



**Police Leadership: The Challenges for Developing Contemporary Practice**

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Emergency Services</i>
Manuscript ID	IJES-04-2017-0022.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	command leadership, task-oriented leadership, people-oriented leadership, police leadership, risk, rank

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## Police Leadership: The Challenges for Developing Contemporary Practice

### Background

Between 2009 and 2016, the number of full time police officers in England and Wales fell by almost 20,000, meaning there are now fewer officers than there were in the late 1990s (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2017). This change in workforce numbers suggests a greater need for effective people management in the police forces in England and Wales than ever before, yet leadership in the police has typically been conceptualised in command and control terms, with a strong culture of deference to rank and centralised decision-making (Bayley, 1994; Grint and Thornton, 2015; Mastroski, 2002; Panzarella, 2003; Silvestri, 2011; Wright et al., 2008; Villiers, 2003). Herrington and Colvin (2016:2) explain:

“Individual leaders can operate effectively in such organisations by relying on their authority. That is, their ability to direct proceedings by virtue of others’ deference to their rank.”

The complexity of contemporary policing and financial pressures on all police forces in the UK demands a broadening set of leadership skills (Brain and Owens, 2015; Neyroud, 2011; Reiner and O’Connor, 2015; Smith, 2008). Shared or participatory leadership approaches offer a greater opportunity for officer engagement in leadership across all ranks as an alternative to the more traditional hierarchical approach. Steinberger and Wuestewald’s (2008) evaluation of a shared leadership initiative in a U.S. police department showed significant improvements in communication, employee relations and employee motivation. In Germany, Masal’s (2015) survey demonstrated support for shared leadership and found transformational police leaders had a positive influence on shared leadership practices through goal clarity and job satisfaction. Craig et al. (2010)’s UK study of shared leadership in the policing of minority ethnic communities illustrates the utilisation of shared leadership in community engagement. However, these studies draw attention to the challenges of adopting alternative leadership practices in hierarchical command-oriented environments like the police. Shared leadership arrangements, for example, place considerable demands on working practices and training (Craig et al., 2010) and importantly the effectiveness of these approaches is reliant on the support and commitment of senior leadership (Steinberger and Wuestewald, 2008). The

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3 authority of rank, in other words, continues to be an important driver in the acceptance of  
4 alternative leadership practices in police organisations (Herrington and Colvin, 2016).

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7 Police leadership is also increasingly conceptualised in **managerialist terms**. The legacy of the  
8 New Public Management (NPM) reforms **in the UK** situate **managerial** skill, such as  
9 management of processes, systems and risk, as an accepted feature of contemporary police  
10 leadership (Butterfield et al.,2005; Davies and Thomas,2003 Hood, 1991; Leishman et  
11 al.,1995). Objective setting and ‘getting results’ (Butler,1992; Cope et al.,1997), competitive  
12 outsourcing and decentralisation, (Diefenbach,2009), staff appraisal systems and customer  
13 feedback mechanisms (Butterfield et al.,2005), performance indicators, league tables, the  
14 expansion of inspection and audit (Golding and Savage,2011; Long,2003) **and the adoption of**  
15 **‘lean’ approaches (Barton,2013)** illustrate the extent to which NPM principles of  
16 effectiveness and efficiency are very much embedded in the discourse of police leadership  
17 (Wright,2000). The College of Policing, **the newly established professional body for the**  
18 **police service in England and Wales**, confirm the **managerial** emphasis in formal policy  
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30 “Senior police leaders manage complex organisations, and the ability to do so  
31 successfully will be enhanced by encouraging positive aspects of a more commercial  
32 mindset. This does not imply a profit-motivated attitude but alludes to specific  
33 attributes, such as: creating opportunity rather than waiting for it; being able to ‘pitch’  
34 new ideas convincingly; valuing positive relationships with peers, teams, and  
35 customers; adapting quickly to new circumstances” (College of Policing,2015:30).  
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40 The **managerial**-orientation of the police leadership role has also been recognised in empirical  
41 research. Reiner (1992), in the seminal study of chief constables in Britain, first highlighted  
42 the bureaucratic rather than operational or command nature of the senior leadership role.  
43 Savage et al. (2000), in their study of chief officers **in Britain**, captures the shift from  
44 command and control approach to leadership towards **the acceptance of managerialist**  
45 **philosophies reflective of private sector organisations**. More recently, Butterfield et al’s.  
46 (2005) study of the impact of NPM on a UK police constabulary found that police leadership  
47 increasingly incorporated strategic and managerial responsibilities. Managerialist principles  
48 and approaches are now taken-for-granted features of police leadership, once again,  
49 illustrating the need for different leadership skills beyond command and control. Savage et al.  
50 (2000:125) confirm:  
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3 “As the rigours of ‘New Public Management’ take a firmer grip on the working of the  
4 police service, there is little doubt that the militaristic overtones of the ‘Command  
5 Team’ style of policy-making will give way more and more to one closer to a  
6 ‘Directorate’ and ‘Executive’ model, similar to that in other public sector  
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10 organisations and, of course, the private sector”.

