include power-related features that impede learning. Although ‘born of learning’, communities of practice can also ‘learn not to learn’ (Wenger, 2000: 230). They may become complacent or even learn inappropriate behaviors. In addition, for selfish motives, individuals may hoard knowledge (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000). These issues are especially prominent in organizations that rely heavily on knowledge transfer:

When information is the primary unit of organizational currency, we should not expect owners to give it away.

Pfeffer (1986) *cited in* Davenport *et al.* (1992: 54).

Recent policing reforms, such as the National Intelligence Model (ACPO CENTREX, 2005) and Neighbourhood Policing programme (Home Office, 2005), mean police practices are dependent on information. Overall, policing is, more than ever, information/intelligence-led (HMIC, 1999/2000). Communities may also generate a negative environment. In this case, members may hold back contributions because they have learned that their opinions, or more generally, ‘creative discourses’, are not appreciated. Similarly, commitment to the community of practice can have the effect that members refuse to learn. This is prominent when communities of practice have experienced successes and become complacent.

The presumed correctness of past actions and interpretations is reinforced by repeated success, and the ensuing complacency breeds rejection of information that conflicts with conventional wisdom.

Day (1994: 24).

Second, the shared practices that make communities of practice effective can also impede learning. Those who do not share similar practices may be excluded from membership because, perhaps, they cannot effectively interact or the information they are trying to share is not what others want to hear. The result is that certain learning is blocked out (Harris *et*

al., 2004). Finally, social processes may not be noticed by community members (Grant, 1991). According to Hendry (1996: 635), “members are absorbed in the taken-for-granted”, their routines are only “half visible to the group” and include a cultural conformity, which can impede change. Subsequently, although communities of practice can be an effective vehicle for learning, they fail to offer any certainty for management that effective learning will occur, and that outcomes will be shared and/or congruent to organizational need (Lipshitz *et al.*, 2002). As a result, communities may constitute fragmented learning, with members continuing to muddle through change and complex problems (Merkens *et al.*, 2001) and/or learning inappropriate behaviors.

3.6 Balancing emergent with deliberate learning process

Hendry (1996), however, recommends that a solution to the “learning/not learning” dilemma exists “through the notion of organizational routines”, which means a “trade-off in resources” between the effectiveness of informal learning and the bureaucracy of organizational intervention (Hendry, 1996: 636). The latter is a deliberate effort by the organization to facilitate naturally-occurring learning. For example, in recognising the weaknesses of naturally occurring learning, Dodgson (1993: 380) states:

Organizational learning is as natural as learning in individuals.... [Effective organizational learning] can be distinguished as one that moves beyond this natural learning, and whose goals are to thrive by systematically using its learning to progress beyond mere adaptation.

Deliberate interventions, such as organizational learning mechanisms (OLMs), are “a structural facet of organizational learning” (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000: 82) helping participants “to interpret information, to exchange views, attitudes and information, and to transfer [knowledge], in order to create new organizational knowledge” (Ellis and Shpielberg, 2003: 1238). OLMs can attempt to influence members to set aside old ways and adopt new or improved practices. The potential to accept criticism or take initiative to seek alternative practices (Wenger, 2000; Seely-Brown and Duguid, 2001) will not be a natural recourse, especially as distributions of power that often reinforce resistance are generally entrenched within organizations (Davenport *et al.*, 1992: 65).

The following case study of KSP workshops illustrates how the project sought to address these concerns by ‘moving beyond natural learning’ (Dodgson, 1993: 380) within the PSNI.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Employing direct observation and semi-structured interviews, the researcher shadowed the KSP for the remaining seven months of its 12 month operation, as well as conducting interviews more widely across the organization. Findings from the workshops are presented as a case study.

4.1 Case Study

A case study enables a comprehensive and in-depth investigation (Feagin *et al.*, 1991). Through robust procedures and methods it is designed to tell a story (Remenyi *et al.*, 2002), in “[bringing] out the details from the view point of the participants” (Tellis, 1997: 1). In pursuit of validity and credibility, the researcher utilised the Triangulation methodology, which synthesises different methods when investigating the same incident. Triangulation

draws on the strengths of each method (Denzin, 1978), thus balancing out their respective weaknesses (Jick, 1979). Critically, it seeks to enhance the validity of the research process by reducing bias (Denzin, 1978). The researcher also provides a “rich, detailed, thick description about the case” to achieve transparency of the findings (Firestone, 1993: 18).

