Law enforcement agencies and action learning approach —
(a potential tool for leadership development)

Georgina Stréhli-Klotz
Hungary

Abstract

Law enforcement agencies increasingly have to adapt to the fast-changing global environment and local challenges. In order to maintain public trust and increase professionalism and efficiency, law enforcement should implement new management and leadership skills. However, law enforcement agencies often maintain traditional hierarchic structures and leadership roles which often interfere with new challenges.

One solution to this complex challenge could be the leadership development training of law enforcement officers with an action-learning approach. Action learning focuses on real problems, provides practical and easy-to-adapt solutions and allows leaders to improve problem-solving processes within the organisation.

The paper discusses in detail the implementation possibilities of action-learning training methods in law enforcement training sessions, which could help not only to improve problem-solving skills and leadership performance but also to change organisational culture and attitudes.

Keywords: action learning; organisational culture; change; law enforcement; leadership development.

Introduction

In our globalising world, having an organisation that is flexible and able to change quickly is increasingly important in the life of companies and also in the area of public service. Public service has to meet changes in the environment since its primary purpose is to serve the citizens. This statement is entirely true in respect of law enforcement as well, together with the fact that law enforcement operates in a specific cultural environment. All this demands that organisations and the organisational cultures of companies have to be continuously adapted to their environment.

In the present study I try to find the answers to the following questions: How is it possible to manage the transformation of organisations as an organic, unified process? How is it possible to establish it based on the specific features of the organisational culture using the methods of action learning? How is it possible to facilitate the organisational model that is considered to be the most appropriate from a professional aspect, through which the law enforcement agencies are able to establish the medium in which law enforcement tasks may be carried out, meeting their specific needs?

In the first section I review the basics of organisational culture, then I cover the special features of law en-
Organisational culture

Organisational culture came to the attention of organisation researchers in the 1980s. This topic became very popular after its appearance. Researchers examined lots of its aspects, issuing a confusing volume of publications. It is characteristic of the proliferation of the topic that one can hardly find any grouping in professional literature that specifies the different schools of approaching the issue of organisational culture. One of the most well-known classifications of this type can be connected to the name of Meyerson and Martin (1987), who separated integrating, differentiating and fragmenting approaches.

However, the purpose of present article is not to discuss these groups in detail, therefore it is only necessary to mention the theories that are related to this topic. Nevertheless, it can be stated that an increasing number of researchers started to deal with this topic, and this is the reason why there is no generally accepted definition of organisational culture in use. One rather meets solutions within the framework of which the authors collect definitions of organisational culture or only review the elements that are relevant for them and, based on this, they create a new definition (e.g. House, Wright and Aditya, 1997).

In my article I use the definition that is provided in the research of GLOBE (1), since the author concluded their definition on the basis of the summary of the experiences of the research that was done in the international arena and its findings. According to this definition (House et al, 2002) organisational culture is ‘shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of collectives and are transmitted across age generations’.

After defining the term, I continue by covering the types of cultures, which may provide assistance in defining the types of law enforcement agencies. I cover this on the basis of the most widely used Handy-type (Handy, 1985) classification, which is based on organisational structure. Handy defines organisational cultures based on power, role, task and person structures. Herein I only present the most typical one for law enforcement agencies: role culture.

In the case of role culture, the structure most resembles the structure of a Greek temple, in which the supporting columns represent the specific functional units. This type is characteristic of bureaucratic, rational and logical organisations, which operate along procedural rules and examples, authority and operation policies. Practically, the policies define each activity and their process within the organisation. The well-defined roles stipulated by rules are the most important aspect, and the person fulfilling the given role is less important. They even select the appropriate person for the role, who will fill in the role in line with the rules. This kind of organisation does not evaluate performance exceeding the role, since this kind of performance is not desirable. Therefore, it does not support creativity, self-dependency, proactivity and independence. An organisation of this type operates efficiently in a stable, slowly changing environment or under integrating pressure. On the other hand, in a continuously changing, unpredictable environment it becomes uncertain, since it is able to change itself only by restructuring the roles, the tasks and the responsibility scopes.

