



**BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF MANAGEMENT**

---

**BAM**  
CONFERENCE

---

**3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER**

**ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM**

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

**About BAM**

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

## Ready or Not? Assessing Organizational Readiness For Change in a Public Service

Richard Harding, Jean Hartley, Loua Khalil, Matthew Jones, Denise Martin.

The Open University.

There is a significant strand of theory and research about organizational readiness to change (e.g. Holt et al, 2007; Weiner, 2008) including a modest literature about public service organizations, notably in health (e.g. Cinite et al, 2009; Weiner et al, 2008). However, police organizations are absent from much analysis, though they provide a valuable location for such analysis, as they provide regulatory not solely welfare services, and are subject to ‘top-down’ policy and institutional pressures. This paper addresses readiness to change in 43 police forces, covering all of England and Wales, and provides empirical evidence on variations in readiness. Change readiness is a predictor of change success (Stouten et al, 2018).

Much organizational change in public service organizations is mandated through policy initiatives, including public sector reform, creating top-down pressures for change (Cabinet Office, 2006; Taggart and O’Flynn, 2015). Policy development is followed by “implementation” or “rollout” which often overlooks the difficulties and unintended consequences of enacting change in complex organizations.

Academic scholars have for decades commented on the limitations of a purely policy-led, rational and project-managed approach to organizational change (O’Flynn et al, 2011). This is in part due to: complexity (Burnes, 2005; Pettigrew et al, 2001); people factors (e.g. Lewin, 1951; Dawson, 2002); institutional path dependencies (e.g. Scott, 2008; Greenwood et al, 2014); informal political factors (e.g. Buchanan and Badham, 1999) and contextual factors (van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Theoretical contributions have included the idea of organizational ‘readiness for change’ (e.g. Holt, 2007; Holt and Vardaman, 2013). This concept can be traced to the early research of Lewin (1951; see also Burnes, 2017) who advocated a three-step model of change which included “unfreezing”, whereby the current state was disrupted so that old behaviours could be unlearned, and new behaviours and structures adopted. Schein (1996) noted that unfreezing required recognising that it is a “*profound psychological dynamic process*” (p.27). Lewin’s three stage model has been much criticised but more recently rehabilitated by Burnes who argues that underlying many of the models of change is a version of Lewin’s change model.

In the last decade, there has been a growing interest in readiness to change (e.g. Shea et al, 2014; Weiner, 2014; Holt et al, 2007; Blackman et al, 2013). Holt et al (2010) define readiness as “*the degree to which those involved [in change] are individually and collectively primed, motivated and technically capable of executing the change.*”

Readiness, academics argue, has two key dimensions, with both psychological and structural factors. The former includes the change commitment of individuals and also views about the efficacy of the planned changes. Structural aspects include leadership behaviours and awareness of the long-term benefits for the organization.

Holt et al (2007) and Blackman et al (2013) developed measures to assess individual readiness for change but in this paper we examine readiness for change at the department

level (in this case the learning and development section of the organization). It is the focus of considerable change.

Readiness to change has some conceptual overlaps with, but also important differences from, organizational learning and absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Zahra and George, 2002; Butler and Ferlie, 2019). Such organizations can acquire, interpret, embed and use knowledge from external sources and are more likely to be more effective at achieving organizational change and innovation (Hartley and Rashman, 2018).

This developmental paper is an examination of readiness to change in the learning and development services of all 43 territorial police forces of England and Wales. The change derives from a national policy document about the future policing of the UK - Policing Vision 2025 (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2016). It provides an opportunity to explore what readiness for change might mean in public services organizations, and in this case across a whole sector.

The context of the research is UK policing. The challenges faced by police services in the UK and overseas are ever-changing. There are evolving challenges of threat, risk and harm, including terrorism, cybercrime, increasingly globalised organised crime and the need to protect vulnerable members of society. Senior police leaders and government acknowledge that services must adapt to keep pace with the modern policing environment.

Part of the ambition of Policing Vision 2025 is the education, training, learning and development of a professional workforce with the skills and capabilities required to meet the policing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With such a broad range of complex scenarios facing modern police officers and staff, it was recognised that there is a need to rethink how best to equip the workforce with the necessary skills, qualifications and specialisations for the future challenges in the policing environment.

The purpose of the research is to understand to what extent and in what ways English and Welsh police forces are exhibiting readiness for change in respect of the organizational changes to training, learning and development which would support to implementation of Policing Vision 2025.

An on-line survey was designed to establish for each organization what are its current working practices in relation to training, learning and development (L and D) and to examine several aspects of its readiness to change. The survey drew on the work of Holt et al (2007) but modified some questions for busy police professionals and to keep the survey short.

The survey covered the following sections: L and D capacity; channels of delivery and outsourcing; evaluation and review of L and D practices; evidence-based research and innovation; readiness of officers and staff for organizational change; factors helping and/or hindering readiness for organizational change

Responses were sought from two managers from each territorial police force in England and Wales. The first role was the individual responsible for the day-to-day management of training, learning and development. The second role was the executive team member who held the portfolio in the executive team for training, learning and development. These two roles were contacted (by name) in force, with a population of 86 for the survey.