4.2 Data Sample

The units of analysis are the project’s Knowledge Sharing Workshops. Both workshops were studied and 19 out of 35 (54%) participants were interviewed. Although the researcher was only able to observe Workshop One (W1), the researcher extracted enough data from interviews and W1 observations to inform a study of Workshop Two (W2).

Aside from both workshops having a temporary time span, interviews were stopped after there was enough data to answer the research question. This is known as ‘saturation point’ (Voss *et al.*, 2002).

4.3 Direct Observation

Observation research has precedence in researching policing organizations (Mastrofski and Parks, 1990), particularly within UK (Van Maanen, 1982) and Northern Ireland policing (Brewer, 1991). As police work is mostly dialogue (Sykes and Brent, 1983) qualitative methods are a popular choice. In particular, storytelling should be observed in its natural environment to observe performance behavior (Boje, 1991).

Prior to observing the workshops the author conducted several interviews with PSNI personnel and read widely on their strategy and policy. This allowed the author to acquire knowledge of the special language used by officers (Van Maanen, 1982). The researcher adopted Direct Observation, the principal method used in studies of change processes (Gummesson, 2000). Direct Observation studies actions, reactions and interactions in real time, noting interrelationships between the various actors. However, access can be difficult, and so the facilitator introduced the author to all participants, citing his organizational experiences, contacts, and exposure to sensitive briefings. This provided the appropriate qualifications essential for limited access to actors’ secrets (Barnes, 1977).

It is impossible to claim the author was a neutral observer (Patton, 2002), as some actors broke from their story in an attempt to explain to the researcher ‘group slang’. Regardless, the researcher tried not to make his presence felt (Yin, 1994) and by discouraging interruptions to the process. As audio recording was not permitted, the researcher took detailed notes (Johnson, 1975) on the workshop process and narratives heard. The researcher also noted the physical setting and atmosphere, as they have an influence on human behavior (Neuman, 1997). Post-workshop interviews with participants were later conducted to obtain additional data on actors’ perceptions, motives for action, and learning gained (Gummesson, 2000).

4.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are considered a central component of the case study approach, especially for investigating organizations (Creswell, 1994). Strength lies in their ability to focus on and more effectively capture language and investigate meaning. In their only partly structured approach, semi-structured interviews stand in contrast to the loose manner of unstructured

questioning. The interviewer may still explore certain themes whilst placing emphasis on the voice of the interviewee, allowing for a flexible, spontaneous and open dialogue (Bryman and Cassell, 2006). Interviewing should be viewed as a systematic enquiry (Arksey and Knight, 1999) and was adopted in this manner. It ensured that the same terms and language were used in each interview. Although the researcher used a set list of questions, each interview conversation evolved in a unique way. The nature of the respondent’s willingness to provide detailed answers dictated the degree to which the researcher prompted each retrospective narrative. Each interview was transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. The main analysis was fed back to the KSP team and a small, random sample of participants. This allowed respondents to comment on the accuracy and quality of the researcher’s findings (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

A key weakness of interviews, however, is their retrospective nature. The focus on individual experiences of a phenomenon means the data is open to potential biases (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). What may be perceived as truth by respondents may not be accurate. Due to recall errors (Leonard-Barton, 1990), it was important to regard recollections as perceptions, which may have been modified or reinterpreted in light of some other event (Voss *et al.*, 2002). In this case, access problems – a common issue in police research (Glaser and Strauss, 1965) – meant that some respondents could not be interviewed sooner than three months from the event. Consequently, Triangulation becomes important as it incorporates more than one perspective on the same incident (Preskill, 1996; Chell, 1998).

4.5 Secondary Sources

The researcher also captured data from feedback cards, left by workshop participants, and other relevant KSP documentation, such as plans, reflection notes and e-mails.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis is defined as:

...a search for patterns in data-recurrent behaviors, objects, or a body of knowledge. Once a pattern is identified, it is interpreted in terms of a social theory or the setting in which it occurred. The qualitative researcher moves from the description of a historical event or social setting to a more general interpretation of its meaning

Neuman (1997: 496).

