



Leading through complexity: Addressing wicked problems with hybrid leadership models in policing

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ABSTRACT

Modern policing organizations operate within increasingly complex environments distinguished by multi-agency partnerships, heightened public scrutiny, technological change, and growing responsibility for vulnerability, safeguarding, and workforce well-being. Traditional command-and-control leadership remains essential in critical incidents but may be insufficient for complex, interconnected problems. This paper explores how different leadership approaches are required simultaneously within contemporary policing and introduces the concept of hybrid leadership as a practical response to increasing organizational complexity. We apply Grint's problem typology framework to examine the relationships among *critical*, *tame*, and *wicked problems* in policing. A routine domestic abuse incident is used to demonstrate how all three problem types coexist within everyday policing. The framework is then applied to a case study of the police response to Storm Desmond in Cumbria, UK, demonstrating how leaders were required to continually move between command, management, and leadership functions throughout the incident. The analysis shows that contemporary policing challenges rarely fit within a single leadership model. Effective responses require leaders to transition among command-based decision-making, management of established processes, and collaborative leadership approaches to address complex societal issues. Storm Desmond illustrates how *command*, *management*, and *leadership* functions operated simultaneously rather than sequentially. The paper argues that policing organizations should move beyond debates about preferred leadership styles and instead develop hybrid leadership capability. This approach recognizes that different problems require different leadership responses and that effective police leadership increasingly depends upon the ability to navigate between them.

Key Words Police leadership; wicked problems; hybrid leadership; command and control; complexity.

INTRODUCTION

The environment within which policing operates has changed significantly over the past three decades. Police organizations are now expected not only to respond to crime and disorder but also to work within complex systems addressing vulnerability, safeguarding, public protection, mental health, counter-terrorism, and community confidence. Alongside these developments, technological change, social media, and increased public scrutiny have transformed the context in which police leaders make decisions.

Historically, many police functions were relatively self-contained. Decision-making structures were clear, communication pathways were limited, and organizational accountability was largely internal. The contemporary policing environment is considerably more complex. Police

leaders are expected to work within extensive multi-agency networks, address vulnerability and safeguarding, respond to mental health crises, maintain public trust, engage with social media, demonstrate procedural fairness, and protect the well-being of their workforce. Simultaneously, they operate under unprecedented scrutiny from the public, politicians, regulators, and the media (HMICFRS, 2025). This interpersonal complexity was evident in inquiries such as the Hillsborough Inquiry (Scruton, 2016) and the Casey Review (2023), which highlight the need for improvements in interactions between the police and the public and the complex relationship that may or may not lead to legitimacy (Tyler, 2003). Studies have identified a relationship between police culture and organizational resilience (Bowling et al., 2020; Hesketh et al., 2015; 2019). Operationally concentrated areas that focus on police/public interaction exist alongside the

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internal function of the police organization, suggesting that there is something important about how police leadership enables and designs both culture and structure (Cockcroft, 2012; Twersky-Glasner, 2005).

The consequence is a leadership environment in which multiple and often competing demands coexist. The challenge is no longer simply making the correct operational decision. Leaders must also consider legitimacy, organizational resilience, stakeholder relationships, workforce well-being, and long-term community outcomes.

This paper argues that these challenges require a move beyond singular leadership styles toward hybrid leadership. Effective leaders must be able to shift between command, management, and collaborative leadership approaches while also acting as organizational stewards responsible for the sustainability of both the organization and its people.

UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY AND WICKED PROBLEMS

Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the concept of *wicked problems* to describe challenges that are difficult to define, lack clear solutions, and involve multiple stakeholders with competing perspectives. Building on this work, Grint (2005, 2010a) proposed a leadership framework that links different problem types to corresponding leadership responses.

Critical problems involve crises requiring immediate action. Solutions are generally clear, and there is limited time available for discussion or consultation. These problems are most effectively addressed through command-based leadership.

Tame problems are more complicated but remain solvable through established processes and expertise. These challenges are best addressed through management systems, procedures, and professional knowledge.

Wicked problems are characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and interdependence. They cannot be solved solely through technical expertise because there is often disagreement about both the nature of the problem and the desired outcome. Such problems require collaborative leadership, dialogue, and adaptation.

Many of the issues faced by modern policing are increasingly wicked. Public trust, safeguarding, community confidence, vulnerability, violence prevention, and workforce well-being cannot be solved through command authority or procedural compliance alone. Leadership in such circumstances requires adaptation, collaboration, and learning. Recent developments in leadership theory support this view. Plural leadership research (Jäppinen et al., 2023) suggests that leadership emerges from interactions among multiple actors rather than residing solely in formal positions of authority.

Hesketh (2012) suggested that transformational leadership may be the most appropriate for leading police through periods of change within the force. With another decade of change, it may now be time to reconsider whether the dominance of a single leadership style is simply unable to meet the demands of the present policing landscape. This paper will illustrate increasing complexity by considering modern policing responses to domestic violence and then explore the implications of this concept using a recent flooding disaster. The *wicked problems* framework lens is used for diagnosis and

analysis (Grint, 2005). These developments are particularly relevant to policing, where successful outcomes increasingly depend upon collaboration across organizational boundaries.

