Lessons from the beat
A personal view from Sir Hugh Orde, commissioned by the NHS Confederation
The NHS Confederation

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Foreword

The police service and the NHS both play a critical role in keeping the public safe, and face many of the same challenges. NHS leaders and police chiefs alike shoulder the responsibility of taking difficult decisions about how best to improve the efficiency and quality outcomes of the services their organisations provide. Both rely heavily on public trust and, over the years, have found themselves at the centre of criticism from commentators, politicians and the public.

The UK’s police forces and the health service also both depend on the day-to-day decision making, courage and honesty of frontline staff like doctors, nurses, sergeants and constables.

The Government’s ambition to make both services more accountable and responsive to the communities they serve has prompted substantial changes to the way they operate. The introduction of police and crime panels and commissioners, for instance, and clinical commissioning groups and health and wellbeing boards, are just some of the features of the new policing and NHS landscapes.

Continuing the NHS Confederation’s series of papers by respected and influential leaders, and building on his keynote speech to the 2012 NHS Confederation annual conference and exhibition, in this paper Sir Hugh Orde offers his unique views on leadership from the world of law enforcement. He highlights the qualities and skills he believes leaders will need to overcome the challenges they face in the years ahead. Reflecting on his personal experiences, he asserts that it is vital for leaders to have full confidence in their frontline staff to allow them to take responsibility for making tough decisions and accepting that things will sometimes go wrong. He argues that when they do, leaders should continue to support staff in the knowledge that decisions were taken for the right reasons.

The series aims to stimulate discussion about the importance of leaders being able to adapt to working in new systems by developing new skills, building trust, leading through influence and acting courageously.

Sir Hugh Orde joined the Metropolitan Police Service in 1977 and served in central, south and west London before taking command of the Territorial Support Group as a superintendent.

He was appointed Commander (Crime) for south west London in June 1998. He was promoted to Deputy Assistant Commissioner in October 1999 and was given day-to-day responsibility for the Commissioner’s Enquiry (Stevens III) into collusion and the murder of a prominent solicitor in Northern Ireland.

In September 2002 Sir Hugh was appointed Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), a position he held for seven years.

Sir Hugh was appointed vice-president of the Association of Chief Police Officers in 2006 and in 2009 he became its president, entrusted by his chief officer colleagues to steer policing in England, Wales and Northern Ireland into the 21st century.

Sir Hugh Orde was awarded an OBE in 2001 for services to policing, and in 2005 was knighted for his work.
Empowering the front line

It is blindingly obvious that you need honesty to be a good leader. But what about courage? I have slightly more difficulty accepting the idea that leadership is intrinsically courageous. Performing the job you’re paid to do properly, fairly, independently and ethically is nothing more than fulfilling the obligations of your position. But what I do know – particularly from my experience as chief constable in Northern Ireland, where I served in fairly difficult policing territory – is that without question, the people I had the privilege to lead were incredibly courageous.

At that time, one of the most important things I learned was that leaders at the front end are absolutely critical to delivering the confidence we need in our services, be it policing or health. It is those leaders who give the public confidence in what we are doing.

When I took over in Northern Ireland, the police force was a very hierarchical organisation. As in many organisations, hierarchy can sometimes be a block, stopping us from doing what we think we should do. One of the greatest difficulties was trying to empower my frontline officers – sergeants, inspectors and constables – to accept, understand and take responsibility for the decisions they had to make in the day-to-day moments of their jobs. Culturally, that was a huge challenge. I don’t think we got there completely, but in seven years I like to think that we came to a place where frontline officers felt empowered to make decisions based on doing the right thing, rather than doing things in the right way.

The principles of policing go back to 1829 (see box on page 3) and have not only stood the test of time, but formed the basis for other policing models throughout the world. In Northern Ireland, I came to learn very quickly that the more we operated to those principles and codes of ethics – rather than rigid policies – the more likely we were to succeed as an organisation.

As the leader of the force, I had to be very comfortable with not always knowing what was happening on the front line. But it’s always a slightly strange moment when you come to hear really good news about situations that you might, or should have, known about – but didn’t. I was of course delighted to welcome all such instances! The more difficult question is, what happens when things go wrong and you don’t know?

When this happens, the most important thing is to have instilled the belief in frontline staff that as long as they have acted in the right way and for the right reasons, they will have the backing of their leadership. In my world, and certainly in Northern Ireland, where we asked the front line to operate in difficult, imprecise environments with high risks, it was vital that my officers were confident that when decisions were made in situations with little, absent or conflicting information – or indeed misinformation – and that decision was wrong, the service would defend them. After seven years, I could say to large groups of officers: “Hands up if you feel you have been disciplined for making an honest mistake?” No one could raise their hand because no one had. But still, I sense that we had not gone as far as we could have.

