

‘Lean’ policing: Initial findings from a study of 5 UK police forces

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Abstract

Improving police performance through the adoption of a ‘lean’ philosophy is advocated in this paper. This is seen as a potential driver for internal police improvements and is made in response to the governments’ call for reform and to address the challenges of a decrease in future police funding.

Keywords: Police, Lean, Management

Introduction

Though the most acute phase of the global financial crisis that emerged throughout 2007 and 2008 may have passed, economic recovery remains slow and fragile across many parts of the world (Brunnermeier, 2009). A consequence of this has seen a reduction in government revenues. Typically these have occurred through losses in corporate and personal taxation, ‘together with increased expenditures on stimulus packages and social protection have reduced governments’ fiscal and political options’. (ILOa, 2010). As a consequence levels of government debt have increased across many nations and the ability to repay has been reduced through the necessity to use fiscal reserves to rescue those governments exposed to large financial sectors (ILOb, 2010).

This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom (UK) where the coalition government announced in October 2010, the results of its highly controversial comprehensive spending review (CSR) setting broad limits of public spending to 2014-15. With total cuts amounting to £67 billion and spreading across all government departments, the impact of these cuts will be far reaching.

This need to reduce Government debt requires a combination of measures – fiscal, social protection and monetary and exchange rate policies that form a coherent public policy response but which in themselves create a direct challenge to public administration. Not least in co-ordinating measures that result in enhanced public governance for speedy implementation of strategies for dealing with both the aftermath and ongoing effects of the financial crisis (United Nations, 2009).

Following the CSR it is clear that the drive for efficiencies across all areas of public spending in the UK will accelerate with the need for fundamental reforms of the way in which services are managed and operated (Radnor, 2010). In particular improvements in service performance are consistent with the need to ‘raise the bar’ in order to reconcile budgetary constraints with higher levels of productivity. It is this aspect of ‘reform’ and more specifically performance improvement of the UK police

service through the implementation of a 'lean' approach to police management that will form the central thesis of this paper.

Police and Operations Management

For at least the last three decades there has been an ongoing debate about how to improve quality and reduce costs across the United Kingdom (UK) public services. In response to this the last few years have seen an increase in the application of business process improvement methodologies and techniques across the public services.

In terms of the methodologies employed the application of 'lean thinking' has an emerging literature (Bhatia and Drew, 2006; Hines et al., 2008), and coupled with the application of Six Sigma would appear to offer potential benefits to public organizations through both enhancing customer satisfaction whilst at the same time reducing costs (Dedhia, 2005; O'Rourke, 2005).

Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and Process Improvement Techniques such as Total Quality Management (TQM), Kaizen and Benchmarking (Barton and Beynon 2006a,b; Tillema, 2010) have also been advocated as means of enabling organizations to change in a way that makes their business processes responsive to changes in both economic and social conditions (Radnor, 2010). Given this context, following the UK Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) in October 2010, it is clear that the drive for efficiencies across all areas of public spending will accelerate with the need for fundamental reforms of the way in which services are managed and operated.

One area in which this has been specifically highlighted is that of the police service in England and Wales (Home Office, 2010b). With a budget approaching £13 billions and employing upwards of 140,000 police personnel, the police service is a significant organization not only in cost terms but also in terms of its impact on society. The police service therefore faces the dual challenge of reducing costs whilst at the same time maintaining levels of public confidence and trust in the services they provide.

To this end the UK police service delivered savings of at least £100 million in 2010/11 (Home Office, 2010b). Both police authorities (police and crime commissioners, November, 2012) and their respective chief constables recognise that only through improving value for money and enabling continuous improvements in delivery will they be able to move towards the further savings of £545 million by 2014 demanded by the UK Home Office. In order to achieve this there will be a requirement to fundamentally review how police services are currently delivered with both the mode of front-line delivery and the supporting 'back office' functions being subject to significant reform.

The need to increase productivity within the constraints of a decreasing budget will require full scale business re-engineering across the entire police service. The increased use of benchmarking, management information and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) value for money profiles will provide some opportunities for informed decision making. However 'to be able to increase delivery and balance budgets, authorities and forces will need to ensure that business processes are as efficient and effective as possible and they must adopt business process improvement as part of their ongoing efforts to increase value for money' (Home Office, 2010b p 2)

Such challenges therefore provide significant opportunities for researchers in the business field of operations management to reflect on current strategic change initiatives across the police service and to engage with incremental operational change opportunities within police forces. For example, one area that has received increasing

attention in terms of its applicability to the police service has been the concept of 'lean thinking' (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009). The development of this 'lean thinking' across the public sector has an emerging academic literature (Radnor et al., 2006), with substantial operational and organizational benefits seen to materialise from adoption of a 'lean thinking' approach (Papadopoulos and Merali, 2008). Although to date the most cited examples of lean application have been within the health services (Radnor and Walley, 2008) and (Provonost and Vohr, 2010). There is much evidence that in other public service environments improvements in service performance, improved processing times and achieving 'better value for money' have resulted from such lean interventions (Hines and Lethbridge, 2008).

