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®FC¯Strategic Innovation in Police Departments

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®FL¯I. Innovation in Private and Public Sectors

In the private sector, managers know that their job is to create economic value for their shareholders. They pursue this goal by finding a "fit" between what customers want to buy, and what their organization knows how to produce. Often, private sector managers look beyond their current markets and products to enhance their organizations' value creating capabilities. They imagine new products that customers might want to buy and new things that their organizations could produce. Often, these imaginings result in the introduction of new product lines. The new product lines, in turn, carry the organizations into new markets, and build new competences in the organization. These, in turn, lay the basis for another round of product line innovations. Over a period of time, this process of product innovation may transform the organization's view of its fundamental business: a telephone company might become an important computer company; or an automobile company an important financial institution.

In the public sector, managers have a different orientation: their job is to achieve mandated purposes as efficiently and effectively as possible. Their mission remains constant. Their first responsibility is to ensure that public resources are spent for the established purposes. They are authorized to innovate to make their organizations more efficient, or to meet a new operational challenge in their domain of responsibility. But they are discouraged from thinking broadly about how their organizations might best be used to deal with the overall problems of the communities in which they operate.

In most circumstances, the differences in the orientations of private and public sector managers seems appropriate. There probably is more need for innovation in the private sector than in the public sector. It is appropriate for private sector managers to run risks with their organizations that should not be taken when public money and important public purposes are at stake. Yet, on occasion, society needs more and larger innovations from public sector managers than it is now organized to produce.

In my view, policing is now in such a stage. The conditions in the nation's cities, and the challenges that they generate for police departments, require police executives to innovate in more aggressive and larger ways than has been true in the past. The need for innovation goes beyond figuring out what new programmatic response is needed to deal with particular issues such as drugs, or violence, or widespread disorder (though such programmatic innovations may be very important). Instead, the need is for changes in the organizations themselves: how they think about their purposes and means; how they will seek to maintain their support in the community; how they are organized and managed; and, most importantly, how they maintain a continuing capacity to innovate.

II. Challenges to Policing

To test this idea, consider the wider implications of three important operational challenges that police departments now confront.

A. Drugs

Take first the problem of drugs. For the last half decade, the United States has been battling an epidemic of cocaine use (including crack) that has destroyed individual lives, torn apart families, and undermined communities. As a matter of national strategy, the nation's local police and criminal justice systems have been put on the front lines of that battle. They have responded superbly -- making an unprecedented number of arrests, and developing many new innovative approaches to dealing with the problem. But in making this reponse, what have we learned? Three lessons seem key.

First, we learned that street level drug dealing was an important part of the drug problem, and that it was impossible to produce a valuable long-term impact on street level drug dealing without the active assistance of the community. Community support was important not only in raising the initial alarms and providing the initial information that provided the police with an operational focus in the community, but also in helping the police to keep the the community drug free once the most intense periods of police activity ended. What has worked to reclaim city blocks from drug dealers has been effective partnerships between police and community -- not arrests of Mr. Big, and not un-coordinated street sweeps.

Second, we have learned that we must be far more imaginative than we have in the past in devising suitable forms of punishment and control. The police have long understood that a crime problem was not solved when someone was arrested. But what the drug war has forcibly revealed is that there are sharp limitations on society's willingness to rely on jail and imprisonment as a form of punishment. The police cannot expect all offenders to go to jail for long stints. The reality is that we need smaller forms of punishment, and less complete forms of supervision such as asset seizures, revocations of driving licenses, boot camps, fines, and community service. To be effective, these limited forms of punishment must rely on supervision in the community. That, too, requires more effective partnerships between the police and community than has been true in the past.

Third, we have learned that, to be successful in reducing drug use, society must work on the demand side as well as the supply side. This has meant using police department resources in programs to discourage drug use among school children, and relying on compulsory urinalysis and drug treatment as part of the criminal justice system's sanctions. It has also forced the police to realized that they need help from social and public health agencies as well as from the agencies of the criminal justice system to achieve the goals of substantially reducing drug use.

B. Violence Among Young, Black Men

Take next, the epidemic of violence among young, black men. This is probably the most urgent crime problem the police face today, and it poses two important challenges to police departments.

The first is to the diagnostic capabilities and operational imaginiation of police departments. The violence now appears to police departments to be essentially random: it occurs in unexpected locations, involves innocent victims, and seems motivated by trivial or senseless concerns. It may be linked to drugs; or it may be linked to gangs; or it may be facilitated by the widespread availability of lethal weapons. But none of these things is known for sure, or seems true in all cases. What the police can see for sure is that the violence involves young black men.

That diagnosis of the problem, worked through traditional police planning efforts, produces a particular response: more aggressive efforts to surveil and control young black men who are suspected of being armed, or of having drug or gang connections. In many cities, curfews have been established, and young black men are being stopped and searched more frequently.

That may well be an appropriate response to the random quality of the violence. But one must acknowledge that such a response is an expensive one for community relationships -- particularly if it has not been negotiated in advance with the communities in which the response will occur, and particularly if it skates close to constitutional limits. Moroever, one must also acknowledge that the violence may only appear to be random because we do not yet understand it. A more serious look might reveal a more differentiated problem and suggest a more targeted approach. It is in this sense that the problem of violence poses a challenge to the diagnostic capabilities of the department.

