

Hero to Host: Developing Police Leadership in the 21st Century

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Introduction

The recent College of Policing leadership review prioritises a move away from 'heroic leadership' to a more team-based and engaging approach. We propose that the metaphor of host leadership – leading as host rather than a hero - offers a useful way forwards, being both richly dimensional and highly practical.

The leadership review

The College of Policing Leadership Review takes a wide-ranging look at leadership throughout the police forces of the UK. It contains 10 key points for progress. The first of these is about leadership culture – in particular the desirability of moving on from a heroic leader position. For example, section 5.2 says:

We heard that in a command orientated world there is a tendency to shift towards the 'heroic' model of leadership in which an individual is the figurehead and followers are there to ensure the leader's will is carried out. We advocate more emphasis on a model in which leaders are there to ensure the success of their teams.

Taking command remains an essential part of the leadership repertoire, but the overuse of command as a leadership style risks disempowering those who are being commanded. Overuse poses an obstacle to the culture of candour and challenge that is necessary to succeed in the future context and it diminishes the qualities of personal resilience, creativity and risk taking that helps teams to develop in the good times and survive in the bad.

The need to be able to take command in an authoritative way is clear – the wider question is whether that is always the best thing to do, and how this option can sit within a wider coherent set of leadership behaviours.

The importance of command – in the right setting

Picture the scene... a road traffic accident has just happened, there are injured parties, damaged vehicles, a blocked road, shock and panic is setting in. The police officer (constable?) arriving on the scene needs to be able to instantly take control, to convey authority, and to give everyone confidence that things are being handled. They must ensure that priorities are dealt with, the scene is protected and secured if necessary, that casualties are given priority and that things are done as quickly as possible to get things moving again. This is a vital part of every officer's training, and rightly so.

Another scenario – a warm body is discovered in a dark alleyway. The police rush to the scene – the ‘golden hour’ is ticking away and it’s key to get the right people doing the right things in short order. For the leader on the ground, this requires getting some team members to do things they would rather not do (such as “stand there and don’t let anyone in”) and others to not do things they want to do (“no, you cannot interview a witness, you have been at the scene and you will risk contaminating both”). Debate is often not possible and compliance is required.

The key elements in these situations are creating order from confusion in a quick time, engaging with the public to ensure rapid operational progress, and appearing as a figure of authority to whom people will look. It’s also key to coordinate the efforts of others and to ensure that what is done is documented properly so it withstands later scrutiny. This style is one with which every officer (and by extension, pretty much every senior leader) will be familiar. However, this is only one aspect of leadership in the modern police force.

The post-heroic boundary

Modern leadership writing shows a broad distinction between ‘hero’ leaders who get results by authority, hard work and expertise, and post-heroic leaders who see their role as being about getting results though bringing others together in a way which allows maximum contribution from the others, not treating them as foot soldiers.

This is a journey of development and increasing awareness. Most people in all walks of life start out assuming that hero leadership is the way to do it – after all, the idea is woven through our culture, our movies, our stories. The police context reinforces this starting point. However, leaders who want to succeed at higher levels will need to learn to develop their style, to get the most out of others in terms of creative and constructive input, as well as hard work.

Some research (for example Joiner and Josephs, 2006) shows that only 10% of leaders in corporate America make it through this post-heroic boundary. So, we should not be surprised if this is not a completely familiar concept. The key question is how to help people to see and surmount this barrier, to go on developing more styles of leadership for more senior contexts.

These more senior contexts often involve:

- Working on a timescale of years rather than hours or days
- Working with senior colleagues and figures from society rather than those who are being impacted by disturbing and disruptive events right now and need order restored for them
- Dealing with complexity, ambiguity and ‘wicked problems’, which are not amenable to

quickfire solutions

- Rallying people around key issues in ways that encourage the development of relationships and longer-term capabilities as well as short-term results. One way to encourage new thinking in these contexts is through the idea of leading as a host.

The metaphor of leading as a host

We have all been hosts in some way. We have all invited people around for a meal or a party. We have all been through the balance of preparation and engagement, the joy of introducing people to new friends, the balance of leading, organizing and participating. And we have all been guests too, experiencing the skill of a good host (and perhaps the clumsiness of a bad one) first hand.

Hosts don't just engage people by drawing them in. They introduce people to each other, make connections and act positively to bring together synergistic groups – people who can complement and add to each other's qualities, skills and interests. The art of arranging – who to put with whom, what might make an interesting group, even thinking about keeping specific participants apart – is a key element of the host's skill.

Having drawn people together, a good host won't dominate the situation. He/she will flit from one group to another, with a word here and a touch there, keeping an all-encompassing eye on how things are going. But the host won't hog the limelight or become tiresome by constantly taking centre stage. The host is always on the lookout for when to intervene and when to leave things ticking along – when to step forward and when to step back. The role of the host transcends and includes both. It entails awareness and timing – and acting instantly.

The apparently mundane act of inviting and engaging guests turns out to be a very good match for a leadership approach. This stresses engaging other people and ensuring that their needs are met while subordinating one's own where they are in conflict with the needs of the 'guests'. Hosts are at once both 'above' their guests (taking responsibility for them) and 'below' them (serving and ensuring they have what they need). This sounds paradoxical, but we have all experienced and handled this tension at home. Now it's time to bring it to the workplace.

