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Purposeful leadership for the future police service

Purposeful Leadership for the Future Police Service

Ramya Yarlagadda, CIPD

Catherine Bailey, University of Sussex

Ksenia Zheltoukhova, CIPD

Amanda Shantz, University of Greenwich

Patrick Brione, IPA

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the prevalence of purposeful and ethical leadership in a UK county police force – referred to by the pseudonym PoliceOrg. It also evaluates the extent to which officers feel their values fit with those of the organisation, and the outcomes achieved by purposeful and ethical leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire survey, interviews and focus groups were conducted at PoliceOrg. Findings are compared with those from a public sector case study and with a representative sample of the UK working population.

Findings – Purposeful leaders at PoliceOrg have a positive impact on important outcomes for their direct reports, and provide a sense of direction and guidance to those who do not feel a strong fit between their values and those of their organisation.

Research limitations/implication – The study focuses on a new construct (purposeful leadership) that has not previously been explored in the academic literature. Consequently, our findings cannot be directly compared with those of other studies. The survey focused on the views of police sergeants and constables, and only one police force participated as a case study; hence, the generalisability of the findings is limited.

Practical implication – Police organisations should nurture and sustain workplace environments where leaders can translate their personal moral code and ethical values into their role behaviours to address the policing challenges of the future.

Originality/value – This study elucidates the concept of purposeful leadership in the context of a police force.

Keywords – Purposeful leadership, ethics, ethical behaviour, person-organisation fit, ethical alignment.

Paper type – Research paper.

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Introduction

The rapidly changing political, social and criminal justice environment poses significant challenges for police leaders (Caless and Tong, 2015). In the UK and many other countries around the world, these challenges are exacerbated by the growth in new types of crime, notably in fields such as terrorism, organised crime and cybercrime, coupled with the demands posed by retrenchment in public service expenditure, and an enhanced focus on the accountability of public servants (Ichiho and Anderson, 2017; Smith, 2016). Recent studies that have highlighted the role of senior managers and leaders in the failings and errors of police forces around the world, such as those of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Perrott and Kelloway, 2011), suggest that earlier command-and-control models of police leadership are untenable in the face of the needs of the modern force.

In this context, there have been calls for new approaches to leadership within the police as well as other emergency services that are more closely aligned with the current environmental contingencies (Ortmeier and Davis, 2012; Smith, 2016). One approach that may be relevant is purposeful leadership, and there have in recent times been numerous calls within business and the wider public sector for more purposeful leaders who can articulate a clear organisational vision founded in a strong sense of personal morals (Craig and Scott, 2014; Gusic, 2015). However, there have been no previous empirical studies of purposeful leadership in the context of the police, and so we lack evidence concerning its potential benefits. In this article, the findings of a research study on purposeful leadership in a police force in the UK are presented, and the implications for the future of police leadership more widely are drawn out.

Leadership in the context of the police

There is a long and rich history of the study of a variety of leadership styles in the police (Caless and Tong, 2015; Ortmeier and Davis, 2012). Leadership styles are relevant not only for successful policing outcomes, but also for outcomes for officers such as workplace relationships, commitment, morale and empowerment (Perrott and Kelloway, 2011; Steinheider and Wuestewald, 2008). As Smith and Charles (2010: 320) have shown, policing work is both 'demanding and threatening' for officers, who are susceptible to shorter life expectancy, along with higher rates of divorce and long-term sickness than workers in other fields. Police leaders now and in the future therefore have a significant moral and ethical duty to create and foster a workplace environment and criminal justice system that are fair and ethical and that achieve positive outcomes for all stakeholders (Ichiho and Anderson, 2017).

Purposeful leadership is defined as 'the extent to which a leader has a strong moral self, a vision for his or her team, and takes an ethical approach to leadership marked by a commitment to stakeholders'. It includes three facets; **moral self**: leaders who have a strong 'moral self' regard it as important to see themselves as having positive moral qualities such as fairness, compassion, helpfulness, honesty and kindness (Aquino and Reed 2002); **vision**: visionary leaders are those who set an inspiring vision for their team that brings out the best in them (Fry et al., 2005); **commitment to stakeholders**: leaders who have a commitment to stakeholders actively take part in activities such as supporting good causes, taking care of employees, and being environmentally aware.

