

Challenging times require forces to change their culture, with a focus on creating resilience to bring about positive and lasting benefits in organisational effectiveness, as **Kusum Sahdev** explains.

Culture change in challenging times

Transforming policing by enhancing resilience



Kusum Sahdev is a director of Organisational Development & Research Ltd (ODRL) and has over 25 years' experience working in organisational development, change management and human resource management with organisations as diverse as central government and international development organisations. She has conducted extensive research on the impact of organisation change/downsizing/restructuring on people management activities and productivity of organisations. She can be contacted at ks@odrl.org

Policing has changed significantly in recent years, with escalating demands for high quality and responsive service delivery at the local, national and international levels. Against this backdrop, the decision by the Government to reduce public sector expenditure to redress the budgetary deficit has no doubt created a challenging context; but one which should be met by exploring alternatives and perhaps unconventional ways of providing services, rather than resorting to reactive downsizing by 'headcount reductions' alone.

There is ample evidence to suggest that reactive downsizing is a short-term, quick fix. It erodes the goodwill of high-performing employees who often are the first ones to 'jump ship' as their talents and experience are attractive to others. Ironically, these are likely to be the very individuals that the organisation needs to have on board to see it through the crisis.

Furthermore, reactive downsizing can result in the survivor syndrome, a medley of reactions such as anger, insecurity, perceptions of unfairness, increased workload, breakdown of trust, decreased motivation, commitment and morale and an overall sense of the violation of the psychological contract between the employer and the employee.

Downsizing also has a detrimental impact on innovation and learning within the organisation, as it can break both formal and informal knowledge and information networks that directly facilitate everyday activities.

Cultural change

The current crisis faced by the police forces in the UK is an opportunity to bring about transformational change that will result in enhanced resilience at the individual level, which in turn would result in resilience at the organisational level.

Our extensive work with organisations indicates that building and sustaining resilient cultures has a direct positive impact on improved performance of organisations. This may sound utopian given that according to research, 70 per cent of change efforts do not achieve their goals in improving organisational effectiveness. However, 30 per cent of the remaining organisations that are able to achieve improved performance do not tinker with change – they are seriously clear about 'what' needs to change and, more importantly, have a clear notion of the 'desired culture' so that they can bring about and embed practices, atti-

tudes and behaviours to achieve enhanced resilience and superior levels of performance.

The link between organisational culture and performance/productivity is firmly established, as evidenced in the wider literature on organisational change, corporate strategy and case studies of high-performing organisations.

The experiences of organisations that have successfully implemented change interventions (such as, systemic change, total quality management and lean working) to drive high performance indicate the need to build cultures that are aligned to the organisational goals to enhance effectiveness at all levels.

One of the key learning points from high-performing organisations is the drive to achieve exemplary results and have in place a positive and enabling culture; having one without the other is neither adequate nor valued by such organisations.

There is a significant body of empirical evidence indicating that organisational culture not only influences the values, attitudes and behaviours of employees, but also either helps or inhibits the organisation's capacity to achieve bottom-line results, performance improvements and the benefits of change.

Culture influences key aspects of organisational performance, such as people management activities, innovation, customer focus, adaptability to change and organisational learning. There is a strong correlation between a positive organisational culture and having an engaged and satisfied workforce.

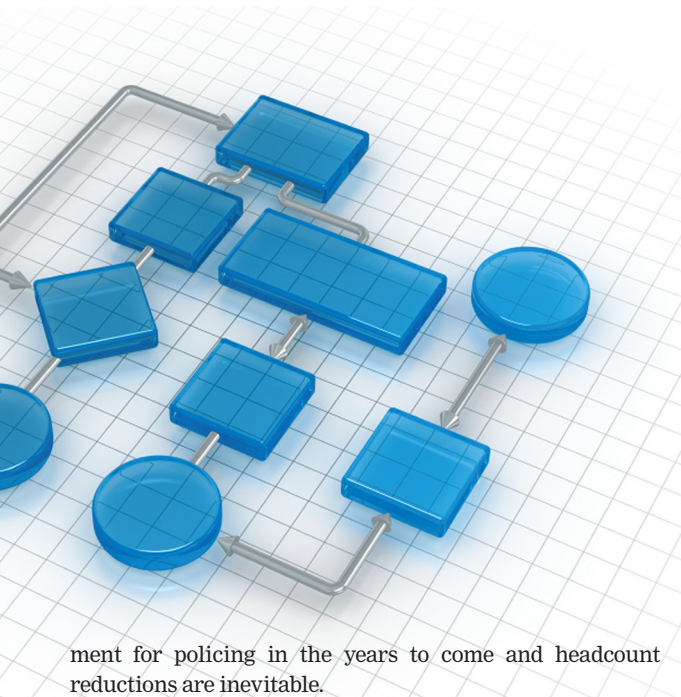
Furthermore, a ten-year study concluded that those organisations that intentionally managed their cultures effectively outperformed similar organisations that did not.

