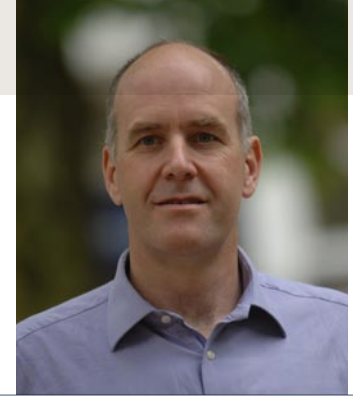


Spiritual training in the police force: are there lessons for other leaders and managers?

Jon Smith

Jon Smith is senior lecturer at Ashcroft International Business School



As a result of the traumatic conditions in which they often work, the police in the UK and the US have begun to recognise the importance of the spiritual dimension at work. As the credit crisis deepens, conditions in other professions are becoming very challenging and we may be able to learn from the police's example. Jon Smith discusses.

THE policing role is a very challenging one and operational policing particularly can be a very demanding and threatening job. Officers are regularly faced with situations that no-one would naturally choose to get involved in. Police have to deal repeatedly with death, serious injury, horrific crime scenes such

as rape, murder, serious road accidents, and riots, as well as having to be constantly alert to attack even when they are not on duty. Furthermore they can be ostracised by communities, friends and families.

All take their toll on an officer: on their health, fitness and well-being, and on their view of people and of the world. This heavy toll results in a series of defence mechanisms: cynicism, resistance to change, detachment from emotions, and these can result in high levels of sickness absence, ill health, divorce, drink and drug related problems and suicides (Smith, 2005).

Yet most police officers have chosen their profession because they want to contribute to building and maintaining a well-ordered, law-abiding society. So there is a great paradox here: whilst engaged in this community work, their day-to-day experience is that of existing in highly traumatic conditions; work for which they do not get recognised. On the contrary, they and their work is often not recognised as making a valuable contribution. They can become caught in a traumatic cycle.

Isolation of police force

In a recent co-authored paper on trauma and the police, we suggested that the violent situations in which police officers have to engage, and the way in which they learn to live with this, keeps them in a constant state of alienation from the rest of society – in

its shadow (Rees and Smith 2008). This is one of the mechanisms by which the traumatic and difficult aspects of ourselves and our society are banished from our consciousness. This is the nature of a traumatised society which is perpetuated by the 'silent bystander'. As Bloom points out:

'Our most pressing national problem today is not the growth of the criminal class. It is the silence, the apathy, and passivity of the people in the middle, the settled, stable, caring reasonable bunch who have become so easily manipulated by the vocal ends. This is the pathology of the bystander, to see what is wrong and remain silent.'

John Nirenberg, on pp. 8–15 also points out the strength of this collective mechanism when he talks about the Stanford prison experiments and his own battle at not remaining the 'Good German'. Given the recent furore over expenses of UK MPs, it seems that this mechanism is as alive and true today as it was in the 2nd World War.

However, one possible solution to this paradox is to provide a spiritual context in which police can be supported, and there is a growing call for this. In our secular society, this may seem radical, but the problem and its solution was identified as early as 2003 in the UK by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2003:120), who make a clear recommendation on this issue:

HM Inspector recommends that all forces have resources in place to meet the spiritual needs of police officers and police staff, while respecting the diversity of faiths and beliefs both inside the service and in the communities which they serve.

This acknowledgment of the relevance and importance of the spiritual needs of employees by a UK governmental body is very significant. However, the way forces try to meet these 'spiritual needs' is simply to employ a police chaplain. Whilst these chaplains do an excellent job, there is a slowly growing recognition that this approach is really just a sticking plaster to deal with a much larger and more fundamental issue which has to involve the whole organisation and its way of thinking and operating (Smith 2005).

A Spiritual focus at the FBI Academy

The fundamental spiritual challenges within policing and the strategic level significance of this has been recognized for more than three decades by the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) at the

'As the credit crisis intensifies, some of the experiences in the modern workplace are becoming ever closer to those experienced by police officers. This is shown in increasing numbers of depression, absenteeism, bullying, and of course the fear aroused by large-scale redundancies. These are issues of survival, and as such create conditions of trauma.'