As a leadership style, it builds on and extends more recent approaches to leadership such as authentic, ethical or spiritual leadership (Charles et al., 2014; Mumford and Fried, 2014; Smith and Charles, 2010). However, what marks it out as distinctive is its inclusion of three distinct attributes that, together, create an encompassing definition of the type of leadership style that may be most relevant for the future of police leadership given recent calls for a greater awareness of the needs of different stakeholder groups and a more 'moral' stance on the part of senior officers (Charles et al., 2014; Ichiho and Anderson, 2017).

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Methodology

We employed a mixed method approach, combining the strengths of qualitative (interviews and focus groups) with quantitative (surveys) data collection (Newman et al.'s (2003). The primary aim of doing so was to seek complementarity, in that the two approaches enhance, illustrate, and clarify the results from one method with the results of another, thereby producing "thick" data (Green et al.'s (1989).

The findings form part of a wider study of purposeful leadership that took place in the UK between 2015 and 2016. The data reported here were gathered from a UK police force (PoliceOrg) and, for comparison, a central government department (GovDep). In PoliceOrg, all Constables and Sergeants were invited to participate in the survey, a total of 2,613. From these, 246 Sergeants and 520 Constables returned usable questionnaires, a response rate of 29%. In GovDep, individuals at a mid-management level and their direct reports were invited to volunteer to participate in the survey; 275 surveys were distributed, and 96 usable replies were received (20 from leaders and 76 from their direct reports). In both case studies, leaders and followers were matched, enabling multi-level analysis to take place. The surveys focused on purposeful leadership and followers' perceptions of their leaders' ethical approach, as well as a range of relevant outcomes such as job satisfaction, wellbeing and turnover intentions. The majority of the scales comprised measures that have been previously validated and widely adopted within the academic literature (e.g. Fry et al.'s (2005) scale for vision, and Brown et al.'s (2005) scale for ethical leadership).

In Police Org, seven Inspectors were interviewed, and three focus groups were held with 12 participants mainly at Sergeant level. Interviews were anonymous and confidential, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were asked for their views about organisational leadership styles.

Additionally, a separate cross-sectional survey of 734 managers in the general UK public was conducted to establish differences and similarities in the three facets of purposeful leadership compared to the leaders at PoliceOrg.

Why does purposeful leadership matter?

The research showed that purposeful leadership and its constituent components – moral self, commitment to stakeholders and vision – were important in influencing a range of outcomes at PoliceOrg for officers, including higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of intent to quit. Alongside this, Sergeants who were seen to behave ethically by their Constables had a positive impact on employee outcomes, such as increased work meaningfulness and decreased levels of turnover intentions. Sergeants who were purposeful found their own work more meaningful, had higher levels of job satisfaction, and reported lower levels of turnover intentions.

Prevalence of purposeful leaders at PoliceOrg

There were relatively more leaders who rated themselves highly as purposeful leaders at PoliceOrg (48%) than those found in the UK population more widely (21%). However, the prevalence of purposeful leaders was significantly higher at GovDep (84%).

Despite this, it was evident in the interviews that officers had a strong sense of responsibility towards the public:

'You don't join the police service to keep your colleagues or your chief officers happy, you join the police service to keep the public safe.'

Constables were also asked to rate the extent to which they felt that their Sergeant behaved ethically. This includes listening to employees, being trustworthy, setting a good example, and discussing ethics and values with employees (Brown et al., 2005). Fifty three percent (53%) of Constables rated their Sergeant as 'high' in demonstrating ethical behaviour, compared to 80% of employees at GovDep (Figure – 1). This is in keeping with the prevalence of purposeful leaders at these organisations, and is indicative of a general link between purposeful leadership and ethical leadership behaviours.