Host leadership at different levels

This is about thinking as a host – something that we can all do at some level, and can develop our skills to improve. This can work at any level of an organisation where people are engaging with others – be they colleagues, team members, customers or the public. It has been said that 'policing is a team activity', which suggests that there might be some mileage in this idea. Let's take a brief look at how these ideas might work at different levels in the police force.

Authority and service on the beat

A host is clearly an authority figure – but one whose authority comes from personal connection and invitation, engagement, attention to detail, and being seen to be making the running. Hosts are both proactive and reactive – good planning is essential, but no plan survives ‘first contact with the enemy’ (or indeed the guests, who may be late, spill things, squabble with each other or turn out not to eat broccoli). In the same way police officers need to be both proactive and reactive - good policing involves the application of community knowledge and intelligence to events, which can be better resolved when those dealing with them are in sympathy with and understand the context. To put it more prosaically, police officers are rarely punched on the nose by youths that they know, if the youths know that they know them.

Similarly wandering around at random, hoping to bump into something (and then reacting to it) is wasteful policing. It’s much better to go to places where there is known to be a problem. As we used to say, “Always drop into the local barbers – they know everything”. The issue is one of asymmetric knowledge: the community as a whole know everything worth knowing about crime and disorder, while the police start off knowing nothing. In order to use community knowledge to good effect, the police have to find ways of engaging the community - in particular those really in the know. That requires a lot of sophistication, patience and empathy.

Senior operational ranks

Superintendent and Chief Superintendents rarely deal directly with operational issues. Rather, they are oversee/lead those who are. A key focus for these roles is to oversee strategy, standards and day-to-day operational policy, and to lead improvement processes senior leaders set the tone for the units they oversee. A shift, say, towards or away from neighbourhood policing requires not just the commands “do it” or “stop doing it” but a commitment to delivering change by getting buy-in and engagement with those who are going to deliver the new model.

Senior commanders also need to advocate for the police to senior public officials and local business contacts, while at the same time both appreciating those other organisations’ issues and refining police practice to reflect local concerns. One might say they are working ‘on’ the police service more than ‘in it’.

Host leadership at these levels will include:

- Using ‘soft power’ to draw people into engagement with new policies and initiative
- Taking care that the spaces where work is done – physical and interactional - support the behaviours and desired interactions
- Gatekeeping – welcoming newcomers, seeing that boundaries of all kinds are

maintained and enforcing (by example and in others) standards of behaviour and probity

- Connecting – within the force and outside it, to build links and contacts for long term benefit

At the level of Assistant Chief Constable/Commander and above, the key role moves from overseeing strategy to developing it and promulgating it internally and externally. This requires an even broader range of awareness, connections and insight. Dealing with internal teams (staff functions and specialisms) and external (Police and Crime Commissioners, politicians, stakeholder groups) is of course vital. They also tend to be the public face of the service. Media appearances and public meetings at which a police input is wanted generally fall to them - or at least the more significant the event the more likely it is an NPCC officer that fronts the police response. At these senior levels the requirement for proactive leadership is even clearer – and so, it turns out, is the need to carefully balance reaching out and engaging others. Even in handling the media there is a proactive side to leadership – building good relations with the press on a continuous basis can pay off handsomely. We are now a long way from the road traffic accident described at the start of this article, and the need to stamp authority on panicking strangers.

Key aspects of leading as host at this level, in addition to those described above, might be:

- Taking an agile and emergent view of strategy development – with long term goals supported by short-term actions and frequent reviewing and refocusing.
- Connecting with relevant others both inside and outside the organisation – and then connecting those people with others within the force to ensure that the best information reaches the right places in a timely and effective way
- Starting new initiatives in useful ways, by reaching out and engaging the right people early on and building support
- Establishing the right ‘container size’ for new initiatives and discussions – balancing the size of the issue with the number of people involved to build progress without either oversimplifying the issue into or collapsing into messy confusion.

Hosts co-participate. They organise and lead events, yes – but they also join in with them, eat the same food, meet the same people, stand in the same room. This balance of leading and participating, of being separate and also of being together, is summed up in the host paradigm. Leaders at all levels will want to develop their skills with regard to this balance – too much apart, and you lose credibility and connection, the vital ear to the ground. Too much together and you ‘go native’, lose perspective and lose

effectiveness as a leader of change. The group spirit of policing is very strong, and the 'all in it together against the world' feeling runs deep in many ways through police culture. It may be that the balance of co-participation offers a challenge for officers at all levels.

We want to move forward from a heroic leadership style to one where the leader is responsible for their team's success. There is a long-term challenge for the police force here – initial selection tends to test for heroic skills, whereas engagement and consensus-building become more important. The development of officers capable of such a shift is therefore even more vital given the prevailing promote-from-within culture. The paradigm of leading as a host offers an accessible yet rich and flexible notion to help leaders to quickly expand their skills and mindsets in this direction.

References Joiner, W. B. and Josephs, S. A. (2006). *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change*. Hoboken NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

About the Authors

Mark McKergow is an international leadership speaker and consultant. He is co-author of *Host: Six new rules roles of engagement for teams, organisations, communities and movements* (Solutions Books, 2014).

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The ideas on Host Leadership presented in this whitepaper are discussed further in the award-winning book *Host: Six new roles of engagement for teams, organisations, communities and movements* is out now. Buy it in print or Kindle format at amazon.com or amazon.co.uk.

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