The author transcribed all the recorded interviews and typed up any notes immediately after the interview, allowing for a more accurate recall of events. NVivo software structured the data and allowed for a more manageable analysis of it (Mason, 1996; Barry, 1998). Using Narrative Theme Analysis, the researcher brought non-linear and fragmented respondents’ narratives into a logical format. This permitted insight into the phenomenon from participants’ perspectives. Each transcript was read and re-read before being analysed separately into inductively constructed themes (Shaw, 1999). These themes were then compared against the themes of other transcripts. Finally, some themes were merged together, whilst others became grand themes, under which sat sub-themes. A re-reading of transcripts meant that themes were constantly reviewed and kept in perspective (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

5 CASE STUDY

5.1 KSP’s Knowledge Sharing Workshops

KSP research in the PSNI highlighted a key issue: No central knowledge sharing facilities or mechanisms exist. Although briefings and debriefings, e-mails, consultation and policy and development, training functions (Collier, 2001), Good Practice Guides, and databases have an organizational learning role, PSNI officers consider these mechanisms insufficient: they lack sufficient detail or information is sanitized. One deliberate attempt to share knowledge, a database for managing complex Policing with the Community (PwC) problem-solving cases, was widely considered overly complex. Consequently, it remains under utilised. As such, rather than sharing knowledge across districts, it became obvious that officers were muddling through, relying on informal, natural learning processes. The KSP team recognised that PwC communities of practices did exist throughout the organization, but, knowledge sharing was not coordinated and consistent.

That’s the thing about this organization. Sometimes there is stuff going on in other areas that you don’t know about it and you are working through it and you are trying something, ...and making all these mistakes and then you find out someone down the road has been through all these before and you could have saved yourself a hell of a lot of work!

LR (W2, p. 11).

Normally, you think on your feet about the best approach. You try your best. You do try to see if someone has done it before... You just hear about [best practice solutions]. You can also ask people you know. I don’t think there’s any mechanism to inform us. At least, I don’t think there’s one up and running that’s worthwhile.

TL (W2, p. 1).

The KSP also concluded that storytelling was a common methodology used by officers to share knowledge. This social process would be most evident during lull times, for example, when officers gathered for lunch, worked together on duty or, as the researcher observed, at formal meetings as a means of translating a point of view.

Sitting in the land rover, sitting in cars, drinking tea, standing on street corners – that’s when [stories] got told. And it still does get done that way... So, a lot of people learned that way...

Colin, KSP Manager (003, p. 4).

Learning is translated to the listener as a story. Indeed, police organizations are considered strong storytelling establishments (Fletcher, 1996). Based on these findings, the KSP envisaged harnessing this natural process with mechanisms that ensured the quality, relevance and appropriateness of the stories or experiences recalled. The overall process, however, would remain simple for participants:

First of all, if you face a new situation you have never seen before, if I could introduce you to someone who has already done it, would you like to meet them? And almost to a ...man/woman they have all said, ‘Absolutely, when can we see them?’. And I have said, Okay, ...If that’s the starting point... and we all have a strong storytelling culture, perhaps that’s the better way to do it, rather than sticking it on a database that nobody will bother ...ever reading or populating. And so, what we hope to do is to run workshops where people have a need, and people have a knowledge, and bring them together.

Colin (003, p. 5).

The KSP had previously organized five workshops. Although their details are beyond the boundaries of this paper, it is worth noting that the team drew learning from their experiences to further refine the model applied to the November 2006 Workshops.

5.2 Organizing the November Workshops

Preparation for the November 2006 Knowledge Sharing Workshops began in September 2006, simultaneous to the KSP coming under new management, the Policing with the Community Branch. Under considerable pressure to deliver key changes, particularly the Neighbourhood Policing programme, Branch management redirected the KSP to other activities. The team were ordered to consult neighbourhood officers with the aim of developing a ‘Tactical Menu for Engaging Hard-to-Reach Communities’. This document would provide a list of best practices informing front line officers on how to better identify, engage with, and work alongside hard-to-reach or marginalised communities. The KSP, however, felt they could still apply their methodology, whilst meeting the department’s requirements. The questions were set as follows:

- 1) How do you identify the different communities present within your districts?
- 2) How do you engage specific communities to gain their cooperation to work with the police to prevent crime?
- 3) What consultation methods do you use to establish what each community identifies as its policing priority?

Two workshops were planned: W1 was attended by Inspectors and Chief Inspectors, and W2 by Reserve Constables, Constables and Sergeants. All officers are considered experts in Policing with the Community, because they hold between five and 25 years’ PwC experience (Prietula and Simon, 1989; Swap *et al.*, 2001). Each workshop constituted a Community of Practice, because of their shared practice and common purpose.