Within the policing context the notion of the emergence of lean value systems which provide a series of contingent value propositions to consumers of policing services might prove to be a mechanism by which trust and confidence in policing can be rebuilt and consolidated (Berry, 2009). This is an important point in so far as the context in which police operate and the realisation of efficiencies is to a large extent dependent on the understanding of the general public to the need for 'change.' The continued support and concomitant increase in trust and confidence with the police could be seen to be a significant measure of police success in delivering operational improvements that are both cost effective and responsive to citizen's demands.

Clearly running in parallel to this is recognition of the importance of police employee engagement. Clearly this will have a major impact on the success as evidence suggests that effective 'lean' implementation is predicated on the construct of people, notably 'front line staff', to make it happen. Such concerns are emphasised by Berry (2009, p. 11) who identifies both the cost and 'danger that forces will seek to apply a few 'lean' tools and techniques to produce impressive short-term results, instead of seeking sustainable, continuous improvement and a true cultural shift.' Further, 'developing a culture that creates the involvement of everyone in the organization is critical for the implementation of the lean philosophy' (Radnor and Walley, 2008, p. 14).

This conclusion may begin to explain why not all lean implementation initiatives have led to such positive outcomes. Browning and Heath (2009) argue that key limitations lie in the fact that the impact of environmental context or organizational contingencies can affect the relationship between lean practices and cost reduction. This suggests that regardless of establishing *what* lean is, it remains important to establish *how* best to become lean in various contexts (Browning and Heath, 2009, p. 23). As a consequence the reality maybe that in the policing context the adoption of some of the principles of 'lean' may prove useful within a broader framework of progressive operational management.

This has consequences for the impact of operational research within organizations such as the police. Given the complexities of policing it is unlikely that even progressive and innovative developments in operational research will solve all the real life problems of police managers. Success is more likely to arise from a blended, multi-disciplinary exchange of ideas than from a single discipline of 'Operations Management'. Therefore, 'Operations Management scholars should actively participate in an ecosystem of exchanging ideas with other management disciplines to enhance learning and increase knowledge.' (Linderman and Chandrasekaran, 2010:357).

The Applicability of ‘Lean’ within the Police Service

The need for police authorities and their forces to do more with less and continuously improve the way in which they work will require the adoption of business processes that are able to deliver ‘value’, both in terms of cost and delivery. ‘Value is created if internal waste is reduced, as the wasteful activities and the associated costs are reduced, increasing the overall value proposition for the customer’ (Hines et al. 2004:2). This notion of ‘value’ is one of the key constructs supporting the concept of ‘lean’ thinking which can be considered as a methodology that has its origins in the Toyota Production System (TPS) and whose principal objective is the creation of low-cost improvements based on the reduction of waste (Suarez-Barraza et al. 2009). This concept along with that of *kaizen* (continuous improvement) are described as having positive affects on an organisations ability to improve its performance and customer satisfaction (Liker, 2004).

Today ‘lean’ thinking and *kaizen* are far from being just influential paradigms in manufacturing (Hines et al 2004) their applicability is increasingly seen as being transferable across to the service and public sectors (Radnor et al. 2006; Radnor and Walley 2008) Within the policing context the notion of the emergence of lean value systems which provide a series of contingent value propositions to consumers of policing services might prove to be a mechanism by which trust and confidence in policing can be rebuilt and consolidated (Berry, 2009)..

In order to realise this however it is clear that policing organisations need to implement sustainable business improvement models that are capable of demonstrating performance improvements. This in itself requires an understanding of the performance management systems utilised by the UK police service. On reviewing current police performance management systems, Flanagan (2008) makes a number of recommendations. Among these he concludes that;

‘Forces should focus effort on high potential areas for improved productivity, such as demand management ... procurement, and flexible working’, (Flanagan, 2008:34

Within this context he also calls for a more ‘lean’ thinking approach throughout the police service. As noted earlier the application of ‘lean thinking’ to the public sector has an emerging academic literature (Radnor et al, 2006), with substantial operational and organizational benefits seen to materialise from adoption of a ‘lean thinking’ approach (Papadopoulos et al. 2008). Although to date the most cited examples of lean application have been within the health services (Radnor et al. 2008) there is much evidence that in other public service environments improvements in service performance, improved processing times and achieving ‘better value for money’ have resulted from such lean interventions (Hines and Lethbridge, 2008).