To contextualize critical, tame, and wicked problems in the context of policing and hybrid leadership styles, we provide the example of a domestic abuse emergency call. At the point of emergency deployment, officers responding to an ongoing assault face a *critical problem*. Immediate decisions are required to protect victims, manage offenders, and preserve life. Command-based decision-making is appropriate. Following the initial response, the incident becomes a *tame problem*. Officers complete risk assessments, gather evidence, process offenders, and initiate safeguarding procedures. Established policies and professional processes guide these activities.

However, domestic abuse as a societal issue remains a *wicked problem*. Long-term prevention requires coordinated work involving policing, health services, social care, education, housing providers, and voluntary organizations. No single agency can solve the underlying causes of domestic abuse.

The significance of this example is that all three leadership requirements coexist within a single incident. Contemporary police leaders therefore require the ability to move among command, management, and leadership functions in response to the evolving nature of the challenge.

STORM DESMOND: A CASE STUDY IN HYBRID LEADERSHIP

Storm Desmond struck Cumbria in December 2015 and remains one of the most severe flooding events experienced in the United Kingdom in recent history. The incident caused widespread disruption to transport infrastructure, homes, businesses, and essential services across the region. The response provides a valuable example of how multiple leadership approaches operated simultaneously throughout a complex emergency.

Command: Responding to Critical Problems

The initial phase of the incident required command-based leadership.

Rapidly rising water levels threatened life and property across multiple locations. Roads became impassable, bridges were damaged, communities became isolated, and large-scale evacuations were required. Immediate decisions were necessary regarding resource deployment, rescue prioritization, and public safety measures.

These circumstances represented a classic *critical problem*. There was little time for consultation, uncertainty was high, and decisive action was essential. Local commanders were required to provide immediate answers and coordinate operational responses under significant pressure. Traditional command-and-control leadership remained both necessary and appropriate.

Management: Coordinating Complex Systems

As the incident developed, management processes became increasingly important.

Cumbria Police activated established emergency planning arrangements and participated in Strategic Coordinating Groups involving multiple partner agencies. Responses were

guided through the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP, 2016), which provide a framework for coordinated emergency service operations.

This phase of the response involved managing resources, coordinating agencies, maintaining communication systems, and implementing established procedures.

Unlike command-based responses, these activities relied less upon individual authority and more upon structured systems and collective decision-making. Management functions enabled multiple organizations to work together effectively while maintaining accountability and consistency.

The significance of JESIP is particularly noteworthy. It represents a shift away from isolated organizational decision-making toward coordinated, shared approaches. Decision-making becomes distributed rather than concentrated, requiring leaders to operate through influence, negotiation, and collaboration.

Leadership: Addressing Wicked Problems

Beyond the immediate emergency response, Storm Desmond generated a series of *wicked problems*. Community confidence, public trust, long-term recovery, and organizational legitimacy could not be addressed through command or procedural management alone. These issues involved multiple stakeholders, uncertain outcomes, and competing priorities.

Social media intensified these challenges. Information, criticism, and public expectations circulated continuously throughout the incident. Leaders were required not only to manage operational realities but also to maintain public confidence in the response.

No single organization possessed sufficient authority or capability to address these issues independently. Solutions emerged through sustained collaboration between emergency services, local authorities, community groups, and affected communities.

This aspect of the incident highlights the importance of leadership as defined by Grint (2005). The role of leaders was not simply to provide answers but to facilitate dialogue, coordinate stakeholders, and create conditions for adaptive solutions to emerge.

Hybrid Leadership in Practice

Storm Desmond demonstrates that command, management, and leadership functions rarely operate independently. Operational commanders often faced critical problems requiring immediate action while simultaneously operating within management frameworks established by JESIP and contributing to wider leadership challenges related to community confidence and recovery.

At strategic levels, leaders were required to balance immediate operational concerns with long-term considerations regarding resilience, public trust, and inter-agency cooperation.

The incident therefore illustrates the limitations of viewing leadership through a single lens. Effective leadership did not arise from command, management, or leadership alone but from the ability to move between these approaches as circumstances required.

This capability can be described as *hybrid leadership*.

Hybrid leadership involves recognizing the nature of the problem being faced and applying the most appropriate

response. It requires leaders to understand when decisive authority is necessary, when established processes should be followed, and when collaboration and adaptation are required.

Developing the Plurality of Police Leadership

The previous example of Storm Desmond illustrates how police leaders now require a multitude of leadership skills. Hesketh (2012) discussed a move toward transformational leadership as changes within the UK police service began to take place. There was a prolonged period of austerity, along with rapid technological development and increased doctrinal requirements, driven by the implementation of systems such as JESIP. This collection of changes was experienced by leaders operating within the policing system and constantly exposed through the public's use of social media. Grint (2010b) discussed a natural propensity toward simpler forms of leadership, such as command and control, which was explored in the Leadership Review conducted by the College of Policing (2015). This yearning for simpler days in leadership is a throwback to times without the constant, pervasive scrutiny of the public and the political and public consequences of inquiries such as the Macpherson Report (1999) and the Casey Report (2023). It is fair to suggest that such simple models are relics of their time and that a plurality of leadership models is required to meet the current needs of incidents such as Storm Desmond.

