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Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Challenges of Leadership in a Divided Society: A Problem-Solving Solution that Works!
The Leadership Grid® Contribution to Policing in Northern Ireland

by Professor James Drennan*

On November 1st 2001, the long-standing and historically well-known “Royal Ulster Constabulary” became the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Why? Well, in simple terms, to ensure that the predominantly protestant police service hired and maintained an equal proportion of Catholic members. This transition, as painful as it may have been to many members of the RUC both new and old, was viewed as essential to ensure a balance of religious background in all members of the police service. In addition, and without going into the detail of the many contentious issues such as the release of offenders from Northern Ireland prisons under the “Good Friday Peace Agreement” or the association to the Crown and Monarchy of England having been eliminated from all visible police icons, change was going to happen. Police buildings, uniforms, markings, policies, practices and structures, had changed within hours and along with that came the abandonment of many police traditions within the old RUC. The PSNI consists of about 13,000 police and civilian members policing throughout twenty-nine district commands in Northern Ireland.

A History of Conflict

The history of conflict in Northern Ireland, much of it historically directed at the police, had created a culture of division and a tremendous challenge for the new police service, a challenge where a new vision of leadership change would be critical. Such leadership change would have to focus on behavioural issues rather than structural or process issues. When examining traditional approaches to organisational change models connected to a new leadership approach, and when attempting to ensure that the focus of the new service would be more on behavioural changes rather than process changes, the “Leadership Grid®” by Blake and Mouton was the obvious best solution.

A Backdrop for Change in Policing Northern Ireland

Many members of the service have struggled with the loss of their historic identity while others simply refused to accept what had happened. Some 303 police officers were murdered on and off duty under the name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. To support the transition, a master severance plan was launched in which several thousand members elected to retire. This retirement plan transition has had a both positive and negative impact on the police and the community of Northern Ireland.

It is of one particular strategy of success that this article focuses on, and it is one which is a great lesson in leadership that should be considered by many police services making similar, yet albeit, less drastic transitions and change initiatives. It really is all about leadership and learning that can help with even the most significant transition in policing. It is also not about the differences between policing in Canada and Northern Ireland, but the similarities. To begin, we will have to accept that police core functions are the same in any democracy.

This is about how one leadership learning programme has provided hope and understanding to both police and community.

It is also an example of how police members can learn to accept that the integration of community and social services of all kinds can occur and problem solving approaches to policing with the community, are essentially driven by our members’ competencies in

*Professor James Drennan is a police educator with Georgian College’s Justice and Public Safety Institute, Police Studies Degree Program in Ontario, Canada. He served under the International Oversight process and the Policing Board of Northern Ireland as Director of the Police College of Northern Ireland between May 2002 and Dec 2004.

critical thinking, problem solving and conflict resolution, these elements of human interaction can be improved and our entrenched views of the world adjusted to provide for superior decisions and performance. Characteristics of the behavioural change needed and a learning approach that the Policing Board and Command teams have supported, will now provide years of increased confidence and competence in police members resulting in a corresponding improvement to the “policing with the community, any community” philosophy.

It is important however, to first provide the context and some background into the struggle in Northern Ireland that has brought us to a model of “leadership in action” that has been developed, delivered and assessed relating to a transition in police leadership in the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The brief description in my opening paragraphs was, of course, a price that had to be paid for peace and reconciliation within this divided society, a province of Great Britain but still a geographic part of one island. To the south, west and northwest is the Republic of Ireland, a much larger area of land that surrounds Northern Ireland with its own beauty, its own currency, economic system, justice system and independent government, all part of the European Union. The struggle to bring Northern Ireland into the Republic homeland (the south) by the Nationalist community, with the intent of creating a one-island country, has been faced by an equally resistant and determined Unionist movement to keep Northern Ireland part of Great Britain.

The often-viewed perception from outside Northern Ireland is that the turmoil, which has continued for years, has been viewed as having roots in a religious divide between Catholics and Protestants.

Although this is partially the case, in my opinion, the division is far more complex than mere religious differences would indicate.

Regardless of the opinions on either side, the fact remains today that even with the Good Friday Agreement bringing a semblance of peace to Northern Ireland, the police service has been seen as serving neither the interests of the Nationalists (Republicans) or Union-

ists (Loyalists). The PSNI as it is now known, is not responsible for hiring new recruit members—that is done by an external private sector provider. Oversight and governance of the police service is massive with no less than seven government and non-governmental agencies monitoring, questioning, advising and directing the police service. Could we imagine for a moment, a Chief of Police in Canada facing so many oversight bodies and, at the same time, attempting to lead a massive change programme with ongoing significant challenges from so many political, community, and special interest bodies?

What had to happen and happen quickly was to enlist support for a transition in thinking for both communities to be served and for the police themselves.

There has to be an integrated programme of not just process in solving difficult issues in Northern Ireland society (an ENDS strategy), but a programme that actually worked and was successful at changing the fundamental behavior of both groups (a MEANS strategy).