There is much we could have learned from other sectors. For example, the British military has developed a more formalised approach to empowering its frontline officers. This approach, called Mission Command, (see case study on page 4), promotes a relatively decentralised subsidiarity of command, freedom, speed of action, and initiative, albeit within certain constraints. This allows for constantly updated responses to changing circumstances within the overall context of the objective to be achieved.
Taking responsibility

I have been a chief for ten years now, both in my current role as president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and in Northern Ireland. The basic principles I have adopted and that have worked for me are very much about ‘saying it as it is’. Honesty has to underpin everything we do. I am not sure what dishonest leadership looks like, apart from doomed to fail. Among the audiences I spoke to in Northern Ireland, be they internal or external, politicians or commentators, whatever I said would be guaranteed to upset 50 per cent of the audience. So one had to get to a point where actually upsetting everybody was probably quite a good gauge of honest leadership.

When we got things wrong, honesty was at the root of our response, and even in a very complex policing world like Northern Ireland, the public understood that. As chief constable, I was prepared to stand up and say: “Look, yes I am sorry, we could have done that better”. I did this very publicly when some officers searched Stormont (the home of the Northern Ireland Assembly) in September 2002. Frankly, this was done in a clumsy way. It was by no means deliberate mischief by frontline officers; they were doing as they had been asked to do. It was not their fault. But what they did had massive national and international implications. Very quickly, I stood up and said: “Yes, we could have done that better. Officers did their very best, it is our fault. We accept responsibility.” That quelled the debate and we afterwards had some frank and honest conversations with those affected.

Peelian principles

1. The basic mission for which the police exist is to prevent crime and disorder.
2. The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions.
3. Police must secure the willing cooperation of the public in voluntary observance of the law to be able to secure and maintain the respect of the public.
4. The degree of cooperation of the public that can be secured diminishes proportionately to the necessity of the use of physical force.
5. Police seek and preserve public favour not by catering to public opinion, but by constantly demonstrating absolute impartial service to the law.
6. Police use physical force to the extent necessary to secure observance of the law or to restore order only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient.
7. Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence.
8. Police should always direct their action strictly towards their functions and never appear to usurp the powers of the judiciary.
9. The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it.

Case study: The British Army – Mission Command

Mission Command was adopted by the British military in the 1980s when, for the first time, it created a common doctrine called Design for Military Operations. The philosophy has four key leadership tenets:

- timely decision-making
- the importance of understanding a superior commander’s (senior manager’s) intention
- a clear responsibility to fulfil that intention
- an ability on the part of the subordinate to meet the superior’s remit.

The underlying requirement is the fundamental responsibility to act (if that is the right thing to do) within the framework of the commander’s intentions. It requires a style of strategic leadership which promotes:

- decentralised decision making (formal delegation/empowerment)
- freedom and speed of action
- initiative.

At its heart is the principle that no plan ever survives intact for very long. In the face of rapidly changing events, a strict set of directions rapidly becomes out of date, and lack of freedom to adapt only delivers failure.

How it works
The exercise of Mission Command relies on mutual trust, shared understanding and purpose. Commanders understand that some decisions must be made quickly at the point of action, therefore they concentrate on the objectives of an operation, not how to achieve it.

Commanders provide subordinates with intent, purpose of operation, key tasks, desired outcomes and resources. Subordinates then exercise disciplined initiative to respond. Soldiers must be prepared to assume responsibility, maintain unity of effort, take prudent action and act resourcefully within the commander’s intent. Effective commanders understand that their leadership guides the development of teams and helps establish mutual trust and shared understanding throughout the force.

Commanders allocate resources and provide a clear intent that guides subordinates’ actions, while promoting freedom of action and initiative. Subordinates, by understanding the commander’s intent and overall common objective, are able to adapt to changing situations and exploit fleeting opportunities. When given sufficient latitude, they can accomplish tasks in a manner that fits the situation.

Subordinates understand that they have an obligation to act and synchronize their actions with the rest of the force. Likewise, commanders influence the situation and provide direction, guidance and resources whilst synchronising operations. They encourage subordinates to take bold action and they accept prudent risks to create opportunity and initiatives.
In Northern Ireland, I learned the real importance of talking to people. I understood how communities in Northern Ireland viewed policing by having quiet conversations with people who truly represented their communities, not with those who claimed to represent them. That meant sometimes talking with strange and interesting people from some very strange and interesting backgrounds. But the learning that came from those conversations was absolutely critical.