DISCUSSION

This finding has wide implications for the development of future policing leaders. At more senior levels of the organization, there are numerous management processes, standard operating procedures, and larger-scale governmental initiatives such as the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships to serve. These partnerships are the longer-term equivalent of the multi-agency JESIP approach and demand a focus on the wicked problems inherent in society. Rational, simple approaches are insufficient when dealing with wicked problems, and Grint argues for a more intuitive, flexible, and agile approach to leadership. This need was further illustrated in the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in which the legitimacy of policing was challenged as a result of decision-making at the highest level of politics, and the police were required to control public behaviour in circumstances where politicians disregarded scientific evidence, broke their own rules, and failed to appreciate the operational requirements with regard to local policing (UK COVID-19 Inquiry, 2025). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic called for a dynamic combination of leadership, management, and command (Grint, 2020).

Other research on policing illuminates the expectations of police leadership from within the service. Leaders have a preferred way of achieving goals through their influence on others; these behaviours are shaped by their personality, experiences, and the surrounding organizational culture. Procedural justice research indicates that the extent to which a person can influence the behaviour of others is dependent on whether they are seen as having legitimate authority (Tyler, 2003) and a degree of trust (McMyler, 2020). It is fair to suggest that these may be far easier to cultivate when there is a single dominant leadership style within the organization. It may be

far simpler for an individual to demonstrate proficiency in command and control than to show multiple proficiencies across leadership domains and to provide evidence that they are self-aware enough to intelligently align their style with any given situation at any time. This would also be a difficult set of concepts to evaluate in terms of future leadership requirements and to judge their efficacy once a leader has been recruited. It would be a leadership approach that requires being “all things to all (wo)men” at all times. With this in mind, it would be fair to suggest that police leadership executive teams should design their future leadership requirements with flexible capabilities in mind. Ensuring the availability of *command*, *management*, and *leadership* across the ranks within a policing organization should be a priority, as this guards against what could be termed a misapplication of leadership style to a particular type of problem. As an example, building a police leadership team around solid command-and-control skills will ensure that leadership capability exists for a crisis but not to address the wicked problem of crime prevention. This is what Grint describes as “Addicted to Command: Allergic to Leadership” (2010b).

When facing wicked problems, which police forces inevitably face every day, organizations need to become more agile (Aghina et al., 2017) to maintain some semblance of stability while responding to multiple challenges, stakeholders, and influences. It has been suggested that, to respond appropriately to wicked problems, there is a need to move from singular leadership, in which one person is expected to deal with critical, tame, and wicked problems, to involving others in collaboration, as in the case study provided. Integrated solutions will emerge from this sustained collaboration over time (Gronn, 2015). Denis et al. (2012) described pluralistic leadership as being characterized by multiple organizational leaders, all of whom exert influence through formal and informal means. In practice, this would mean that police forces would understand the strengths of their potential leaders in problem-solving and design their teams around balanced skills in the areas of *command*, *management*, and *leadership*. This directly challenges the broader need to meet the community’s more comprehensive leadership demands for large-scale events such as Storm Desmond.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The findings have important implications for the development of police leaders operating in increasingly complex environments.

First, leadership development programs should place greater emphasis on helping leaders diagnose and interpret different types of problems. The ability to recognize whether a situation is critical, tame, or wicked may be more important than mastery of any single leadership style, as different challenges require fundamentally different responses.

Second, leadership assessment and promotion processes should evaluate an individual’s capacity to operate effectively across multiple leadership domains. Future leaders must demonstrate adaptability and sound judgment, selecting the most appropriate approach for the circumstances rather than relying on a preferred or habitual style.

Third, leadership capability should be considered at both the individual and team levels. Leadership teams should be structured to provide collective strength across command, management, and leadership functions. While individual leaders may possess different strengths, effective teams require a balanced combination of these complementary capabilities.

Finally, leadership development and major incident training should incorporate scenarios that combine critical, tame, and wicked problems. Such exercises would more accurately reflect the realities of contemporary policing, where operational incidents frequently involve simultaneous demands for command, management, and adaptive leadership.

CONCLUSION

Modern policing organizations operate within environments characterized by increasing complexity, interdependence, and public scrutiny. The leadership challenges arising from these conditions cannot be adequately addressed through command-and-control approaches alone.

Using Grint’s framework, this paper has demonstrated how *critical*, *tame*, and *wicked problems* coexist within contemporary policing. The response to Storm Desmond illustrates how command, management, and leadership functions operated simultaneously throughout a complex emergency.

The findings suggest that the future challenge for policing is not identifying a single preferred leadership style but developing hybrid leadership capability. Effective police leaders must be able to recognize different problem types and move flexibly between command, management, and leadership responses.

As policing continues to face increasingly complex societal challenges, the ability to navigate this plurality of leadership demands may become a defining characteristic of effective police leadership.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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