

A fair cop? Not for the police.

This article was originally published in The Observer

Instead of blaming officers for failing performance, David Blunkett should look at how the Government has failed the boys in blue, writes John Seddon

DAVID Blunkett has promised to tackle our failing police. He criticises their poor detection and conviction levels, blames police performance for a failing public confidence - and proposes measures to solve the problems. The Home secretary thus ploughs the furrow of his predecessors. But instead of blaming the police he should stop and think. Many 'police problems' have been created by Government intervention. All police officers want to do their job; but they are prevented by a succession of interferences.

To see the effect and extent of management interference, Blunkett should go out with a 'response' policeman, an officer who attends non-emergency incidents, for example, a burglary where the offender has left the scene. If he asked the officer: 'When you attend an incident, how often do you have all the right information and are you in the right place at the right place?' he would find the answer to be: 'Hardly ever.'

To find out why, Blunkett might care to work his way backwards through the flow of work. He would find a three-stage procedure in which his first stop would typically be a divisional operations room where people decide which policemen to send where.

If he asked: 'Are you confident that you have all the information you need to make the correct decision about who to send where?' he would discover that up to 40 per cent of the time the operations officers have doubts about the quality of the information they receive. Sometimes they can phone to check, more often they make the best of it and hope the response officer will sort things out.

The second stop in the Home secretary's voyage of discovery would be the 'call takers' (the name varies around the country), whose job is to create an electronic record of the incident and pass this to the operations room.

What is it, Blunkett might inquire, that causes the call takers to pass on such unsatisfactory information to the operations officers? He will discover three interwoven causes. Putting things in writing often loses the flavour of what has occurred; the time allowed for the work is limited; and, not being police officers, call takers find it hard to judge what matters in policing terms.

So how did the police come to have a call-taking function in the first place? Answer: government invented it. In an attempt to cut costs and maximise time for policing, the Home office investigated what policemen did and then hived off a number of 'non-policing' activities to civilians. By now Blunkett might be wondering whether this was wise. It was not. It meant focusing on function, not flow, and, as he will have begun to realise by now, it makes the flow worse.

But there is yet a third to visit for the Home Secretary to make on this journey through the police workflow. His last stop is the call centre (not the same as the call takers), which initially handles the myriad calls to the police from the public and decides how to route them.

If he probed a bit, he would find that the biggest issue in the call centre is the volume of 'failure demand' – demand caused by the organisation's failure to do something properly or at the right time. Failure demand is waste: phone calls that shouldn't happen. Progress chasing – following up a previous call - is a good example. In police call centres, failure demand can total 60 per cent of all calls. How, Blunkett might wonder, did police organisations come to have call centres in the first place? You guessed it: a government initiative. Under the slogan 'Invest to save', Ministers have been persuaded by technology companies that call centres reduce costs.

By now, the Minister might twig that by treating all calls as equal, call centres conceal the largest opportunity for understanding and improving the work. He would realise that the government slogan should more accurately have been 'invest to waste' and might pen an urgent note to his colleagues to stop them making the same mistake with local authorities.

In the call centre Blunkett would see the fundamentals of the 'sweat shop' phenomenon; people being targeted and appraised on their levels of activity when the major causes of variable performance lie in the work itself. This profound realisation would perhaps cause him to reflect on the merit of his proposed police league table.

He might realise that league tables ignore variation, and knowledge of the causes of variation is central to performance improvement.

By taking performance data over time police forces would see the extent of variation in their own performance. They, like Blunkett, would then ask 'what causes variation?' and they would, if they took the same journey through the flow, realise that the problems are all in the design and management of work.

Moreover, they have been caused by government interference. By managing costs, successive governments have diminished the ability of police forces to do their job, worsened performance and damaged morale. Police personnel are now leaving before retirement in droves, something unheard of in the past.

The Home Secretary should provide leadership. Rather than berating and bludgeoning policemen and women, he should encourage them to learn all they can about what currently helps - and hinders - their achievement of purpose. And he should be open about the Government's culpability, rather than promoting further solutions from on high.

Hello, hello, hello

AS WITH all performance improvements, better response policing has to start from a position of knowledge. This can only be gained by looking 'outside-in' – understanding the type and frequency of demand, and how the organisation responds.

Listing of calls to the police show several kinds of predictable demand: people reporting disturbances and crimes; people asking for information; people wanting to find out what happened to previous call.

The greatest opportunity for improvement exists in turning off the causes of 'failure demand', such as people calling in repeatedly with the same issue. For the other demands, the next steps should be to

establish capability measures to show how well and predictably the organisation responds to each type of demand in terms of the purpose of the work – detection and convictions.

Having established the 'what' of performance, however good or bad, the next step is to establish the 'why'. Mapping out the steps taken in dealing with each type of demand allows a very illuminating question to be asked: where is the 'value work', the work necessary to meet the demand carried out?

By definition, everything else is waste – whether obvious 'type 1' waste like much of the current recording and reporting of response activity, which adds no value, or 'type 2', like the three-stage information-handling procedure, which is structural and needs to be designed out of the system.

Working only against measures of capability (reflecting purpose) the police should experiment with method – how they respond to the different types of demands. And that is the central point: the people who do the work should be engaged in improving it. This would have a profound impact on performance and morale. It would also slash the reporting bureaucracy, a major cause of the current malaise.

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