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12 The interplay between leadership and management is complex and contradictory  
13 (Adlam,2003; Andersson, and Tengblad,2009; Kent,2005; Loveday,2008; Washbush,2005;  
14 Yukl,1989). There are inherent tensions in the relationship between leadership and  
15 management (Golding and Savage,2011). This managerial emphasis, with a focus on  
16 stability, structure and control, conflicts with leadership as entrepreneurial (Grint and  
17 Thornton,2015;; O’Malley and Hutchinson,2007; Villiers and Adlam,2003;). In private sector  
18 organisations, leadership is often described in entrepreneurial terms, with an emphasis on  
19 innovation, creativity and change (Gardner,1990; Kotter,1990; Mintzberg,1994;  
20 Zaleznik,2004). Bennis (1989), an eminent leadership scholar, highlights the entrepreneurial  
21 qualities of leadership in his description of leaders as innovators, ‘an original’ who  
22 ‘originates’ and challenges the status quo. In the process of distinguishing between leadership  
23 and management, however there is a tendency for leadership to be positioned as superior; the  
24 dichotomy is unhelpful in developing future leadership capability (Collinson,2014;  
25 Gardner,1990). The contemporary policing landscape necessitates a move away from  
26 command-based leadership to incorporate innovative approaches to leadership. The College  
27 of Policing (2015) confirms the need to develop collaborative leadership practices in which  
28 power is dispersed across police organisation. Ideas generation, innovation and  
29 entrepreneurship, it seems, appear central in policy rhetoric on police leadership.  
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43 Within this context therefore, scholars recognise leadership is not an objective entity separate  
44 from the social world, but influenced by social interaction and discourses (Meindl,1995;  
45 Grint,2010). Wood and Ladkin (2008:17, original emphasis), for example, recognise that  
46 “leadership is *not* the thing; rather than playing out of leadership *is* the thing.” Informed by  
47 social constructionism, leadership theorists have therefore begun to consider how theories of  
48 framing and sense making contribute to our understandings of leadership in organisations  
49 (Pye,2005; Weick,1995); how these processes define credible approaches and restrict  
50 alternative forms of leadership (Grint,2005; Peck and Dickinson,2009). Smircich and Morgan  
51 (1982), in their seminal paper on sense making, examine the role of framing or the  
52 ‘management of meaning’ in the construction of leadership. The authors explain:  
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3 “Leadership is realised in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in  
4 attempting to frame and define the reality of others” (Smircich and  
5 Morgan,1982:258).  
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9 Language is an important part of the ‘playing out’ of leadership; the framing and sense  
10 making processes. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), in their study of leadership in a  
11 research and development company, explore how managers talk about leadership to  
12 understand the practice of leadership. Davies and Thomas (2003:686), in their analysis of  
13 managerial practices in the UK police service, confirm:  
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18 “It is through language that individual subjectivity, social institutions and social  
19 processes are defined, ‘made up’ and contested”.  
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24 Situated within a social constructionist framework, this study sought to understand the  
25 meaning and practice of police leadership in one UK police force. The research objectives  
26 were to explore the understandings of leadership amongst senior police officers, how these  
27 understandings of leadership had developed and the implications for leadership in police  
28 constabularies. Informed by the sense making and framing literature in leadership studies,  
29 this paper draws on the language used in semi structured interviews to explore the framing of  
30 police leadership as managerial and command-led  
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### 39 **Methods**

