

Police leadership and integrity

Implications from a research programme

Paul Quinton – College of Policing

This paper provides an overview of the main implications from a programme of research on police leadership and integrity. The College was commissioned in 2013 to carry out this research by the National Policing Leads for professional standards and police ethics, following a series of high profile cases and national reports that raised questions about the integrity of the police and the role of senior police leaders. The purpose of the programme was, therefore, to enable the profession to take ownership of these issues by helping them understand better what factors might lead to problems emerging, and highlighting ways of promoting ethical police behaviour and stopping similar problems recurring in the future. The research also informed the development of the Code of Ethics (College of Policing 2014), which was commissioned at the same time, and resulted in 'fairness' and 'respect' being included as policing principles. The programme – which was carried out in partnership with several independent academic institutions – included the following studies:

- A Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on 'what works' to promote ethical behaviour and prevent wrongdoing in a range of organisations (McDowell et al. 2015).
- A qualitative case study research examining the role senior leaders play in encouraging ethical behaviour among frontline officers and staff (Porter et al. 2015).
- Survey research on organisational justice, which examined how the perceived fairness of senior leaders and supervisors can impact attitudes and behaviour such as their commitment to the principles of ethical policing (Quinton et al. 2015).
- An exploratory study on what investigators and stakeholders perceived to have contributed to cases of chief officer misconduct (Hale et al. 2015).

Overall, the programme highlighted that senior leaders need to be more aware of the risks they face to their own integrity in leadership positions, and more reflective about their own leadership style and its effect on behaviour. In addition, a number of promising activities were identified that could help to maintain and enhance the ethical health of police forces.

The need for senior leaders to be more aware of the risks

Previous research has suggested that some aspects of police work are especially susceptible to unethical behaviour, and that anyone doing that work would face similar risks (Waddington 1999). Research has tended to focus on the vulnerabilities of frontline officers resulting from, for example, contact with criminals, confrontational situations, the pressure to deliver results, the occupational sub-culture, and the use of discretion. While chief officers are not routinely exposed to what are sometimes referred to as 'invitational edges', the current programme highlighted that they will face other risks by virtue of their position. A chief officer will inevitably be the 'public face' of the force and its history, be subject to multiple layers of accountability, and take responsibility for numerous high-risk decisions. In this respect, senior police leaders are likely to be no different from those in similar leadership positions in other large, complex organisations, such as government departments, financial institutions and hospital trusts.

Despite the number of reported cases in recent years, it is not possible to conclude from the research that standards of behaviour have necessarily fallen at the chief officer level. No national trend data were available to present a clear picture. Over this time, the police have also been subject to increasing levels of public and media scrutiny, and there has reportedly been a growing tendency for any allegation of chief officer misconduct to be investigated formally. Moreover, the reported cases discussed in the exploratory study related to a small

proportion of chief officers in service at the time, and a large majority of cases were about professional decision-making (mainly procedural matters) rather than interpersonal conduct. In around a third of cases examined, no misconduct was found to have taken place.

The research programme underlined the need for change to come from within senior ranks, and for chief officers to be more aware of the risks they face in their leadership positions. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the proportion of cases related to procedural matters, a common risk was highlighted with chief officers thinking the rules do not apply to them, or that they are somehow exempt from them in a particular situation (e.g. due to the perceived need for expediency). These examples, of what are often called 'cognitive failures', were thought to be much more frequent than chief officers behaving unethically out of self-interest or for personal gain. For this reason, it is important for chief officers to act with humility and not to see themselves as occupying a 'special position' at the top of their own organisations (see also: Price 2006; Punch 2009). There is also likely to be scope for chief officers to be more open about the ethical decisions they routinely have to make. Relatedly, the research also highlighted how senior leaders needed to keep up to date with changing ethical standards, perhaps illustrated most clearly by the change in public opinion about what constitutes an acceptable use of public money during austerity.

There are steps chief officers can proactively take to minimise personally the risks they face. A central theme to emerge from the programme was the need for senior leaders to create a working environment where people at all levels of the organisation feel able to challenge their peers and those in leadership positions. This change is likely to require chief officers to be more transparent and introduce stronger governance processes, so that their own decisions are more routinely subjected to scrutiny. Greater openness and diversity at senior levels within the service – in terms of profile, perspective, and leadership style – might result in a more reflective approach to decision-making, whereby assumptions are questioned rather than taken-for-granted, and alternative perspectives are critically evaluated. There are also likely to be wider implications in terms of using values to attract the 'right' people in to the police, promote them, and develop their leadership, decision-making and interaction skills.

The development of greater internal checks on senior officer decision-making is also likely to involve staff being provided with more opportunities to voice their concerns. These processes are, however, unlikely to make a difference on their own without senior leaders also giving officers and staff the confidence to come forward, and tackling the barriers that prevent them from doing so. In hierarchical police organisations, which traditionally place value on deference to rank and 'command-and-control', these barriers are likely to be numerous and deeply-rooted within working practices. Furthermore, given the perception that 'blowing the whistle' can be detrimental to a person's career, there may also be a need for chief officers to be more overt in providing support to those who do.

The role of senior leaders in creating ethical organisations

There was consistent evidence from across the research programme that senior police leaders play a crucial role in creating – or undermining – an ethical working environment, which can impact on the attitudes and behaviours of officers and staff. The qualitative study pointed to a positive shift in this respect in recent years, with leaders moving from autocratic to a more inclusive and open leadership styles, which are more likely to promote ethical behaviour.

