
Organizational culture change through training and cultural immersion

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Introduction

Modern organizations are becoming more culturally diverse than they have ever been. Consequently, there is a need for leaders of such organizations to address the challenges presented by these emerging complexities with increasing vigour and commitment. This article looks at the specific need to address problems associated with staff, usually predominantly of Anglo-Celtic descent, who are required on behalf of their organization to interact in a dynamic way with indigenous people who make up a significant percentage of the population they are required to service in particular geographical locations.

The Queensland Police Service (QPS) is one such organization. It is Australia's third largest police service with approximately 6,500 officers attached to over 360 locations throughout the State – a State which is some 1,727,000 square kilometres in size (QPS, 1989, p. 83). The State of Queensland has a diverse demographic profile. The State's population is 3,112,597 with 1,421,700 in Brisbane, the State's capital, and the remaining people spread across the State (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1991). There are, within the population, a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in comparison to most other States in Australia. In fact, approximately 70,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in Queensland out of a total of 265,465 Australia-wide (ABS, 1991). When this is coupled with a prison population containing some 25 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Any opinions, analysis and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not nor are intended to reflect Queensland Police Service policy. The paper is presented without endorsement of the Queensland Police as a contribution to public record and debate.

The writers wish to acknowledge the good faith, confidence and wisdom of the Aboriginal elders and people of Cherbourg with whom they worked and whose support helped to make this project the success it was to be. The significant contributions of the members of the Queensland Police Service to the development and implementation of the Cherbourg Project and the innovative vision and tenacity of its leaders to see things through has to be commended.

All these people are the innovators, the real change agents; the paradigm breakers and, together, they are the leaders of change; the change makers, the builders of the new police-Aboriginal relationships culture. It is a difficult path. These are positive beginnings.

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people it becomes evident that matters associated with cultural diversity and the need to make organizational changes to meet society's expectations becomes paramount for police administrators.

Debates surrounding police-Aboriginal relations have a long history and one that was deeply punctuated by the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADC) National Report in 1991 (Johnson, 1991). This report was particularly critical of the way police, throughout Australia, handled their interaction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a result, some 100 recommendations were made which had a direct impact on the QPS and which created an environment in which the police administration undertook "...considerable soul searching and innovation ... to develop programs to meet the ideals outlined in the recommendations" (Melville *et al.*, 1994a, p. 252). Over the ensuing years the QPS undertook a range of initiatives to address the recommendations made. Melville *et al.* (1994a) provide a detailed description of the range of initiatives. However, the degree to which these programmes were effective is still problematical, particularly if long-term indicators are sought. Central to all initiatives was a desire to change the way both the organization and individuals within the organization perceived how police interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Accordingly, this article, in the form of a case study, provides one such example of an innovative training programme aimed at bringing about organizational change in the dynamic and complex environment of white-black relations.

It is a reflective account, some two years after the first major evaluation was completed, and seeks to contribute further to the debate (Fogarty and Wilkinson, 1992). This initiative was taken by the QPS in partnership with the Cherbourg Aboriginal community which is located some 160 kilometres North West of Brisbane, the State's capital. In particular, the programme was aimed at developing positive, constructive police-Aboriginal community relations, within the context of a special intercultural training programme for first-year police constables in a specific community. Our discussion will commence by setting the organizational scene, highlighting some of the significant literature relating to organizational culture change, and the environment in which intercultural training occurs. Thereafter, a comprehensive description follows of the case study evaluation together with its findings and the revised training project. It will be at this stage that an attempt will be made to elicit the most significant factors from the programme insofar as they relate to organizational culture change and training. Finally, a number of implications for future police-Aboriginal community programmes is presented.

Setting the organizational scene

As indicated above, this article presents the organizational setting, the significant intercultural training and organizational change factors which contributed to a successful community relations initiative known as the Cherbourg project undertaken at Cherbourg Aboriginal community between 1990-1992. The training programme aimed to encourage first-year constables[1]

to develop positive attitudes about the Aboriginal people. This was to be achieved through direct immersion in the community where they could be emancipated from negative attitudinal stereotypes, sometimes held by police and other people in society generally, about Aboriginal people. The first-year constables were to be given an opportunity to look, listen and learn about significant aspects of the community culture, and to become familiar with and respectful of the “ways of doing and thinking” of the Aboriginal people with whom they were to interact (Fogarty and Wilkinson, 1992).

