

# More than leading from the front

The Association of Chief Police Officers lists the first of its objectives as “to provide strong and visible leadership to the police service”. What does strong leadership mean in the demanding environment senior police officers and, increasingly, civilian police staff managers now operate within? asks **Gordon Tinline**



**Gordon Tinline** is a director of **Robertson Cooper Ltd**  
[www.robertsoncooper.com](http://www.robertsoncooper.com)

**L**eadership strength often seems easiest to identify in times of crises or threat: Rudy Giuliani around 9/11; Nelson Mandela faced with the apartheid regime. Arguably, this sits comfortably with many senior police officers. Leading from the front in a time of terrorist threat or other crisis is what many regard as real policing, where protecting and serving the public is visible to all and reinforces the leader’s identity as strong and resolute.

However, such crises do not come along every day, so what does strong leadership mean, faced with less dramatic but often just as demanding challenges? For example, during the police service amalgamation debate generated by the Home Office, which ultimately ended in frustration and increased uncertainty about the future, what constituted leadership strength in terms of chief officer reaction? Part of the answer lies in two essential key leadership practices (Kouzes and Posner’s, 1995): challenging the process; and encouraging the heart.

Challenging the process is an aspect of leadership that many senior police officers are likely to find particularly fraught with difficulty, as was the case during the amalgamation debate. Those in the lower ranks often feel, and say, that their chief officers do little to resist the latest Home Office policy initiative, performance target, or changing view on policing structure. This perception is likely to be very frustrating to leaders who feel that they take every opportunity to clearly and strongly state their opposition to changes that they see little value in. Such challenges are usually expected to take place behind closed doors. Strong leadership in terms of challenging the process may often not be visible to staff, reinforcing a frequently false perception of compliance without question. Interestingly, some of the challenge to amalgamation from many chief officers has been very visible, possibly leading to an increase in identification with their leadership from frontline personnel.

The need to encourage the heart is one that leaders in the police service are increasingly expected to embrace, as approaches such as developing emotional intelligence and sensitivity to diversity start to make an impact. This may not always sit comfortably with a long-serving senior officer steeped in rational procedural management and command and control expectations. However, it is surely a critical component of strong leadership when the demands on the service and frontline officers seem to change and increase by the day.

Keeping frontline officers’ commitment and engagement levels high should be given a higher leadership priority than it often is. In our experience of conducting well-being audits across a large number of police forces, the commitment of frontline

officers, particularly those with more than five years service, is substantially lower than it should be. It is also characterised by the absence of what Allen and Meyer (1990) term affective commitment – attachment of the heart that grows from trusting relationships and a clear sense of purpose. Rather, attachment seems to be based on the costs (eg lost pension benefits) of leaving being too high (continuance commitment), and a public service ethic (normative commitment). The latter is obviously desirable but without commitment of the heart leads to a chasm between the lower and senior levels where the bobby on the beat feels he or she is only there for the public and has little connection with the senior levels in the organisation. This creates cynicism and an almost instinctive resistance to change.

The other essential component of strong leadership is personal resilience. Leaders in the police service experience high levels of work-related pressure from a variety of sources. As Ivan Robertson highlighted in his December Management Clinic, resilience is determined by a combination of personality and experience. Given that most of us can do little to change our personality, the route to development lies in exposure to different experiences and the capacity to learn from them. Senior police officers and police staff managers should be exposed to the full range of leadership challenges to help them develop the resilience, and effectiveness, to deal with whatever the job throws at them. This suggests that career pathways should be sufficiently broad to ensure that a chief constable has had exposure to the full range of leadership challenges before taking the top job. It may also mean it is unlikely a civilian could become a strong chief constable in the foreseeable future, a notion advocated by some who regard policing as essentially a business.

However, experience will only produce growth if reflection and learning occurs. This is where the need for effective leadership coaching and for processes that encourage leaders to take the time out to, in Stephen Covey’s term, “sharpen the saw”, play an essential part. There is a personality component in this but there are also techniques to enable all leaders to learn more effectively, strengthening their capacity to move forward with increased resilience and visible leadership confidence. Developing this strength requires leaders in the police service to be prepared to understand themselves and the impact they have on others, beyond the hierarchical positional power that comes with the senior uniform. It requires them to be able to accept and seek to manage their imperfections but also to reflect fully on their leadership strengths and how they can make the most of them.