

Learning together: a matter of prioritizing, facilitating and institutionalizing

Learning evaluation of the development of the business operations at the Dutch police

Summary



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Title: Learning together: a matter of prioritizing, facilitating and institutionalizing

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Commissioned by: Scientific Research and Data Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security
Utrecht, December 2023

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SUMMARY

Background research

The Police Act 2012 has led to a national police force. The aim was to make the Dutch police more efficient and effective. The expectation was that many economies of scale could be achieved, especially with regard to business operations, such as tasks related to ICT, information provision, purchasing and HRM. However, the Kuijken Committee in their evaluation concluded in 2017 that working towards centralized business operations has proven to be tough. Since then, the police have focused on a change movement towards a more self-learning system for the development and implementation of their services through projects of the Police Services Centre (Politiedienstencentrum PDC) such as PDC Next Level.

Design of the study

At the request of the police, the Scientific Research and Data Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security commissioned a study into the state of this change movement. Specifically, the WODC wanted to know what the change movement was intended to achieve, to what extent the change movement had an effect and which mechanisms could further strengthen the change movement.

Utrecht University conducted the research in 2023. In this research the experiences from operations, PDC and policy actors were actively involved through interviews, interim reflections with the advisory board, observations and a working conference. Specifically, we looked at the experiences around five cases: Robotic Process Automation, National Police Introduction Program, Blue Portal, the introduction of the Taser and decentralized activities related to Surveillance and Security.

The ambitions of the change movement

The change movement encompasses a multitude of initiatives, in which different goals have been formulated over the years. All things considered, there are three central elements to be found in the change movement:

1. Strengthening the *self-learning capacity* of the police around its business operations. Facilitating learning between units, PDC and policy actors in such a way that tasks are taken up structurally, integrally and with attention to the end user.
2. Increasing the *flexibility* of the police's business operations, so that the staffing, ways of organizing and concrete services can best meet the specific requirements.
3. Strengthening the *versatility* of the police's business operations, i.e. the ability to respond more powerfully to the changing (future) needs and opportunities that the police are facing.

The effects of the change movement

Self-learning capacity: The cases show that retrieval and use of user experiences is often already taking shape. Especially in the pilot phases of projects and within individual projects, the learning between operations, PDC and policy actors is well underway. At the organizational level, however, this is still a challenge. There is insufficient prioritization of which business tasks deserve attention and capacity. In addition, the divisions between business domains and the many layers between management and implementation make learning across projects and in an integrated way difficult.

Flexibility: The cases show that the focus is now less on standardization of business processes and that there is more room for flexibility. Specific tasks or teams are more often provided with tailored services if the situation requires it. A stumbling block remains the (perceived) cultural difference between operations and PDC. Both sides still regularly experience that the other does not understand their perspective. In-person contact between PDC and operations helps to articulate the question properly and provide the right service. However, the lack of capacity at the PDC and the retirement of the older generation with a lot of experience makes flexibility and learning more difficult. Flexibility also requires clarity from the management about why some frameworks are fixed and what room there is for discretion.

Versatility: The Taser and Surveillance and Security case studies show how much can be achieved if the choices are made in close cooperation between operations, PDC and policy actors. Based on a clear political assignment or a changed social threat, a lot of personnel and equipment is deployed in a relatively short period of time. However, other cases show that business operations are less agile if the choices are not so clear. More fundamentally, the crisis-driven culture of the police creates a challenge to sustainably safeguarding capacity in the long term.

Continuing to learn together

Looking back at what has been achieved and looking at the challenges ahead, we argue that three aspects are needed to further strengthen the change movement that has been initiated:

1. **Prioritizing operational tasks.** Further improving the operational management of tomorrow's police requires clear choices from the police leadership. In doing so, there must be insight into how many changes the organization can handle in the coming years and which changes have priority.
2. **Facilitating learning behaviour.** The desired change movement should ultimately lead to behavioural change among police employees with regard to learning, both from operations, PDC and policy teams. Learning behaviour can be facilitated by structures that stimulate and safeguard learning and that give people peace and space and reward them for good initiatives.
3. **Institutionalizing practices.** The police are good at implementing and learning during temporary well-defined pilots, projects and programmes, but continuous improvement of business operations requires that temporary initiatives are embedded in the culture, structure and processes of the organization and thus that learning practices are institutionalized.