I probably learned more about the struggle of working-class Protestants and their relationship with policing from David Ervine, a convicted terrorist, who has since passed away, than from anyone else. I learned a lot by just sitting in his front room eating fish and chips. Similarly with the Republican side. In doing this, I realised how crucial it is to have an understanding of what and how the community see the organisations we have the privilege to lead.

We should also be clear that making a lot of noise does not necessarily achieve a lot of results. Seven years in Northern Ireland taught me that quiet conversations, sensible negotiations and influence are a far better tactic. It led me to conclude that courageous and honest leadership does not have to be in the full light of the press and media. Of course, this means that because it is quiet, it is not as explicit or clear to those who may feel we have let them down. But I don’t think we have let them down – we have done our level best.

Strong leadership is also about allowing others to succeed. In my role, this means empowering frontline officers and giving them permission to deal with risk, accepting that things will sometimes go wrong. If there is one skill leaders need it is resilience – at times you have to have the hide of an ossified rhinoceros to survive! Particularly so during periods of great change and difficult economic times.

There is something different about a crisis, and resilience is absolutely key. People may perhaps remember the small series of local disorderly events in the summer of 2011 – which came to be known as the riots. My role was very precise; I had to coordinate the national policing response. But pressure, as you can imagine, was immense. The public were rightly terrified because the police response could, and in many places should, have been quicker, although the situation was of course very complicated. There were real issues around who was in charge, who was responsible for what, confusion over roles and the feeling among frontline officers that they were being unfairly criticised by politicians and some commentators.

Part of the pressure was created by one image in particular, which was to become iconic. A building in Croydon was burnt down during the disruption and the scenes were played on a minute-by-minute basis across the world, sending a frightening message in the teeth of the upcoming London 2012 Olympic Games. This made the need to reassure the public vital. I had a role and there was something about ‘saying it as it was’, without being concerned about the fall out.

These were truly unique circumstances and the police faced an unprecedented situation, not just in London. What the police did was what it always does – learn and respond with incredible speed. We went from 6,000 officers
in London to 16,000 the following night. At that point, you saw that while violence continued and moved around the country to different locations, the force responded magnificently and officers put huge effort into protecting communities and, more importantly, protecting lives.

It was during this crisis that I saw the police service’s greatest strengths – its transparency and ability to learn quickly and pull together. And also that of it’s leaders, all of whom of course understood the front line because they had been there themselves. They worked together tirelessly, supporting each other to make sure that we deployed staff to the right places. At that point you saw the British policing model kicking in and the robust policing tactics we chose to adopt, succeed.

Key learning points

• Frontline staff are critical to delivering the confidence we need in our services, be it policing or health. It is those people who give the public confidence in what we are doing. Leaders should make it their ambition to empower frontline officers to accept, understand and take responsibility for the decisions they have to make.

• The more you operate and make decisions based on a well-established and well-tested set of principles, rather than rigid policies, the more likely it is that your organisation will succeed.

• When making a decision, the most important factor is not whether the decision was made in the right way, but whether the decision was made for the right reasons.

• It is vital that frontline staff know they will have the full support and public backing of their leaders when they make the wrong decisions, as long as they were taken for the right reasons.

• Leaders need to be able to stand up and admit when they or their staff have got something wrong.

• Dishonest leadership is doomed to fail. Being honest as a leader is far more important than saying what pleases people. Leaders should be prepared for and accept that, at times, what they say will not please everyone or anyone.

• It is vitally important that leaders have quiet conversations with people in the communities they serve, to learn about their situations and understand how the community sees the organisation they lead.

• Leaders need resilience to deal with a crisis. They should be prepared to accept criticism, learn from their mistakes and, on occasion, stand up and make it clear that they are doing everything they can to improve the situation.
Lessons from the beat

The police service and the NHS face many of the same challenges, and NHS leaders and police chiefs alike shoulder the responsibility of needing to make difficult decisions to improve efficiency. Both rely heavily on public trust and, over the years, have found themselves at the centre of criticism from commentators, politicians and the public.

Continuing the NHS Confederation’s series of papers by respected and influential leaders, Sir Hugh Orde offers his unique views on leadership from the world of law enforcement. He highlights the qualities and skills he believes leaders will need to overcome the challenges they face in the years ahead.