

Transforming policing: An interview with Mike Bush, New Zealand's police commissioner

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The country's crime rate has decreased drastically in recent years after the police commissioner shifted to a focus on prevention instead of prosecution.

New Zealand cut its crime rate by 20 percent in four years while boosting public satisfaction with policing. The country's police chief attributes its "180-degree shift" to a prevention-focused approach—a shift that holds lessons for other public-sector transformations.

When Mike Bush joined the New Zealand police service as a cadet in 1978, it was an organization focused squarely on prosecution. As Bush told Mary Calam and Roland Dillon of McKinsey, the ethos was: "Catch offenders, lock them up, and forget about the rest." Thirty years later, as deputy commissioner, he began the transformation of the service by putting prevention first—a transformation he has continued as commissioner.

For Bush, this transformation has been deeply personal. "It went back to my reason for being a police officer," he explained. In a previous role as an area police commander, Bush piloted an approach of intervening early to prevent crime and using the justice system as the final option. He saw how that made the police service better at keeping the population safe—and gave his fellow officers greater opportunities to change people's lives.

When he was promoted to the national role of New Zealand Police Commissioner in 2014, Bush made that innovative work the foundation for a national project called "Prevention First." It soon became the cornerstone of the New Zealand Police's operating strategy and helped spur the transformation of the entire police service.

Prevention First was "a 180-degree shift from where we had been," he recalled. Persuading a decentralized workforce of more than 12,000 to try something new was no easy task: Bush estimated that two-thirds of the workforce saw the new operating strategy as a threat. "When people feel threatened, they are going to opt out, they are going to challenge, they are going to resist," he said.

¹ *Policing Excellence: The Transformation of New Zealand Police 2009–2014*, New Zealand Police, December 2014, police.govt.nz.

As the numbers show, Bush was able to overcome this resistance and bring the service with him on the transformation journey. New Zealand's crime rate fell by 20 percent between 2010 and 2014, while public satisfaction with policing rose from 79 percent to 84 percent over the same period.¹ That has made New Zealand a global success story in policing—and a key case study in public-sector transformations.

In conversation, Bush reflected on three essential success factors of such transformations: committed leadership, compelling communication, and capabilities for change.

McKinsey: *We know from our research on government transformations that leadership commitment is critical in driving successful transformations. What did you do to demonstrate your personal commitment to the change?*

Mike Bush: People who delegate transformation out will never succeed. Unless the chief executive and leaders in the organization own and champion the change, it will never happen. Seeing senior leaders within that group championing the operating model of change makes a massive difference. Once people see you delegate transformation out, it is not important to your people because it is not seen as important to you. It's symbolic, because if you commit time, your people understand how important it is to you.

Being closely involved gives you a better understanding of where the barriers are and how to remove them. It brings that absolute, relentless focus. Because if you have your arms around something, you understand it. You're able to make things happen.

McKinsey: *That must have been a huge commitment in terms of your time.*

Mike Bush: My rule of thumb is—and I got this from others, so it's not my own rule—you need to dedicate at least 60 percent of your time inside the organization to driving a transformation.

The police service in New Zealand is very decentralized, so it was critical for the leadership team to get out and about regularly to talk to officers and staff on the front line. And this starts right with new recruits. When we induct them, on day one, I meet with them all, which helps them understand our business.

McKinsey: *Can you give me an example of how that leadership commitment had an impact?*

Mike Bush: When we reached out for a mobility partner, I led the procurement and spoke to the chief executives of the major providers. I said, "This is our vision. This is what we need—we do not want a provider or a supplier, we want a partner. We want to innovate. We want support." So we wanted someone to come on the transformation journey with us.

Now three of the main CEOs that we approached all took different approaches. One quite rightly said, "Too big for us." The second thought, "I got this in the bag. We're already there, no problem." And the third company, the chief executives said, "I'm going to own this. I'm going to champion it. I'm going to ensure that this happens. Because it's important to the organization. And actually, I really like what they're trying to do."

They won it. We're still really close partners. We're innovating. We're doing everything we said we'd do. Again, it was led from the top in our place. But it was championed from the top in their place as well. So that was worth it. What their chief executive did made the difference.