The organizational culture of the QPS, the ways that things were thought about, planned and carried out by the police officers, constables, Aboriginal community police and Aboriginal people at the Cherbourg police station and related workplaces were to be drawn on in a positive way to be constructive, environmental forces for building intercultural understanding.

The systems of espoused beliefs and observable practices of supervisory police officers at the sites, strongly supported by the facilitative leadership of commanding officers of the Queensland North Coast Police Region at that time, were strong and extremely important culture-forming influences. The training and learning experiences of the constables, including their interaction with Aboriginal elders and ordinary community members during the two years in which the evaluation occurred, happened within the above macro-supportive environment and challenged the prevailing “war stories” of older, “battle-hardened” police. This, it was hoped, would provide first-year constables with an opportunity to become more reflective and critically aware of the prevailing stereotypes. It is through this, it was believed, that the programme could influence the attitudes of the first-year constables positively.

The curriculum programme and the trainers in the workplace context at Cherbourg endeavoured to set new attitudes; a new value system of acceptance, understanding and interaction prior to any prejudgement of Aboriginal people. This was to be an outlook stated by officers to be based on respect rather than fear. It was a system of beliefs which sought to displace any negative, presiding values and any underlying, pre-conceived, racially-biased assumptions by first-year constables about Aboriginal people. The course developers and implementers were driven by the publication of the RCADC Report (1991) with its serious implications for police and other service organizations. Furthermore, senior training officers were concerned to “turn around” the potentially biased thinking about Aborigines reported to exist within some quarters of police services in Australia. Essentially a cultural change effort was required. A special project “laboratory” of positive cultural change mechanisms was set up through a training curriculum. This, coupled with visionary, executive support, created the environment to enable the beginning of the programme designed to respond to the concerns raised by a number of governmental reports and Royal Commissions (Fitzgerald, 1989; RCADC, 1991, recommendations).

This was the philosophical landscape which prevailed at the time the project commenced. This article will review some of the relevant concepts of organizational culture change, and training for the building of intercultural

relationships. Following this review a comprehensive account of the project will be presented. Finally, we address the most significant points that contributed to change in an analysis of the project and its future implications.

Literature review

The culture of an organization is crystallized and reformed continuously and dynamically over time. It is a set of shared assumptions (Schein, 1992) about the world of work within a particular profession. These assumptions relate to concepts such as reality, truth, time and space as these impinge on individuals and groups. The notion of culture in the Cherbourg project case can be seen as deep and basic, almost unquestionable, unconscious, embedded systems of values and beliefs. The police officers in this study are immersed within the culture-forming forces of the police organization.

In this way the information of a police organization's culture refers to visible happenings, structures and behaviours of people within an organization. Morgan (1986, p. 112) calls it "the pattern of development ...of knowledge, ideology, values, laws and day-to-day ritual". Schein (1992) summarizes some of the organizational culture research appropriate to our purposes in this project. He states that the major categories that are associated with the notion of an organization's culture are:

- observed behavioural regularities when people interact, the language they use, the customs and traditions that evolve, and the rituals that are employed (Jones *et al.*, 1988) groups' norms (Kilmann and Saxton, 1983);
- espoused values (Deal and Kennedy, 1982);
- the broad policies and ideological principles that underlie a group's actions towards their stakeholders (Ouchi, 1981);
- the "ropes" or rules of the game that a newcomer must learn to become accepted in the organization (Ritti and Funkhouser, 1982);
- the feelings conveyed between participants or the "climate" (Schneider, 1990);
- embedded skills (Peters and Waterman, 1982);
- mental models and habits or ways of thinking as noted by Douglas (1986);
- shared meanings and understandings (Smircich, 1983); and
- metaphorical and symbolic ideas that somehow surface or become exposed in the material artefacts of an organization (Gagliardi, 1990; Morgan, 1986; Schultz, 1991).