Organisational structure within law enforcement

As we can see from the previous section, the organisational culture is significant from the perspective of the operation and performance of the organisation. It defines the processes, it influences management and competitiveness and it has an impact on the entire organisation. And in the case of law enforcement agencies we can talk about a culture that has very strong traditions, since the character of their task already significantly predestines that law enforcement has to establish a special organisational culture.

(1) GLOBE on the research, see: http://globe.bus.sfu.ca/
Of the above culture types, role culture is the most appropriate for the organisational operation of law enforcement, since basically in this regard we can talk about a bureaucratic organisation. Several researchers have tried to describe this culture type, and as regards their characteristics these descriptions are similar to the typology of Handy. According to Quinn (2006) this type is a hierarchy; according to Feldmann (1985) it is culture of conformity; Deal and Kennedy called it process culture; while according to Kono (1990) it is bureaucratic culture.

Although there are differences in countries’ organisational cultures, in many cases due to national cultural differences, nevertheless it may be said that the cultural elements of law enforcement agencies are the same as regards their main features. These similarities can be observed obviously in the unified nature of their related task system.

According to Gábor Kovács (2009) it is characteristic of law enforcement organisational culture that it forms a closed, autocratic, command-based power system, within which there is a strict hierarchy. However, in addition to this, the author mentions human orientation, i.e. caring, as a cultural element. The reason for this in this case is not caring by the management, but social caring that is due to the closed system, which is provided by public service workers. Control is strong — it is exercised by the management — and there is little scope for criticism and conflicts. However, people working in law enforcement consider their profession to be a mission of their lives and performance orientation also unambiguously appears in the culture of the organisation. The author also mentions the dimension of risk avoidance and risk undertaking. In this regard, he describes the organisation as a risk-undertaking one. However, this is due to the character of the tasks of the armed organisation rather than to undertaking risks of organisational decisions or to the implementation of innovative ideas. These factors include characteristics of bureaucratic or role culture as well. However, examining some of its characteristics it can be said that it includes special elements as well, which cannot be classified under bureaucratic culture. These characteristics include, among others, the reaction or relationship to the environment, since according to Kovács law enforcement has to react to its environment, although, in spite of this, relationship with the environment and flexibility appear to a smaller extent among the features of this category. It has to be added that reaction to the environment is probably one of the most important factors in respect of which the police have to meet the requirements. However, the present practice — especially in Hungary (Krémer at al., 2008) — reflects to a significantly greater extent the bureaucratic, inflexible organisation, hierarchy-based, formalised organisational structure, which does not offer any space for creativity and for innovative solutions.

The appearance of community policing (Wilard, 2001) can be also interpreted as a response to this specific problem, since while with the development of means of state penalising power, law enforcement — and law enforcement agencies as well — became increasingly regulated, they adapted themselves with increasing difficulty in the 1960s to increasingly dynamic societal-economic relations, especially to the demands of local communities. The attitude-related response to this was the appearance of community policing, which was based on the establishment of organisational strategies — and of organisational cultures — which increasingly take into consideration the demands of local communities, and which try to achieve partnerships with them, which produces new problem-solving methods and approaches criminal acts in a proactive manner (COPS, 2008).

Another research project (Pirger, 2015) that primarily examined Hungarian law enforcement agencies points to the fact that there are differences between the desired cultural values and those that are realised in practice. This involves human orientation, i.e. the level of empathy of the leaders and their social sensitivity, the extent of performance orientation and willingness to be creative and to innovate.

Based on my own experience gained as a trainer I have to mention that law enforcement today needs development of the superior–subordinate relationship, i.e. the development of leadership skills and creativity. Implementing ideas with more risk undertaking is the leadership behaviour required in order to allow flexible adaptation to changes in the surrounding environment and to react to the challenges. In the next section I cover these challenges, which have proliferated over recent decades.
Challenges facing law enforcement agencies

In recent decades we have witnessed a number of societal, economic and technical changes, which have transformed societal and economic life at its roots and, due to this, have an influence on criminal activities and crime-fighting as well. Let us take into consideration one by one what these changes may be and which of them represent the greatest challenges for law enforcement agencies.

Use of technical devices has become increasingly widespread in the 21st century, and this field has undergone accelerated development. This development offers newer and newer opportunities to those committing crimes, including smartphones, fraud committed with bank cards and the application of blackmail viruses. In addition to this, not only have the innovations been used, but the methods for committing crimes have also changed, to which the police have to react and adapt (Stephens, 2013).

