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## **Developmental Paper**

### **Understanding leadership in inter-organisational collaborations – Emerging insights from an emergency service collaboration**

#### **Abstract:**

Emergency services leadership has been characterised as ‘top-down’, hierarchical, ‘heroic’ with a command and control approach prevalent in the organisations. There has been reliance on historical and hierarchical models of ‘heroic’ and ‘top-down’ leadership and absence of a distributive and pluralist approach to leadership. Current thinking and models are often based around individual services without much joined-up approach. Greater collaboration entails a different approach to leadership development, which needs to be facilitated at multiple levels within the organisations. In this paper, we use insights from an on-going collaboration between two police forces in England to identify critical challenges the collaboration faced as it evolved over a period of four years and the response of the senior leadership team to address the changes. We find that the most significant challenge the leaders faced from the members of the two organisations pertained to resistance to collaborate. The leaders adopted two approaches, involving organisational members in developing the business cases and organising culture and team bonding events, to mitigate resistance to address the challenges.

#### **Key Words:**

Inter-organizational collaboration; Police Forces; Leadership Theories; Integrative and Collaborative Leadership; Longitudinal Case Study.

## **Introduction**

Inter-organisational collaborations are increasingly recognised as a distinctive feature of public administration in general (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Crosby and Bryson, 2018) and more so in the case of emergency services (see Wilson and Grammich, 2017), which broadly falls under the domain of public management or public administration. However, the literature on leadership in public management does not adequately engage with nuances underpinning collaborative contexts (Crosby and Bryson, 2010; Morse, 2010; Van Wart, 2013). This is not simply a gap in the literature in public management rather this is also observed in the extant literature on inter-organisational relationships (Judge and Ryman, 2001; Rodrigues, 2005). In fact, we observe that in the set of both the literature, scholars tend to use the terms ‘managers’ ‘senior management’ and ‘boundary agents’, ‘alliance champions’ interchangeably to often highlight the role of the social agents involved in the formation and operationalisation of strategic partnerships (Crosby and Bryson, 2010; Kale and Singh 2009; Morse, 2008; Luo, 2008; Luvison and Cummings, 2017). In this respect, a number of studies have acknowledged the role of the ‘top management’ in influencing and shaping the formation of inter-organisational collaboration, particularly in international context (see for instance, Lee and Park, 2008; Boone et al., 2019; Yang and Meyer, 2019). However, there is a gap in terms of illuminating the roles of the organisational leaders or top managers in subsequent stages of the evolution of inter-organisational collaborations (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994; Burgelman et al., 2018). The significance of the role of the leaders in shaping the alliance process was succinctly made by Doz and Hamel (1998). They assert that “...senior managers often disengage once the deal is done, naively hoping that the alliance will fly along the auto pilot...the challenge of sustaining the on-going process of collaboration attracts little top management attention. So, no wonder majority of alliances fall short of original objectives” (Doz and Hamel, 1998:x). In this paper, we attempt to fill this gap. We systematically explore the roles of the leaders, those who were involved in providing strategic leadership as well as those involved in providing operational day to day leadership an on-going collaboration between two police forces in England, as the collaboration developed over time. The remainder of this short paper is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of leadership theories in context to public management in general and police forces in particular, since matters relating to police services falls under the broad category of public management. We then briefly provide an overview of the background of our research, i.e. the context of collaborations in police forces in England. We then describe our research setting and data sources. We conclude with some reflection from the insights generated from our study.

## **Leadership theories in public management**

The topic of leadership is one of the central concepts in the broad domain of public management or public administration and it has attracted considerable attention from different scholars, particularly in the context of its significance in addressing challenges associated with structural and organisational issues (Van Wart, 2003; Gretha-Taylor et al., 2011). In a recent critique on leadership in public management, Chapman et al., 2016, conclude that ‘while leadership in general has been difficult to study and measure, the increasing complex scope of public administration has made this more challenging, resulting in a fragmented approach to the study of public service leadership’ (p. 111). Collaborations and various types of strategic partnerships have added to the existing complexities associated with leadership in public management (Page 2010; Crosby and

Bryson, 2018). Broadly speaking, there are three strands of research on leadership in the context of public sector management. One body of research focuses on the character underpinning public leadership, whereas the second stream of studies explore functions associated with leadership and which include the importance of accountability, strategic actions, collaborations and entrepreneurial initiatives. The third stream of research highlights on the jurisdiction of leadership in public management, i.e. where leadership is exercised (Gretha-Taylor et al., 2011; Van Wart, 2013). Leadership issues in collaborative arrangements, in essence, occupy space within each of the three strands.

In specific context to police forces, most studies conceptualise leadership as based on individual leaders and their traits and skills, which complements the rank-authority and command and control structure that characterise most of the forces. As Wright et al. (2008) observe, police leadership has been typically explored based on three broad leadership theories, namely the behavioural, situational and transformational theories of leadership. Although each of these leadership theories are essentially underpinned by the traits and expertise of the leaders to lead the organisations, albeit by adopting different approaches. For instance, whilst the behavioural theory helps in identifying desirable behaviours (see for instance Schafer 2010; Hawkins and Dulewicz, 2009), situational leadership theory emphasises that leaders must adapt to different and complex situations. They can be directive as well as supportive to their subordinates depending on the complexities of the situation (Whitefield et al., 2008; Collage of Policing, 2015). Transformational leadership, pertains to a more collective approach of leadership that in essence places the leader in the role of an enabler of change and transformation (Cockcroft, 2014; Campbell and Kodz, 2011). However, these approaches to leadership, as some scholars argue (e.g. Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Page, 2010), are not suitable for collaborative settings. Inter-organisational collaborations, Crosby and Bryson (2010) suggest necessitate a more ‘integrative approach’ that entails, “...bringing diverse groups and organisations together in semi-permanent ways, and typically across cross sector boundaries, to remedy complex public problems and achieve the common good” (p.211). Building on this interpretation, Page (2010) posits that integrative leaders demonstrate capabilities to frame agenda, bring together different stakeholders and structure deliberation as the collaboration develops over time.