The KSP promoted the event via e-mail to police Districts. DCU management allocated people to attend. The e-mail outlined, although vaguely, the format of the workshop and its purpose. Importantly, it asked officers to consider some successful initiatives in their area. The workshops were hosted in a country club, a modern establishment, which intended to stand in contrast to police facilities. In total, 16 Inspectors and Chief Inspectors, and 19 Reserve Constables, Constables and Sergeants attended. Colin, who facilitated the workshops, tailored the methodology to the intended audience. Two key processes are outlined and differences between W1 and W2 are also highlighted.

Colin delivered rules and regulations which outlined the manner by which everybody could and should participate. These emphasised respect for each other’s views and that inappropriate or offensive comments were unacceptable. To support this, both the e-mail invitations and opening remarks emphasised an informal and flexible, although governed, atmosphere. It was also observed that three factors contributed to achieving informality: All officers were of similar rank; storytelling is regarded by officers as an informal practice; and, a small networking exercise, conducted after introductions, got participants into the process of informally interacting.

Storytelling was split into three sessions, structured by the Branch’s three questions. Using the areas identified in participants’ e-mail replies, the KSP team identified several

participants within the room who could give an example story for each question. In the first sessions, however, Colin used a story from his own experience. Storytelling by participants was structured using the Scan-Analyse-Respond-Assess (SARA) problem solving model. Using open questions, the model guided storytellers through their story:

- Scan – What was the problem?
- Analyse – How did you learn more about the problem?
- Respond – How did you develop a response?
- Assess – What was the outcome?

The physical structure of the room allowed up to six officers to sit at one of the three tables. Each table had a flip chart, pencils and paper. However, participants were encouraged not to take notes, but to simply listen to each other, as each person would receive a copy of the ‘Tactical Menu’ document. Although the groups were left to self organize, a KSP member intervened when two Chief Inspectors dominated their group. Noticing the remaining four Inspectors were apprehensive in challenging their superiors, the KSP member encouraged informal interactions. After being given a question and example story, the groups were left for 30 minutes to share their stories. In the last ten minutes of each session groups broke down their experiences into learning points, which were written on their flip chart. These points were then presented informally back to the workshop, with each point accompanied by a supporting story. The wider audience responded with questions or requests for more detail. This process helped officers make sense of the recalled experiences, as questions would often take the form of a story. This process would be repeated for each session. Colin also scheduled regular breaks in between each session with intermediate summaries to recap on some key stories told. The repetition of stories made them more memorable. After the three storytelling sessions, Colin scheduled a fourth session, as he had identified, from the e-mails, an individual who was especially innovative. This officer had a fifteen minute session in which to explain and answer questions on the initiatives he had developed. Materials relating to his initiatives were also distributed. In W2, Colin spoke for the officer.

Both workshops experienced a slow start. For example, in W1, participants became confused when storytelling, a ‘taken for granted’ (Hendry, 1996) process, was made explicit through explanation. Interestingly, the audience seemed able to relate to the method once Colin told two short stories of how storytelling was used to share knowledge. This suggests that officers, prior to the workshop, were not explicitly aware of how they learn and share knowledge. In addition, both workshops experienced moments where officers aired their grievances about changes in the work place. W2 had to include an extra session, at the beginning, to allow officers to express their concerns. This signified the uncertainty and frustrations of front line officers regarding constant change in the organization.

Officers were comfortable telling stories within their groups. Mindful of the rules, listeners were attentive and respectful to the speaker. Interruptions occurred only to ask for clarification or greater detail, or to relate their own experiences. In doing so, listeners would briefly summarise a similar story of their own. Dynamic interactions and the critical examination of stories appeared welcome by all. Interestingly, storytelling was already ongoing in W1 before the formal process commenced. Sharing stories had the

effect of creating a closer bond between officers, as stories provided evidence of their experiences and ‘hardships’ to listeners. Indeed, officers stayed in the same groups throughout the workshop. Trust was driven by knowledge of shared roles, rank, and work experience. One story easily led to another. During tea breaks and lunch, additional stories became extensions of the subjects debated in the workshops. They featured less humour and fact, and were more reflective. By the third storytelling session, it was evident that officers were critically reflecting, as groups, on the stories, by relating the facts to their own context.