With the spreading of globalisation and the spreading of extreme ideologies, an increasing number of terrorist acts can be also observed. As a consequence of this, fighting against terrorism became of primary importance not only within countries but at the international level as well. Therefore, law enforcement increasingly needs the deployment and ensuring of international networks and information flows. To this end several initiatives have been conceived (2); some of them are more refined, while others are still operating only in their initial phase. In the case of terrorist acts we have to keep abreast of the devices used and the changing of the group of perpetrators and the changing of their criminal act-related behaviour.

Differences between the generations have always been a part of our lives. However, there has never before been such a huge technical, knowledge and behavioural difference between the different generations as there is nowadays. While the baby boomer generation was already working hard at the time when the first office computers appeared, generation X could get acquainted with the new technologies right from the start. However, even among that generation there are lots of people who are lagging behind as regards mobile applications and cloud-based systems. Generation X had the chance to get acquainted with the new technologies as youngsters, however the employees of the future, the online generation or generation Z, can already use new technologies as real digital natives, beginning at the age when they start to walk, and in line with this their brains, their way of thinking and their problem-solution abilities have already shifted to using mobile technologies. Based on this, it represents an increasing challenge for employers to transfer knowledge between the generations and to optimise their cooperation (Frost, 2011). All these challenges, and primarily the increasingly accelerated pace of change, place a significant burden on law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies, in order to be able to adapt themselves to these societal changes and to meet the increasing societal expectations, have to incorporate innovations into their day-by-day work in a flexible manner. And this requires an organisational culture that supports and facilitates these solutions and is able to manage changes in a flexible manner.

Therefore, it can be seen that the current, rather hierarchical organisational structure of law enforcement agencies is less suitable for flexibly adapting to rapid changes. To this end, it is essential to reduce the hierarchy and at the same time to support within the organisation the deployment of attitude forming, cooperation and professional relations. There are several options for achieving this attitude transformation. However, according to the experiences (Stephens, 2013), and in my opinion, the method of action learning could be a method that on the one hand may adapt itself to the thinking and structure of law enforcement and on the other hand may provide an answer to these challenges and provide the assistance law enforcement needs even today.

About action learning

The process of coaching that serves the development and supports the management skill of the top managers is an area that is already known to many people today. In fact it is an advice-providing system tailored to the individual, the essence of which is to support leaders in managing problematic situations arising out of their work, which essentially goes hand in hand with the development of the leader’s skills. In addition to business coaching, this development tool has numerous forms. Interaction takes place primarily between the manager and the coach in the course of this process. However, there is so-called team coaching as...
well, in which the method employed is similar, however in this case the coach already leads a team unit. Similarly to training events, team coaching is also done in small groups. Nevertheless, the main difference is that it does not exclusively deal with management problems, rather it deals with problematic situations or group dilemmas. This method places a greater emphasis on cooperation, through which it highlights the way the players can work together in the most efficient manner. The subject of my study is the action-learning method, which is one of the variants of team coaching.

But what actually is action learning? In short, ‘Action learning is nothing else, but learning through actions within a controlled environment’ (O’Neil and Marsick, 2007). This method is connected with the name of Reg Revans. He developed it in the 1940s and 1950s. Reg Revans recognised at a relatively young age, when he was still a teenager, the significance of information sharing. His father was a member of the examination committee of the Titanic disaster, which within the framework of this work drew conclusions as regards the circumstances of this fatal accident. The examination established that it would have been possible to avoid the accident if everybody had received the important information (the fact that the ship was approaching an iceberg) in due time and in due quality. This was the time when Revans recognised the huge opportunities that are represented by questions. He recognised that we have to find the answer to the question ‘what?’, i.e. the plain information and facts, instead of trying to answer the question ‘why?’, i.e. instead of dealing with marginal issues. Probably everybody knows the situation in which, after assigning a task to a subordinate, the latter primarily tries to find out why exactly they are the person that has to implement the task, and why it is not the task of someone else. That is, they do not deal at all, even by chance, with what they should do and how they will carry out the task.