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42 A case study approach was adopted to access rich, in-depth data in one police constabulary  
43 (Schofield,1993; Stake,1995). Informed by social constructionism, and the conceptualisation  
44 of leadership as socially constructed, produced and reproduced through social interaction  
45 (Collinson,2011; Fairhurst and Grant,2010; Meindl,1995; Uhl-Bien and Pillai,2007), scoping  
46 interviews and observations with six police officers and a review of the policing literature led  
47 to the development of a semi-structured interview guide. A total of 38 interviews were  
48 conducted with senior police officers (25 male and 13 female) to explore their understanding  
49 of leadership. Officers were sampled purposefully to reflect the importance of rank in police  
50 leadership. Interviews were conducted with 6 chief officers, 11 officers at the superintendent  
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3 ranks and 21 at the inspector ranks. The interviews produced over forty-five hours of  
4 transcriptions.  
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7 The research was approved by the University's ethics committee and paid particular attention  
8 to informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. As rank was a potentially identifiable  
9 feature for senior officers, participants were divided into three sample groups to ensure  
10 anonymity: senior management (chief officer rank); middle management (superintendent  
11 ranks) and lower management (inspector ranks). All direct quotes are therefore attributed to  
12 the sample group.  
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18 Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and subject to an inductive, reflexive  
19 approach to the data analysis, informed by grounded theory and the primacy of 'emergence'  
20 (Charmaz,2014). Qualitative data were coded with descriptive codes followed by thematic  
21 codes to produce an in-depth analysis of the understandings of police leadership.  
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## 28 Findings

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30 In exploring the language used in the construction of leadership, the analysis revealed that  
31 police officers draw on managerial and command discourses in their understandings of  
32 leadership. A sub theme, related to the perceived risk and visibility of the situation in which  
33 leadership is demonstrated, also emerged in the analysis.  
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37 [INSERT FIGURE]

### 38 *Leadership as Command Led*

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42 Across all the ranks interviewed, police officers described leadership in terms of command  
43 and operational issues. Police officers spoke of a strong attachment to the functionality of the  
44 hierarchical rank structure in the arrangement and practice of police leadership. In particular,  
45 police officers perceived the rank structure as critical in providing a clear demarcation of  
46 roles and responsibilities and a clear positioning of decision making in operational situations.  
47 In situations where the rank structure was understood to be useful, a task-oriented approach  
48 to leadership was perceived to be needed; police officers describing this as 'task not ask'  
49 leadership. The following quotes capture the relationship between the rank structure and a  
50 task-oriented approach to leadership.  
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3 “We are an emergency service, the clue’s in the title, so it is very much I don’t know  
4 what’s going to happen in the next five minutes, and it sounds dramatic, but it could  
5 be I’m dragged off and I spend the next 18 hours which I didn’t plan to do, and that’s  
6 the same for everybody, certainly police officer wise, in response to this job. So you  
7 have to cope with that, that’s part of our business. Then you’ve got to think about only  
8 certain positions have responsibility for things when they happen, so we have a rank  
9 structure, so we have certain places that we have to fill... The service does need  
10 people who say ‘just do it’, because there is going to be a time where we’ll ask people  
11 to do things that are a bit shitty, a bit against what they want to do, but it does still  
12 need to be done and quite timely” (Middle Management).  
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23 Police officers, particularly at the inspector and superintendent ranks, used military  
24 connotations to describe police leadership. Phrases such as “follow me over the trenches”  
25 “backing the troops” and “leading from the front” emerged in the analysis as reflective of this  
26 command-based understanding of police leadership. The following quotes capture the  
27 militaristic connotations of leadership in the police:  
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32 “So that’s very much command and control, I’m very shouty, if people don’t do what  
33 I tell them to do, they get a bollocking, because, the risk is so much higher, you have  
34 to flip in to that command and control, and everyone knows there’s a hierarchy, and  
35 it’s more like the Napoleonic, ‘follow me, I know the way’ type leadership”. (Lower  
36 Management)  
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41 “When I think about leadership it’s about the people who say ‘right we’re going into  
42 this room and it’s full of people wielding knives and you follow me in and we’ll sort  
43 it out’ and you say ‘ok I’ll follow you in’ and it’s that sort of natural charisma and  
44 personality. They tend to have that aura about them. It’s probably similar to the armed  
45 services, people will follow them into any battle situation.” (Lower Management)  
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53 The analysis revealed that tasks and outcomes are prioritised above people in command  
54 leadership. Police officers emphasised the centrality of the effective management of tasks,  
55 rather than people-oriented approaches, in operational situations. The following quote  
56 captures the primacy of tasks in command-based leadership.  
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3 “Our primary role to me is crisis management, and when you deal with crisis  
4 management, those involved in it, and even those who aren’t, they really understand  
5 that you need that clear responsibility, we can make quick decisions in seconds and as  
6 long as everyone follows their level of command, that’s why you need a command  
7 structure. We deal with crisis management really well... ‘no I’m in charge, I’ll make  
8 the decisions, you do this you do that’” (Lower Management).  
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14 Police officers in the research referred to the necessity of the directive, autocratic nature of  
15 leadership in operational situations and the importance of ‘getting the job done’. However,  
16 the emphasis of task in command leadership acts as a barrier to developing alternative,  
17 people-oriented approaches. The following quotes capture the resistance to developing  
18 difference in leadership in the police.  
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23 “There are other people who say, actually it’s hard work engaging people and getting  
24 people around saying ‘what do you all think’ and problem solve things together  
25 because you’ll always get the idiotic view from Jim over there or whoever, ‘he’ll have  
26 his say but we’ll ignore it’ attitude, so actually it’s more comfortable to just tell me  
27 what to do in the first place. I just wonder if that then, the softer style is harder, maybe  
28 that’s where we need to do more work with people to develop them to operate in that  
29 way so as a result, all levels just acquiesces back to the command and control side of  
30 it.” (Senior Management).  
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37 “I think [rank] can be restricting in a lot of ways in that it can be the thing that stifles  
38 innovation and creativity and the development of new ways of doing things, and  
39 trying new ways of doing things” (Senior Management).  
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#### 45 *Risk and Visibility*

