

The Strategic Management of the Police

Despite some significant differences, the most important principles of strategic management apply to the public sector as well as to the private. Managers in both sectors strive to create value for shareholders and customers, taxpayers and service users; build and

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exploit the distinctive competencies of their organizations; and transform their organizations in the face of new challenges, problems, and opportunities.

In addition, to be successful, an organizational strategy in the public sector must meet three

criteria. First, it must define a goal or purpose that, if achieved, would be worth the cost to the public. Second, it must capture and sustain the support of the elected representatives who oversee the organization's operations. Third, it must be doable. If any of these criteria are not met, the strategy will fail.

It is the application of these basic principles that has catapulted Lee Brown to a position of national leadership in policing. More than any other police executive, he has seen the limitations of the past strategy of policing and envisioned and pursued a new one. To see the quality and scope of his vision, it is useful to compare the old strategy with the new.

Professional Crime Fighting

In the past, police forces have been guided by a strategy that could be characterized as "professional crime fighting." The central goal was to reduce crime, and some offenses were singled out for special attention: homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

To accomplish their central goal, the police relied on three, key operational tactics: patrolling the streets, responding rapidly to calls for service, and conducting retrospective investigations to identify and apprehend criminal offenders. Over time, police departments organized and invested in their capabilities to optimize their performance in these areas.

This strategy found support among the citizens and their representatives since it seemed to promise relief from criminal victimization. The police were focused on a problem that concerned the community, and it seemed plausible that their tactics would deal with that problem effectively.

But the tactics had one additional advantage: they seemed to economize on the use of public authority and to protect citizen privacy. Because the tactics are reactive, they ensure that the police intrude only on those occasions where crimes have been committed and where citizens have invited them to intervene.

Taken together, these elements constitute a remarkably coherent and successful organizational strategy — one that has endured for more than a generation throughout the country. But it is exactly this strategy that Lee Brown is now challenging, based on some increasingly apparent weaknesses of the old and some promises of the new.

The Limits of Professional Crime Fighting

Three cracks have emerged in the surface appeal of "professional crime fighting." The first is the simple fact that the strategy seems to be failing on its own terms: it neither reduces crime nor reassures citizens that they won't become victims.

It is possible, of course, to lay this failure at the door of prosecutors who fail to convict and judges who fail to sentence. Or to claim that social forces have driven up crime rates. But the far more damaging news is that systematic research and experimentation have shown that the tactics on which the police rely simply do not do the job. Increasing the level of random patrol by a factor of two has no effect on criminal activity or on community confidence: most citizens cannot even tell when the number of patrolling vehicles has been doubled. Nor does increasing the speed of response result in increased arrests; the time between the incidence of the crime and the call to the police is too long. And retrospective investigation turns out to be a discouragingly weak tool in dealing with crimes committed among strangers. Less than 20% of robberies and less than 10% of burglaries are cleared by arrests. Usually, retrospective investigations only work well when victims or witnesses can tell detectives who committed the crimes.

The second important crack has been the discovery that citizens' fears are an important problem in their own right and that they are triggered more often by instances of disorder and incivility than by serious crime. The police have assumed that fear was a lesser problem than actual criminal victimization and that fear could be reduced only by putting serious criminals behind bars.

In fact, fear itself is just as costly as criminal victimization. It impoverishes the quality of life in urban areas, and it undermines the economic and social activities that hold neighborhoods together. Moreover, fear is more commonly triggered by noisy teenagers, minor vandalism, dark streets, and littered hallways than by serious crimes. Police tactics such as foot patrol can reduce fear even if these tactics do not reduce serious criminal victimization. Traditional police tactics, in contrast, tend to miss an important part of the problem for which the police are responsible – the promotion of community security.

The third important crack is less widely noted but potentially far more significant: public policing is losing market share to various forms of private security. There are now more uniformed private security guards in the United States than public police officers. Public police officers are increasingly selling their off-duty time to private interests. And many citizens who cannot afford to buy private guards have bought guns, dogs, and locks to supplement police protection.

This trend toward private over public security reveals the failure of the police to answer citizens' growing demands for security. Even worse, it creates the prospect of an uneven distribution of protection. The public police could become an institution that only poor people value.

The Promise of Community Policing

These limits of professional crime fighting indicate the need for a change in strategy. They also point in a particular direction: toward a close engagement between the police and the citizens. That goal is the principal aim of the strategy of community policing.

Community policing aims not simply to reduce crime and criminal victimization, though that remains the core objective. Added to that are the goals of pre-

venting crime by discovering and acting on the immediate conditions that seem to precipitate crime, reducing fear and promoting a sense of security by increasing the felt presence of police in local areas, and dealing more effectively with the variety of social emergencies that stimulate calls to the police, thus strengthening the relationship to the community. Beyond the political appeal of crime control, community policing makes the police more responsive to the concerns of citizens. The police will also offer to help with community problems.

The operational methods of policing change from the reactive methods of patrol, rapid response, and criminal investigation to proactive methods of problem solving. Instead of treating each call as a separate incident, the police will look for the problems that underlie recurrent calls. They will also look for situations that can be mediated or where other public agencies can help.

There are lots of reasons to believe that the new strategy of community policing will be successful in enhancing security and reducing crime. But there are also many uncertainties. Indeed, as one police chief said when he committed his organization to community policing, "I felt like I was jumping off a cliff." In this respect too, managing in the public sector is not much different from managing in the private sector.

– Mark H. Moore

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