The method was initially applied in coal mines and in hospitals, then — encouraged by the success — multinational companies that manufacture IT, electronic and telecommunication devices also started to use it, and even one of the largest financial service providers in the United States applies it. Several companies active in the international information technology sector extended the application of this method and introduced it in most of their subsidiaries. In addition to the private sector, the method has been also spread in the group of state companies. For example, it is also used in the United States by the Ministry of Defence, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) (Lanahan and Maldonado, 1998) and the Department of Justice.

Action learning is basically a kind of further development of competence-based training events. It is based on the elements of the methodology of training, and it uses its principles to provide the solutions. Its great advantage is that it uses experience-based learning as its foundation, i.e. the participating leaders learn and develop through solving specific problems. The participants may come from similar areas of the organisation, but they may even come from completely different special fields, and the selection of the topic will not necessarily be connected directly to each participant. This issue is completely irrelevant from the point of view of achieving the purpose of action learning. Therefore, the members of the team may work on different slices of the same organisational project, or they may even work on completely different projects. During training events they get to the recognition through simple, schematic tasks, from which they can draw the appropriate conclusions. The conclusion is important from the point of view of the task, which we can build around many areas. However, the method exceeds the methodology of training, since it brings the participants and the members of the team nearer to the problem, and over a short time a solution may be achieved — a solution that may be immediately applied in the course of day-to-day work.

The essence of the method is summarised by Marquardt (2011) in six components. These represent the basis of the methodology of action learning. The efficient operation of these elements offers the opportunities included in this method, which lead to fast, efficient and — according to the experiences — spectacular results in the lives of the organisations. This way the method is capable of managing the challenges in a more focused manner. The specific elements are summarised by the following figure. Subsequently I try to describe these elements briefly.
The problem

Action learning focuses on the problem in the project, the challenge that is faced by the organisation, the difficult case or task. It is important that these problems are very important from the point of view of the individual, for the team and/or the organisation. It can also be said that generally they require an urgent solution, and it is expected that the team will provide one. In addition to the team focusing on solving the problem, it offers a possibility for learning and for establishing joint knowledge, and in addition to this it provides an opportunity for individual development. Simultaneously, the capabilities and skills of the team and of the organisation are also able to develop. The situation to be solved may be a simple or a complex problem, although challenges that do not involve a single solution provide more opportunities for the participants.

The team

A key element of action learning is the group or team. In an ideal case the team consists of four to eight persons, who are present as participants and who work on the organisational problem to find its solution. Usually the members of the team have different backgrounds and different professional experiences, and this ensures that they will consider the situation to be solved with a new, fresh approach and encourages the participants to get acquainted with different perspectives and opinions. The character of the problems depends to a great extent on the composition of the team. The team — depending on the character of the action-learning problem — may consist of voluntary applicants or of delegated members, of colleagues from different specialised areas or organisation units or of representatives of other organisations or professions. Moreover, it may also include suppliers and consumers.

Questions

Action learning gives priority to questions and feedback rather than to statements and opinions. It focuses on the good questions and even more on the good responses. It places emphasis on what we know and what we do not know. Action learning deals with the problem through the flow of questions, through which it is possible to clarify the problem and its character. Subsequently it provides feedback and identifies the possible solutions. It defines the measures needed only after having implemented these steps. The questions are in the focus, while the great solution contains the best solutions and the essence of the best questions. The questions build up the team, define the dialogues and facilitate cooperation, and in addition to this they support creative and system thinking and improve the results of learning.

Action

In the process of action learning it is an expectation that the team should be able to work on the problem. The members of the team themselves have to take the necessary steps or they have to ensure that their expectations should be implementable. If a team phrases
only expectations it will lose its energy, creativity and commitment. In this case there will be no sensible or practical learning in the course of the process and reflecting. Also in this case it is not certain that an idea or plan will be effective and that it will be possible to incorporate it. Action learning enhances learning because it provides a base and provides handholds to the critical feedback points. During the course of action learning the participants redefine the problem and define the targets again and again, step by step, and the participants define the strategy only after these steps, and then again they will define the measures required.

