The Requisite Path to Community Policing

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the author’s recent six-year experience of collaborating with Elliott Jaques in an examination of community policing. It describes how they met, some of the things she learned from him, the findings of the research, and why his work holds such potential for enhancing the effectiveness of policing in democratic societies.

Key words: community policing, Elliott Jaques, requisite organization

Over a period that spanned slightly less than six years, it was my great privilege to work collaboratively with Dr Elliott Jaques in an examination of community policing. This paper describes how we met, some of the things I learned from him, and why his work holds such potential for enhancing the effectiveness of policing in democratic societies.

The name Elliott Jaques first came to my attention around 1995 while I was serving as Chief of Police in Austin, Texas. His name was brought to me with a request for assistance from an employee who, at that time, was attending the University of Texas. The request was that I authorize a study within the Police Department that would test some of the principles put forth by Jaques (1988). I was then, and still am, an advocate of higher education, and so I was inclined to offer whatever assistance I could. Nevertheless, as one of very few female police chiefs in the United States, I knew that everything I did was subject to inordinate scrutiny, and so I could not afford to be overly casual in granting approval for a study that purported to change operational procedures. In the hope of procuring my assistance, the employee in question gave me a video tape of a presentation made by Dr Jaques, and she urged me to watch it so that I
could gain a better grasp of his theories. I have long since forgotten the details of what I saw on that tape, but I will never forget the negative impression it made upon me. I advised the hopeful student that, in good conscience, I could authorize only an abbreviated version of the study she proposed – one that was certain to have no lasting impact on the organization. My reaction, I learned subsequently, was quite normal, if inexplicable; rejection of Dr Jaques’ theories almost always seems to precede embrace of them.

In 1997 I accepted an offer to undertake research sponsored by the Office of Community Policing Services, United States Department of Justice. The subject of the research was leadership; my objective was to develop a curriculum for police managers that would enable them to learn leadership practices, the application of which presumably would enhance their effectiveness in their respective organizations. In the beginning, the project seemed relatively straightforward. I decided that I needed simply to examine the work of the many leadership gurus whose ubiquitous books lined the shelves of libraries and bookstores, and translate their teachings into a context that seemed more relevant to the dynamic, ever-changing world of policing. I decided the following criteria were necessary to a successful police leadership curriculum.

- Practical: the curriculum needed to be grounded in the real-life experiences of police, and the unique environments in which they operate.
- Flexible: the curriculum needed to have relevance to police agencies of all sizes and political environments.
- Effective: the results of implementation of prescribed leadership practices needed to be explicit and measurable.
- Transferable: the results of implementation needed to lend themselves to replication, so that the impact of small achievements could be multiplied and expanded (Watson and Jaques, 1999, p. 4).

After only a few weeks of background research, I realized I was in serious trouble; the writings on leadership seemed to prompt more questions than answers. For example, how was I to develop police-specific scenarios of effective leadership, when I could not even discover a commonly accepted definition of the term? Each self-proclaimed expert described it differently. Furthermore, the literature seemed to suggest that a void in leadership is a function of the individual, and must be remedied by teaching people how to behave differently. The overall approach to leadership seemed to be one of helping individuals gain insight into their own behavior, apparently on the presumption that such insight would strengthen their leadership effectiveness. Even if that premise were valid, how would I endeavor to measure the impact of the change effort, much less replicate it for use by others?

I remember sitting at my desk in Washington, DC wondering how I was going to make effective use of the grant monies I had been awarded when the
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phone rang. The caller identified himself as Dr Elliott Jaques. He said he had been referred by the young college student who previously had tried unsuccessfully to persuade me that I should listen to what he had to say. Since I already had reached an apparent impasse in my project, I accepted his invitation to meet him in order that we might discuss his views of leadership. I spent two hours in his office, and all these years later, I still am reeling from the impact of that discussion. He began by asking me how I became interested in the subject of leadership. I told him of the 20 years I had spent in the Houston Police Department, serving in every rank from police officer to Police Chief. I contrasted that experience with my tenure as Police Chief in Austin. I briefly described some of the most nagging problems in the profession, all of which I thought might be corrected if police managers could be taught to lead effectively. The issues to which I alluded include the following.

- Despite some flattening efforts, police departments are notoriously top-heavy. The number of levels in the hierarchy – commonly referred to as ranks – follows no predictable pattern. Even departments with a few as a dozen sworn officers might have four distinct ranks.
- Accountability is lacking. Levels of pay usually are a function of rank or title rather than job function or effective performance. Equity is viewed as ensuring that all persons with the same title get the same pay, with perhaps some adjustment for seniority. Merit and personal effectiveness are rarely reflected in pay differentials. This unfair situation is aggravated by the fact that people who work the hardest are assigned the most difficult tasks, while those who do almost nothing get comfortable jobs that require little effort.
- Most training is targeted at the lower levels of the hierarchy, and is concerned with the mechanics of policing (e.g. procedures, laws, etc.) Training opportunities for managers are often limited and sporadic.
- Police departments are characterized by an almost total lack of trust. Relations are strained between line personnel and management, between union leaders and executive staff, between uniformed and non-uniformed personnel, between police and the community. Suspicion and mistrust are so widespread that they are accepted as a normal or even inevitable part of doing business.
- Job descriptions are vague and generally end with a catchall phrase such as “and other duties as assigned.” The practical effect is that exceptional performance is difficult to reward, and substandard performance difficult to correct. The entire situation is demoralizing (Watson and Jaques, 1999, p. 5).