The trainers and curriculum implementers of the Cherbourg project had to be acutely aware of the above in their practices. On examining the above summary definitions extracted from Schein's analysis it will be clear to students of organizational change that to attempt to bring about worthwhile cultural

change is a complex task and difficult to implement. A group's experiences such as those of the members of the police cadre in question is that group's accumulated learning. Some of these learnings are positive, and others, inevitably, are negative. The problems that groups such as police in diverse workplaces in our society have to grapple with are, invariably, about survival, growth, adaptation, as well as the internal integration function for sustainability and ongoing change. There is much unlearning to occur both for individuals and for the organization as an entity (Senge, 1992).

The challenge that the Cherbourg project's visionaries and senior trainers set for themselves as a group within the larger police culture was to take action to attempt to change some aspects of the sub-culture in relation to how police, and in this case a selected target police group, related to their clientele. This case of sub-cultural change was to be accomplished through a training curriculum.

Training has long been an accepted method for developing the capacity of human resources to deal with change. As we know, organizations utilize their human expertise and physical resources to shape the changes desired for the purposes of achieving organizational goals (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Fogarty and Wilkinson (1992) argue that the training curriculum as developed and described in the following section of this paper set up the scenario for positive attitudinal change to occur as a result of the cultural immersion activities.

There are many researchers who have written about how to change organizational cultures. For the purposes of this project we refer to Schein (1992) and Wilkinson (1993). Schein argues for addressing artefacts, values and particularly the basic underlying assumptions of the organization. Some of Schein's change mechanisms or organizational development learning, persuasion and infusion are all apparent in this case.

Wilkinson (1993) suggests that to change organizational cultures it is important to be acutely cognizant of, and facilitative of the following factors: an agreed ideology; an atmosphere of congruence; leadership; an empowerment factor in training; a grasp of micro-politics in the organization; time resources; and planning; grass-roots and top-down support.

The above points from the literature related to the Cherbourg case.

The concept of cultural transformation was also central to this case. A number of writers have discussed the aspect of changing attitudes (Chambers and Pettman, 1986). In addressing this issue the project organizers were acutely aware that attitudes and attitudinal change mechanisms are extremely complex phenomena, partially caused in this work context by the nature of policing for law and order within a complicated, sometimes conflict-ridden cultural context. This was further exacerbated by the many differences among cultural groups and how these impinge on the role of police, because of, unfortunately, often negative black-white contact in Australian history (McConnochie *et al.*, 1988). A real potential exists for police attitudes, it was perceived, to be easily "coloured" in the form of negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people.

While the literature (Chambers and Pettman, 1986; McConnochie *et al.*, 1988) says that this attitude is one within Australian society as a whole, the initiative of pioneering Queensland police was to begin the task of systematizing the dismantling of such beliefs. This was done through a small but controlled, positive “laboratory” where first-year constables and their Aboriginal community could try to work together in an atmosphere more conducive to building bridges between cultures than could be attempted in the normal, police station cultures.

The project

The project's beginnings

It was determined at the earliest stages of the project that it was probable that it would only succeed if extensive consultation was initiated between the police service and the Cherbourg Aboriginal community to determine the programme structure. To this end every effort was made to ensure the two parties were closely involved with both the planning and implementation stages of the project. The principal mechanism used to achieve this end was a series of workshops and informal discussion groups undertaken at Cherbourg between the two on-site project officers and the community. The results were pleasing and, by and large, the original structure of the programme remains even today.

The programme

Essentially, the programme involved the placement of two first-year constables at Cherbourg for a period of four weeks. This was to become an ongoing process with further groups of two first-year constables commencing the programme each two weeks except during school holiday periods. This overlap period became invaluable as it provided a mechanism to ensure that the informal exchange of information occurred between one group of participants to the next. A key goal of the programme was to provide first-year constables with an opportunity to “look, listen and learn” about the Aboriginal culture. In the pursuit of this goal, first-year constables were exposed to a programme which emphasized almost complete immersion into the community for the period of four weeks through being actively involved in activities which struck at the heart of Cherbourg “life” rather than merely passively visiting various locations.