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Include figure 1 here – Percentage of employees who believe their leader behaves ethically at work

Compared with other organisations in the public sector, higher levels of ethical leadership behaviours were found at PoliceOrg compared with the sectoral mean, where 40% of followers in public employers rated their leader's ethical behaviour highly. One of the reasons for this could be due to the greater variation within the UK-wide sample, which included managers at various levels of seniority.

Although the survey analysis showed that around 1 in 2 leaders were seen to behave ethically at PoliceOrg and interviewees suggested that ethics and ethical behaviours run *"through the lifeblood of everything that we do in policing"*, the sense of 'fit' between the values of the employees and those of the organisation was relatively low. At GovDep, 64% of followers experienced high levels of value-alignment with those of the organisation, but at PoliceOrg the figure was 20%.

Include figure 2 here – Percentage of employees who believe they have a good fit with their organisation's values

At PoliceOrg, more Sergeants (46%) than Constables (30%) said that the values of the force were similar to their own. This is an interesting finding, which suggests that while leaders seemed to understand and embody the values of the organisation, they may struggle to articulate the importance of these values to their followers. It could also be that junior officers perceived a rhetoric-reality gap in terms of what leaders said about the values of the organisation, and how they saw their leaders championing these at an organisational level. Another potential reason is that more junior officers were in frequent contact with the public and could see the gaps that were arising between the force's priorities and those of the community:

'To that community, the fact that they're getting burgled all the time means a lot to them, where for example [name] Police might say that domestic abuse is a priority. So I think we just need to make sure that we are reflecting what the community wants sometimes.'

The wider research study showed that the presence of an ethical leader helped employees feel a sense of fit with the values of the wider organisation. This ethical alignment is linked to employee outcomes such as job satisfaction (Schleicher et al., 2015), perceptions of meaningful work (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000), the extent to which individuals engage in organisational citizenship behaviours (Dalal et al., 2009), and desire to leave the organisation (Boroff and Lewin, 1997).

At PoliceOrg, however, only 9% of officers reported high levels of ethical alignment, in other words, where they believed that their leader behaves ethically and their values matched those of the organisation (Figure 3). In comparison, 37% of GovDep employees reported high levels of ethical alignment. Also worrying were the findings on ethical void, where employees feel that their leader does not behave ethically and their values do not match those of their organisation. More than half of PoliceOrg officers surveyed (57%) felt that they were operating in an ethical void, in contrast to 17% at GovDep.

Thirty two percent (32%) of officers at PoliceOrg reported ethical misalignment, where they felt that their leader was ethical but the match between their values and those of the organisation was low. This is in line with the findings from the other case study organisation. Finally, only 4% of officers surveyed at PoliceOrg reported unethical alignment, where they felt that there was a close match between their values and those of the organisation but did not perceive their leaders to be ethical. These findings suggest that very few officers who participated in the study felt that they had a sense of alignment with the values of the organisation in the absence of an ethical leader. This suggests that ethical behaviours of leaders can play a crucial role in generating positive outcomes for employees even when they feel that their values do not fit with those of their organisation.

Include figure 3 – Employee perceptions of their leader's ethical behaviours versus their belief that their values match those of the organisation - PoliceOrg

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Why does the degree of ethical alignment matter?

The study found that those operating in an ethically aligned context seemed to have more positive outcomes than those in ethical misalignment, unethical alignment and ethical void. Employees in an ethical void seemed to have the most negative outcomes.