After listening attentively to my concerns, Dr Jaques began to sort through them very methodically. He described underlying organizational conditions with a level of accuracy I found stunning; he described organizational differ-
ences between Houston and Austin that I had never consciously appreciated, but which nevertheless enabled similar change efforts to work in one place while they failed in the other. I wondered how he could know so much about police agencies, especially since those of us who grew up in them tend to believe not only that police organizations are different from all others, but that our own particular agency is unique unto itself.

I decided to find out whether my colleagues would be as excited as I was about the possibility that applying Dr Jaques’ theories might help solve long-standing problems. Therefore, I invited a small group of police chiefs and police academics to attend a two-day session to explore the issue of leadership in policing. Dr Jaques agreed to address the group in order to explain his theories and field questions about them. I was anxious to know whether his ideas would seem relevant to all police departments, so I invited a diverse group of chiefs. Some came from large urban agencies, others from small rural ones. I also included chiefs from special service departments, such as transit and corrections. Several of the chiefs came from cities that had differing political structures.

At the end of the first day, things were not going well. Indeed, one of my colleagues was so enraged that, even before the day ended, he stormed out of the room and refused to return. Others grumbled that they had wasted their time traveling across the country to hear such nonsense. One of my friends pulled me aside privately and asked, “What were you thinking?” Horrified, I grabbed Elliott by the arm and we retreated to a private corner of the hotel dining room to assess our situation, and develop a game plan for the following day. Neither of us could think of what we could do to make amends, so it was agreed we would follow in the same vein, and dismiss everyone at lunch with sincere thanks for their participation.

To my great relief, all but one of the participants returned for the morning session. Surprisingly, the mood was cheerful and animated. After about an hour of discussion, the most tenured chief in the room announced, “This man has answers to questions I’ve been looking for for 30 years!” His comment was echoed by others, who agreed they were hearing fresh new ideas that made fundamental sense. Their only caution was that Elliott needed to get himself educated about policing if he had any hope of connecting to a larger police audience. They offered to host us in their respective agencies and give us an opportunity to speak to their subordinates, to test Elliott’s theories in the real world, and to determine with no uncertainty whether they had any practical significance.

Over the next year and a half, Elliott and I traveled throughout the United States, visiting with police officers of every rank and in all sorts of assignments. We rode along with patrol officers; we chatted with union presidents, with staff attorneys, with finance personnel, and with countless others. We questioned, we tested, we listened, and we learned. Nearly everywhere we went, we encountered the same curious reaction that marked my own initiation to
requisite organization, namely, rejection followed by enthusiastic embrace; Elliott and I began referring to it as “the overnight phenomenon.”

We ended our tour with a report that described what we had learned (Watson and Jaques, 1999). The report was accompanied by a handbook that described, in step-by-step fashion, what needed to be done in order to implement requisite principles. In short, we learned that, strange though some of the theories seem to be (time-span measurement, for example), they are entirely relevant and useful when applied in police organizations.

Elliott often told me that his experience with police was unlike any other in that he came to understand the enormous societal impact requisitely organized police departments could make. His principles, he said, are “writ large” in policing because nowhere else is their so much at stake on a daily basis. Police go to work in neighborhoods close to their homes, day after ordinary day, yet they are unsure of what they might encounter, or of whether they will survive it. That uncertainty, he said, underscores the importance of properly organizing police agencies, and establishing policies that require trust-inducing behaviors, in contrast to the thoroughly entrenched alienating practices that currently permeate the profession. Among the lessons learned from our time together, three findings emerge as fundamentally important to effective police operations:

1. Defining the difference between supervision and management.
2. Defining explicit and distinctly separate roles for each managerial level in the hierarchy.
3. Restructuring patrol operations.

Elliott and I were able, for the first time, to articulate the real difference between supervisors (sergeants) and first-level managers (lieutenants). Specifically, time-span measurement revealed that supervisors occupy roles in Stratum I, as do police officers. For decades, police executives have tried (with relatively little success) to pull supervisors into the management realm, and have complained bitterly about the difficulties created by many supervisors who either refuse or are unable to satisfactorily assume the managerial yoke. Perhaps the most obvious examples of supervisory deficiency include disciplinary hearings, in which sergeants invariably will support their officers’ behavior, even in the most outrageous circumstances, rather than recommend they be disciplined for proven misconduct. Time-span measurement revealed that the problem is in the role rather than in the person. The role requires a real-time, short-term view of events, whereas disciplinary recommendations require a long-term, comprehensive assessment of impact. The two roles are at odds with each other, and, when push comes to shove, the predominant short-term outlook usually prevails.

