A qualitative study into the organisational culture of the Dutch National Police

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Police culture in action

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Summary
“How can the organisational culture of the Dutch police be described, in different parts of the organisation? In which way can this organisational culture be developed?”
Questions and research methods
This report is the result of a qualitative study into the organisational culture of the Dutch National Police. By the end of 2014, the minister of Security and Justice requested for this study. This request came forth out of an appeal the Police unions and the ‘Tweede Kamer’ made: to pay attention to behaviour and culture in the context of the reorganisation. The following questions were the starting point for this study:

“How can the organisational culture of the Dutch police be described, in different parts of the organisation? In which way can this organisational culture be developed, according to the realisatieplan?“

These questions are answered in this report. During this study that was conducted in 2015, the researchers spoke to 118 employees of the Dutch National Police in interviews and workshops. Key to these talks were concrete stories and anecdotes. Stories and anecdotes that paint a picture of how police work goes and in which the organisational culture becomes visible. The interviews and workshops took place in a variety of parts of the organisation: executive teams, criminal investigation teams, support teams and management. Furthermore the realisatieplan and scientific literature on Police culture were studied. From these sources answers have been derived, in four stages, to four questions:
1. Who do we want to be?
2. Who are we now?
3. How can the difference be explained?
4. Can we change this?

The study kept close to the way employees appreciate their work. This does not mean that employees were asked directly to describe what they think their organisational culture is. The stories and anecdotes have been analysed, by both the researchers and the participants in the workshops, searching for recurrent themes. Four of the themes found resemble culture themes from the realisatieplan. The other three themes are new. Together, these seven themes form the description of the organisational culture of the Dutch National Police. Where possible, the studied literature is related to the results from the interviews and workshops.

The first three stages of the study resulted in the description of the organisational culture. This was the starting point for creating a number of development proposals in stage four. These development proposals are intended to stimulate action within the Dutch National Police.

Organisational culture of the Dutch National Police
This study aims to give insight into the tension between ‘who we want to be’ and ‘who we are now’. This tension is described in the seven culture themes. Table 4 gives an overview of the seven culture themes found in this study.

FAMILY
Being part of a big family is a widespread feeling within the police organisation. Top management refers to unity, connection and collaboration. Worker stories often refer to collaboration, solidarity and loyalty. This is valued highly and police people want more of this. On the other side people talk about parochialism and island mentality. Solidarity and loyalty seem to be under pressure. The strength of the family culture should not interfere with openness and direct communication. In practice this is not always possible. Being part of a group necessarily implies that others are not. The connection with those colleagues weakens. Still, being within the safety of a group is a strong driver in a world with a lot of uncertainty on the street, pressure from management and today’s societal criticism. This means that within a strong family culture, effort is needed to safeguard curiosity, independence and hospitality.

PROFESSIONAL FREEDOM
Employees need to be able to deviate in special situations from the established protocols. So states the realisatieplan. This professional freedom is meant to stimulate creative craftsmanship and to
promote learning on the job. In practice professional freedom is seen by executive employees as ‘leave me alone to do my work.’ Also learning on the job happens not as often as possible because police employees seem to be reluctant to show their doubts and weaknesses.

**Hierarchical relations**

Another aspect of the relation between employees and the organisation is that it is often hierarchical. The Dutch National Police states: we need managers that can handle employees that think along and talk back. This leads to a balanced dialogue about the work at hand. Practice is different: executive employees tend to call their boss before taking action. This interaction between managers and employees and their mutual expectations enforce each other. The hierarchical sensitivity in the organisation is also reflected in stories that are told recurrently about use of power.

**Initiative**

On all levels of the organisation the idea of people taking initiative is valued. Still, most people don’t take as much initiative as everyone would like. A typical way of looking at police work is ‘stepping forward where all others step back.’ But another important form of initiative is taking action on topics that are important but do not necessarily need to be handled right away. This holds for instance for collaboration with partner organisations concerning national security or for professional development of workers, important but not always urgent matters.