Although Melville *et al.* (1994b) outline in depth both the details of the programme and the subsequent evaluation, it is worth outlining the core ingredients of the programme for the purpose of this article. It became evident at the workshops that the focus of the programme quickly came to evolve around the primary school (five to 12 years of age), the high school (13-17 years of age) the Cherbourg emu farm, the old people's home, the Blue Light Disco (a police sponsored entertainment event for teenagers), bingo nights at the local church hall and the children's court. In addition, there were a number of events which were held from time to time at Cherbourg, and which became a valuable focus of activity. These events included culture days, camping trips, horse

riding and the opportunity for first-year constables to go on patrol with the Aboriginal community police.

The first-year constables were asked to reflect on their experiences and each maintained a log book throughout their period of time at Cherbourg. Both their comments and observations were invaluable for the first-year constables to analyse at a later date.

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Project evaluation and analysis

The evaluation of the project was based on a number of methodological assumptions. It was seen to be important by the evaluators that: they were on-site at regular, periodic intervals as observers; and a study of the Cherbourg community be carried out as a prerequisite to an understanding of the attitudes and behaviours of both Aboriginals and police. The programme was clearly immersed in the history of Aboriginal-police relationships. It was reasoned that a background knowledge and understanding, not only of the project, but also of the Cherbourg community, would assist the evaluators to see past superficialities.

The subjects were all stakeholders involved in the Cherbourg project. These included: first-year constables; other state police including those stationed at Cherbourg and regional and district training officers involved in or associated with the project; Aboriginal community police; Aboriginal elders and local councillors; Aboriginal residents from Cherbourg and Murgon, The main county town near Cherbourg; Aboriginal school students from the Murgon State High School and the Cherbourg Primary School; Aboriginal teachers' aides from the Cherbourg Primary School; the principal of the Murgon State High School and the principal and teachers from the Cherbourg Primary School; the manager, deputy manager and employees of the Cherbourg emu farm; the owner of the Cherbourg store; and the manager and employees of the Cherbourg Curio Factory.

The evaluators employed specific data-gathering methods to gain an understanding of how subjects viewed the project. Questions concerning the project were asked in in-depth, semi-structured interview situations, of 24 first-year constables, in groups of four, over the period of the evaluation. The views of the first-year constables were triangulated with those of the other subjects through appropriate questions.

A variety of methods and situations were employed in asking questions of the various categories of subjects. In all instances, subjects were informed that responses would be treated as confidential. Workshops, semistructured interviews and informal discussions were all employed to gather data from the range of stakeholders. Preparation before formulating questions for the workshops and interviews involved: an analysis of the terms of reference for the project, its curriculum and materials, especially the manual used by the first-year constables; introductory discussions with state police personnel involved in and associated with the project; and on-site observations and discussions

with first-year constables, police training officers, Cherbourg State Police and Aboriginal elders and councillors.

The questions thus developed were not considered to be static. The consultants adopted an action research approach to the questions asked. This involved a spiralling action-reflection-follow-up-action approach that utilized the gradually emerging data for the formation of additional questions in subsequent workshops and semi-structured interviews. To facilitate this approach, the consultants engaged in regular reflection sessions.

As a means of gaining further data, the consultants:

- (1) attended the regular Cherbourg Aboriginal-Police Community Council meetings;
- (2) attended one of the debriefing sessions, conducted by the Northern Police Region training officer, with groups of first-year constables after their return from Cherbourg;
- (3) reviewed all reports of the debriefing sessions conducted in (2); and
- (4) constructed a questionnaire for distribution to all first-year constables who had been involved in the project.

Items that were included in the questionnaire were drawn from the data that emerged from the various data collection methods. First-year constables were asked to respond to each item in terms of its importance to the project and the degree to which it was being achieved. In each case, they were asked to choose one of the responses: strongly agree; agree; undecided; disagree; and strongly disagree. The evaluation of the project was structured to eliminate, as far as possible, bias owing to the closeness of the consultants to it. Triangulation of data was a strategy to effect this, but another was that of validation. An external assessor was appointed to oversee the evaluative work of the consultants. The assessor's task was to stand back from the source, be an observer and examine the documentation and reports generated by the consultants. He also interviewed the consultants regarding their role in the evaluation and visited the Cherbourg Aboriginal community on two occasions to acquaint himself with the location in which the project was in operation. The assessor's report was presented under separate cover as a supplementary document to the consultants' report.