Learning

It provides a solution for an organisational problem straight away, within a short time, for the organisation and in a refunded way. Learning means a greater, longer-term and more complex advantage for the organisation, while at the same time the profit obtained from learning involves each team member and the team as a whole as well. Thus, experience-based learning acquired in the course of action learning represents greater strategic value for the organisation than the direct, tactical advantage that is acquired in the course of problem-solving. Accordingly, the method places equal emphasis on learning and the development of the individual, as well as on the team and the solution to the problem. The smarter the team becomes, the faster and higher quality the decisions will be, and the measures will be defined as a result of the action-learning meetings.

The action-learning coach

In the case of coaching it is important that the team focus on the important (e.g. learning) and the urgent (e.g. problem-solving) issues. The action-learning coach helps the team with feedback in respect of the learning of the members and the problem-solving method. In the question phase the coach permits the members to reflect on what they have heard, i.e. through this the coach helps them to reframe the problem, to provide feedback to each other, to plan and work, to define their assumptions and, finally, to define their beliefs and measures. The coach also helps the team to focus on what the members wish to achieve, to find out what they consider to be difficult and to define the processes they use and their consequences. The coaching role may rotate between the members, or the team may even appoint one of its members to be the coach.

These training sessions may be used for a number of purposes beyond competence development. From the point of view of the present study, it can primarily be highlighted that the leaders participating in the training are able to acquire a new attitude, which is based on common thinking and the sharing of experiences. If the leaders are able to also apply this approach — which operates successfully within the controlled training environment — within the organisation, they may build a new organisational culture. Since the leader carries forward the action-learning approach and the ‘attitude that is experienced and acquired’ together with it, this approach will also slowly transform the method of organisational thinking. Therefore, action learning is the method for changing the organisational culture, and it can be an excellent means for reform and change management.

Implementing organisational change and culture shift is always a complex process, and the process is never linear (Fullan, 1993). According to Senge, cited by Silins (2001), organisational change is like a ‘fundamental shift of mind’. This change has to be accepted by each member of the organisation and they need to be able to integrate it into their day-to-day work. This kind of integration may occur with a higher probability if the individuals are organised into work teams. Learning within a team has a higher probability of being implemented, and it also has a higher probability of reaching other persons and teams. Through this, organisational change and its acceptance may become more efficient.

In one of his studies Robert Kramer (2008) also examined the role of action learning in connection with organisational culture shift. According to his standpoint the change may be realised by the participant living through and experiencing the essence of the method, and by establishing a closer relationship with colleagues and by asking questions the participant gets a huge amount of additional information. However, if the original organisation culture is rigid and hierarchic, and it has a more direct management style, the manager participating in the action-learning training will be able to apply what they have learned only in a restricted way. Therefore they will be forced to reduce the distance between their subordinates and themselves, and through this to establish a looser organisational...
Applying action learning in the area of law enforcement

Let us now see in what respect the method of action learning is different and why it can be used more efficiently in the field of law enforcement. As I have already outlined in the first section, the organisational structure in the area of law enforcement has a very strong, hierarchical character, which includes strict expectations and well-demarcated performance requirements. In an environment of this type, a focused tool that provides a solution in a brief manner is required. While team coaching in many cases covers several areas, it tries to map cooperation and workplace relationships with a wider scope. Contrary to this, action learning dictates more focused and stricter rules, which matches well to the expectations of an organisational culture of this type. In addition to this, the processes of learning and problem-solving are also more evident for the participants in the case of action learning.

Although the daily operation of the law enforcement agencies is characterised by a high degree of unpredictability, which organisations try to counterbalance with their internal stability and predictability, achieving a more risk-undertaking and looser structure may also improve efficiency and performance. This is also proved by the research that has been introduced in the previous sections.

Since traditions and attitudes may be traced back a very long time, even a period of several hundred years, the changing of the culture at law enforcement agencies — also due to weak organisational intentions and experiences — means especially great challenges. It is obvious that this type of organisational change is a process that cannot be conducted easily. In my opinion, for this reason, especially great emphasis has to be placed on involving the persons participating and on implementing gradual transformation instead of radical change, since without this not a single organisational change can be successful.

From the point of view of my topic the role of leaders is especially significant. The professional literature of today already assumes an unambiguous relationship between organisational culture and managers’ behaviour (Schein, 2004) and attitude, which have a forward-backward impact. For example, according to Schein (2004) the most important function and task of management is the establishment and maintenance of an organisational culture.