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47 The command-based approach to police leadership is influenced by the understandings of the  
48 demands of the situation. High risk and highly visible situations, such as public order and  
49 firearms incidents, were perceived by police officers as typical examples of situations that  
50 necessitated a command-based approach. These situations were highly likely to attract wider  
51 scrutiny from the public and media, and reflected high levels of perceived risk. The structure  
52 and authority of rank in these situations was used to ‘get things done’. The below quote  
53 illustrates the command approach relative to the perceived risk and urgency of the situation:  
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3 “If you have a major incident, you know, a significant incident on the ground where  
4 you need people to do things quick time, that’s when that [rank] side of it really kicks  
5 in. Because it’s like, there ain’t no time for asking a question. I’m taking the direction,  
6 this has got to be done, because there’s a risk there, so you’d have to direct people  
7 quick time and I think that’s where it then kicks in. You’ve got to have that control of  
8 that structure around deploying your resources in quick time. Because when you’ve  
9 got an incident on-going, there are things that just have to be done.” (Lower  
10 Management).  
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20 In contrast, there was some evidence that alternative approaches to leadership were being  
21 accommodated in low risk and less visible situations; protected spaces, hidden from public  
22 view, such as informal, one-to-one interactions between junior and senior officers. In these  
23 situations, command leadership was not necessary to ‘get things done quickly’. Police  
24 officers, in describing these situations, spoke of the ability to share or involve their staff in  
25 decision making. The following quote illustrates the sense of ‘safety’ to adopt a more  
26 participatory and collaborative approach to leadership in low risk and less visible situations:  
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31 “So, if I had a one to one with the chief, or he came out and met me, I would ask him  
32 questions and I wouldn’t be worried about challenging him... I know he’s open to  
33 challenge, and if it’s a one to one between me and him, I would.” (Middle  
34 Management).  
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39 “My team’s views are really important, so I would consult with the team about  
40 decisions we make, as a command or as a department, and make sure they’re involved  
41 in the decision making, create that environment.” (Middle Management).  
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### 47 *Leadership as Managerial Oriented*