Process models in leadership, systems for solving community and police problems, crime or otherwise, had to be found, there simply was no option.

Members of this new service had to be prepared to deal with a community they had seldom interacted with because they policed in groups and did so from behind fortress walls and in armoured vehicles. This was essential for the preservation of their lives, a very serious business with tremendous security demands required for mere survival. Everything would hinge on the ability of the members of the new police service and the divided, yet somewhat accepting of change, communities they served. In order to make a successful transition from crime control policing to one of community centred and community-driven action, more than physical structures had to change. Think of just how difficult achieving “policing with the community” is within a normal society—never mind for a police service that was separate from, and not a part of, society for so long. A police service hated by so many community elements

on both sides yet expected to suddenly—overnight—become a caring and compassionate institution of peace and reconciliation that could apply a “community interest” in policing.

A “Command and Control” Approach

Real behavioural change had to take place for both police and community members alike. Increasing everyone’s problem solving ability, expressions of candour without being offensive, increasing team effectiveness (police/community teamwork was unheard of in many respects), increasing the quality of the decisions that had to be made, integration of everyone’s thoughts and contributions, abandoning personal prejudices and increasing understanding and application of ethical decision making and human rights. The ability to learn to do “What is Right” as opposed to the daily pressure of doing “Who is Right” in day-to-day policing, would have a significant ethical requirement. This all seemed to be too much to expect of the new service that had such a history of “Command and Control,” a model of crime control and the fortress approach to policing communities that had been used for so long.

The RUC was a police service that worked directly with military armed patrols—collectively, they merely attempted to keep public order—never mind solve crime.

A leadership and member development plan that promoted improvements in all of the above aspects of human and organisational effectiveness had to be put in place.

Clearly, one of the best models identified, a model that could achieve such wholesale and lasting change through practical learning, was the “Leadership Grid®” programme established in the 60’s by Blake and Mouton, two social scientists whose research identified the benefits and means to achieve a balance between the tasks needing to be done and the consideration of the thoughts and ideas of the people who had to carry out those tasks. Surely the “Leadership Grid” would be a strategic approach to overcoming such barriers to change and organisational effectiveness. The only way to really find out was to try the programme out and examine the Grid’s effectiveness against such complex challenges in human behaviour.

A Proposal for Change

In the spring of 2003, a proposal to hold police and community joint seminars was accepted and a pilot approach to a year-long scheme was put in motion. The Canadian affiliated firm with Grid International (Robinsonleadership.com), was brought to Belfast and a plan for ongoing sessions over the next two years was established. The four-day, intensive workload of learning from the Leadership Grid was launched and the plan called for extensive evaluation and assessment of the programme. Reviews on every seminar were held and participants from all areas of the service were identified, police and civilian.

Community members and experts were invited in to the seminars to ensure openness and transparency was achieved.

External police services including: the Republic Police known as the Garda Siochana, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Swedish Police Service and Latvian National Police, all joined the PSNI members in the seminars. Government officials and community members, other public sector employees and even members of the England’s well-known Centrex Police College (formerly Bramshill) attended with PSNI members. The Chief Constable and his entire senior command team, both police and civilian, completed the entire seminar after hearing one consistent message from their members” “The Chief Constable and his team must complete this program if it is going to have any lasting effect on our organisation.” The senior command team then did complete the entire program in June of 2004.

The results were simply amazing. In short, the top team through the Chief Constable stated that the Grid would be the change model for leadership development through problem solving and decision making improvements for the future.

A new five year plan for completing a critical mass of the present 13,500 members was put into place just recently and the benefits across the service resulting from the 500 plus members having done it already, has simply been spectacular. Members of the Department of Education, the University of Ulster top management team and others, have all now determined that the need for similar development through the Leadership Grid, would be of great benefit.

One of the most consistent statements of support has been that the programme in “Grid” development has not only been the best learning they have ever undertaken, but it has really changed their lives.

It was not only liked but also learned, not only was it unanimously seen as improving the member’s own behaviour and ability to solve problems in teams, it has done the same for the organisation. Most commented that it would forever, change the way they approached decision-making and problem solving in their daily

work and home lives. There is, at least in my mind, no reason why this same success could not be realised by police services across Canada. It simply offers so many valuable lessons to all levels of the police service.

I have now been in policing and education for thirty-two years and I have never seen a more beneficial and pragmatic programme than the Leadership Grid.

The Grid provides a functional, hands-on and total individual involvement “learning experience.” Remember what the significant change barriers were in Northern Ireland policing. Remember the challenges and the changes everyone had to endure and more importantly, remember how significant the demands have been on the PSNI police service in moving from a crime control focus to a “policing with the community” culture. The “Leadership Grid” programme has already proven to be a significantly important aid to this transition and it does this through one of the most valuable learning events we have witnessed.