

¹‘If I knew what you know!’: A Knowledge Sharing Project to improve Neighbourhood Policing performance

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In 2006, research at the Queen’s University Management School, Belfast², began a study of a pilot project within a UK police organisation, which attempted to capture and share knowledge to improve Neighbourhood Policing performance. The study of learning activities within police organisations is important to the academic community as there are questions about the appropriateness of organisational learning for public sector organisations. Learning activities are also of interest to police professionals because, more than ever, police organisations need to learn, continuously, better or alternative ways of *policing with* the community – as opposed to *policing the* community unilaterally. Furthermore, studies to date support the premise that without a deliberate effort to learn in police organisations performance will suffer. As an example, the recent reform programme, Neighbourhood Policing, has required that officers work in completely new ways or do old things in new ways, or both. Providing answers to ‘what’ officers and their organisation must do often comes more readily than the ‘hows’. This research, therefore, explores how learning activities sought to address this in a police organisation undergoing continuous change.

Sharing Knowledge across the organisation

Research suggests that constant change within organisations encourages a short-termist and reactive culture, i.e. the effectiveness of front line officers is reduced when left to interpret and then fulfil their new roles and responsibilities. As a result officers become increasingly isolated and develop diverse practices in an attempt to implement the desired changes. However, by sharing their experience, officers can begin to understand and address these challenges, leading to a potential for positive and effective changes in practice. When officers perform their duties, they accumulate experiences that become inherent in their practices. The challenge, therefore, is in identifying what experience officers have and then being able to facilitate learning between officers, whether it be via written media, spoken, or demonstrated to others so that novice colleagues can also learn. However, if organisational mechanisms for facilitating learning are ineffective, the learning remains isolated to pockets of, or people within, the organisation. For the author, this became most evident following the initial implementation of the researched organisation’s Neighbourhood Policing strategy in 2003.

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The central assumption of Neighbourhood Policing is that effective policing constitutes a collaborative, problem-solving approach by empowered (i.e. trained, decentralised, resourced and responsible) officers, whose efforts deliver a more accountable, locally focused police service. In doing so, front line officers must seek long-term solutions to the many and diverse range of community problems. These problems are often complex and, therefore, ‘solutions’ must be sought using sustainable partnership interventions. At the heart of this police work is an ability to build and develop relationships and maintain trust with the community. Doing so requires that officers maintain high levels of personal resilience, tenacity and the ability to use lateral thinking by which to engage with key stakeholders. In addition, officers are also being measured on a performance matrix. In light of these requirements and pressures, the question arises: What are police organisations doing to help officers address all of these challenges? This research suggests that there are several organizational strategies stating ‘*what*’ must be done; however, these do not easily translate into the crucial ‘*hows*’ of front line service delivery.

To elaborate on this concern, Basic Command Units (BCU) or Neighbourhood Teams are often independently addressing the same or similar issues, unaware of their neighbouring counterparts’ efforts. The research also suggests that, although many front line officers and their management know this to be the case, few police organisations have effectively addressed the issue. As such, police managers are neglecting the untapped potential of learning across BCUs or dispersed teams, which might otherwise address many of their performance goals and deliver a better service to the public. Although researchers have conducted several studies about the management of change in police organisations, there is a dearth of research and understanding about the role of organisational learning (particularly social learning activities) in improving policing performance.

The author’s research followed one police pilot, the Knowledge Sharing Project (KSP), which attempted to address this issue. The study highlights the merits and potential for such a capability, providing insights into a more strategic possibility for police services throughout the world. This stands in contrast to wider police studies that, to date, have tended to focus on information management or technology-based solutions. The lack of studies also reinforces the suggestion that police organisations are not pursuing more holistic (organisational) learning strategies. To the author’s knowledge, therefore, this study highlights a unique attempt to facilitate social learning activities between operational police officers.

The Knowledge Sharing Project

In 2005, following an external and internal review of the organisation’s patrol effectiveness, which included Neighbourhood Policing activities, the Chief Officer Team

recognised that, due to the lack of effective “knowledge sharing”, a significant knowledge gap existed between BCUs, with efforts and mistakes being repeated at the expense of ever decreasing resources. The service needed to “better share” (and create) good practices amongst its front line Neighbourhood Policing and Community Safety officers and their managers. According to the organisation’s Deputy Chief Constable (DCC), a solution was not just about sharing good practice solutions; it was also about fundamentally supporting changes in work practices and officers’ outlooks:

I suppose, one of the major things we are trying to do at the minute is spread the good practice, make sure people understand what problem-solving is, how they can go out there and do it, and realise there is more than one way to solve a problem.

Deputy Chief Constable

A police Sergeant, with 25 year’s Neighbourhood Policing experience, referred to here as CN, volunteered to produce a “knowledge sharing” solution and, so, in April 2006, after being granted funding by the DCC, the Knowledge Sharing Project (KSP) was established. With the support of two administrators, the project ran for one year and conducted, amongst other activities, seven Knowledge Sharing Workshops. Some of these workshops included partner organisations. The final two workshops, focusing on police officers only, produced the most significant outcomes.