**Operational Leadership**

The feeling exists that operational leadership is missing. In day-to-day practice, taking care of things with direct colleagues circumvents much of this omission. This, however, is not the organised operational leadership on which employees can fall back and that stimulates organisational learning. Also the need is felt to translate organisational and national targets with priorities and activities on the local level.

**Connection between support and operation**

Police people are motivated to perform for and in their direct environment. This work nowadays needs to be done within an organisation with national scope and a centralized support organisation. From an organisational point of view, this is completely reasonable. In practice, workers feel they don’t know where to go with questions for support. From a culture perspective...
this calls for an empathic stance from everyone involved: both executive and support employees need to think what their actions imply for the other. This is hampered by lack of personal contact, the support organisation is not only centralised but also communicates mainly via digital means. This makes it difficult to have meaningful dialogue.

Unity in thought and action
Also the idea of ‘Unity in thought and action’ is reasonable and defensible. Top management indicates that this culture theme is developing well. In practice this is perceived more negatively. People complain about full schedules and about minor issues. Management and executive employees interpret ‘Unity in thought and action’ differently: management talks and thinks about joint goals and easy collaboration throughout the whole organisation; executive employees relate ‘Unity in thought and action’ to red tape from The Hague.

Limits to cultural change
Before presenting the development proposals, some limits to the possibilities of cultural change are discussed. Organisational culture is deeply rooted in collective routines and habits, manners of speech, humour, etc. These are matters that are not changed easily. Also individual and group drivers and motivation are important, which for instance shows itself in ideas about collegiality and good policing. These drivers and motivations are very stable. A third issue is that efforts to change organisational culture are often aimed at ‘who we want to be’. These efforts only increase the gap between ‘who we want to be’ and ‘who we are now’. In practice this often does not lead to closing that gap. On the contrary, a gap that is perceived as to big to close can lead to defensive behaviour.

Another aspect is that organisational culture is not a stand-alone thing. Organisational culture shows in tangible things as logo’s, stationary and clothing. Organisational culture is also connected to the organisational structure and to the systems people use in their work.

To conclude with, changing organisational culture by definition affects everyone within the organisation. This makes it tempting to create a program for everyone. For most people however, such a program is too abstract and too easy to not take part in. Especially within the police organisation good reasons to focus on something else are abundant, there is always another priority.

Police culture
Two of the culture themes found in this study overlap with themes from scientific literature: Family is related to what is called ‘sense of solidarity’ and Initiative is related to the strong ‘sense of mission’ that is seen in other studies. These aspects of the organisational culture are so interwoven with and a result of the essence of police work that changing these is probably detrimental if at all possible. On the contrary, development proposals gain strength when they are based on these robust aspects of police culture.

Solidarity
Solidarity connects to the culture theme Family and is reinforced by three factors: perceived danger on the street, pressure from management and today’s societal and media criticism on policing.

Incident driven
The culture theme Initiative sketches an organisation that focuses on incidents. This focus is somewhat broader that the sense of mission from literature. In the Dutch National Police also incidents other that crime fighting are a trigger to take action. A result of this focus on incidents however, can also be less focus on non-urgent matters; there is always something that distracts.

Possibilities for cultural change must thus be seen as limited. The development proposals operate within these limitations and can be characterised as ‘small steps when possible and valuable’. The next paragraph shows how this can work.

Development proposals
Favourable development proposals for influencing police culture meet as much as possible these six requirements:

1. The development proposal offers learning possibilities for those involved. Without learning there can be no change. People develop the drive to learn when the context feels safe. However, a context too safe also does not stimulate learning by not revealing areas for improvement.

2. The development proposal is based on existing behaviour in the organisation and uses developed qualities in teams and individuals. Development proposals are phrased in existing language and metaphors.

3. The development proposal is sufficiently concrete for everyone to understand but also formulated in a way that all involved can relate
to and participate in. All people involved are encouraged to take the proposal at heart.

