



A Force for Change

Changing the culture of an entire organisation is never an easy task. But imagine taking on that challenge in an organisation of 44,000 employees, many of them long-serving and set in their ways. Add in the very public profile of the organisation and the negative way in which it was perceived, and it would be a challenge too far for most of us.



It's the challenge Lord Peter Imbert was faced with when the Home Secretary asked him to take on the role of Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in 1987. And It's a challenge he accepted.

But then Lord Imbert was no stranger to difficult challenges. He served for many years in the Special Branch and rose to prominence after his successful negotiations with armed IRA terrorists during the week-long Balcombe Street siege in 1975. He held senior positions in the Surrey Constabulary and Thames Valley Police and was awarded the Queen's Police Medal in 1980. He returned to the Metropolitan Police as Deputy Commissioner in March 1985.

So just how did he set about changing the culture of the Metropolitan Police I wondered as I went to meet him in April. Where on earth did he start? Apparently that was the question he asked himself after he accepted the Home Secretary's offer.

He was still pondering the question when he arrived back at his office in Scotland Yard. He noticed a cartoon on the top of the pile of newspaper cuttings lying on his desk. It showed a PC with a shield, a NATO helmet and a truncheon.

"It was all just 'force' and I thought we have got to change that," he told me. "That gave me the idea of cultural change.

"I realised it was not just about what we, as police officers, wanted. We had to look for what the public wanted and expected from us."

That was his starting point. He brought in leading branding and advertising agency Wolff Olins to find out what sort of policing the public wanted to see. As well as canvassing opinion from the general public they also asked London MPs, as well as officers and civil staff within the service.

The answers were fairly consistent. People wanted firm, clear, friendly policing that reassured them. They told Lord Imbert that the Metropolitan Police needed to change from being a Police *force* and become a Police *service*.

"We needed a mission statement; a statement of common purpose and values that treated people as individuals," he explained. "The results of the survey revealed that there were some who thought people within the organisation were treated as second class citizens.

"Well, if you can't treat people within your organisation properly, then you certainly won't treat people outside it properly.

"Just before I became Commissioner, a MORI poll showed that 68% of the public were not confident in their police.

"I did not want to be head of an organisation who had more dissatisfied than satisfied customers. I decided we all had to turn over a new leaf and give the public a good service."

Communicating the vision

It was obvious that Lord Imbert had a clear vision for a new style of policing. I wondered how he communicated this vision to the workforce. I noticed similarities with the problems facing my last interviewee, Richard Baker when he took over the top job at Boots.

There too was an organisation steeped in tradition with old-fashioned attitudes, particularly towards customer service. However, Lord Imbert's people were unique in that they faced tough and potentially dangerous situations most days.

He admitted it was an enormous logistical problem.

"We called it the Plus Programme. Not everyone was enthusiastic from the start. There were people who had been in the service for a long time and were well within their comfort zone. But they had to accept that the weight of the momentum was with change.

"One member of my senior team was very much against change. He saw the momentum swell from the ground and that won him round."

Appointing disciples to spread the word

"I had to identify disciples; people who would go out and spread the message such as the statement of common purpose and values.

"We got hard-bitten, experienced Detective Inspectors and Superintendents of 30 years service sitting next to canteen assistants. We would go through the statement and they would discuss it.

"We found out a lot about what dissatisfied people. I called it our sellotape culture. Scruffy police stations had been highlighted. So one day when I was in plain clothes on my way home from a meeting, I asked my driver to take me to my nearest police station.

"There was one officer behind the desk with a queue of people waiting. A notice stuck to the wall read 'only one person at a time at the counter, and I do mean only one!'

"What kind of welcome is that if you have a lost child, had your house burnt down, or if someone has threatened to shoot you?

"The officer behind the desk had only seven months' service. When I asked where the Duty Sergeant was he told me he had gone out on patrol but he was now in the back room with the Inspector. Or at least he thought he was.

"And there indeed he was, sitting with his foot up on the desk. The Inspector was leaning against the mantelpiece with a cigarette in his mouth. Meantime a probationer had been left alone at the counter to deal with the public. That was an example of our sellotape culture."

Incidents like this and other feedback from the survey made it obvious to Lord Imbert and his team that they were alienating the public. A large amount of money was spent on making police station entrance halls more welcoming so the public wouldn't think they were being a nuisance to the police.

"One thing that surprised and pleased me was the number of people who were behind the idea of change once we got the Plus Programme seminars going. The disciples carried people with them," Lord Imbert recalled.

"The canteen culture changed from officers laughing about how badly they had treated someone they had arrested to officers taking pride in doing the job properly.

"The leader's job is to articulate the vision and communicate it to the workforce in a way that enthruses them. There was a bottom-up ground swell of people who said 'this is what I want and this is why I joined'.

Leadership: part nature and part nurture

Since we had touched on the subject I asked him about his leadership style. I wanted to know how he encouraged dialogue and difference, while at the same time, kept everyone on track.

"Leadership involves both nature and nurture. As a leader you first work out what is best for your customers. Then you enthuse people and make sure it's going the right way," Lord Imbert explained.

"The senior team really needs to be interested and on board with what the leader is doing. It has to be convincing.

"You have to have dialogue with your people and you have to be right. I couldn't have imposed any other statement of common purpose on them than the one we adopted.