The violence also poses a political problem for the police. The violence can be seen, discussed, and responded to in two quite different ways. Viewed from the perspective of the minority community, the violence is most obviously a tragedy for their community. It is killing their children -- the young men who must become the providers, husbands, and fathers of the future if the community is to survive. It makes them despair of the their future, and long for help and reassurance -- but only from sources that they can trust.

Viewed from the police perspective, the problem seems less a tragedy for the black community than a generalized threat to the broader community, and, to some degree, a vindication of their own views and fears about young black men. The different perspectives makes it difficult for the two groups to talk. And without the talk, the police will have only limited capacities to see the problem with accuracy and precision, and to act with legitimacy.

Again, then, in dealing with the epidemic of violence, there is a need for analytic and imaginative problem-solving, and for effective working partnerships with the community -- particularly the minority community.

C. Disorder

Take third, the problem of declining civility on the city's streets. In the past, we have viewed littering, noise, general rowdiness on the streets as nuisances beneath the dignity of a crime-fighting police department. Now, thse problems are seen as conditions that create fears, undermine morale, and create conditions under which more serious crime can flourish. They become important targets of police fear reducing and crime prevention efforts.

Yet, turning police agencies toward this task requires an important redefinition of police purpose. Nuisance calls and conditions must be treated as important claims on police resources rather than as distractions from the fundamental mission of the police. An effective response to nuisance conditions also often requires effective interactions with other city agencies orchestrated. And the initiative must come from individual officers at the operational level rather than at command levels. We know that the work can be done, and that it pays off in terms of stilling fears and cementing police community relations. But the response does not come naturally from organizations committed to crime-fighting through centrally controlled random patrol, rapid response to calls for service, or retrospective investigation.

III. Implications for Police Organizations and Leaders

Typically, police departments respond to problems such as drugs, violence, and disorder one by one. They invent new programs to handle each problem as it arises. Or they establish special squads to deal with them. To some degree, this is analogous to a private sector firm introducing a new product line. Such responses have the apparent virtue of leaving the basic strategy of the organization and its basic administrative form largely unaffected --- at least for a while.

A different response, however, would be to notice that the particular challenges now facing police departments are revealing basic weaknesses in their overall strategy and organization. In short, what these problems are teaching us is that police departments need strategic rather than programmatic innovations. If this is true, the task for police executives would be to think about how to use the pressures associated with these operational challenges to begin the process of re-orienting and re-positioning the departments. From my perspective, we should now be thinking of three key changes in the overall strategy of policing.

A. Widening the Front of Police Engagement

First, we must widen the front on which the police enthusiastically engage the communities they serve. We should not think that our only or most important task is to respond to incidents of serious crime. We have to focus on opportunities for crime prevention as well as crime control. We have to view fear, and the disorder that causes fear, as an important problem in its own right, and as a way of building close relations with the community. We must recognize that in today's cities we will be inevitably drawn into social emergencies of various kinds where we will need help from other agencies in making an appropriate response. In short, we must be crime preventers, fear reducers, and problem-solvers as well as crime fighters.

B. Reaching Out for Community Support

Second, we must recognize that the support and legitimacy that the police need to operate rests in community satisfaction with the quality of their services as well as in compliance with the law and the use of their technical expertise to deal with serious crime problems. Moreover, we must recognize the citizen perceptions of the quality of service depend on something more than the speed of our response. They depend far more fundamentally on on the quality of the response they get from operators and officers. And they depend on their sense of the police presence in and commitment to their communities. And they depend on the police willingness to deal with the problems that they rather than the police think are the most important. This means that every officer must become a community relations officer, and have the continuity in assignments to develop a relationship with the community, and the freedom and initiative to develop responses to community nominated problems.

C. Commissioning the Officers

Third, to make it possible to achieve the goals outlined above, police organizations must become far more decentralized than they now are. We must commission the officers. We must replace the existing command and control systems that now pretend to establish accountability and control, but really succeed only in frustrating initiatve with new mechanisms of accountability and control that rely on the promotion of professional values, and rest on peer and community review of police conduct.

D. Problem-Solving and Community Policing

To some degree, the concepts of problem-solving and community policing offer some guideposts indicating necessary directions of change. Problem-solving emphasizes the importance of analysis, the invention of wider responses, the decentralization of responsibility and initiative. Community policing emphasizes the importance of being responsive to community concerns, and to the value of community groups in helping to achieve police goals. But they do not fully specify (and therefore do not limit) the need for change. The future of policing remains to be invented.

IV. Conclusion

Police departments are phenomenonally valuable public resources. In the tradition of public sector management, we have defined their mission in terms of effective crime control. In pursuit of that mission, we have built organizations that are designed principally to respond to serious crime incidents. That has been thought to be the most efficent and effective means of achieving their mandated purposes.

The private sector, however, would think about the question of how best to use the police forces in a much different way. They would begin with the observed capabilities of the organization: a disciplined, mobile, resourceful force, available to citizens 24 hours a day seven days a week for the price of a phone call, carrying around the authority of the state. They would then ask how many useful things they could do with such capabilities. In the environment of today's cities, it is by no means clear that the value of our police forces is found only in responding quickly to serious crime calls. I think there is much more value to be wrung out of police departments than this.

Society is lucky to have resourceful police mangers and leaders who are prepared to explore the potential of their organizations to contribute to the problems of the cities. I wish them Godspeed in their efforts to innovate strategically as well as programmatically.