Responses were received from 45 participants representing 32 police forces. The response rate represents a robust proportion of the total survey population at 71% and enables valid conclusions to be drawn. Two respondents covered both roles so the overall response rate by individual is 54 per cent, which is a good response rate. Thirty-four responses were received from day-to-day managers of TLD and nine responses were received from those holding the portfolio for TLD in the executive team. Consequently, the survey focuses more on the perspectives of those responsible for implementing training, learning and development operationally, rather than those whose role is to link TLD strategically into wider policing priorities. Nine of the 45 participants were police officers, with their ranks ranging from sergeant to superintendent.

The paper presents the findings from the survey, from which three themes about readiness can be discerned.

First, the survey showed that many forces are preparing for the upcoming changes set out in Policing Vision 2025 but the readiness for change is low. There are several indicators that training, learning and development staff were not ready for the changes. This is indicated by measures about perceptions of the volume and pace of change; lack of confidence in whether changes will be successfully implemented; not feeling personally ready for change; and lacking confidence in their organizational being effective at implementing changes to achieve evidence-based practice.

Second, there are some structural factors which support readiness for change. This includes expectations of support from senior leadership at executive level and within the L and D department; opportunities to learn from other police forces, from other professions and from international comparisons of organizational change in L and D.

However, the third theme is the high levels of uncertainty in forces, as reported in this survey, with measures of uncertainty about why changes in L and D are occurring; whether or not Policing Vision 2025 will bring benefits to the force; uncertainty about whether or not Policing Vision will be implemented successfully). Organisational research into uncertainty in the workplace points out that gaps in knowledge may be filled with rumour and myth, which can be hard to undo, or to change later.

The empirical research makes a contribution to the literature by deploying the concept of readiness to change to organizations in the public service sector, where change has more often been mandated than voluntary. It adds to the literature about organizational set in their organizational field (Scott, 2008) which has been under-analysed in much organizational analysis.

## References

- Blackman D, O'Flynn J and Ugyel L (2013) A diagnostic tool for assessing organizational readiness for complex change. *Conference paper*. Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management. Hobart, Tasmania.
- Buchanan D and Badham R (1999) *Power, politics and organizational change: Winning the turf game*. London: Sage
- Burnes B (2005) Complexity theories and organizational change. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 7(2), 73-90.

- Burnes B (2017) *Managing change*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Pearson.
- Butler M and Ferlie E (2019) Developing absorptive capacity theory for public service organizations: Emerging UK empirical evidence. *British Journal of Management*, doi 10.1111/1467-8551.12342
- Cabinet Office. (2006). *The UK Government's Approach to Public Service Reform – A Discussion Paper*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Cinite I, Duxbury L and Higgins C (2009) Measurement of Perceived Organizational Readiness for Change in the Public Sector. *British Journal of Management*, 20(2), 265-277.
- Cohen, W and Levinthal D. 1(990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35(1):128-52.
- Dawson P (2002) Understanding organizational change: *The contemporary experience of people at work*. London: Sage.
- Greenwood R, Hinings R and Whetten D (2014) Rethinking institutions and organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(7), 1206-1220.
- Hartley J and Rashman L (2018) Innovation and learning in a national programme of public service reform *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 84, (2), 231-248
- Holt D, Armenakis A, Harris S, and Field S. (2007), Toward a comprehensive definition of readiness for change: a review of research and instrumentation, in Pasmore W and Woodman R (eds.) *Research in Organizational Change and Development (Research in Organizational Change and Development, Volume 16)*.
- Holt D, Helfrich C, Hall C, Weiner B (2010) Are you ready? How health professionals can comprehensively conceptualize readiness for change. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. 25(Suppl 1): 50–55.
- Holt D and Vardaman J (2013) Toward a comprehensive understanding of readiness for change: the case for an expanded conceptualization. *Journal of Change Management*, 13,(1), 9-13.
- Lewin, K. 1951 *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper and Row.
- McTaggart D and O'Flynn J (2015) Public sector reform. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 74(1), 13-22.
- National Police Chiefs' Council. *Policing Vision 2025*. NPCC: London.
- O'Flynn, J., Vardon, S., Yeatman, A. and Carson, L. (2011) Perspectives on the Capacity of the Australian Public Service and Effective Policy Development and Implementation. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 70(3), 309-317.
- Pettigrew A, Woodman R and Cameron K (2001) Studying Organizational Change and Development: Challenges for Future Research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4), 697-713.
- Scott W. R (2008) *Institutions and organizations*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

- Shea C, Jacobs, Esserman D, Bruce K and Weiner B (2014) Organizational readiness for implementing change: a psychometric assessment of a new measure. *Implementation Science*, 9(7),
- Stouten, J., et al. (2018). Successful organizational change. *Academy of Management Annals* 12(2): 752-778.
- Van de Ven, A and Poole S (1995). Explaining development and change in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (3), 510-540.
- Weiner B (2008) A theory of organizational readiness for change. *Implementation Science*, 4.
- Weiner, B, Amick H and Lee S (2008). Conceptualization and Measurement of Organizational Readiness for Change: A Review of the Literature in Health Services *Medical Care Research and Review*, 65(4), 379–436.
- Zahra, S and George G. (2002). Absorptive capacity: A review, reconceptualization and extension. *Academy of Management Review* 27(2):185-203.