

Chief of Police, Chief of Reinvention: Bill Bratton Teaches Through Example

I've been writing books for two decades now, and the real fun has always been the research. What better than to find smart, creative people who are breaking out of the bureaucratic box, visit them, and pick their brains?

One I missed was Bill Bratton, who has been chief of police in Boston, New York City and now Los Angeles. I've been a fan of Bratton's ever since he drove felony crime down by 39 percent and murder down by 50 percent in just 27 months in New York—and in the process launched a renaissance in the city.



I had the pleasure of visiting with Chief Bratton in his Los Angeles office recently. During the conversation he was kind enough to give me a copy of *Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Crime Epidemic*, which he wrote with Peter Knobler.

Somehow I missed *Turnaround* when it came out in 1998. But it's an important book, and it's one hell of a good read.

For me, reading *Turnaround* was like reliving a wonderful era, a time when so many of us were figuring out, bit by bit, how to transform the dysfunctional, industrial-era bureaucracies we had inherited. Bratton tells the story of his own path of discovery in autobiographical fashion, beginning with his childhood in Boston, moving through his years as a street cop in Boston, and ending when he resigned as NYC Chief of Police in 1996.

We see a young Bratton figuring out why the police departments he came to know produced such poor results, then beginning to learn how to change them. As he rose to command in Boston and the New York City Transit Police, we see him putting his knowledge into action. And in New York, we see him putting it all together.

For me it was almost as if someone had taken *Reinventing Government* and *Banishing Bureaucracy* and turned them into a flesh and blood story with all the drama of America's grittiest public workplace: the police department.

If you're familiar with *Banishing Bureaucracy*, you know that my co-author Pete Plastrik and I presented five key strategies that are necessary to transform a bureaucratic organization into a high-performing, 21st century organization. To help people remember them, we labeled them all with words that begin with the letter C: Core, Consequences, Customer, Control, and Culture.



In compliance (as opposed to service) work, the customer strategy is not front and center. But Bratton used the other four strategies to dramatically improve life for his customers: the residents of New York City.

The Core Strategy: Clarity of Purpose.

When Bratton arrived in New York, he found “a fearful, centralized bureaucracy with little focus on goals.” His first diagnostic report made clear that the core purpose was not to reduce crime: “At the highest levels of the organization, the basic aim of the NYPD was not to bring down crime but to avoid criticism from the media, politicians, and the public.”

“Ever since the 1970 Knapp Commission, which publicized the NYPD’s institutionalized corruption and made Frank Serpico a household name, the number one priority was always controlling corruption. The rest varied from commander to commander, but crime was way down the list.”

Bratton made it clear to one and all that his department would have one overriding purpose: to reduce crime. The first year goal would be 10 percent. Every decision would be judged on how it affected that goal, and every personnel move would be made with that goal in mind.

Clarifying purposes and setting goals are two key steps in the Core Strategy; developing strategies to achieve those goals is a third. Strategy development is a rare and little understood art in the public sector, but fortunately Bratton brought a strategy development genius named Jack Maple over from the Transit Police.

When they were running the Transit Police, Maple and Bratton had embraced the “Broken Windows” strategy advocated by academics James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. Bratton’s predecessor as NYPD Chief had also bought in, launching an effort to arrest the “squeegee men” who descended upon drivers at key street corners Manhattan. Bratton broadened the strategy, going after other signs of broken community, from aggressive panhandling to urinating on the streets. Then he launched, in rapid succession, new strategies to get guns off the streets, prevent youth violence, and reduce drug use, domestic violence, auto crime, and corruption.

The Consequences Strategy: Creating Consequences for Performance

“The police department had always thrown numbers at the community: ‘Look at all of our arrests, look at our activity,’” Bratton writes. “But the department only measured activity, it didn’t measure results. ... Statistics were not for use in combating crime, they were only for keeping score at the end of the year. ... Nobody used them for anything.”



Seizing on a proposal from Maple, Bratton decided to start using crime data on a weekly basis. The result was “Compstat”—one of the most influential innovations ever to come out of the public sector.

Maple organized meetings at which he and other leaders grilled commanders on crime statistics in their precincts and on what they were doing to prevent such crimes. “It started as the simple monitoring of a briefing,” Bratton recalls. “It became an extravaganza. We had started panning for gold and had struck the mother lode.”

As Compstat evolved, more and more people attended the meetings, including representatives of the district attorney, the U.S. attorney, the parole system, the public schools, and the Port Authority police.

“Until this time, a precinct commander would never in his or her career expect to talk consistently and directly to the chief of department, the first deputy, or the police commissioner, but there we were, sitting at the command table,” Bratton says. “Each commander was called upon to report on his precinct about once a month, and we had his precinct’s numbers in front of us. So did everyone else in the room.”

Soon they had maps with pins marking every crime. “Within a year, we had three huge eight-foot-by-eight-foot computer monitors mounted on the walls and could call up each map, each crime, by computer.”

