

A different perspective

Ray Powell, president of the National Black Police Association for the UK, set to stand down from the position this month, writes about how the police service can move forward and better reflect and work with different communities.

 The National Black Police Association held its 6th national conference this year in Cleveland, Middlesbrough, entitled 'Black Police Associations in the Communities'. This was the first national conference held by the Association with a purely external focus on the service the police deliver to communities.

As I come to the end of my presidency, it feels appropriate that I reflect on the last six years of working with the National Black Police Association and partners to bring about change within the service and our communities.

The concept of community engagement is by no way new to the police service, the inner city riots of the 1980s were partially due to the service not paying attention, not listening or hearing the concerns of our communities. The inability of a white, heterosexual and male dominated police service to view the world through the eyes of people who do not fall into this category, has had a long lasting and sustained affect upon the service to this day. Have we however learned any lessons and if so, what has changed and does the service have a vision of success.

What is community?

The concept of what a community has changed over time; most would agree that the community in the days of 'Dixon of Dock Green' is a far cry from today's multi-faceted and culturally diverse society.

It is crucial that the police service understand this concept before actually being able to work with communities and also to reflect them within the service.

Understanding the dimensions and the concepts of community will enable those working with them to better target their efforts and improve their work.

An example of this can be found when looking at the Muslim community. When some forces look to take on board the views of this community they may have an idea that the people they need to consult may be leaders representing Pakistani members of a community.

But Muslims come from all walks of life and ethnic groups and may have very varied opinions on how the police should work with them.

As a service we like to put people in boxes, I believe there is a time and a place for boxes and sometimes we have to empty the boxes and let our subjects find their own way and take the observers with them in the process.

A practical example of this would be to invite all those who have a view to take part in discussing the impact of stop and search powers on ethnic minority communities, rather than known leaders from a particular group.

The central definition of communities is a sense of 'who is included and who is excluded from membership'. A person may be a member of a community by choice or by virtue of their innate characteristics such as race, age, gender or ethnicity. As a result individuals may belong multiple communities at any one time. These are complex associations that the service must be aware of and utilise when developing community strategies both external and internal.



Responsibility

The horrific acts of terrorism of 9/11 and 7/7 have brought new challenges and new responsibilities to the policing family. The most important and obvious challenge being public safety, secondly the fair, proportionate and non-discriminating implementation of legislation, and finally maintaining public confidence.

Every person within the police service needs to take responsibility in working towards a better relationship with communities.

I see, what I would call, transformational leadership as being essential to the service moving forward. This is where individuals transform beliefs and values from within the police service, primarily to respect and value others for

their uniqueness. This will go some way, I believe, to driving racism out.

It is difficult to simply 'weed out' racists at the recruitment stage or give officers diversity training to put a stop to it, this needs to be done by values within the service. If the service oozes such values, then those who come into the service who are racist and do not adhere to such values will find themselves in a very uncomfortable environment.

Leadership has to be at all levels, from the Home Secretary to chief officers and frontline officers on the ground. The definition of responsibility implies that we have a choice. By choosing to look, see, listen and hear what is happening around us and to our communities we begin the first steps to building the foundations of change for the service.

If we were to take this ingredient of responsibility and add a little bit of lateral thinking, diverse perspective and forethought, we just may get some different thinking and subsequently different results.

I would like to share my thinking around some of what I would describe as key ingredients for the way forward.

We make choices in life using our history and past experiences as a reference point. Why do we therefore keep making the same mistakes when dealing with community issues? How often have we seen the introduction of vital legislation without the policies and infrastructures to support those who may be adversely affected the introduction of such legislation?

Examples of this may be the new anti-terrorist legislation, which my adversely impact upon innocent members of the Asian communities as does stops under the

Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE). In some cases this adverse impact can be seen both internally and externally.

Home Office figures showed that in 2003 to 2004, Asians were 1.9 times more likely to be stopped and searched, compared with 1.7 times more likely in the previous year.

In respect of 'stops' for example we see disproportionality amongst the Black communities and extra pressures upon first line supervisors to ensure that officers are not conducting stops in an unfair and disproportionate manner.

There has been a clear inability to respond to these two groups from the inception stage of drafting such legislation. An opportunity missed to gain the confidence of our Black communities and supervisors within the service.

Effective consultation can be that catalyst to enable the service to change its thinking, should it take responsibility.

What do we do as a service when our reference point, based on our own experiences, tells our thinking that our choices are not going to work?

More often than not we try to re-badge an old idea under a new name, maybe because it's easier than establishing another reference point from somebody else's experience.

The thinking process in the brain is very much like pouring water on a pile of sand. If you pour water onto a pile of sand it will create troughs for the water to run down. If you pour water on the same place the troughs just get deeper. If, however, one was to pour water onto a different part of the sand, new troughs would appear, this is our new thinking.

Diverse perspective

To be truly informed and open to possibilities for the way forward, the service needs to see the world through the lenses of others, appreciate and value their uniqueness. The strands of diversity need to be acknowledged as each brings with them their own community and culture. I often feel that the police service views community engagement as a purely external exercise, with no real acknowledgement for the communities within the service or what value they can bring to service delivery within their respective communities, be it in the areas of disability, race, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation.

There is a huge potential locked away and restricted within our own four walls that needs to be invested in if we are to unlock this valuable resource.

Government 'targets' state that seven per cent of the service should be non-white by 2008. The Met's target is 25 per cent.

Instead of talking about targets, we should be talking about how we respond to our communities needs. If our communities want black and ethnic minority officers, with a knowledge of those communities or language skills to communicate with them, then that is what the service should be doing.

It is not about advertising for a 'black officer' but being role specific, looking for someone with the skills that community wants and needs for us to deliver an effective service.

Community engagement and confidence is about everybody taking 100 per cent responsibility, from the janitor to the Home Secretary. The Home Office needs to realise and appreciate the impact that its policies have upon

frontline police officers, staff and their respective communities, by providing adequate support for staff support associations, to enable them to carry out their business on behalf of, and in support of the service.

There has to be a fundamental change in mindset at the individual level, where community engagement is not seen as something that has to be undertaken, but something the individual wants to do, not only for the development of the service but self development. By applying basic leadership skills when engaging our communities with respect, appreciation and willingness to listen and hear. The service will more than likely get that back in return; further more it can only lead to individual growth and subsequently the growth and development of the service, with a degree of sustainable change in culture.

Finally, I would like to say that I have seen an improvement, and a level of raised awareness of race and diversity within the police service. I feel that we have all played a part in this, the tri-partite of ACPO, Home Office and Association of Police Authorities, have always responded to the concerns of the NBPA, not always the right response however.

I would also like to acknowledge the work and dedication of those in local federations around the country who have shown tangible support for my members and local Black Police Associations. There have been some excellent examples where joint branch boards have stepped outside that box to send a clear message to the rest of the Federation. I view the chairs of these branch boards as pioneers within the Federation.

