



Psychological Competency Training

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INTRODUCTION

With social and economic changes as well as heightened awareness of human rights, the public has expanded their demands on police officers. While expecting police officers to be efficient and competent in their traditional roles of peace keeping and crime fighting, citizens generally also demand officers to provide professional and quality services to them in day-to-day encounters. Thus, it has become vital for the Hong Kong Police Force (the Force) to instil a new level of professional competency in officers to meet such demands.

The Force studied a new initiative called 'Psychological Competency' in 2002. Psychological Competency Training (PCT) and related change measures were piloted in 2004 and formally introduced as part of the Force Strategic Action Plan 2005-2008. Officers have found PCT useful in improving their work performance and job satisfaction. PCT also received an American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) Excellence in Practice Award 2009. The Force was one of 21 award winners out of 131 international entries.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPETENCY

Psychological Competency, a term coined by the Force Senior Police Clinical Psychologist, is a set of psychological knowledge and skills, behavioural patterns and lifestyle management skills necessary for the effective performance of a police officer. In short, it is a set of skills that address the human aspects of modern policing.

ordinary everyday duties, when they requested members of the public to produce identity or driving documents, and during interaction with crime victims and witnesses. Traffic officers encountered particular difficulties as their duties of issuing fixed penalty tickets and prosecuting drivers for traffic law violations tended to result in conflict and complaints. The consequences of such conflict and complaints were stress and frustration in officers as well as grave concerns among senior Force management over achieving the organisational aspiration to serve the community by providing a quality service.

PROBLEM TO BE ADDRESSED

The service pledge of the Force is to 'Serve with Pride and Care'. Striving to meet mounting public expectations, the Force has embarked on the journey to become a service-oriented organisation since the 1990s. In 1996, the Force Vision and Statement of Common Purpose and Values was launched, and between 1999 and 2003, organisational wide Service Improvement Training was carried out to cultivate a new service culture among all Force members.

Force management realised that police professionalism had evolved to require not only the qualities of bravery, physical strength and command abilities in law and order situations but also expertise in interpersonal interactions to secure citizen compliance and restore order in emotionally charged situations. The pressing issue for the Force to ponder was: after promoting a service culture and equipping officers with service delivery skills, how could the next level of professional competency be inculcated in order to meet the changing needs of this dynamic society?

PROBLEM EXAMINATION

As this was an important issue, the Force systematically studied the problem and consulted important stakeholders. A Steering Committee was first set up in 2001, chaired by a Chief Superintendent, which comprised senior officers from Training and Personnel units and the Senior Police Clinical Psychologist, with a Working Group headed by the Senior Force Training Officer as the executive arm. The following three steps were carried out in 2002:

Step 1 – Defining a Competency Standard

Further to the use of Core and Functional Competencies in the Force, research was conducted to see if competency standards should be developed on human skills. The human knowledge and skills accumulated in the field of psychology, which is a scientific study of human behaviour, were found to be valuable and applicable to law enforcement work. So, after conducting academic research, focus groups and a questionnaire survey, a set of competencies on human interaction was developed and termed 'Psychological Competency'. It comprises a number of subjects and behavioural statements under five domains:

- (a) Stress and Lifestyle Management;
- (b) Emotional Regulation;
- (c) Conflict Management;
- (d) Counselling and Interpersonal Communication; and
- (e) Criminal and Investigative Psychology.

Step 2 – Training Needs Analysis

Having developed Psychological Competency, a training needs analysis

(TNA) was conducted to further confirm the competency and assess if Psychological Competency training was required. The TNA consisted of three parts: a questionnaire survey was conducted on a random stratified sample of frontline and management officers; focus groups were held to get views on officers' needs and preferred learning mode; and interviews with Senior Management were arranged to obtain organisational needs.

Step 3 – Review of Existing Training Curriculum

A review was also conducted on the existing coverage of Psychological Competency in core training programmes, including recruit and development training.

TNA and Review Findings

The TNA and review findings showed that the overall training on Psychological Competency was inadequate, and identified two root causes for the gap in competencies:

(a) Limitations of Traditional Training

The focus of training programmes was mainly on law and procedures, with little time spent on human interaction skills. Service Improvement Training was useful but officers expressed a need for higher levels of expertise in officer-public encounters, including expertise in dealing with people at their worst, such as when they were victimised and/or in emotionally charged situations.

(b) Constraints of Traditional Work Culture

While yearning for effective human interaction skills, officers still clung to traditional beliefs that primarily valued authority, action and hard skills (e.g.

command and verbal skills in the use of force). Soft skills such as listening and empathy to handle citizens were viewed by many officers as useless, soft and too weak.