From an organizational perspective the programme generally operated with little difficulty, particularly after the initial three-month period when wider acceptance was gained from both the community and the police service. However, it is also true to say that improvements were made to the programme as it evolved and these generally revolved around the induction phase. Overall it was the simple everyday activities on which the programme concentrated which resulted in the greatest success. It was simply not necessary to go past the basics towards expensive innovations to achieve success. In fact the programme proved so successful that not only does it still continue today but it has been expanded into other communities throughout the State.

Analysis

The analysis of the data gathered via workshops and semi-structured interviews was based on the work of Fogarty and Lennon (1991), Glasser and Strauss (1967), Patton (1990) and Wilkinson *et al.* (1992). Groups of propositions, based on attitudes towards the project as expressed by the various categories of subjects, were generated by the consultants. The level of support for each of the propositions, in each of the groups, was classified as low, medium or high.

The analysis of the data gathered via the police-Aboriginal relations cultural index questionnaire commenced with the calculation of frequencies for both "importance of item" and "degree of achievement" by summing the numerical values for both categories of response, that is 5 = "strongly agree" down to 1 = "strongly disagree".

The frequencies were employed to calculate means and standard deviations for both categories of response as well as *t*-values and probabilities. The analysis of data from the workshops and the questionnaire were compared and a high degree of commonality was revealed.

The major findings of the evaluation were: almost all first-year constables found the project a valuable experience; Aboriginal cultural activities were very popular with first-year constables, who believed that they learnt a great deal about Aborigines from them; visits to the old people's home, the Blue Light Disco and bingo as well as horse riding provided ideal opportunities for interacting with the Aboriginal-in-the-street; visits to the primary school and the high school were seen as valuable, but with the former being favoured over the latter; the visit to the emu farm was seen as a valuable opportunity to interact informally with the workers, that is the Aboriginal-in-the-street; first-year constables felt that they did not meet a wide enough cross-section of Cherbourg Aborigines; Aboriginal primary and high school students were developing positive attitudes towards police; the involvement of Aboriginal elders in the project was seen as critical to its success; and project stakeholders were satisfied with its progress. Some first-year constables were critical of the organization and the running of the project and the manner in which they were inducted into it. Overall, the Cherbourg project was judged to be succeeding and the assessors made recommendations for its refinement.

On the basis of the positive evaluation of the project and the suggested refinements, it was decided to implement Cherbourg-type projects in three other Queensland Aboriginal communities, paying due regard to the unique context of each community. In 1993, cross-cultural training programmes were implemented in three more Aboriginal communities in Queensland. These were Doomadgee, Kowanyama and Mornington Island. In March 1994, the programme commenced at Cunnamulla.

Significant reflections about organizational culture change

As a result of the evaluation, it is confidently held by officers of the QPS, with whom the evaluators have had an ongoing professional contact through the running of Cultural Awareness Workshops for recruits, that the Cherbourg

project and adaptations of it in other communities has provided, and will continue to provide, the opportunity for first-year constables to gain a positive insight into the culture of a community of Aboriginal people and assist the constables to react to further critical, operational incidents with greater sensitivity and understanding. Most importantly, it has laid the foundations for more effective communications between Aboriginal people and the police service. A typical comment made by first-year constables returning from Cherbourg is:

Before going to Cherbourg, I would have been afraid to have a conversation with an Aboriginal person. Now I know it's the same as speaking to anyone else.

In terms of factors that contributed to both individual and organizational change there are a number of points worth making, in retrospect. First, the Cherbourg experience has undoubtedly been a project of significance to the QPS. The model that transpired at Cherbourg could be helpful to other areas of Queensland; indeed, it could be seen as a project of some significance to police-Aboriginal relationship innovations around Australia, and perhaps the western world.

This training project, indeed, can be categorized as an element of post-structuralism (Fletcher, 1992, p. 31). It attempts, in a small way, to shake the status quo of entrenched attitudes in an organization. The project's change agents are endeavouring to break the organization out of an attitudinal "psychic prison" (Morgan, 1986) through training. In the world of culturally diverse organizations, predictability, flexibility, discretion, empathy, understanding and knowledge through positive cultural immersion are critically important for success.