The role of leadership in supporting culture change is also key in determining whether culture change interventions succeed or fail.

The experiences of change leaders indicate that it is relatively uncomplicated to introduce the mechanistic aspects of changes in technology, structures, systems and processes. However, in order for the organisation to reap the benefits in a sustained manner, these mechanistic changes need to be accompanied by relevant changes in organisational culture.

A roadmap for change

Reduced public sector spending and the need to deliver increasing levels of service present a challenging environ-



ment for policing in the years to come and headcount reductions are inevitable.

In this context, the whole-hearted engagement and commitment of the employees who remain will be a critical factor in sustaining the effectiveness of forces over time. The engagement can be measured in a number of ways: for example through sickness/absentee rates, productivity and performance levels or customer/community satisfaction scores.

However, a more compelling way of measuring this is by directly engaging with staff at all levels using the tools of positive psychology to discover the areas where the force is strong as well as areas for improvement, thus identifying a cultural baseline profile or a 'snapshot' which forms the basis for developing a roadmap for change.

ODRL (Organisational Development & Research Ltd) specialises in such audits and has already worked with six constabularies in England with a database of over 10,000 police officers and police staff at all levels.

Undertaking a culture audit will provide forces with a 'healthcheck' of current practices that help or get in the way of building and sustaining resilience and organisation effectiveness.

Our findings

Strengths of the police forces: based on our findings from audits undertaken within six constabularies in England, there is a range of common positive cultural elements that prevail in forces. These include:

- Taking personal responsibility for delivering a top-quality service;
- Going the extra mile to solve problems of the community or customer;
- Building relationships and sharing agendas with partners to deliver and resolve community or customer priorities;
- Taking pride in working for the forces;
- Respecting the different needs of people; and
- Accepting personal accountability when things go wrong.

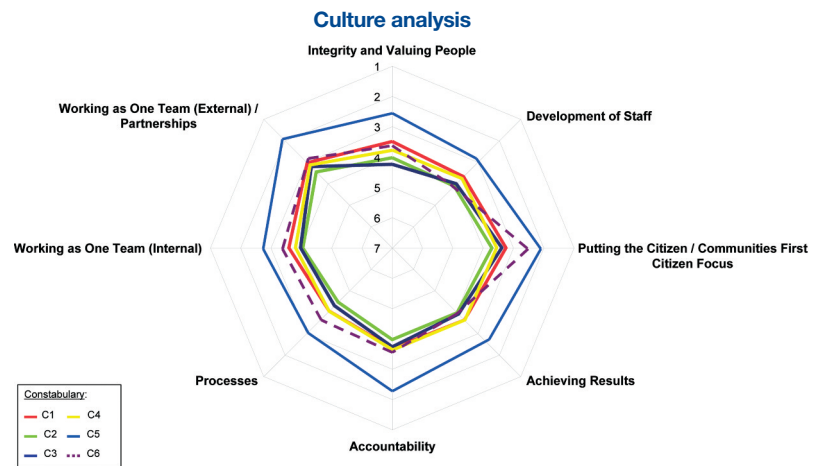
Forces cannot afford to lose these core strengths that have shaped the culture thus far. Maintaining these core cultural characteristics will be critical in dealing with challenging times to avoid the negative effects of the survivor syndrome. In fact, forces can leverage on these defining characteristics by putting in place ways of engaging and involving employees at all levels.

Challenges faced by the police forces: on the other hand, based on the findings of our studies, forces face a number of cultural challenges where they need to make improvements in order to manage the prevailing context better as shown below:

- Addressing the poor performance of colleagues;
- Valuing and recognising talent and ensuring career development opportunities are equally available to all;
- Ensuring staff have a good work/life balance on a day-to-day basis;
- Effective use of resources; and
- Ensuring that the organisation's priorities are the same as the priorities of communities and that a seamless service is provided to communities/customers, rather than working in silos.

The diagram below provides a high-level comparison of the six forces audited, along the cultural dimensions that make up the profile of the forces.

Items constituting each of the cultural dimensions provide a detailed roadmap of actions that forces can take to build and sustain the desired culture over time. Within



each of the cultural dimensions there are a number of items (there is not space to list them all here) that provide a detailed roadmap of actions that forces can take to build and sustain the desired culture over time.

Conclusion

There is a lot that forces can do to provide exemplary policing in a shrinking public sector economy.

They need to be proactive to transform where necessary but at the same time not make unnecessary and/or untargeted changes. By taking a considered approach and conducting a cultural baseline study forces will be able to develop the evidence base for changes and will have a sound basis for implementing relevant actions.

Furthermore, to manage change of this magnitude it is imperative that leaders engage directly with employees at all levels, as it is those employees that will ultimately take responsibility for reshaping work, at times with the full knowledge that for some of them the future may be elsewhere. The trick is to build the momentum within the workforce to bring about sustainable culture changes over time. Challenging times require forces to change their culture, with a focus on creating resilience to bring about positive and lasting benefits in organisational effectiveness.