REDEFINING POLICE PROFESSIONALISM

Recognising that there was a wide gap between the conventional law-enforcement approach to police work that produced an overwhelmingly masculine image and the actual wide-ranging support and service work performed daily by officers, the Steering Committee decided on a change initiative that profoundly altered the existing paradigm of what constituted an effective law enforcement officer and formally recognised the importance of expertise in interpersonal interactions, which had long been neglected. The change initiative was to proactively redefine the professional competencies of our police officers by introducing the new dimension of Psychological Competency in addition to other more traditional core and functional competencies.

The Steering Committee also realised that Psychological Competency could not be imposed upon officers but had to be gradually inculcated into the organisational structure and culture by the introduction of three key change elements:

- (a) establishing a new competency standard of professional officer-public contacts;
- (b) transforming the work culture of valuing only actions and hard skills into one that also embraces soft interaction skills; and
- (c) equipping officers with the necessary psychological knowledge, expertise and skills.

Following a successful pilot scheme in 2004, Psychological Competency Training (PCT) and its related change measures became an important initiative in the Force Strategic Action Plan 2005-2008.

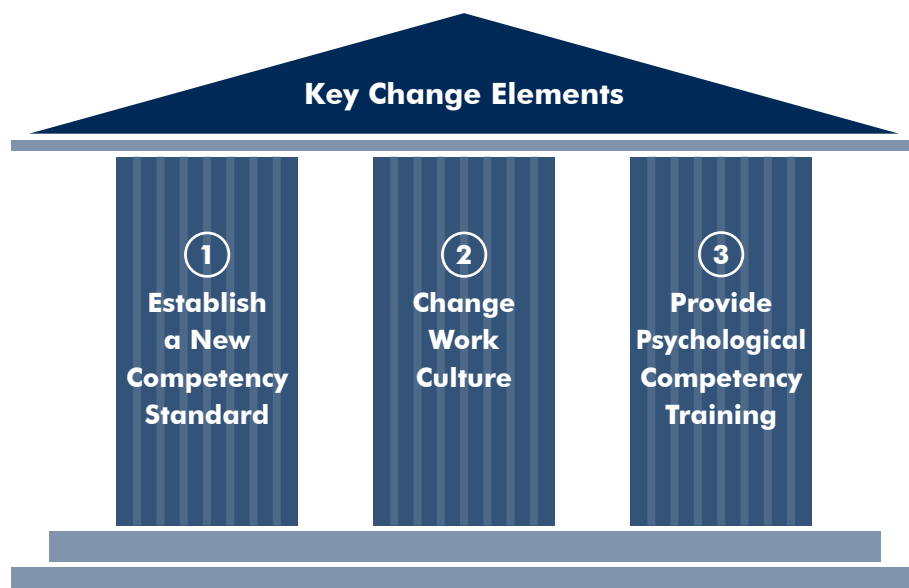
ESTABLISHING A NEW COMPETENCY STANDARD

The five Psychological Competency domains have been established as a new competency standard and formally introduced as part of the organisational Competency Model to support the Force Vision and Statement of Common Purpose and Values.

CHANGING WORK CULTURE

It was not easy to change the work culture from valuing only actions and hard skills to one embracing soft interaction skills. Two groups of change agents, namely internal trainers and supervisors/managers, were identified to help the buy-in of other officers.

Internal trainers were considered suitable persons to combine psychological expertise with practical law enforcement experience to help trainees apply the newly learnt competencies. To solicit trainers' support, they were involved early in the stage of designing new training materials and were among the first groups to be invited to the new training provided by local universities. Regarding supervisors and managers, their support was indispensable for officers to accept and apply the new competencies. So, a number of open seminars were conducted by university psychologists and relevant experts for the middle to senior management to be aware of and to learn the new Psychological Competencies.



