

Posted 4/1/13

QUANTITY, QUALITY, AND THE NYPD

Has a preoccupation with “numbers” compromised craftsmanship?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “Make cases, put people in jail, numbers. Our department right now is heavily into numbers...There are [statistics] being taken through the chain of command, ‘see how good a job we’re doing, how many people we’re putting in jail,’ that sort of thing.”

Given the controversy embroiling the NYPD, one might think that this comment was made only the other day. But it wasn’t. More than thirty years ago, narcotics officers from New York City and several other large police departments whom I interviewed for my dissertation were unanimous as to one thing: numerical productivity wasn’t the only way that bosses measured their performance, but it was far and away the most important.

By the second decade of the twentieth century so-called “scientific” management and its obsession with counting had become entrenched features of the private sector. Actually, numbers didn’t become gospel in the public sector until the 1960’s, when the new Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, infused the Federal government with practices brought over from Ford Motor Company, which he had served as president. During the Vietnam War, McNamara’s endless reports of bombs dropped, acres deforested and enemy killed were repeatedly offered as proof that victory was inevitable. His mea culpa in “The Fog of War” (2003) came forty years late.

Government managers jumped on the bandwagon. Policing usually consumes a majority of city budgets, and now that computers made number-crunching ridiculously easy concerns about the use of public funds could be easily addressed. Cop shops didn’t make widgets, but they did produce its equivalent, in the form of countable tickets, stops and arrests.

It wasn’t just about justifying police budgets. Reducing everything to numbers had another benefit: it made performance “evaluation” ridiculously simple. What couldn’t be counted didn’t exist. “Making cases” became the new mantra. Concerns that reductionism might fundamentally distort what cops actually do were ignored. Worries about the quality of police work were brushed aside.

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From there it was just a short step to quotas. Although informal understandings about minimum numbers of tickets, stops and arrests had always been there, systems such as Compstat, Bill Bratton's gift to the NYPD, reified counting. It wasn't just lowly beat cops who now had to take care. Sergeants, Lieutenants, Captains – every manager could be held accountable for meeting standards whose objective appearance lent a scientific imprimatur.

Counting isn't always inappropriate. Officers should write some tickets and make some arrests, and it's probably wise to pay attention to those whose productivity seems unreasonably low. Yet bureaucracies that measure their performance with numbers are apt to look stagnant unless – you guessed it – the trend line keeps going up. It's in the nature of the counting beast: whether or not crime is on the increase, stops and arrests must keep going up.

Of course, endlessly boosting production will at some point require that officers take shortcuts. Police hamburger, though, usually gets made out of the public eye. Accusations that NYPD officers were pressured to stop citizens or pat them down without “reasonable suspicion” can't be evaluated with a calculator, so proving that cops cheated may be difficult.

What ought to be done? We know that numerical measures can easily displace other, more worthwhile criteria. Numbers must never stand alone but be carefully integrated into the definition of what it means to do a quality job. Police management styles must also change. Pressuring cops to “get numbers” breeds cynicism, devalues the craft of policing and can precipitate a moral decline in the ranks. Police, politicians and the public must come to grips with the fact that our New Centurions are not well positioned to fix fundamental social ills, and that assigning officers “mission impossibles” will lead even the best-intentioned cops to breach the moral and legal boundaries of their craft.

It seems that several badge-wearing NYPD whistleblowers have come forward and will be testifying in the current Federal civil trial about the effects of pressures to produce on officer behavior. It will be interesting to see if what they have to say will really “count.”