For instance, at PoliceOrg:

- Those in ethical alignment were more satisfied with their jobs than those in ethical misalignment and in an ethical void, but there was no significant difference in mean levels of job satisfaction between ethical alignment and unethical alignment. There was also no significant difference between those operating in an ethical void compared with those in ethical misalignment or unethical alignment.
- The same pattern of relationships was found for work meaningfulness.
- With regard to organisational citizenship behaviour, those operating in an ethical void were less likely to be a good citizen compared to those in ethical alignment and ethical misalignment. Yet, they were no different from those in unethical alignment. This suggests that even if an employee feels a sense of fit with the values of the organisation, the absence of an ethical leader means that employees in this group have the same level of negative outcome on this measure as those operating in an ethical void.
- Officers in an ethical void were more likely to have intentions to quit the organisation than those in the other three groups. Those in ethical alignment were also more likely to desire to stay with the organisation than those in ethical misalignment, yet there was no significant difference between ethical alignment and unethical alignment with regard to intention to quit.

The fact that there were a large number of officers at PoliceOrg operating in an ethically void environment is a cause for concern. In the interviews, it emerged that ethical fit can be in a constant state of flux, due to changing leadership, organisational circumstances, or resourcing pressures. As one officer at PoliceOrg explained:

“We’ve got less and less resources, we’ve got less and less people, probably less police officers than we’ve ever had out there which puts a strain on officers to do the job to the ability that they would like to do it ... that causes a huge amount of strain and stress to officers because they can’t do the job they’re trained to do, they can’t do the job that they’re paid to do, they can’t do the job that they think they want to do and the reason why they joined in the first place, and I think that the organisation is almost disempowering them in that way, whilst giving a message that they need to behave ethically but not give them the space and time to do it.”

It might also be the case that employees develop a sense of being in an ethical void or misalignment over time, as disillusionment with leadership behaviours grows, or when employers recruit individuals whose personal values do not necessarily match the values of the organisation. The reverse may also be true – i.e., officers who once did not feel a sense of alignment between the organisation’s values and their own in the absence of an ethical leader might develop a different view under a new leader who behaves ethically. We found this at PoliceOrg, where some participants felt that they could identify with the values of the force under the leadership of their current Chief Constable. More leaders at PoliceOrg felt a sense of fit with the values of the organisation than their followers. This places them in a very good position to articulate and embed these values across the organisation.

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Conclusions

The research showed that purposeful leadership and its constituent components – vision, moral self and commitment to stakeholders – influence a variety of employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, willingness to go the extra mile and intentions to leave the organisation. This builds on and extends earlier studies which suggest that new approaches to police leadership are required to address the demands of modern policing (Smith and Charles, 2010; Ichiho and Anderson, 2017).

More specifically, at PoliceOrg, we found that purposeful leaders create positive outcomes for themselves and their followers. Leaders who are purposeful find their work more meaningful, have higher levels of job satisfaction, and report lower levels of turnover intentions. Followers of purposeful leaders want to remain employed with the organisation and have higher levels of wellbeing. The elements of purposeful leadership that have the most significant impact on these employee outcomes are vision and commitment to stakeholders. The incidence of purposeful leaders at PoliceOrg is quite low when compared to the other public sector organisation, although it is higher than the general UK population.

Researchers have argued that more ethical approaches to leadership in the police are associated with better outcomes for officers such as improved wellbeing (Caldwell and Anderson, 2017; Smith and Charles, 2010). This was reflected in the findings of this study. Although leaders and followers largely agreed that ethics and ethical behaviour form the cornerstone of their work, only a minority of officers felt that their values fit with those of the organisation, with leaders reporting a higher degree of fit than their followers. Leaders at PoliceOrg have a clear role to play here by articulating and embedding the values of the organisation across the force. Additionally, the research also found that very few officers at PoliceOrg felt a sense of ethical alignment, where they saw that their leader behaved ethically and that their values fit with those of the organisation. A large majority of them were operating in an ethical void, where they did not feel that their leader behaved ethically or that their values fit with those of their organisation. These are interesting findings, which show that despite having a strong code of ethics, a whistleblowing policy and various training programmes that reinforced the importance of ethical behaviour, they did not seem to be having a positive impact on officers' perceptions of their leaders' ethical behaviours or their organisational values. It could also be the case that the organisation was struggling to create an environment where leaders can bring in their personal moral code and values to work and translate these into their roles.