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49 The analysis also revealed the nature of police leadership is understood as managerial rather  
50 than people oriented. Police officers used language reflective of private sector organisations  
51 to describe leadership practices. Policing activity was described by police officers as “the  
52 business” and the organisation as “the corporate”. Similarly, people were referred to in terms  
53 of their position in the organisation; chief officers as “the executive”, staff as ‘direct reports’  
54 and senior officers as ‘line managers’ rather than in terms of their individual expertise. Terms  
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3 such as 'the strategic direction', 'vision' 'performance' and 'benchmarking' were used  
4 regularly. Likewise, phrases such as 'buy in' 'corporate message' 'business case' and  
5 frequent reference to 'open door policy' were illustrative of this. Phrases such as "what could  
6 you bring to the table" (Lower Management), "singing from the same hymn sheet" (Middle  
7 Management), "touch base" (Lower Management) "sense check" (Middle Management)  
8 "across the piece" (Lower Management) and "emails need to be actioned" (Lower  
9 Management) were further illustrative of this managerial jargon. The managerial discourse  
10 used to explain leadership reveals assumptions about the universality of leadership skills and  
11 transferability of principles and practices from private sector organisations. The following  
12 quote captures the managerial emphasis of the police leadership role:  
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21 "You know, we all have opinions, I've got opinions on stuff that's come out, and I'll  
22 openly say 'they're crap, they're shit', but as a manager, I have to say 'no, no, it will  
23 get better' because that's the corporate response to it... you accept that corporate  
24 responsibility, you have to set out the corporate message." (Lower Management)  
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28 The managerial and command emphasis in leadership also acts as a barrier to prioritising  
29 people-oriented approaches. Relational or people aspects to leadership are downplayed in  
30 favour of a focus on task. The following quote captures the barrier of conventional task-based  
31 approaches to police leadership:  
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35 "I've got a name, use my name, let's connect as human beings first... We default to  
36 'do this, do this' and, well I perceive, people tend to conform that stereotypical  
37 persona when they take a responsible leadership position. That's not authentic.  
38 Authenticity is about, who are you as a person? How can you influence them as  
39 people? How can you connect to them as people in an authentic way that they want to  
40 follow you? Putting barriers up is not the way." (Lower Management).  
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46 Understanding leadership in managerial terms is contrasted to understandings of police  
47 leadership as command-based and operational. That said, the command-based or managerial  
48 conceptions of leadership are not mutually exclusive categories; the same individual, for  
49 example, would discuss different leadership situations reflecting both conceptions. The  
50 presence of these different approaches to leadership therefore reflects the broadening skills  
51 required of the contemporary police leader.  
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## Discussion

This study sought to explore how officers construct understandings of leadership in a UK police constabulary. Managerialist and command discourses were used to frame police leadership in managerial and command-based terms, rather than a focus on people as a critical resource in modern day policing. The task-based understanding of leadership conflicts with people oriented approaches. This reflects literature on military leadership which typically captures leadership as task-based. Adair (2009) draws on military leadership to demonstrate the importance of effectively responding to the needs of the task. The people aspects of leadership, in other words, is achieved through effectively managing the task. Adair (2009:77) confirms: "Achieving the task is your principal means of developing high morale and meeting individual needs". The focus on task, therefore conflicts with the relational and people aspects of leadership; in a military context, these capabilities are perceived weakness (Dunn,2008). These conflicting discourses therefore reveal the tensions in the practice of police leadership. Reuss-Ianni's (1983) ethnography in a New York Police Department provided an early insight into the tensions and divisions between the managerial and operational roles of 'street cops' and 'management cops'. In the UK, Holdaway (1977) captured the conflicting policing approaches and priorities in 'managerial professionalism' and 'practical professionalism'. These competing conceptualisations of police leadership can further the divisions between senior and junior officers and act to downplay an approach that values individuals and the workforce collectively in developing future leadership capability.

Command-based leadership, as this study illustrated, is typically task-oriented, directive and autocratic. This reflects existing literature which conceptualises police leadership as emphasising a centralised top-down structure, with clear allocation of roles and decision making and clear specification of tasks (Loveday,2008; Whitfield et al.,2008) and the authority of rank (Herrington and Colvin,2016). The reported presence of command-based leadership further illustrates the well-documented resistance of police occupational culture, and notions of command, discipline and hierarchy, to change (Cockcroft,2014; Loftus,2009). This resistance is understandable given that in high risk situations, effective command leadership holds considerable occupational value (Grint,2010; Herrington and Colvin,2016; Silvestri,2011). The paradox is therefore, at a time when police leadership may need to become more innovative and people-focused, the pressures and complexities of the contemporary policing environment mean that police officers retreat to leadership which is command-led and driven by the primacy of effectiveness and efficiency.