4. The development proposal impact at least one of the seven culture themes.

5. The development proposal consists of multiple small increments that elaborate on each other and that allow incremental learning.

6. The development proposal uses the robust cultural themes: ‘sense of solidarity’ and ‘incident driven.’ Solidarity in this respect could mean that everyone involved in the change is also allowed to participate. In an incident driven approach limited effort might lead to some quick results.

Figure 5 gives an overview over the development proposals that are described below and how these relate to the culture themes.

ALLOW EXPERTS TO FUNCTION ALONGSIDE MANAGERS
Managers need to allow space to those who have shown expertise and proven professional behaviour. This requires managers and employees to engage in dialogue about what professional behaviour means and entails. And dialogue about which areas of expertise are the most important to develop.

OPERATIONAL LEADERS STIMULATE INITIATIVE
Operational managers are crucial in stimulating or discouraging employees’ initiative. The suggestion is to embrace the motto ‘rather apologise after than ask for permission prior to the action.’ And to point out to employees where they can take responsibility. Don’t take over but stimulate people to act themselves. Sit still and coach initiative.

HELP OPERATIONAL LEADERS TO TRANSLATE POLICIES FOR THEIR EMPLOYEES
Political and top management goals and policies often are not actionable for executive employees. That implies that these goals and policies need to be translated. It is suggested to help operational leaders with that translation by providing information leaflets together with top-down plans in language that is familiar to executive employees.

MORE AND BETTER DIALOGUE THROUGHOUT THE ORGANISATION
Options to improve dialogue throughout the organisation are:
- Focus on a number of topics throughout the whole police organisation and make sure that these are addressed in local, often unplanned conversations. For instance around the question: ‘What does professional freedom actually mean?’
- Improve dialogue techniques. For instance by increasing the diversity in conversational roles with the concept of ‘Thinking hats.’
- Pay attention to giving and receiving feedback.
- Separate the personal “how is this for you?” from the content matter “how could you have done this better?”

ALSO EVALUATE CASES THAT WENT WELL
Giving attention to successful deviations from the rules, leads to curiosity. It also appreciates employees’ successes that can be an example for others. In this way, taking initiative and using your professional freedom is no longer just a risk but also offers chances to do well and get rewarded. More dialogue on successful situations also creates comfort to discuss situations in which you are in doubt or where you even made errors.

EXPERIMENT WITH LOCAL AUTONOMY
Examples of local autonomy are being able to change a car’s headlight, being able to buy somebody flowers when needed and being able to make small repairs to your equipment belt. This suggestion is not about the availability of budget. The suggestion is to do a series of experiments: search for existing examples of local autonomy and repeat this in other places.

‘COLLEAGUE’, MAKE MORE USE OF THE POLICE-FEELING
The suggestion is to create more contact between employees. This can be done by:
- Let support staff temporarily take part in the work on the street.
- Let executive colleagues take shifts in the support organisation.
- Organise an introduction tour through the organisation for new colleagues after a few months employment.
- When colleagues from the executive domain move to a support or management job, let them tell about their experiences on both sides.
Figure 1, culture themes and related development proposals
A qualitative study into the organizational culture of the Dutch National Police was conducted in 2015. The goal of this research was to describe the police culture and to create development proposals for this culture. During the study the researchers spoke to employees throughout the organisation to gather stories and anecdotes. In these stories and anecdotes the organisational culture became visible. This is compared to the desired organisational culture as described in the realisatieplan (implementation plan) of the Dutch National Police. Differences between these sides of police culture have been discussed and development proposals have been put forward.

This summary sketches police culture in seven themes, such as 'Family', 'Professional freedom' and 'Unity in thought and action'. Some of these are so closely connected to police work to be considered unchangeable. These strong features of the culture can be used to develop other culture themes. Thus other culture themes give rise to development proposals: small steps when possible and valuable. The seven development proposals vary from 'Also evaluate cases that went well' to 'Help operational leaders to translate policies for their employees'.

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