Within Flanagan’s Report (2008) the adoption of a ‘lean’ variant in the form of ‘Quest’ aims to manage cost, provide value for money and deliver economies of scale by systematically bringing together front-line practitioners, senior officers and specialist consultants to work as a team. This Home Office sponsored process improvement programme adapted for use in the police service utilises ‘the combined experiences of the team to identify inefficiencies in key systems and processes and to acquire skills and techniques to prioritise and develop improved ways of working’. (Berry, 2009:8). In addition its application is identified as an opportunity ‘to engender and embed a culture of continued improvement, where culture change is the essence in successful process improvement work’ (Flanagan, 2008:32).

To further investigate the reality of the impact of such business improvement initiatives on individual police forces in July 2010 funding was secured to finance a pilot study of 5 police forces within England and Wales. The intention being to identify the reality and not the reported rhetoric surrounding the nature, variety and scope of business improvement initiatives being pursued across the UK police service. In the first instance 14 Chief Officers and Borough Commanders (London) were contacted and 5 agreed to participate in an initial pilot study.

The Five Police Case Study Areas

Through the use of case study examples the intention was to examine primarily the nature of 'lean' initiatives being undertaken within the 5 police areas. Of the 5 sites identified 4 were in Constabularies and the 5th was a London Borough.

The increasing literature on the application of 'lean thinking' to the public sector has identified that both operational and organizational benefits can be seen to materialise from the adoption of a 'lean thinking approach' (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Radnor, 2010).. The intention of this research was to evidence what in reality was happening at police force level and to confirm whether all the positive assumptions surrounding lean implementation initiatives were actually happening.

In order to progress this initial meetings were held with the Chief Constables designated liaison officer/s (Police Constabularies) the Borough Commander in London and the Head of the Local Criminal Justice Board for a region of Wales. This paper reports the outcomes of those initial meetings to provide an insight into the diversity of approaches within the police and criminal justice service. A more detailed in depth analysis of the case study areas will be completed in the near future..

Case Study 1

The Chief Constable within this case study area saw the importance of improving inter- agency co-operation as a means of improving the criminal justice process overall as a key policing objective. In order to achieve this the Chief Constable designated a formal representative onto the Local Criminal Justice Board. It was the Board who then decided to implement a 'Lean Review' of the Criminal Justice area. The Board agreed in late 2009 that a bottom up approach would be taken to work, with facilitated staff workshops being the primary tool for identifying process issues, areas for improvement and subsequently waste reduction. Performance improvement was considered a key objective for the review in the light of national criticism and particularly hard hitting inspection report for the CPS. This was also a source of concern for the police. The agreed scope of the initial project was to review the process from arrest to summary trial readiness.

With few exceptions all workshops were of a multi-agency format. After six months a number of process changes were made through the project with business benefits including cost savings being identified. The lean approach continues to be supported through short daily team meetings and the use of team information Boards (TIBs) to aid these.

In summary although the strategic direction of the Lean review was to focus on business change to improve performance through developing a culture of continuous improvement, and to tackle the blame culture that existed in the area. Identification of efficiency savings and cashable gains were not the driver for this programme being undertaken, however, there was a recognition that this should inevitably follow if greater synergies amongst teams and agencies could be established.

Case Study 2

The Borough Commander (Chief Superintendent) had responsibility for over 800 staff and had operational responsibility for a diverse area that crossed a number of London Boroughs. His primary concern was the amount of performance data and objectives that he had to benchmark himself against on a daily and weekly basis. Whilst understanding and accepting the reality of progressive business process improvement developments he was not 'wedded' to the idea that 'lean' was the answer. Whilst conversant with concepts of six sigma, business process re-engineering and process improvement technologies such as ISO9000; TQM and EFQM. He was as concerned about police and civilian staff morale in the wake of anticipated government cuts. Whilst recognising that efficiencies could be made and were in reality being made the bureaucracy and increasing paperwork was identified as a constant frustration amongst staff. Whilst aware that there was a continuous improvement initiative being undertaken across a number of London Boroughs he had been unable, at the time of reporting, to secure funding from central Metropolitan Police resources.