5.3 Workshop Outcomes

The workshops produced three significant outcomes. First, the KSP were reassured that, a) their methodology was an effective means of sharing Policing with the Community knowledge, and, b) information systems would not be an adequate solution to sharing knowledge – officers would have the time to enter sufficient amounts of detailed knowledge regularly. Second, the KSP produced a ‘Tactical Menu’. The workshops comprised two distinct audiences, capturing knowledge from a management and non-management perspective. As such, the document benefited a wider audience of police officers. The Tactical Menu was also integrated into revised PwC policy. Third, and of significant interest, the workshop-defined communities of practice sustained their interactions after the workshops. During the workshops, participants had been encouraged to share details, which they readily did. Combining this with a ‘Reply All’ function on the KSP’s initial e-mails to participants, some officers shared support materials. Examples were bespoke intelligence forms and crime awareness leaflets. Participant interviews also revealed further post-workshop interactions, via the telephone. Respondents recalled this continued interaction as the most beneficial outcome of the workshop: in addition to hearing about other initiatives, participants then benefited from the support materials. The KSP then bridged workshop-defined boundaries by forwarding e-mails to all contacts in their mailing list. This led to community members organizing a knowledge sharing conference on a specialised subject. Participants from both workshops, or their colleagues, attended. With the closure of the KSP, due in part to resource shortages, post-workshop knowledge sharing still continues but is diminishing. Presumably, fresh interventions are required from time to time to stimulate knowledge sharing, as it cannot be assumed that the informal knowledge sharing, emanating from a story-telling workshop, will continue forever.

5.4 Participant Feedback

Participants were concerned that the organization did not properly promote best practice from the bottom line, even expressing feelings of isolation. Participants claimed officers outside their district and role-based communities of practice would not reveal details of initiatives, particularly pitfalls or areas for improvement. Hence, the ability of the workshop to allow strangers to share knowledge so readily and quickly had a significant impact on perspectives:

I came away from the workshop in a very positive way. I talked to others and they were so surprised at the amount of stuff that we had taken away with us. Even the partnerships and contacts. Things like the Schools Forums: we have had contact schools but we never ran School Forums. ...I wasn’t even aware this was done!... The KSP workshop was very relevant to what I do.

PW (W2, p. 6).

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I found it was really useful because you got a real opportunity to talk to people, find out where they were from and what sort of problems they were dealing with and share what you were doing. And that was the really useful part of it that a lot of things were talked out and different sorts of problem-solving approaches had been used in different areas. And you were able to learn from it. And we got useful contacts ...

LR (W2, p. 11).

As well as providing knowledge of direct benefit, the workshops had the additional effect of reassuring participants about their role and activities. Hearing other experiences provided guidance and confidence that officers were doing the ‘right thing’.

Several respondents commented on the atmosphere of the workshop, perceived to result from workshop governance and the similar rank amongst participants. Comments highlight how the presence of senior officers can stifle open and frank discussions amongst lower ranks. In such cases, officers may feel obliged to conceal mistakes or errors in their thinking or actions.

...I am confident it was one of the best courses I have ever attended in this organization. The way it was managed, how it was held in a different format. The whole thing was so conducive in my mind to sharing knowledge. The courses you normally go to here are usually very regimented. ...But this one really brought about a relaxing atmosphere and people really spoke about things freely. People just talking openly. Normally you are trying to pry things out of people. But here we were all sharing things.

TM (W1, p. 2)

...it was very relaxed, and you were encouraged. There was no sort of feelings of holding back or being afraid to say anything. You were encouraged. Now, I know some of the other ones that had been run previously, there had been a lot of senior officers at it... and there was a reluctance to speak. I think it works better if you have people, Sergeants and Constables [of similar rank] who are actually dealing with problems on the ground and actually share that experience and what they have done, what they have found works and what they found didn't work and then you are not making the same mistakes.

LR (W1, p. 11)

I think it was a good way [to share knowledge]. I think everybody felt very comfortable the way it was managed. It was informal but everybody got the chance ... I know there are some people less comfortable getting up and speaking but it wasn't that kind of a day. ...Everybody there was all trying to do the same sort of thing and everybody was interested in what everybody else was saying and I think that was a good thing. You felt what you were contributing was of value and of interest.

HI (W2, p. 19).