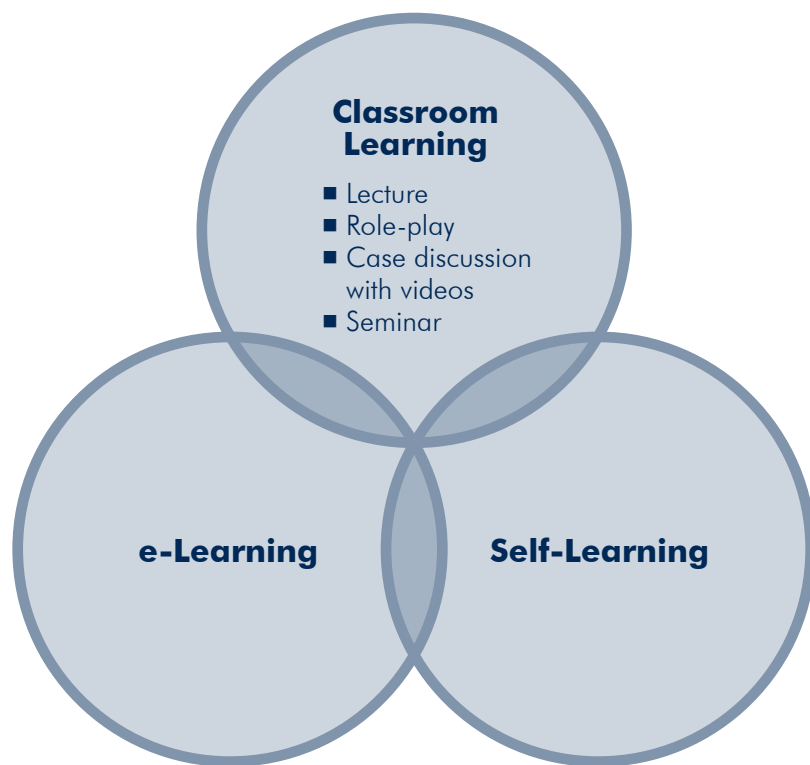
PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPETENCY TRAINING

Contrasted to the old ways of leaving officers to learn human skills from experience or peers, systematic training on Psychological Competency was provided by the Police College working in partnership with internal psychologists and psychologists from

local universities. Tailor-made training materials and a series of train-the-trainer workshops were developed in eight specific Psychological Competency areas identified in the previously mentioned TNA.

Moreover, as the following table shows, to address various needs and constraints cost-effectively, a blended learning approach was adopted.

Eight Psychological Competency Areas		Learning Approach
(a) (b) (c) (d) (e)	Conflict Management Victim Psychology Interpersonal Communication Skills Counselling Skills as a Police Supervisor/Colleague Emotional Regulation	The main strategy was to integrate these five competency areas into the training curriculum. The new learning was also supplemented by e-learning programmes for all officers to learn and refresh at any time at their own pace.
(f) (g)	Stress Management in Police Work Healthy Lifestyle	
(h)	Psychological Skills in Suspect Interviewing	
		Due to a lack of local experts, self-learning materials were developed in consultation with top UK National Advisors.



A Blended Learning Approach

PROGRAMME IMPACT

In late 2008, a post-training survey was conducted to assess the overall effectiveness of PCT. Survey results showed that 84% of respondents were highly satisfied with this training. An average of 2.4 years after training, 70% indicated that the training had enhanced their own and their colleagues' competence, and had positive impacts on their lifestyle as well as work performance, such as reducing conflicts with the public and increasing their job satisfaction.

Behavioural Demonstrations

There are many cases demonstrating how PCT has helped officers improve service to the public and increase their job satisfaction. Two cases are described below.

In the early stage of implementing PCT, a traffic enforcement case displayed the new competencies learnt. An officer stopping a private vehicle for speeding found that the whole family was inside the car. Instead of

the traditional authoritative way of telling the driver that he was wrong, the officer applied the soft skill of 'killing them with kindness'. When handing out the penalty ticket, the officer said to the driver politely and assertively, 'Sir, you are now fined for speeding. This is mainly for the safety of your whole family. Please do not do this again!' In response, the driver not only accepted the ticket without complaining, he even called a radio phone-in programme and complimented the officer's professionalism. This story spread quickly and was picked up by internal trainers as a successful application of PCT skills and who then used it to impart the new Psychological Competency to trainees.

In another case of dealing with an attempted suicide, a frontline officer related that previously he did not know what to do or say when citizens kept silent. However, after learning more about the emotional states and needs of distressed persons from PCT, he applied the skill of 'reflection of feelings'. He told the man with suicidal intent that he looked extremely sorrowful and

asked if something was troubling him. This application of understanding and empathetic skills enabled the officer to persuade the man to give up his intention of committing suicide. Furthermore, instead of leaving the scene at that moment as he would have done in the past, the officer, with his new learning, took one more step to provide professional service before leaving by arranging a support person for the man to help him deal with his emotions.

CONCLUSION

The PCT change initiative aims to fundamentally raise officers' competencies in managing daily public encounters so that the organisation can achieve its ultimate goal of serving the community with 'Pride and Care'. The training has been successfully incorporated into core training programmes ranging from recruit training, promotion and development training, to specialised courses such as traffic training. The training will continue and advanced materials will be developed to equip officers to meet the changing needs of society.

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