Relying on self-initiated learning

In the early months, the KSP’s internal research highlighted that formal (top-down) organisational learning mechanisms were not meeting the needs of operational officers and managers. Although briefings and debriefings, e-mails, policy consultation exercises, training functions, ‘Good Practice Guides’, reports from external bodies, and databases have a valuable role, police officers considered these mechanisms insufficient. For example, officers expressed the view that these mechanisms fell short of reflecting reality, as the information was often sanitised or uncoordinated, sometimes producing contradictory outcomes. One earlier attempt to enforce problem solving procedures and share experiential knowledge, a database for managing complex Neighbourhood Policing problem-solving cases, was widely considered overly complex. Consequently, it remained under utilised. As such, rather than ‘sharing knowledge’ across BCUs, it became obvious that officers were muddling through the new changes, relying on social learning processes by socialising with colleagues in their local station or personal networks – rarely with those in similar roles elsewhere. Despite this, KSP research did identify some small intra-BCU networks, otherwise labelled ‘communities of practice’, existing in pockets throughout the organisation. However, these communities remained isolated from each other, learning from others was not consistently pursued, and the learning activities were so informal that it remained outside the realms of management oversight. Social learning activities between colleagues went unnoticed, being perceived merely as ‘common sense’ practice – even though only a few expressed an active

endeavour to participate in such interactions with others. In addition, acquiring relevant knowledge is more an accidental episode than part of a coherent strategy, as one Neighbourhood Police officer explained:

That's the thing about this organisation. Sometimes there is stuff going on in other areas that you don't know about and you are working through it and you are trying something, ...and making all these mistakes and then you find out someone down the road has been through all these before and you could have saved yourself a hell of a lot of work!

In the absence of organisational efforts to systematically 'manage' the fragmented wealth of internal experience, the KSP identified storytelling as the favoured method of discourse between officers. This social and informal process would be most evident during lull times, such as when officers gathered for lunch or breaks and worked closely together.

Storytelling is dynamic, facilitated through social interaction and, therefore, is not static and limited such as written articles. By engaging in storytelling, participants can question and explore the storyteller's narrative, facilitating the negotiation of meaning, practice and identity against changing contexts. However, academic research highlights several weaknesses with social learning activities. Although facilitated through networked groups or communities of practice, these networks or communities can become isolated and insular, losing touch with the organisation or external environment; and social learning activities can become so taken for granted that, without the ability to identify the process(es), they become invisible, perhaps seemingly irrelevant and difficult to make improvements. As such, the organisation cannot validate the learning outcomes or usefully direct learning towards strategic objectives.

The KSP Response

Based on this understanding, the KSP envisaged harnessing these social learning processes (i.e. storytelling during informal interactions) with mechanisms that ensured the quality, relevance and appropriateness of the stories or experiences recalled. Importantly, the KSP's principle aim was not to centralise knowledge sharing activities or responsibility for it, but to improve the effectiveness of learning activities through Knowledge Sharing Workshops, centralised administrative support and, eventually, improved IT support. As the KSP Manager (CN) explained, the overall process would remain simple for participants,

First of all, if you face a new situation you have never seen before, if I could introduce you to someone who has already done it, would you like to meet them? And almost to a man/woman they have all said, 'Absolutely, when can we see them?' If that's the starting point and we all have a strong storytelling culture, perhaps that's the better way to do it, rather than sticking it on a database that nobody will bother ever reading or populating. And, so, what we hope to do is to run workshops where people have a need, and people have a knowledge, and bring them together.

The KSP involved a trade-off between social learning activities, namely socialisation and storytelling, and formal organisational mechanisms or management interventions. This balance manifest as the KSP's Knowledge Sharing Workshops. The project illustrates, first, how such an attempt can work within police organisational structures and, second, how a balance between informal (bottom-up) learning activities and deliberate (top-down) learning mechanisms may be achieved. The outcomes of the project, although limited, evidenced significant potential and have informed a national consultation on knowledge sharing in police organisations at the National Police Improvement Agency.

The Knowledge Sharing Workshops: Impact and Assessment

The KSP acted as a centralised body for bringing together willing participants (who had demonstrated constant innovations in local practice), expert officers ('old-timers'), and novice officers (new transferees). Through its Knowledge Sharing Workshops, the KSP facilitated the social process of storytelling within particular governance structures. Participating officers were encouraged to engage with each other and share their stories. Stories were structured by a problem-solving model (i.e. SARA) and focused on strategically-relevant Neighbourhood Policing issues. Prior to the final two workshops the team consulted applicant participants and identified the key operational topics ('learning needs') for the workshops. However, in light of continuous change efforts, departmental management eventually chose a subject focus for the final workshops. Each workshop represented a collection of similarly ranked officers, contributing to a more open and reflective atmosphere: Workshop One involved Inspectors and Chief Inspectors and Workshop Two involved Constables and Sergeants. As a result, the workshops acquired knowledge that would benefit a wider audience of police officers. Engagement and participation was encouraged from the beginning with governing rules, ice breakers and illustrations of storytelling as means of sharing experiences with one another, on complex issues, in an attractive and easy way. It was clear from the outset that officers valued this opportunity and came with the expectation of participating fully for mutual gain.

