

‘Opportunity in the wind’ by Jim Dale

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Former chief superintendent Jim Dale examines areas of policing where it would be appropriate to apply transformation and take advantage of the opportunities that come from the current financial crisis.



The Police Service, along with the rest of the public sector, now faces unprecedented budget cuts. A recent report from the Audit Commission calls for a *transformational approach* for delivering the changes now required, but what does this mean? Following a prolonged period of growth, is the police service and its leadership equipped for transformational change? In this article I will endeavour to address these questions. Several references are made to the private sector where examples of transformational change are more prevalent. I also offer a simple four step model for achieving this type of change. Reconciling huge budget reductions as part of a coordinated programme of transformational change may even provide future opportunities for the Service. In any event, it offers a much more palatable alternative to catastrophic number of projected job losses (36,000 to 58,000) which commentators, including Dr Tim Brain (former head of ACPO finance) has alluded to.

Background:

Cutting costs while at the same time improving service would appear to be an impossible feat yet the private sector have been striving to achieve this goal for decades. Think about competition in the high street retail sector, and the threats from internet shopping, the introduction of low cost airlines or changes in the world of communications or electronics. The harsh laws of economics will dictate success or failure. The police service in England and Wales has experienced a period of sustained growth and enjoys an annual budget of £13.7b, 47% more than a decade ago. Police numbers have also increased significantly and I am sure this will have contributed to a record fall in crime. Everything appeared rosy until the banking crisis, the global recession and now the Coalition Government's Emergency Budget on 22 June, when it was announced that there will be a 25% cut in budgets between now and 2013/14.

Transformational change v incremental change:

Kenichi Ohmae, nicked named, 'Mr Strategy', is a management guru and author. He uses the phrase 'rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic' to differentiate between incremental change and transformational change. You may recall that after the Titanic hit the iceberg the captain ordered the crew to put the deckchairs back in position. He even asked the band to play in an attempt to recreate a sense of normality. The analogy Ohame makes is that the captain was in the *incremental mindset*, ideal when facing small level change but totally unsuitable for the dire situation he, his crew and passengers now found themselves in.

The on line dictionary describes *transformation* as achieving 'marked change'. It implies significant, major and fundamental change. In the context of change management it is risky, often involving all or significant parts of the organisation. Incremental change on the other hand is less risky consisting of much smaller steps as part of a gradual process of evolution.

The Police Service is naturally conservative, with a small 'c', in its approach to change. Incremental organisational change is part of the mindset of its leadership and with good reason. So how does the Service now embark upon a programme of transformational change?

A Model for Achieving Transformational Change:

Simplicity is the key. If the model for change is understood staff can sign up to it. Participation is, also, key to success:

Step 1	Where are we now?	Benchmark. Really understand what you are doing.
Step 2	Where do we want to be? What will our organisation look like in the future?	Create a compelling, transformational vision of the future
Step 3	Delivery	Move to the future state as part of a coordinated programme of change
Step 4	Consolidate	Don't allow things to slip back to the old ways of working

Step 1 - Where are we now?

In their 10 commandants for customer service Carl Sewell and Paul Brown agree that **everything** must get measured. In business it is essential you understand your cost base and are capable of benchmarking this with others. My experience is that in policing, decisions are often based either on flaky data or at worse anecdote or intuition. You really have to understand what your organisation is doing and how this compares with others in order for meaningful gains to be planned and delivered.

The CBI recently highlighted the 'prohibitive costs' of providing HR, IT and finance services within policing. Despite this damning assessment do forces truly understand how their respective back office departments perform and at what cost? If they did surely the Police Service would have embraced shared service centres as others in the private and public sector did many years ago.

Step 2 - Where do we want to be?

Creating a compelling vision of the future is imperative. It is possible to achieve more for less but it takes courage, commitment and leadership. Transformational change requires a transformational vision.

Without a vision the default position is salami slicing. Everyone shares the pain by getting less than they already have. Frontline policing will suffer. This is an abdication of leadership.

The term workforce modernisation is now used widely in policing. While this has achieved some cost reduction the prohibitive conditions contained in the Police Staff Handbook often result in significantly enhanced payments to staff required to work outside normal office hours. The HMIC recently highlighted inconsistent service and performance levels within police scientific support services. This makes an interesting case study. Many forces are unable to provide a 7 day service to support policing because the costs are prohibitive. Rather than pursuing limited collaboration agendas, as many forces are doing, perhaps a more transforming vision would be to pool existing services at a regional level, using either a lead force or even an 'outsourced' model. Improved service and reduced costs could easily be achieved. I question whether workforce modernisation can be 'transformational' if it simply represents a new word for civilisation, modelled on existing terms and conditions of employment.

Training is another area where a transformational vision could be crafted. My view is that the existing model of providing police probationer training is no longer sustainable. A similar approach to the nursing profession could be adopted with the onus shifting to the individual to obtain a policing diploma or qualifying through a vocational route. Once qualified 'graduates' would be able to apply for a policing position. Time and money spent would be cut significantly.

Leaving forces to go it alone makes little sense. Bodies such as ACPO the successor organisation to the NPIA will have an important role to play and there are several examples of good practice from other public sector bodies which could be replicated in policing. For example, NHS Shared Business Services, a joint venture with Steria plc now provides services to more than a 100 trusts and bodies. Similarly, Firebuy Limited is another public / private sector initiative with the stated aim of standardising all fire service equipment under a common procurement framework.

There are many more areas of policing where a transformational rather than a crude cost cutting approach could yield significant benefits.

Step 4: Delivery

'Starting with the end in mind' is always useful when embarking upon a programme of transformational change. The Office of Government Commerce estimate that as many as 80% of programmes and projects fail to achieve the planned benefits. The common causes of failure are:

- Poor leadership
- Unclear roles
- Unclear objectives
- Poor risk management
- Optimism bias, particularly when planning and delivering benefits
- Inadequate delivery skills or resources
- Poor financial management
- Poor change management
- Lessons brushed under the carpet rather than shared in an open, learning environment.

While there are numerous examples of the police service delivering new capacity and capability through collaboration, those achieving significant savings are much harder to find. This is because levels of programme and project management maturity are not generally high within the police service. For many these are new skills that will need to be learnt and applied.

Step 5: Consolidation

The aim of this final step is to reinforce the new ways of working and avoid slipping back to the old ones. More mature readers will remember how the Police Service quietly re-introduced the ranks of chief inspector, chief superintendent and deputy chief constable following abolition as a consequence of the Sheehy Inquiry in the early 1990's. Maintaining the product of transformational change requires renewed commitment and leadership. In a proud profession such as the police service, with a long and illustrious history, it is easy to unpick the changes and slip back into the old ways of working.

Conclusion:

Delivering transformational change will be tough, very tough. A Chinese proverb states that '*a crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind*'. The police service is facing a crisis. Below the dire headlines of swingeing budget cuts there is an opportunity to change and improve policing. It is possible to deliver more for less but this will never be achieved without a really good understanding of the current position, a compelling vision, leadership, sound programme and project management and a relentless drive to consolidate new ways of working.

Jim Dale retired as a chief superintendent in February 2007 having served for 30 years in the MPS and Sussex Police. He now is the director of his own company.