Respondents' narratives suggest that continuous organizational change has left officers uncertain about their redefined roles and new style of policing. However, participants left the workshops feeling valued and empowered to continue in their work.

Although all respondents said they would attend future workshops, participants believe pressure from resource shortages would make regular attendance difficult. In addition, some participants suggested future workshops could be more focused on a single issue:

I would agree with selective targeting. I don't know if we could afford that resource-wise. We are really limited with our time.

EA (W1, p. 1).

We had discussed that day that yes it was very general and that in dealing with community engagement it had tried to cover many subjects. It would probably be better if it were more focused on specific subjects and therefore was shorter.

Considering resource pressures – a consequence of constant organizational change –, several respondents suggested having a database to ‘dip in and out of’. This system would capture outputs from all workshops, allowing officers to quickly identify and contact a range of knowledgeable individuals. A renewed, user-driven database for sharing problem-solving cases across DCUs is currently being developed.

The KSP team were convinced that the workshop had been a success, although limited. Participant interviews suggest a similar conclusion. Critically, several respondents had put acquired knowledge and material to use. This was a significant achievement for the KSP, as sharing, acquiring and creating knowledge (i.e. applying the knowledge to their area) was considered pointless if it wasn’t relevant and could not be put to use. Participants, who now bridged two communities of practice, returned to their own districts and shared the acquired knowledge. The ensuing debates served to translate the knowledge into something that could be applied in their own area.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The central contribution of this paper is to illustrate the impact of a police organization’s attempt to develop its organizational learning capacity by capturing learning at the operation level. This involved a trade-off between naturally-occurring learning (storytelling within communities of practice) and organizational intervention. Admittedly, within the wider organizational learning literature, the KSP methodology is not radical or groundbreaking; however, within the policing context, it is unique and the perceived value amongst UK practitioners is considerable. More than ever, police service organizations need to learn, continuously, better ways of *policing with* the community – as opposed to *policing the* community unilaterally.

Wider analysis supports the perception that the PSNI lacks a coordinated effort to acquire, share and create PwC knowledge. Consequently, the KSP’s efforts were facilitated by a need at the front line. Rather than deliver a top-down mechanism, the PSNI recognised the precedence and power of storytelling amongst existing communities of practice. The KSP methodology empowered the social process within a governed atmosphere of psychological safety. Organizational learning works effectively within flat hierarchies (Örtenblad, 2004; Rowe and Boyle, 2005) and where officer/managerial rank is absent (Popper and Lipshitz, 2000); the KSP attempted to remove these barriers – although, on occasion, they persisted – and instilled a relaxed, open and flexible atmosphere.

Three lessons can be drawn from this case study. First, participants realised an inherent process for sharing knowledge. The workshops illustrated, what was previously ‘taken for granted’, an explicit and relevant process for coping with change and problem-solving. Perceptions and conceptual maps were challenged, and new understandings emerged, which were then shared with non-workshop colleagues. Second, the workshop illustrates, a) how organizational learning has a role to play in facilitating organizational change, and, b) how changes can impede learning. The learning process was overridden by the emergence of frustrations and ‘fear’ amongst officers about organizational change. The workshop commenced once officers were given space to air their emotions. As a result, participants developed their confidence from a collective understanding of shared

circumstances. Also, as observed, organizational change, particularly the resulting resource shortages, also affected the KSP's ability to develop an organizational learning capability. Furthermore, the pace of change is such that many officers – regardless of training (Easterby-Smith, 1981) – remained uncertain about how to apply new problem-solving models and policing styles. Although storytelling cannot transfer skills (Swap *et al.*, 2001), it empowered participants with knowledge about how to adopt and apply the recent reforms. Finally, although storytelling may be perceived as an instrument of power for organizations, it is also an instrument for effectively sharing knowledge on complex issues amongst both management and non-management personnel. It provides a detail and interactive quality that permits co-producers to make sense of their environment, and as a consequence, to create new solutions. The KSP enhanced storytelling by structuring the dialogue, giving it a purposeful focus and implicit governance. This ensured that learning was appropriate to the needs of the organization.

Undoubtedly the workshops are a snap-shot in time, and their organizational impact was limited. Furthermore, participants who attended were perhaps already willing knowledge sharers – leaving the problem of how to address those unwilling to learn. However, the case serves to illustrate how organizational learning is both important and applicable within a hierarchal organization facing constant change, environmental uncertainty, extensive accountability, and resource shortages.

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