

Objectives of WP7 and Its First Phase (September 2012 to April 2013)

Summary of WP7.1 Results (Leadership), 2013

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Leaders play a key role in times of organisational changes – from the strategic decision on whether to implement a certain change to the planning, communication and motivation of staff to deal with its (potentially negative) reactions and consequences. WP7 led by Erasmus University Rotterdam addresses the question, what leaders in police organisation can and should do to facilitate change processes from their initiation to their completion.

Past investigations into change leadership have done much to identify relevant leader attributes and behaviors during changes. Yet, this research has two major gaps, when it comes to change in European police organisations. Firstly, most research was conducted in private organisations, which potentially reduces their application to public organisations with different features. Secondly, most research is based on single country studies and has moreover a strong bias towards investigations in the USA or Britain.

Research demonstrates that there are important cultural differences in what is seen as effective leadership. Applied to the context of police forces this suggests that what it means to be 'an effective change leader' will differ from country to country. An important aspect of the work in WP7 is therefore to identify the country-specific aspects of leadership that are deemed essential for the successful leadership of change. In the first phase of WP7 we aimed to better understand how leader behaviors and attributes impact perceptions of changes within specific organisational and national contexts.

Method

To arrive at an inventory of country-specific aspects of change leadership in police organisations, we used a two-step approach. In a first step, research partners in all ten COMPOSITE countries conducted qualitative interviews in which officers described successful and unsuccessful changes. In total we gathered 149 accounts of successful and 151 accounts of unsuccessful change projects. In a second step we analysed the subjective criteria change recipients used to describe successful and unsuccessful change projects.

Main results from the first phase of WP7

Analysing the 300 change project descriptions, we found considerable overlap in the type of change projects reported across countries. Most policing projects were large scale, top down and focused on structural, personnel or process changes. Still, disparities existed in the type of projects considered successful or unsuccessful. Compared to unsuccessful projects, successful projects were more often described as being initiated bottom-up, of middle to high impact, incremental in nature, conducted as a continuous process and targeting core aspects.

Comparing descriptions for the success or failure of change projects yielded clear differences across countries. The most obvious aspects were the design of the implementation process and the role of change leaders. Countries differed considerably in the extent that change leaders were seen as responsible for successes and failures. Change leadership seemed to be the most important aspect in the UK and Germany, and also played an important role in Belgium and Macedonia in facilitating the implementation of the change. In contrast, participants in France and Italy hardly mentioned change leaders. Accordingly, French and Italian officers assigned little praise or blame, while in the U.K., for instance, successes and failures were frequently ascribed to aspects of positive or negative leadership.

Disparities emerged also in terms of the positive and negative attributes of change leaders suggesting that 'good' and 'bad' change leadership may take different forms in different countries. Officers in the U.K. mentioned the broadest range of features varying from knowledgeable, charismatic, and approachable, to focused, proactive, strong and unique. Spanish officers further put a high value on leader characteristics emphasising that successful leaders believed in the project, were approachable, decisive, dedicated and encouraged participation and work in teams. Macedonian officers put a strong emphasis on the professionalism of their leaders, while in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands being knowledgeable was seen as an important aspect. Belgian officers focused on behaviors related to participation such as the seeking of consensus and compromise, learning from others and respecting autonomy, but also the willingness to take command, target people who resist and respect hierarchies. Romanian officers focused more often on the project management side of leadership describing their leaders as good organisers, good managers, who take initiative, are informed about the change process and able to handle the administrative and procedural side of the project.

Countries further varied in their preferences for staff involvement. Generally, accounts of interviewees suggest that officers in all countries preferred participation and involvement. Yet, officers clearly differed in the extent they expected this preference to be met.

Conclusion and outlook

In line with recent developments in the academic literature, our findings refute the omnipresence of universal criteria which still dominate the project management literature on project success, process and especially change leader behavior. We not only show that perceptions as well as evaluations of the success of change projects are highly context-specific, but also detail the specific differences across national police forces. These findings provide the input for a more systematic investigation in the form of

a survey in the second phase of this work package. The survey will deliver a multi-source investigation of large cross-sections of police forces across the ten participating countries, capturing the extent to which leaders fulfill the different leadership of change roles identified with a strong emphasis on country-specific behavioral expressions of these roles.