The second important finding is related to the first. Specifically, we developed precise roles for every managerial level in the hierarchy. The need
for this precise delineation of duties emerged gradually. Having determined that supervisors occupy a Stratum I role, we turned our attention to the role of shift lieutenant. To our surprise, it also measured at Stratum I. Basically, the duties of a shift lieutenant were described as ensuring that shift personnel were deployed throughout the geographic area, settling any disputes that might arise between sergeants, handling various administrative matters, and being readily available if an unusual and/or significant event arose that might require the attention of higher level managers. One captain in California described the role of shift lieutenant quite succinctly: “Break Glass When Needed.” It became obvious that the prevailing shift structure underutilized the lieutenant role, and that realization led to another important finding, namely, the need to reorganize patrol operations.

In the vast majority of police organizations – in the United States, at least – patrol operations are structured according to shift first, and geography second. In other words, police officers, sergeants, and lieutenants all are assigned according to shifts, and within the shift, officers and sergeants are assigned to relatively small geographic subsets. Captains (who normally occupy Stratum III roles) are accountable for relatively large and/or densely populated geographic areas that might require the service of hundreds of police officers. This structure produces some very negative effects. First, there is the aforementioned under-utilization of lieutenant roles (with the bulk of work falling on the sergeants’ shoulders); second, captains often feel overburdened with demands from the community and from their own staff. Even more important, perhaps, is that the structure creates an accountability void. Because accountability for policing a specific location is shared among many people working different shifts, only the captain can realistically be held accountable for the quality of police service in the area. Lower levels can be held accountable for little more than adhering to precisely worded directives, which are piled high (and are, themselves, the source of considerable frustration.) By dividing the Captain’s geographic area into smaller geographic subsets, each led by a lieutenant, and defining roles explicitly, these shortcomings are corrected.

A test of the new role definitions and structure in one relatively large urban police agency produced compelling evidence of its potential value. Crime within the captain’s defined geographic area dropped dramatically. (Although not related in any way to the work Elliott and I were doing, the same kind of result was produced in New York City by the CompStat process which holds captains accountable for crime within their respective precincts. Crime in New York City dropped so dramatically that the world took notice, and copies of the CompStat crime reduction model have been adopted by police departments all over the globe.) The point is that defining the accountability of captain unequivocally produces dramatic results.

One cautionary point is that failing to define other roles just as explicitly causes confusion and discontent within the organization. In one of the police departments Elliott and I studied, for example, lieutenants who assumed
command of geographic areas tended to usurp the authority of the captain, and perceived his control of their resources as micro-management. That experience underscored the need for defining each managerial role explicitly, so that incumbents understand not only what they are required to do in their own role, but what duties belong exclusively in the roles above and below their own. Sample role specifications were developed during the grant-funded project, and have proven to have widespread appeal to police from very diverse operational backgrounds.

In summary, I have absolutely no question that Elliott Jaques’ principles hold enormous potential for improving the quality of life in our neighborhoods. I know it because I have had the rare opportunity to test those principles and to watch the amazingly positive results that emerge. Not only does crime plummet, but citizen satisfaction with police service seems to improve. It stands to reason that if neighborhoods are safer, and that people living in them feel safer, the community at large must prosper.

An important question remains unanswered: Since so much of Elliott’s work has produced findings of extraordinary practical significance and positive societal impact, why are they not enthusiastically adopted everywhere? At this point, I have only conjecture to offer. I believe that the real appeal of Elliott’s work is that it is rooted in common sense, but to borrow a hackneyed phrase, common sense isn’t all that common. The shortcoming, as I feel sure Elliott would point out, is not in the people, but rather, in the systems we have created. Common sense has been buried under years of policies and procedures that, however impractical they might appear, are deeply ingrained in the fabric of everyday organizational life. Police departments, for example, have endeavored for years to control the exercise of discretion with written directives. Rules, policies and procedures have become so numerous that no one could reasonably be expected to remember, much less abide by all of them. Nevertheless, a new policy seems to emerge every time an officer engages in conduct deemed improper, but not explicitly prohibited by existing regulations. As a result, some policies are so specific and bizarre they might as well have an officer’s name on them. Everyone knows this situation exists, but precious few are willing to sort through the morass and allow common sense to prevail.

Elliott often spoke of the wildly popular one-minute approaches to management that seemed to resonate among a wide range of organizations. Their key to popularity seemed to lie in their simplicity; make it easy, and everyone will do it. Pills will trump diet and exercise every time. Unfortunately, diet pills don’t work. There is no quick fix to correcting the organizational malaise that has resulted from years of unguided management, however well intentioned. On the other hand, hard work and commitment is a proven strategy and now, thanks to Elliott Jaques, there is a guide, a roadmap to organizational health. If just one police chief has the courage, wisdom and commitment to follow that map, the positive effects will be so significant that...
the familiar domino effect will reoccur. Police organizations all over the globe will adapt quickly to the new model, if only to rid themselves of the ubiquitous ills described at the beginning of this article. The result will be more than better managed police departments; the result will be safer, more productive communities, and that goal is worth pursuing. Surely, the world of policing contains at least one bold leader who, in the words of an anonymous pundit, has the courage not to follow where the path may lead, but to go instead where there is no path, and leave a trail.

REFERENCES


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