If we consider this to be the basis, it can be said that an efficient organisational environment can be consciously facilitated with exercises which model the required operation, while at the same time the controlled environment provides an opportunity to correct the improper sample, to assist leaders in experiencing and practising the desired form of behaviour and to pass over the approach that has been acquired. Consequently, from the point of view of transforming the organisational culture, it is of key importance to form of the leadership attitude and acquire the necessary management support. It is obvious that changing the organisational structure of law enforcement agencies is a very slow process, and primarily the target is not to change the entire system in a radical manner but rather to establish an organisational medium where cooperation and relationships can operate more smoothly in the fields of both domestic and international relationships.

Although the methodology of action learning has been basically set out for the entrepreneurial environment, in my opinion the flexibility of the elements of the methodology allows its efficient and successful application also in environments that significantly deviate from the entrepreneurial environment. Naturally, to this end, it is necessary to modify to a greater or lesser extent the six components described in detail above, the purpose of which continues to be to find adequate responses to organisational challenges.

It is the advantage of action learning that it is possible to rely, on the occasion of its introduction, on the already existing structure. While the professional literature highlights the different professional backgrounds of the participants, nevertheless, in my opinion, this method should primarily target an improvement in the cooperation in and the efficiency of the professional areas in the field of law enforcement. Therefore, it is more important that the result be achieved through the cooperation of participants of different backgrounds. On the one hand this is indispensable because in a number of areas it is necessary that several organisations
work together in a harmonised way. On the other hand, teamwork and case discussions directed at solving specific and complex problems can help other participants in exploring their own problems and cases.

For example, such a group may be a group of colleagues in a city that work in the area of crime fighting, which may even be implemented in several forms. Based on my professional experience, the operation of a professional area (e.g. investigators) in the form of an action-learning team or the establishment of a mixed group within the crime-fighting area (e.g. patrol, explorer, investigator, etc.) may be efficient. In this case the collision of viewpoints that originate from the different professional backgrounds and experiences, described by Marquardt (2011), also appears, naturally with the modification of the original concept, making it specific to law enforcement.

In addition to this, the application of the method can also contribute to the mitigation of generational conflicts existing within the organisation, since it usually encourages leaders that belong to the older generation to be flexible and open and to acquire higher-level management skills. As I see it, these faculties are of key importance for understanding and motivating younger colleagues.

In addition to being used within the country, it can be also be used effectively in international cooperation. At present, there is one European example (3) available, in the case of which the police leaders of the world worked within the framework of a longer training course using the action-learning method, with the aid of which international relationships and cooperation, as well as strategies, can be implemented more smoothly. The good practice referred to, in my view, could be used effectively in the central/eastern European region as well. There may be cultural similarities in the areas of crime and crime fighting, and the development of crime-fighting cooperation in this region still includes significant hidden opportunities.

### Summary, conclusion and recommendations

Generally, we can conclude that organisations may be successful if they are able to continuously adapt themselves to societal-economic changes. From the point of view of law enforcement this is of outstanding importance, since the service is provided for the citizens, therefore the changes taking place within the environment can be immediately felt. In addition to this, the activities of law enforcement agencies are less similar to those of a producing enterprise, since in this area the processes are based less on detailed process descriptions, standards and automated solutions than on experiences, customary procedures and know-how. Naturally, in this area there are similar and repeated tasks, but there is also an increasing number of tasks that require complex solutions, especially in the area of crime fighting.

For this reason it is an important aspect for law enforcement agencies that they should be able to adapt themselves rapidly. A significant role in this may be played, among others, by external forces, the flexibility of the organisation and management support.

Action learning is able to facilitate this process because it is able to change attitudes in such a manner that while dealing with the solution of problems it directly involves the organisation and the work. In addition to this, it is suitable for forming the approach of the leader and for developing the managerial competences. Therefore coaching will provide an opportunity that the manager will be able to apply in the case of his subordinates as well. The spreading of this method as wide as possible in this way will also exert an impact on organisational culture. In my opinion, the usability of this method within law enforcement is primarily within the area of short, focused, cost-efficient and relevant problem-solving, and I hope that in the future it will be used increasingly widely.

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