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Academy (Harpold & Feemster 2002; Feemster 2007). Pioneers, such as James T. Reese and James J. Horn of the BSU incorporated spirituality in their research and courses across the last twenty-five years. The BSU sponsored in May 2001 a satellite broadcast focused on the responsibility of communities to answer the call to support the spiritual needs of first responders. In 2002 BSU hosted a Spirit of the Law Working Group to explore developing curricula designed to encourage and enable officer, agencies, and communities to collaborate on this initiative. A Spirit of the Law Conference was conducted in August 2003, followed by a second satellite broadcast highlighting interdisciplinary approaches to meeting the spiritual needs of first responders in 2004. This innovative research recently culminated in the establishment of the Beyond Survival Toward Officer Wellness (BeSTOW) Project (Feemster 2009 a; Feemster 2009 b).

This initiative is designed to educate law enforcement executives who attend the FBI National Academy about how to protect themselves and the officers they lead from the toxic effects of their profession. Authorized by Supervisory Special Agent Samuel L. Feemster at the FBI BSU in 2008 and 2009, I participated in working conferences in Lansdowne, VA which explored these spiritual challenges.

These conferences have been very significant and explored the challenging nature of policing and what interventions can be made to support officers in their work. We focused mainly on the importance of bringing a spiritual focus to the role, and looked at the challenges and benefits of doing this. The FBI recognise the vital role the public play and are also developing strategies which raise the general public's awareness of the role they play in supporting officers with the challenging role they have to perform. People attending were mainly senior law enforcement officers although there were several academics and police chaplains from America.

They fully recognised the ethical and business reasons for bringing more of a spiritual focus to policing. First and foremost they understood that there are moral obligations to train and support officers so they are safe and fit for duty, and are fully aware of the impact their required duties may have on them. Secondly, whilst this additional training and support will cost money, they believe this will be recouped many times over through reduced levels of: absence; staff turnover; long-term sickness; medical retirements; and officer suicides. Dealing with the spiritual chal-

lenges officers face is also likely to result in more motivated officers who show greater empathy, resulting in improved levels of service to the public.

What this will look like is yet to emerge. What is clear, however, is the radical change in approach that this conference implies. It raises many questions. What do we understand by spirituality? How can this in practice meet the needs of police officers? My earlier work in the police force examining just this, showed how difficult it was to break through the defensive culture that these traumatic conditions had evoked.

Wider applications

Our work with the police service has much wider learning and application. Although possibly more pronounced and extreme, the underlying challenges faced within policing are actually very similar to those seen in many other professions. Firefighters, soldiers, doctors, nurses, teachers, leaders and managers all face similar challenges. They too need to deal with their emotions and develop coping mechanisms to manage the stress they encounter in the role they undertake every day. They too need training and support to enable them to manage this stress effectively. Many other professionals face similar pressures but sometimes these are not as easy to recognise and identify. In these professions, the nature of the working conditions is not so clearly in need of change, though earlier issues of *Interconnections* have highlighted this.

As the credit crisis intensifies, some of the experiences in the modern workplace are becoming ever closer to those experienced by police officers. This is shown in increasing numbers of depression, absenteeism, bullying, and of course the fear aroused by large-scale redundancies. These are issues of survival, and as such create conditions of trauma. It may be that here too, we will need to develop and provide leadership models that include elements of spirituality. Indeed there has been a growing emphasis on this over the past few years (for example the new *Journal of Spiritual Management*), and the credit crisis has intensified this necessity.

So whilst the police have traditionally struggled not to be working in isolation, we may have a lot to learn from the new educational and leadership models that are now beginning to be employed within the police service.

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Section 3

Research and practice forum

This section provides a space for dialogue between business and academics, and for building a community of people engaged in breaking down the divide between theory and practice. Any comments on, or contributions to this section will be warmly welcomed.