“The maps made crime clusters visual,” Bratton says. “It was like computerized fishing: you’d go where the blues were running.”

The grilling was intense. Commanders who implemented strategies to reduce crime in their precincts got promoted; those who didn’t got transferred to Siberia. “Compstat was police Darwinism; the fittest survived and thrived,” Bratton writes. “Within nine months, we replaced a significant number of the seventy-six precinct commanders, installing many new people who understood what we were asking of them and who had shown at Compstat that they were capable of doing the job.”

When good ideas came out, Bratton and his staff applauded them and spread them to the rest of the commanders. Over time, commanders began bringing along officers who had done exceptional work. “You can imagine the effect on a young cop and his or her career to stand there and be applauded by everyone in the department from his commanding officer up to and including the police commissioner,” Bratton says. “Compstat became a rallying point to encourage and reward people for good work.”

The Control Strategy: Shifting Control Away From the Top and Center

When Bratton arrived, he says, “The organization was very military oriented, with a strict chain of command, and information didn’t flow easily from one bureau to another. Each



bureau was like a silo: Information entered at the bottom and had to be delivered up the chain of command from one level to another until it reached the chief's office. There it would wait to be dealt with. Even when a memo finally arrived, there was a less-than-acceptable level of cooperation between bureaus. At some point, it seemed like one would call another and have to take a number, like in a bakery.

“We have a drug problem up here in Washington Heights.”

“Sorry, we'll get to you in a couple of months. Narcotics is very busy now.”

“Once the chief's decision was finally made, it had to be sent back to the bureau that requested the service and work its way back down that chain of command. It's a wonder anything got done.”

Bratton began by recruiting 300 cops to work on 12 different reengineering teams, to design better ways to do business. Then he took out an entire layer of the organization, the divisions that sat between precinct commanders and the boroughs. He cut staff at headquarters and added it to the precincts, and he empowered the precinct commanders.

“I encouraged the precinct commanders to use their own initiative, and I told them I would judge them on their results. ... I did not penalize them for taking actions that did not succeed, but I did not look kindly on those who took no action at all.”

Because of the stovepiping and fear of corruption, precinct commanders had been told to leave all vice, drug dens, houses of prostitution and automobile chop shops to the specialized bureaus. As a result, Bratton reports, “Precinct commanders went to community meetings and got their heads handed to them about all the crime locations in their precincts, but they didn't have the power to address those issues....

“We changed that. ... We freed them from old restraints, gave them responsibility, held them accountable, and were very pleased with the results. We were often amazed. Commanders came up with solutions and innovations that none of us on the command staff had thought of.”

The Culture Strategy: Changing Habits, Hearts and Minds

One of Bratton's first moves was to hire a consulting firm to perform a “cultural diagnostic,” to pinpoint the cultural barriers to performance and the corrective values the new leadership needed to implant. After surveying nearly 8,000 cops, his reengineering teams reported that the culture was rampant with distrust and actively discouraged creativity.

The biggest impact leaders can have on an employee's culture is in their first weeks and months on the job. So in addition to everything described above (and much more, as



you'll see if you read the book), Bratton's team redesigned the Police Academy, where recruits were trained, raised the minimum age for cops from 20 to 22, required two years of college, and required passage of a tough physical exam.

Bratton also went to work on the cynicism that afflicts most cops after a few years in the trenches: "I went after the culture to make the NYPD a more proactive police force and a more respectful one."

He started by taking the 75 top leaders on a two-day retreat, at which he outlined his goal of reducing crime by 10 percent in year one and the new strategies and new culture he wanted to create. "This is how we're going to go," he told them. "If you can't deal with it, you're going to have to get out. If you stay, and I find you are still not with the program, then I'm going to have to get rid of you."

Conclusion:

Bratton understood that one of the five C's was not enough; he needed four of them. Community policing was an important innovation, for instance, but if the purpose of reducing crime was not front and center, if the community police officers were not empowered to attack all sources of crime, and if their units faced no consequences for performance, it wouldn't work.

He also understood that these strategies had to be in place from the top of the organization to the bottom. Describing Compstat, he sums it up well: "We created a system in which the police commissioner, with his executive core, first empowers and then interrogates the precinct commander, forcing him or her to come up with a plan to attack crime. But it should not stop there. At the next level down, it should be the precinct commander, taking the same role as the commissioner, empowering and interrogating the platoon commander. Then, at the third level, the platoon commander should be asking his sergeants, 'What are we doing to deploy on this tour to address these conditions?' And finally you have the sergeant at roll call—"Mitchell, tell me about the last five robberies on our post..."—all the way down until everyone in the entire organization is empowered and motivated, active and assessed and successful. It works in all organizations, whether it's 38,000 New York cops or Mayberry, R.F.D."

He's absolutely right. In a future letter, I'll report on how he's refining Compstat in Los Angeles.