"Before that we had a statement that had been in use since the Met was formed in 1829. We had to learn it by heart - 'the primary object of an efficient police is the prevention of crime...' We replaced it with the statement of common purpose and values.

"I wanted people to say 'yes this is the police service we want to be in.' We wanted to give satisfaction and reassurance. Not just by talking people into it but by showing we cared and were genuinely trying to bring about change."

Lord Imbert gathered together 500 senior officers of Inspector and above, and introduced them to the Plus Programme, spelling out his vision for the Met. He told them about the change from force to service. He told them they had to make changes as individuals as well, most importantly, they needed to be proud to be police officers.

"It takes 30 years to build your reputation in the service," he said. "One police officer could destroy that in 30 seconds by inappropriate behaviour or inappropriate action".

He told me a story that must have been disheartening at the time, but impressed me by how he turned a negative to a positive through good leadership skills.

A young Constable sent a note after attending one of the Plus Programme seminars. Apparently when he got back to his station, his Chief Superintendent said to him "right you've had your day's holiday; now you're back to real policing. Get out there and nick 'em. Forget about the style."

Lord Imbert called a meeting with the Chief Superintendent in question and had a long chat with him. He became one of his best disciples.

"We discussed the changes we were trying to make and why. I was in a persuasive mood," he smiled.

Laying the foundation for change

I wondered, once he had set the vision, the purpose, and the framework, did he let his team of very bright people make the decisions? Did he see himself in more of a steering role, making sure they were on the right path?

"I had very loyal staff, particularly in the mid to senior ranks. One particular Commander was a reformed alcoholic but had enormous credibility as an operational policeman. He became the main generator of enthusiasm out there.

"At that time, the Met was a very macho organisation. He got a lot of support for his operational capability. I believe I did too because people knew I had been through the mill during my time on the anti terrorist squad."

It seemed to me that Lord Imbert was describing a good example of viral change of which I am an advocate. You don't just do the neat top down cascade. You engage the people who are well thought of and get them to light fires. They infect others with their enthusiasm. That's how viral change happens.

During the last nine months or so I've interviewed quite a few leaders for Sharpening the Axe. They've all talked about the need for humility and the importance of listening. They have told me you also need great self-belief.

On the face of it, that seems to be a paradox. But one thing I've learned from them is that if you have the self-belief, you won't mind being challenged or appearing vulnerable.

I asked Lord Imbert if that was true for him.

"You must have humility: you are a human being. You've been given the job of leader but you need assistance to do it.

"When we are challenged, the temptation is to be defensive. But I believe if you are challenged you have to listen then decide whether you are right or wrong. Part of the statement of common purpose and values is to listen to criticism with a preparedness to change.

"When challenged, before I speak I consider whether my challenger is right. If you lash out you establish your position and may find you are wrong.

"You have to listen to well-founded criticism with a willingness to change. A good example came after we had done the mission statement following our consultations with the public, politicians, police officers, and civil staff. We had asked them what they wanted us to do and had written the statement on the back of it.

"However, it was Norman Tebbit who pointed out that we had missed out one very vital thing. We had forgotten to mention upholding the law and arresting those who were doing wrong. We amended the statement accordingly.

"It was a good lesson in listening. You have to listen because you can be too close to things."

Living the message

It was obvious that Lord Imbert had used every opportunity to communicate and then live the Plus Programme message, whether in a meeting or during a visit to a police station. Everyone would have seen it was genuinely on his radar. Was that his philosophy I wondered?

"You have to live it rather than just talk about it. It was vital that I kept visiting police stations and talked to people about how we were serving the public.

"It was exhausting mind you. I had a serious heart attack in 1990. I had a heart bypass then couldn't wait to get back to carry on with the work I had started. I thought if I didn't come back it was going to fade away. You have to let people know you are all in it together."

Talking to him, it seemed to me that he had an intuition about the direction the Met needed to take from the very first day as Commissioner.

"I couldn't just go on day to day dealing with the odd crisis," he told me. "And believe me, in the Met you do get crises. One every 45 minutes in fact. I realised we had to change our way of working; we had to have a strategic approach."

Throughout the interview, Lord Imbert was open and willing to share his thoughts with me. His answer to my final question summed this up nicely. I asked if he had any views on leadership in today's world where people in high office face stiff criticism.

"Transparency is key." was his unhesitating answer. "You have to go public on difficult issues.

"Whether people are working ethically or not, we should all know what they are doing. Integrity is important.

"During our consultation and research phase, we published the 'sellotape culture' examples and gave them to the media. We got good press for being honest."

Before he left, Lord Imbert told me that his six years as Commissioner 'was forever' but if asked to do it all again he would.

"When you initiate a programme it suggests it's got a beginning and an end. However because of its scale and nature, Plus had to be enduring. The message needs reinforcing time after time after time."

Lord Imbert retired as Commissioner of Police in 1993. Since then he has held various appointments in the commercial world and has lectured here and overseas. He writes the occasional article, mainly on criminal justice and policing matters, and supports a number of charities.

In June 1994 he was commissioned as a Deputy Lieutenant of Greater London and appointed Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London in December 1998, an office he served with distinction for ten years. He was awarded a Life Barony (Baron Imbert of New Romney in the County of Kent) in the 1999 New Year's Honours List.