Case Study 3

This small Police Constabulary in the South of England had secured funding from the Home Office and was proactively engaged in a performance improvement programme entitled Operation QUEST. This programme is currently being delivered to 17 police forces in England and Wales over the last 5 years and is described as an approach to continuous improvement and not a solution. QUEST delivers benefits and supports senior officers to make re-investment decisions and seeks to build professional capabilities to deliver continuous improvement.

Within this Constabulary the Lean Implementation Manager was a Chief Inspector and was supported by an Inspector, Sergeant and Constable. All had been on the training courses provided and were keen enthusiasts of the approach. They were able to demonstrate initiatives that had improved the processing times of persons arrested and had centralised the custody suites within the Constabulary area thereby creating a 'super' custody complex. Such successes were visually represented on display boards that were located within the Police HQ. All the team were positive about the benefits of the QUEST introduction and saw it as a vehicle for securing additional funding from increasingly limited central government funding sources.

Case Study 4

This mid-sized Constabulary in Central England has also secured funding previously for implementation of the QUEST programme. This has been seen as a success by the Chief Constable and is alluded to in the Annual Policing Plan for 2010/11. Here the QUEST programme has been used to support a key strategic priority: 'To ensure people see us using people, budgets and all other resources wisely to deliver a value for money service.'

More specifically during 2011 the Force intends to review the way in which the Force is structured to deliver its services, building on the findings from the QUEST programme. Such researched options will then be discussed with the Police Authority to determine how the Force can be best structured to effectively and efficiently provide its services.

In terms of delivering value for money across services the intention is to use the savings made from planned efficiencies to be made available for re-investment in

targeted areas of the service. Finally following a trial review of new duty management system will be introduced and will help to manage police resources to more effectively and efficiently respond to needs.

Case Study 5

Whilst the previous case study illustrates a strategic and Force wide utilisation of the QUEST programme for improving productivity and performance improvement. This small Constabulary has been unable to secure further funding for the 3 police staff to continue with their work as a team of 'lean implementation champions.' This small team consisting of 1 Inspector and 2 uniform sergeants were able to demonstrate to good effect some of the initiatives and small savings that they had been able to implement during the duration of the project however a decision had been made by senior officers that their knowledge would be better diffused throughout the organisation. In discussions the sergeants identified that the practical realities of the current budget cuts made such decisions inevitable and there was a feeling that the notion of 'continuous improvement' within the Constabulary was a stalled process. Significant concern was raised as to the sustainability of such initiatives such as QUEST given the current economic climate.

Conclusion

The pressure on public organisations to improve productivity and performance has presented an opportunity for operations management scholars to engage in the development and application of business process improvement methodologies within such organisations. Radnor (2010) identifies from the analysis of the findings of an 'expert panel' that within the public sector variances of Lean (64%), Six Sigma (41%) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR) (23%) are being used.

To this extent the UK police service is not unique. Whilst it can be argued that full scale implementation of rigorous methodologies of for instance 'lean thinking' have not been adopted there is substantial evidence of individual police forces utilising specific tools and techniques in an attempt to improve business performance (Flanagan, 2008; Berry, 2009a,b).

One of the key difficulties remains however as to the sustainability of such interventions. Lean implementation is expensive and although initial results may be encouraging there is a danger of focusing on short term gains (Bateman, 2005). For the police there is a need to focus their resources and minds of their employees on the key priorities that will allow them to meet the expectations of the public. Policing cannot exist in isolation it requires citizen participation and co-operation. This is important as it is through engagement with the public and an understanding of the customer interface that appropriate tools and techniques can be applied to effect positive changes for both the police and the public. This is particularly so given the context of policing where operationally there is wide variation and demand for services. This has been previously identified by authors such as Spear (2005) as having important implications for managers.

From a police perspective this is relevant as there is a general consensus within the police (Home Office, 2010) that there is a no 'one best fit' approach. Within this first observation of five case study sites it is clear that there is significant diversity in approaches to the utilisation of new business improvement methodologies. For example in *Case Study 4* the Chief Constable appears to be using the Home Office supported QUEST approach to support strategic interventions to support force wide changes in the force's organisational structure and the way it performance manages its

staff. Whereas in *Case Study 1* the Chief Constable is intent to participate in a broader Criminal Justice System (CJS) ‘Lean’ implementation project to drive continuous improvement activities to ultimately improve performance.

What this points to is that it is likely that the most successful adoption of operations management techniques are likely to be ‘tailored’ to the appropriate needs of a force area or locality within that area. Through this more ‘scientific’ approach the benefits of increased involvement of operations management are likely to provide the most useful contribution in enabling the police to maintain their capacity to meet the dual demands of a reducing budget with increasing public expectations for better service delivery.

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