Changing police culture:
the bottom-up view

By Clifford D. Shearing

NORMALLY, when one talks in police circles about culture change and its associated problems, one is talking with senior managers from the point of view of senior police management.

Invariably the point made in these conversations is that the occupational culture of rank-and-file police officers is a major impediment to police reform. The argument put forward is that while management is committed to reform, these initiatives are being stymied by 'hardhead' rank-and-file police officers.

The type of example given to support this view is represented by the young woman in the recent ABC documentary 'Cop It Sweet' who described the training she received as a New South Wales Police recruit at the Goulburn academy as 'bullshit'.

Such examples are used as evidence to support the claim that police reform is being undermined through the informal on-the-job coaching that takes place on 'the street'; coaching that results in outdated values and attitudes becoming entrenched. This situation leads managers to throw up their hands in exasperation.

In speaking to Australian police I find that precisely the same story is told by rank-and-file officers about senior management. They too go around throwing up their hands in desperation about the 'hardheads' they have to deal with in the senior ranks who make it impossible for them to bring about progressive reforms.

This bottom-up story gets a lot less attention in public forums than the story about cultural resistance that senior management tells. This second story, the story that rank-and-file police officers are telling about the cultural resistance they face from senior management to policing innovation, is worth some attention.

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The complaints about the culture of senior management often come from officers in the so-called 'soft option' areas like community policing. These officers argue that although senior management frequently support these 'soft options' in their public statements, this support is very seldom translated into tangible resources. These arenas of policing tend to be marginalised. Thus one has 'victims support programs', 'police in the schools programs', 'community policing programs' and so on.

Similarly it is argued, that while such programs are often given considerable publicity, this attention is seldom matched with hard cash from within the police budget. The vast majority of police resources are devoted to the harder, more traditional, policing arena. Thus 'Watch' programs are sometimes funded, in large part, through corporate sponsorship so that very few police resources are actually devoted to them. The same point is made about rewards within police departments.

Police officers who devote themselves to the soft options policing arenas, it is argued, are unlikely to advance their careers. Career advancement requires that one do well in the traditional areas of policing, in particular in the CID, not in the areas that police managers stress in their reform rhetoric.

I have heard the same argument voiced by officers in public order policing which is usually seen as a relatively 'hard option'. They too complain of the lack of support from their senior officers. Their complaints about senior management are, in certain fundamental

respects, identical to complaints of the people in the 'soft option' areas.

Both groups say the trouble with senior police officers is that they are committed to a 'bandit catching' mentality that views policing as law enforcement. Senior management, they argue, tends to be dominated by people who have been detectives. They see and understand the world as detectives, seeing policing as catching crooks and bringing them before the courts to be sentenced. It is this vision of 'bandit catching' that determines the way police departments are run, where resources are put, and who gets promoted.

The critique offered by people involved in both 'community policing' and 'public order policing' is that this is not what policing should be about; policing should be about security (secure-ity); the promotion of safety for persons and their property alike. They argue that this involves different skills and requires a different allocation of resources and that it is senior management's refusal to recognise these skills and to resource them that is the major handicap to police reform.

What the community wants, they argue, is protection; they want to be guaranteed that they can live their lives in the knowledge that they will be secure. The community might want to see people who harm them get their 'just desserts', but this is not their primary concern. Their primary concern is ensuring that their safety is guaranteed.

I suggest these people are on to

something and what they have to say should be considered. Perhaps the problem of police reform is not simply one of implementation, but one of vision and understanding that requires change at the top. Perhaps it is time to abandon the vision that views 'bandit catching' as the central objective of policing and to replace it with a determination to guarantee safety and security.

If this change were to take place, not only would policing change drastically, but so would the role of the police within it. If this were to happen the police would, I suggest, cease to 'own' policing. They would see themselves less as people who provide policing and more as people who enable policing to take place through assisting in the co-ordination of resources that can be used to accomplish safe, secure environments.

It is this vision that I see emerging within police departments in arenas as diverse as community and public order policing and it is the absence of a clear articulation of, and concrete support for, this vision by senior management that is, I suggest, the major obstacle to significant police reform at present.

Let me illustrate what I have been saying with a story taken from corporate policing.

I once interviewed a Director of Security of a very large clothing retail chain that had outlets across Canada over a decade ago. One of my early questions dealt with the size of his budget. He answered that it was well into the seven digit range. My next question was about the size of his department.

My expectation, drawn from my research with public police departments where some 80 per cent of the budget is spent on employees, was that he would reveal that he had a relatively large staff.

To my surprise his answer was. "One, and you are looking at him." "You must earn a lot," I responded facetiously. He patiently explained that his budget was to support the security responsibilities of all the company's employees; his job was to ensure that these responsibilities were properly executed.

Policing within his company was not based on the use and capacities of specialised security guards, but on the co-ordinated capacities of all the company's staff.

National co-operation on crime prevention

ARRANGEMENTS were agreed on 15 July in Melbourne at the Australasian Police Ministers' Council for an approach to crime prevention which cuts across political and jurisdictional boundaries to tackle a nation-wide community problem. The Federal Minister for Justice, Senator Michael Tate, who chaired the APMC meeting, described the decision as a crucial initiative in identifying and tackling community concerns about safety and crime prevention issues.

"The aim is a better understanding of criminal and anti-social behaviour to develop a strategy which brings together those involved in government and community planning and development to deal jointly with the conditions that generate crime," the Minister said.

As part of the strategy it is planned to conduct national annual Crime Prevention Awards, to encourage and highlight particular achievements in improving community safety and combating crime.

Under the national crime prevention approach, Police Ministers will comprise the new Australian Community Safety Council.

Senator Tate said that already all police forces were involved in crime prevention, working to varying degrees with their communities.

The Ministers will meet in Melbourne later this year with colleagues from other policy areas and with co-opted experts on criminal justice and social justice issues, crime prevention, youth, the aged and cultural minorities.

The power tool factory
(or lateral thinking applied to crime prevention)

A large power tool manufacturer in Canada was suffering ongoing pilfering by employees of hand-held power tools costing in excess of $500,000 a year. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) asked his Head of Security to consider the matter and provide advice on how to deal with the pilfering.

After a week of consideration, the Head of Security (a former police investigator) recommended that undercover security officers be placed in high risk areas, that offenders be caught red-handed and made examples of by prosecuting them to the maximum letter of the law.

The CEO was appalled at the suggestion. He asked his Head of Security if he had learned nothing about the business since his employment with the firm? The CEO said "I am in the business of making money, what you are suggesting will cost me more than I am losing on pilfering." He detailed

the down side of the proposal showing he would lose valuable resources in experienced, well trained tradespeople whose replacements would have to be re-trained at great cost to the company. Production would be affected and the prosecution cycle would cost money and tie up personnel in the security area with much time wasted at court. Besides, the CEO believed new personnel would probably do the same, with pilfering not easing.

The CEO told the Head of Security he had a week to resolve the problem with a positive, instead of negative, approach. If he was not able to come up with an acceptable proposal, he would no longer be required.

The Head of Security came up with an acceptable option very quickly once he shifted his perspective from 'crook catching' to 'crime or security management'.

His solution was simple — set up a tool library.