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3 This study also showed that leadership practice in the police is framed in terms of risk. The  
4 understanding of situations in terms of risk therefore is a tension that needs to be addressed in  
5 the development of future leadership capability. Policing is traditionally organised to  
6 prioritise hierarchy, bureaucratic processes and risk aversion rather than risk taking,  
7 innovation and entrepreneurship in leadership (Heaton,2010; Loveday,2008; Smith,2008).  
8 Whilst task-based leadership in this study reportedly inhibited innovation in leadership,  
9 alternative practices emerged in low risk and less visible situations. These low risk, 'safe'  
10 spaces are necessary to allow police officers to 'do things differently' and develop a more  
11 participatory, collaborative and relational leadership approaches. The use of low risk spaces  
12 to facilitate relational and people aspects of police leadership has been acknowledged in  
13 recent work. Herrington and Colvin (2016) note the use of 'innovation laboratories' in the  
14 police and Smith (2008), to develop an entrepreneurial culture in the police, recommends the  
15 identification of particular areas in constabularies where individuals are empowered to act  
16 autonomously on improvement projects. Therefore, to develop future leadership capability in  
17 the police, this study further confirms the significance of designated safe spaces within  
18 constabularies for innovation in police leadership.  
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### 33 *Limitations*

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35 The findings were based on doctoral research comprising of 38 semi-structured interviews  
36 with senior police officers, from the rank of chief constable to inspector, in one UK police  
37 constabulary. The 'generalisability' of case study findings is an area of methodological  
38 debate (Hammersley,1992; Lincoln and Guba,2000). Schofield (1993) argues for a re-  
39 conceptualisation of the notion of generalisation in qualitative research; A new, alternative  
40 'theoretical language' is needed (Donmeyer,2000). Schofield (1993) considers the criteria of  
41 'fittingness', 'comparability' and 'transferability' and similarly Stake (1995) argues for  
42 'naturalistic generalisation' of case study research whereby insights from case study sites can  
43 be applied to other similar settings. To facilitate generalisation of findings therefore, the  
44 selection of the case study was informed by Schofield's notion of typicality. The police  
45 constabulary involved in this study is a typical rural constabulary in England and Wales. Like  
46 other constabularies in England and Wales, the case study site has made considerable savings  
47 in response to the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2010. The Constabulary has also  
48 increased its focus on vulnerability, much of its activity is now organised on the basis of  
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3 'threat, harm and risk', which is reflective of the national trend. According to the most recent  
4 HMIC inspection, the proportion of frontline officers in the Constabulary's workforce and  
5 police officer numbers per 1,000 local population are in line with the national levels.  
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7 Likewise, the rate of victim-based crimes and cost per person, per day locally, according to  
8 the recent HMIC inspection, are also comparable with the national picture.  
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## 11 12 13 14 15 **Conclusion**

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17 This paper explored how police officers understand leadership in a UK police constabulary.  
18 The College of Policing in the UK calls for the creation of an organisational environment in  
19 the police of inclusivity and flexibility to "accept and encourage differing perspectives" and  
20 "cope with greater innovation" (College of Policing, 2015:12). The command and  
21 managerialist discourses evident in the construction of police leadership reflect the body of  
22 research literature that highlights the importance of task and 'getting the job done'. This task  
23 centred approach to leadership can act as a barrier to the development of people-oriented  
24 approaches. In order to respond effectively to the complexity of the demand on the police,  
25 police leadership should be supported to develop legitimate, alternative leadership strategies  
26 that are relevant and applicable to the policing environment. An essential precursor to this is  
27 the creation of low risk 'safe spaces' where alternative leadership practices can be enacted.  
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31 In the context of diminishing resources and increasing complexity of police demand, police  
32 constabularies need to better understand and develop their workforce as a whole. As such,  
33 this study suggests further research is needed to explore the perceptions and practices of  
34 leadership of police sergeants and police staff to understand and develop future leadership  
35 capabilities in the police.  
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