PoliceOrg should enable a work environment where leaders are able to bring their personal moral beliefs and values into the workplace environment. These, in turn, when observable by their officers, can help to mitigate the negative impact of disillusionment officers experienced in relation to their leaders' behaviours and the organisation in general. For instance, very few officers at PoliceOrg said that they felt aligned to the values of the organisation in the absence of ethical behaviours of their leader. To ensure that PoliceOrg attracts, develops and retains individuals who embody the values of the organisation, the force should take a 'values-based approach' to all aspects of its HR processes – including recruitment, training, performance appraisals, promotions and leadership development programmes.

Although the study sheds new light on purposeful leadership within the context of the police, the research focused mainly at the more junior leadership levels, i.e. Sergeants, and it only included one police force. It also does not take into account the views of police civilian staff. Further research that examines for instance the processes and outcomes of purposeful leadership at more senior levels, within other forces and national settings, and within other emergency services, would be welcome.

The findings of this case study have important implications for future leadership within the police, as well as within other emergency services settings. In an environment where police leaders are called upon to balance the competing demands of austerity and the changing nature of crime, along with increased public scrutiny and accountability, the ability to lead 'with purpose' becomes all the more significant. Purposeful leadership approaches that combine a clear vision, commitment to a broad range of stakeholders, and a sense of personal morality can enable senior officers to create better outcomes both for themselves, and for junior officers.

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Figure 1

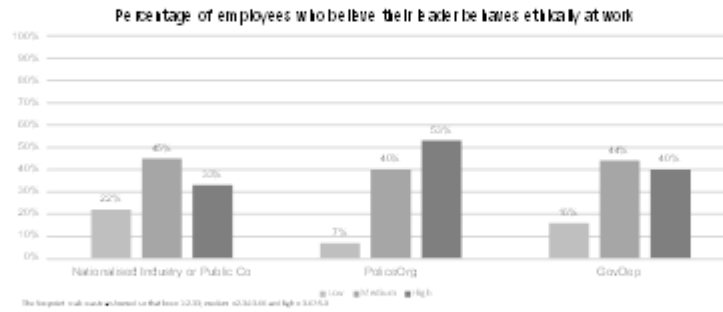
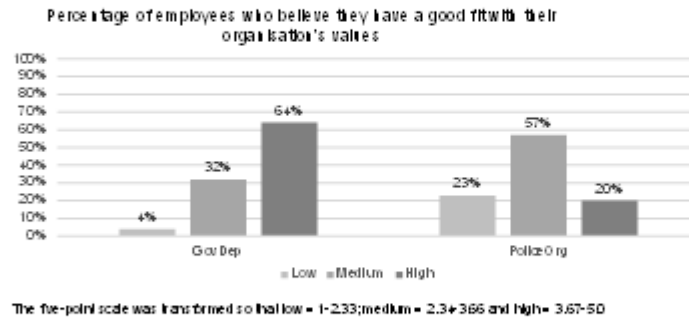
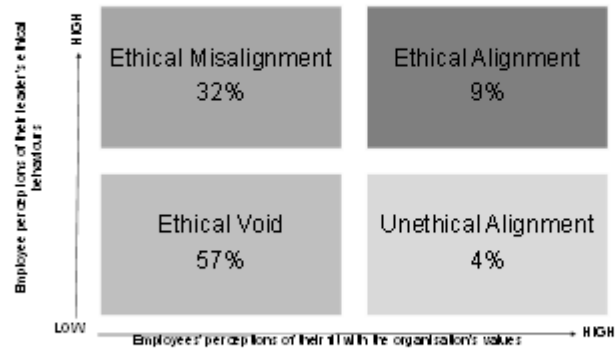


Figure 2



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Figure 3 Employee perceptions of their leader's ethical behaviours versus their belief that their values match those of the organisation – PoliceOrg



Values of each cell are in a 2x2 matrix. The low and high ranges are on the left and bottom. All 4 quadrants, one empty, are used to identify any one of a range of issues. The data is by age and by sex.