The KSP built on the experience of five workshops in developing their knowledge sharing methodology for police officers. Consequently, the final two workshops were a product of systematic learning by the project team, producing significant outcomes. First, various levels of feedback reassured the KSP that, a) their methodology was an effective means of facilitating learning on Neighbourhood Policing initiatives (successful or otherwise), and, b) information systems could not be an wholly adequate solution to sharing knowledge – officers did not have the time to enter or read sufficient amounts of detailed knowledge regularly. From another perspective, there was less attraction to reading database notes in contrast to engaging with colleagues and 'talking it out'.

Second, key learning points from both workshops were captured in a good practice document. This document could be easily diffused throughout the organisation. In addition, the document was also integrated into Neighbourhood Policing policy, which was under revision. As a result, policy now incorporates and presents both the operational ‘*how*’ as well as the strategic ‘*what*’ of Neighbourhood Policing. Unsurprisingly, the document could not truly reflect the breadth and detail of learning points articulated in KSP notes or of the ensuing debates that occurred during both workshops.

Third, and of significant interest, workshop participants sustained much of their new-found contacts after the workshops. During the workshops, participants had been encouraged to share contact details, which they readily did. Combining this with the organisation’s e-mail, intranet and telephone functions, participants continued to share knowledge and support materials. Any material sent via the KSP was also forwarded to all contacts in the KSP mailing list. Example materials were processes and procedures for partnership problem solving of common issues; bespoke forms and crime reduction tools (although this raised the interesting point of needing to control learning to ensure consistently in forms etc.); practical Neighbourhood Policing techniques, hints, and tips; and leaflets and posters, which had already been translated into multiple languages for recently arrived non-nationals. Respondents recalled this continued interaction as the most beneficial outcome of the workshop: in addition to hearing about other initiatives, participants then benefited from the support materials and new organisation-wide relationships. Having bridged disparate ‘communities of practice’ from across the organisation, the KSP’s central locus helped sustain continued interactions by forwarding material and guiding officers to those who might inform solutions. Since the workshops, research interviews have revealed several new initiatives being implemented in BCUs, which relate directly back to the KSP’s workshops. Furthermore, realising the benefits of joined up storytelling, participants within the Workshop One ‘community’ organised a ‘knowledge sharing conference’ on Anti-Social Behaviour. Several participants from across all seven KSP workshops, or their colleagues, attended together with two statutory partner organisations and a youth charity dealing with disaffected teenagers.

Finally, interviews consistently reveal that participants left their workshop with a refreshed confidence in their roles, their role within the wider organisation (especially in relation to the new performance measurement framework), and the problem-solving tools they were required to use. Critically, the workshops helped shape a unified identity as Neighbourhood Policing officers.

The KSP team and participants were convinced that the workshop had been a success, albeit limited in organisational impact. Critically, several respondents have put acquired learning, and supporting materials, to use. This was a significant achievement for the KSP, as facilitating learning relevant to officers' current and potential learning needs was considered pointless if the resultant learning could not be put to use. The interactional nature of participation permitted officers to translate their training and the learning of others into something that could be applied in their own area. Overall, this case illustrates the impact (on change and performance management) of applying a carefully developed methodology when bringing together people with similar learning needs and where practice is shared. In addition, the central locus of the KSP allowed for the accumulation of the knowledge captured, the potential for its validation and then diffusion to all Neighbourhood Policing officers throughout the organisation. This involved filtering large amounts of learning outcomes, being fed bottom-up, into an accessible format that was easily manageable and timely. However, with the closure of the KSP, due in part to resource shortages, centralised learning support and post-workshop engagement diminished or became, once again, 'invisible'. Without a centralised function, the networks were without fresh intervention (i.e. introducing new members or references to initiatives in other forces); officers and teams in need of guidance or a solution had to return to old and ineffective practices and personal networks; and management, unable to grasp the fit between storytelling-based methods and traditional reporting structures, continued to ask the same questions: 'How can we get our officers to share their experience to improve 'service delivery' across this organisation?'

Conclusion

The KSP intervention illustrates a significant and unique, although limited attempt to facilitate organisational learning within a large police organisation under constant change. Acknowledging that information systems have a role to play in supporting 'a hands-on' approach to learning, the pilot project manager, CN, later led a review of the problem-solving database, which has resulted in a new, user-friendly system ready for implementation. However, the KSP case supports a clear message: organisational learning cannot be addressed by a technical solution alone. It also suggests the value of providing a central learning mechanism function that seeks to support, and not displace, operational level learning activities. After all, the project sought not to replace storytelling activity but to improve officers' capacity to tell stories in a strategically-directed manner and, where the need was significant, in facilitating an atmosphere for wider organisational interaction.