McKinsey: *Our research on government transformations highlights how critical communication is and that most organizations don't do it nearly well enough. How did you articulate the vision?*

Mike Bush: I spoke to another 40 new recruits yesterday, and I asked them why they joined. And the answer that always comes back to you is, "I joined to make a difference." Understanding the "why" is critical. We reflected the purpose of policing right up front. The purpose of policing is to ensure people are safe and that they feel safe. Now, everyone in our business can articulate that. And we have performance measurements that are absolutely aligned to that. Reducing the number of people who are victims of crime is absolutely the *raison d'être* of policing, no one would argue with that—that's the "be safe" part. But citizens are only going to "feel safe" if they trust the police—and we've set really high targets for trust, confidence, and satisfaction.

You also need to have the right plan to achieve the right outcomes. A big part of this is related to resource reallocation. A frontline officer who made an arrest for disorderly behavior could spend two hours preparing a file and then spend a day at court for a hearing, and yet ultimately there might still be no result. And we knew that prosecuting low-level offenses like these was not contributing to our vision of preventing crime and making people feel safe. Implementing this new vision meant we took out 41 percent of the volume of referrals, which freed up capacity to dedicate to preventing people becoming victims in the first place, with more officers out on the street rather than in the office or waiting in court.

McKinsey: *And how was that vision communicated across such a large and geographically dispersed organization?*

Mike Bush: In terms of bringing the organization with you, the first mistake you can make is just assuming that because you have a good plan, and it is the right thing to do, that people are going to buy into [it]. It takes massive change management, massive leadership commitment, relentless communication and championing. It is continuous.

If you think about our new operating strategy, Prevention First, with victims at the center, that was a 180-degree shift from where we had been. From an organization that was offender focused, that was prosecution focused—just catch bad people, lock them up, and forget about the rest. We went from being prosecution first to being prevention first. That, in some people's minds, was absolutely the right way to go. But 60 or 70 percent of the organization saw it as a threat to their traditional approach to policing.

I've been in the police service for 40 years. It was contrary to the organization I grew up in. But I personally led the development of the new operating model. So I understood it. And it went back to my reason for being a police officer, for being in the New Zealand Police. So, my

ability to say, “That was then, this is now,” was helpful. I was not parachuted in. This was the organization I grew up in, and I understood its psychological drivers.

McKinsey: *Did you run into any roadblocks when communicating the vision?*

Mike Bush: Getting the messages right meant trial and error, and our messages evolved over time. At the start, people thought we meant enforcement and investigations were now less important than prevention work. We had to change tack, to make them understand that we know all the components of policing are important. It is just the order in which you think and act that makes the difference, putting prevention at the front and victims at the center.

For example, our detective branch saw their role as investigating serious crime and arresting serious and organized crime offenders. They thought, “Prevention is in another part of the organization.” So it wasn’t communicated to them in a way that seemed relevant. If it’s communicated correctly, prevention becomes really relevant—arresting serious crime offenders quickly and effectively actually prevents further crime. Understanding the drivers of organized crime helps prevent a lot of other harm and crime. So we left quite a significant part of our organization behind because the change was not championed by the leaders in that space, and it was not fully understood. That’s been corrected, and the detectives are massive champions now of our operating model.

McKinsey: *How did you go about building the new capabilities and ways of working?*

Mike Bush: We increased the training—whether it’s around prevention, whether it’s around response or investigation. There has been much more professionalization of core policing skills, building a police officer’s judgment, and ensuring they bring their core skills and their intrinsic values to the job. It’s a two-and-a-half-year program to roll out. We’ve got 12,000 through, soon to be 14,000 people.

It’s also about leadership skills, which is a big change for them as well. It’s going from a high-fear/low-trust leadership model, which is the model I joined under. Back then, you were scared of your bosses, and there was very little trust. But now we have moved—and it’s low fear/high trust. I’ve got to build capability in all my people, because I have to trust them when they’re out there day and night.

I’ve also learned to never assume. Never assume that because something is a better, and maybe even easier, thing to do, that people will adopt it. People adopt things for different reasons. The example I use is technology. You give everyone a smartphone. Tell them they can do whatever they like within the law on that device. And at the same time, use it for the policing purposes. Never assume that they’re all going to adopt it. We only had a 50 percent uptake. So then we had to step back and say, “How do we lead this change?” So never assume.

McKinsey: *The last question: If you were speaking to someone who’s in a position like yours embarking on a five-year journey, what is the one thing you’d want them to know?*

Mike Bush: You have to own it and lead it. Without the leader, it will fail. Your leadership is critical, and you cannot delegate transformation. I've seen people delegate transformation and fail. It has to be central to your purpose. □

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