

An inspector's lot is not a happy one

The middle ranks of the police are finding themselves under pressure from all sides, says **Gordon Tinline**



Just as in recent debates about NHS target culture, political leadership that seems only to be concerned with statistics and quantitative indicators leaves many officers feeling that quality of service is of little interest



Gordon Tinline is a director of Robertson Cooper Ltd
www.robertsoncooper.com
 See also the new wellbeing blog from Robertson Cooper director Cary Cooper at www.carycooperblog.com

Middle management pressures are not, and never have been, the preserve of the civil service or private sector. Those working in the emergency services are also subject to the pressures of being sandwiched between the top and bottom of the organisation. The Inspectors' Central Committee (ICC) – the body representing inspecting ranks within the Police Federation – recently commissioned Robertson Cooper to conduct a well-being survey of all inspectors and chief inspectors in England and Wales. The results reveal much about today's police service and remind us that certain classic middle management challenges are still alive and kicking.

There is certainly no problem with the commitment of inspectors to the job. Many are prepared to expend substantial discretionary effort to ensure that they deliver a high standard of public service. This is very much part of the inspector's identity. While this has obvious positive consequences, there are also risks in terms of how much inspectors tend to take on in this pivotal role, and this can present work-life balance challenges for them (of which more later). It also means that inspectors don't need to be constantly challenged to maintain a high level of service, because they are usually intrinsically motivated to do so. In fact, being told by the Home Office and senior officers that they need to deliver more with the same level of resources may be perceived as undermining not just their professionalism, but also their whole *raison d'être*. These kinds of dictates can lead to frustration and ultimately damage morale across this critical layer of the police service.

Another key finding was that relationships at work are seen as being slightly more difficult than is typical elsewhere – particularly relationships with more senior officers. This reflects a common middle management issue that is compounded by aspects of the police command culture. Generally, command and control as a management and leadership style seems to have had its day. Of course, in emergency response situations a disciplined command structure is essential, but this can also be an opportunity for some senior officers with poor leadership and people management skills to use their rank as their only influencing strategy.

Police inspectors are often at the hub of the public interface. They will frequently be the most senior officer presented to the community – someone who is asked to be the face of the police force. As a result, they tend to be well-informed about the needs of the public.

If, rather than listening to and considering these views, a more senior officer ignores them and tells the inspector to get back to their crime performance indicators, relationships become strained and, on a broader scale, you end up with an organisation

that is not responsive to its customers.

I am not pointing the finger of blame at all superintendents and chief officers here. There is no doubt that the majority of senior officers do their best in the face of complex demands, and I have met many who are excellent leaders. However, at senior level there is clearly a tension that results from trying to retain a disciplined command structure in parallel with trying to develop a more open approach that engages staff and harnesses diversity. This blend would be difficult for any senior manager to balance, and in the police service it is questionable whether senior officers receive the leadership and management development they need to equip them to meet this challenge.

And now to that staple of middle management – work overload. The most consistently negative perceptions in the survey of inspectors concerned workload and work-life balance. These are not unique to this level in the police service, but it is easy to see why they may be felt most acutely by the inspecting ranks. The demands on inspectors come from all angles – downwards, upwards, and from external stakeholders.

This finding highlights the need to systematically review the level of demands faced by inspectors. Just as in recent debates about the target culture in the NHS, political leadership that seems only to be concerned with statistics and quantitative indicators of crime leaves many police officers feeling that quality of service is of little interest as long as the performance indicators go in the right direction. The underlying point here is that success, however that is measured, is only sustainable if key staff groups are on board and believe in the overall direction of the police service.

In the context of the results from our survey of inspectors it is understandable that they, and their colleagues in other ranks, felt betrayed by the Home Secretary's decision not to backdate their last pay rise. It was interpreted as a tangible signal that police officers are not valued in spite of their loyalty (no strike action) and their dedication to the service. The fact that, in most cases, the difference was no more than a few hundred pounds wasn't really the issue. It was perceived as another put-down or morale-breaker at a time when many police officers felt they needed supportive reinforcement of the roles they dedicate their working lives to.

Of course, police inspectors probably do not expect their work demands to lessen to any significant extent in the future. Therefore, the personal challenge of maintaining their own personal motivation and wellbeing should be high on their agenda. This includes continuing to seek constructive dialogue, particularly with more senior officers, but also seeking to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle in the context of their work demands.