There are, however, limits on the influence senior leaders at the top of the organisation can have. In practice, supervisors are likely to have the greatest impact on the frontline. Middle managers were found to be 'everyday' role models, helping to establish the local ethical climate, and providing the most immediate feedback on behaviour. To perform these roles well, there was evidence to suggest middle managers need to feel empowered and supported by senior leaders in terms of their role, decision-making and professional development.

Despite the importance of middle managers, the setting and enforcing of ethical standards of behaviour by senior leaders emerged as an important issue. Systematic review evidence identified by the REA suggested, for example, that codes of ethics can have a strong, positive effect on ethical decision-making. However, this effect was only found when workers believed the code was actively used to set standards of behaviour and was well-enforced, which highlights the need for forces to take steps to embed the Code of Ethics for policing. The importance of leaders being 'firm' in terms of setting and enforcing standards was also highlighted. The qualitative research found that officers and staff felt senior leaders needed to communicate consistent standards of behaviour, respond appropriately to 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, and demonstrate support to those who made honest mistakes in order to have a positive effect. The study also showed that force values and priorities were thought to have an important and positive influence on ethical behaviour, particularly where they placed emphasis on delivering a quality of service and helped support their use of discretion.

A consistent theme to emerge from across the programme was for senior leaders to be good role-models for behaviour and to lead by example. The importance of leaders showing consistency between their own behaviour and their expectations of others was highlighted in the qualitative research. Officers and staff saw particular value in senior leaders communicating directly with them and being accessible, rather than being closed off and remote. Chief officers who went 'back to the shop floor' were generally seen to be credible and authentic, and thought to understand the challenges of the frontline. Officers and staff felt this style of leadership encouraged them to feel valued and empowered, and to think the organisation was open and transparent, and there was a shared set of values. Those who did not see senior leaders as visible or accessible seemed disinterested and cynical. A key challenge for senior leaders, therefore, is how to maintain this level of communication, and ensure their messages are not misinterpreted as they permeate through the organisation.

In contrast to the traditional view that chief officers need to be heroic and decisive figures, there was consistent evidence to suggest they could have a stronger influence on the attitudes and behaviour of staff by listening to them. The research on organisational justice showed that when officers and staff felt their supervisors and senior leaders listened to their views, made decisions fairly, and were open and honest, they were more likely to take on additional work voluntarily to help others, value delivering good quality of service, and feel empowered to use their discretion. There was also evidence to suggest that fair decision-making and respectful treatment by supervisors and senior leaders encouraged support for ethical policing amongst the frontline – officers were significantly more likely to say they valued suspects' rights, the fair treatment of the public, and the proportionate use of force.

Unfairness within the police was, conversely, identified as a significant organisational risk. The research suggested that officers and staff who felt they had been unfairly treated were likely to disengage, see less value in serving the public, become more cynical in their views, and be less committed to ethical policing. Research in other occupational settings has also suggested unfairness could also increase sickness rates and employee theft. In addition to ensuring that management practices are fair, inclusive and open, there may be value in senior leaders trying to identify the main sources of perceived unfairness in the workplace – such as poorly handled organisational change programmes, opportunities for promotion, not dealing with under-performance, and access to leave and flexible working.

While senior leaders need to set and enforce clear standards of behaviour, there was consistent evidence to suggest there were risks with them using traditional 'carrots and sticks' to do so, particularly in the form of performance management and sanctions. While the qualitative research highlighted a common view that officers and staff who deliberately fall below expected performance standards should be investigated (and dismissed where appropriate), the need for fairness and proportionality was widely acknowledged. There was also evidence from the organisational justice study to suggest that a 'carrot and stick'

approach has a limited effect on attitudes and behaviour (only rule-following), and can have a negative effect on behaviour by encouraging officers to follow the rules unthinkingly. Furthermore, if this approach is viewed by officers and staff to be unfair – perhaps in terms of rewarding the ‘wrong people’ or taking a disproportionately hard line on under-performance – its effect is very likely to be counter-productive.

This finding highlighted the risks of senior leaders implementing performance regimes that routinely penalise ‘bad’ performance as a way of incentivising ‘good’ performance. There was a highly consistent view that the use of quantitative targets, and a narrow range of performance measures focused on crime reduction and enforcement activity, could have a negative impact on ethical behaviour and erode public service values. There was wide recognition that senior leaders had started to move away from such targets and measures, though some confusion among frontline officers and staff about their use was identified. The research highlighted a need for senior leaders to define and articulate clear performance expectations, but for integrity and staff wellbeing to be included in a more comprehensive package of measures and for there to be a change in the nature of performance conversations to emphasise organisational learning and problem-solving.

At the most basic level, senior police leaders can help to create ethical organisations by implementing initiatives that encourage the ‘right’ attitudes and behaviours. While the REA did not find any ‘what works’ evidence, several promising interventions were identified, all of which focused on prevention, rather than apprehension and discipline. Systematic review evidence showed that fair and respectful policing (e.g. community policing, informal police/public contact) could improve public perceptions of the police. Individual studies showed that transparency and accountability – in the form of body worn video and reminders to officers – can also have a positive effect, as could training that aims to improve the decision-making and interaction skills of officers and staff. In addition, the use of analysis to identify ‘integrity hotspots’ and ‘problem officers’, and targeted early intervention activity to prevent problems developing, were also found to have a positive impact. The REA suggested – given the multiples causes of unethical behaviour at the organisational, situational and individual level – that a multi-pronged approach was more likely to succeed than a sole focus on the ‘few bad apples’. Overall it seems that commitment from senior leaders is critical for initiatives to work as they can ‘trigger’ ethical behaviour by acting as role models.

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