## **Research Background**

Collaborations occupy a central place in the police forces in England and Wales (HMIC, 2012). The drive for collaborations in the police forces is guided by two intertwined objectives, namely achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness. Simply put, in the backdrop of significant financial challenges in the period of austerity collaborations are increasingly viewed as a strategic mechanism through which police forces in England and Wales are expected to achieve operational resilience as well as accomplish significant saving and efficiency. HMIC defines collaborations as, “all activities where two or more parties work together to achieve a common goal and which includes inter force activities and collaboration with the public and private sectors including outsourcing and business partnering” (p. 11; HMIC report 2012)

HMIC report (2012) identified some 543 collaboration projects that were either currently under operations or are planned for the future. Based on these, the report has highlights four broad models of collaborations that are prevalent in police forces. These include:

- (a) Collaborations between and amongst police forces;

- (b) Collaborations between police forces and other public sector organisations;
- (c) Collaborations between police forces and private sector organisations; and
- (d) Multiparty collaborations between police forces and public as well as private sector organisations.

Considering a greater drive to achieve financial efficiency, particularly since 2011, it is expected that majority of police forces will engage in collaborations with different partners at the same time. In fact, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act, 2011 (sections 22 B and 22C) delineates active identification and consideration of collaborations as one of the key duties of the Chief Officers. The Chief Officers have to explore the opportunity of using collaborations even when a resulting collaboration may or may not bring any immediate benefit to their own respective forces (p. 13; Statutory Guidance for Police Collaboration, 2012).

Notwithstanding increasing importance given to collaborative activities by the police forces across England and Wales, there are significant variation in the scope, integration and maturity of collaborations. In this context, the HMIC report (2012) notes that although by 2014-15 “a sixth of the policing will be delivered collaboratively in England and Wales...current collaboration landscape is mixed and patchy...*with* some forces have found it challenging to provide basic costs and saving and few forces are looking to transform the way their deliver their services” (p.56; *italics* added). Considering these challenges, it is imperative that we pay attention to the leadership aspects underpinning collaborations amongst the police services.

### **Research Setting and Data Sources**

In this exploratory research we adopt case study method (Yin, 2003) to explore (a) various challenges collaborating organisations face as the relationship evolves; and (b) response of the senior leaders to these challenges. The specific case study we adopt in our paper pertains to an on-going strategic alliance between two police forces in England. This collaboration was formally initiated in March 2015. This agreement followed the announcement in December 2013 from the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and the Chief Officers of the two forces after they first agreed to explore opportunities for greater collaboration. This decision was consistent with the direction set nationally by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and the Government, where neighbouring forces are encouraged to work more closely together (HMRC report 2012). The overarching objective of the alliance is to explore how the two forces could maintain effective policing whilst also reducing costs by working more closely together. As a result the two forces decided to work together in over 30 administrative and operational business areas. The common areas of work included within the strategic alliance accounts for almost 40% of the total activity of the two forces. The chief officers and the crime commissioners decided at the beginning that the two forces would continue to have their own distinct identities and will pursue police and crimes plans agreed locally with their elected police and crime commissioner. They also decided that any costs and savings that come from joining these business areas together in the strategic alliance will be shared between the two organisations in proportion to the size of each force.

### **Data sources**

Our study relies on several data sources. First, qualitative data generated from semi-structured interviews over two phases with approximately 40 individuals associated with the alliance. The interviews in the first phase took place in May / June 2015, immediately after the alliance was announced. The interviews in this phase sensitized us to the background of the alliance in general and as well as the positions of the respective partners. The second phase of data collection took place in September and October 2017. In this phase the interviews were organised as ‘focused groups’. Second, we collected quantitative data by administering a longitudinal survey in July – August 2017. The survey, which was administered to 800 respondents, who had by then become part of the departments providing services in the alliance set up, encouraged respondents to provide their perspectives on various aspects relating to the alliance since it was initiated. Thus, we attempted to capture data in a longitudinal manner, i.e. what their perspective was when the alliance was initiated, whether they were part of any cultural workshops or if they were actively or passively involved in the drafting the business cases, and their perspective on functioning of their respective alliance team. We received responses from 308 respondents (approximately 38% response rate). Almost 170 respondents also left detailed comments, on various aspects relating to the functioning of the alliance, in a section that was provided for their insights at the end of the questionnaire.

### **Some concluding remarks**

We find that the collaboration between the two forces had two broad objectives. The objective to achieve efficiency and effectiveness was most often cited by the senior leaders. This was consistent with the stated objectives of the UK Government. The second objective, of the collaboration was to bring about organisational changes in both the collaborating organisations. The impact of organisational change resulting from the collaboration was particularly felt by the frontline officers as well as back office staffs. As a consequence, the collaboration faced significant resistance from the members of the two organisations. We observed that the senior managers overseeing the collaboration adopted two different tactics to mitigate the resistance. First they involved members of the two forces in drafting the business cases, that essentially makes the case for the collaboration; and second they organised team building sessions, inviting all the members affected by the collaborations to attend and directly interact with the senior leaders.

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