With reference to corporate culture, caution is needed by police leaders so that the organization does not revert to the "old culture", leading to failure in the development of future, positive, intercultural experiences and attitudes. The changing of police culture through training and cultural immersion in the Cherbourg case worked for those young police officers at that time. The sustainability of this change and the maintaining of the momentum is now in the hands of the QPS as it sets directions for the future.

As many researchers have noted (Chambers and Pettman, 1986; McConnochie *et al.*, 1988) there is an underlying ideology of racism in Australian society. The QPS as an important sub-unit of this society is not immune and is naturally subjected to the same forces of racism within its ranks as any other organization.

The specific nature of the role of police in a modern, multicultural nation places each officer at the precarious edge of black-white contact in many critical, and extremely sensitive cultural incidents during their work. It is an enormous challenge for each individual police officer and, indeed, for police groups at their workplace stations and on the beat. Organizational group dynamics issues such as dominance, power and the role of police as an arm of

the status quo naturally create a delicate situation for law protectors when endeavouring to deal with conflicts that entail racial situations.

Finding a way out of this ongoing dilemma of sustaining positive attitudes, of learning from critical incidents and problems and ensuring ongoing cultural change and organizational development could be carried out through the utilization of action research (Wilkinson, 1995) processes in an organized, systematic way at each officer's workplace. Officers could engage in the cyclical process of learning to be more effective in intercultural contacts by following questioning, planning, actions and reflections phases in their work. This would also involve other officers in debriefing sessions in a participative, academically rigorous manner.

Implications

Where to from here?

In terms of the future of Aboriginal-police relations and intercultural training there are strategies for cultural change which are needed. A strong, continuing facilitative style of training leadership together with a transformative, visionary directional force for change by strategic police in the field and on the beat, organizational leaders and training officers is required on an ongoing basis for the sustenance of the forces of cultural change in the QPS.

The participants in this case have been the pioneers, or the initial players in a game of organizational culture change. It is a game of reality; one that is fraught with sometimes overwhelming institutional barriers; and one that has changing situations requiring a deep understanding of how to engage in the use of positive cultural relationships and unobtrusive organizational power with police clients. It will require an understanding of changing cultural values of police clientele; knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with the concepts of racism, prejudice, stereotyping, bigotry, ethnocentrism, individual, cultural and institutional racism by the key players involved. This is important content knowledge acquired from training. With these understandings police training officers can then facilitate on-site cases in communities such as Cherbourg to ensure that positive relationships can begin to emerge in a police officer's psyche. This is a process knowledge required for action and cultural change. If this process continues using cultural immersion projects such as Cherbourg, a gradual critical mass of attitudinal change will be reached which will then be a turning point for organizational paradigm change in the QPS.

Conclusion

This attitude/cultural development task at Cherbourg was only a small step; a beginning. It was, and continues to be, we understand, a "beacon" against traditional, conservative, unchanging and prejudicial cultural stalwarts and other community attitudinal barriers such as those sometimes perpetrated in negative, stereotypical form to the general public by the print and audio-visual media, among others. This remains an ongoing challenge for all governmental service organizations in Australian society, not just officers of

the QPS. As a “first contact” group in society’s intercultural dynamics, police officers such as those of the North Coast Police Region in South-East Queensland have had to take this initiative to train their young officers through immersion in the “real world” of their clients. It is our opinion from our personal and observed experiences in this project that people in other police education, health and welfare, legal, and business organizations may benefit by involvement in similar initiatives to the Cherbourg project. These initiatives should assist their intercultural relationships, competences and content knowledge. Trainees’ skills and understandings can be developed and fine-tuned, together with learning about processes that work for both police and Aboriginal groups.

In terms of the QPS it is conceded that there is a lot more to be done, and that “Cherbourg is just one small step on the long journey”. There are also a number of other significant projects that are trying to begin the reconciliation process between police and Aboriginal people (Melville *et al.*, 1994a, 1994b). The Cherbourg project is merely one such project but an extremely significant model where there is an effort to rebuild the connections between two critically important groups in our Australian society through attempts at organizational culture change by the implementation of a training curriculum and cultural immersion within an Aboriginal community.

Note

1. First-year constables are “rookie” police who have been sworn-in as police after completing basic training (usually six months) at the Academy.

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