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Ottawa cops pursuing diversity

A recruitment strategy to serve and protect for the future

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The figures are stark, even starker than the numbers regularly invoked to illustrate the dilemma employers face as the population ages.

This particular employer, the Ottawa Police Service, is staring at a total turnover of its senior ranks: 100 per cent are set to leave, the majority of them into retirement, within five to 10 years.

But that's not all. Consider those officers who will take their places. An astounding number have less than five years' experience — 65 per cent of the sworn officers on the front line. Call it a management gap, a leadership gap or a knowledge gap, the situation is critical.

But rather than ramping up a recruitment drive to draw police candidates from across the country, the Ottawa Police Service is going for an unusual, almost counter-intuitive, solution. It's setting out to recruit from immigrant communities which have traditionally shown little interest in policing. And it's doing so by pursuing a strategy to become an employer of choice for all.

"We're looking at losing hundreds of years of experience and knowledge with those people who are soon to retire," said police chief Vince Bevan.

"And we want to take the steps that are necessary right now to preserve corporate knowledge, to make sure that we've got the people with the skills and knowledge to police what is a very complex community."

Set against that reality is the changing face of the city. One in five residents is born outside of Canada. And while this immigrant population isn't as sizeable as it is in some other municipalities, it's still growing at twice the rate of the general population. In the face of this population shift, it became clear that "we would not be a legitimate police organization unless we had the capacity to communicate with and understand the diverse population that call Ottawa home," said Bevan.

"If we can't communicate with the victims, who was going to investigate crimes

committed against them? And if we can't penetrate organized crime because we can't speak the language and don't understand the culture, who's going to halt its spread?"

The way that staff sergeant Syd Gravel sees it, when police services talk of recruiting, what they usually mean is processing applications.

"If the chief comes to me and says, 'We've got to hire 30 people,' I go and pull out 200 files from the filing cabinet from people who were naturally attracted to policing. And I go through the files and bring them down to 30 excellent candidates, and we would hire 30 people."

The problem is the names in that filing cabinet resemble less and less the names one encounters on Ottawa streets. But getting people from fast-growing immigrant communities to start filling that cabinet with their resumes was to be no easy task, as many police departments have found. Many immigrants come from nations where the police oppress rather than serve the public. Others arrive in Canada only to find themselves or their youth too often targeted by police using racial profiling. For these communities, a policing career for their children just doesn't come up as an option to consider.

To reach out to these groups, the police service had to examine how it is seen as an employer, said Gravel. The police service launched a process of consultation for community groups "to tell us what strategies we should put in place to help recruit a police service that reflects the community." The service's corporate planning section then put together nine focus groups of officers and civilian staff who were women, visible minorities, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Interestingly, the recommendations that came out of the community groups and the ones voiced by police staff in the focus groups were very similar. "We were thrilled to see that," said Gravel, because that meant it would not be difficult to convince both insiders and outsiders the organization needed to change.

The police service then approached Carleton University's Eric Sprott School of Business to conduct telephone surveys of sworn officers and civilian employees on the changes that management needed to make. By this point, more than 90 recommendations had emerged, which an outreach project team comprising of people from various functions — HR, race relations, community relations, corporate communications, among others — reworded and merged into 35. The project team then went to the Community and Police Action Committee (COMPAC), a committee of community members that acts as a sounding board on police issues, and then to the outreach program steering committee. By the end of the process, the recommendations were distilled into 17, which formed the blueprint for the service's outreach recruitment program.

The project team took the final 17 recommendations to the Police Services Board and made a case for making the first recommendation — to be a diverse and bias-free organization — one of the 10 organizational values. The board approved, which means

that henceforth, the chief is required by the Police Services Act to go to the board every three years and report on how the service is living up to that value.

“So now we knew we were entrenched,” said Gravel. No matter who comes and goes at the top from this point, this 10th organizational value of diversity and non-discrimination was going to outlast them.

And as for the focus group findings, said Gravel, “we decided to go public with it.” The results weren’t flattering, but the public can read on the Ottawa police’s website that while white male officers didn’t believe the organization had a retention problem, the female officers in the focus groups voiced discontent and a desire to leave the service. Or that civilian employees in the focus group felt the same way. Or that visible minority officers found the recruitment process fair and welcoming, but once on board, felt their peers viewed them as “employment equity” hires. And on and on.

“It’s pretty cutting stuff. But what we did was ask, ‘Are we going to keep this under wraps?’ Or are we going to admit to everybody that we see a problem with our organization? Let’s put the skeletons out in public and say, ‘We’re sorry, we’re going to fix this.’”

Things might have seemed quiet in the first two years as the service laid out the groundwork, but now the projects are coming out fast and heavy. There’s a volunteer recruiter initiative, in which the police service brings on board people from various communities who’ve agreed to help the police recruit. A first group of 15 are being trained in May to go out with a pair of police employees, one uniformed and one civilian, to job fairs and career days to speak about policing as a career.

Another program has the Ottawa police teaming up with the Ontario Provincial Police to go into an English-as-a-second-language class to teach young newcomers Criminal Code terminology — and to talk up policing as a career.

To help young candidates with entry requirements, the police service is setting up information sessions to prepare people for the aptitude tests, which are set out by the province.

Holding information sessions to explain to young immigrants what the tests are about, or matching up mentors with young candidates to answer their questions one on one, begins to put them on an equal footing to start the application process, said Gravel. “I’ve not given them anymore than anybody else. I’ve not treated them any different. I’m just giving them fair play. It’s about equity.”

To make the case that diversity means reaching out to all, not to some, the police service went one step further and framed all the work in terms of being an employer of choice for all.

“It’s one thing to recruit people, but unless you have a welcoming organization to make

them feel comfortable inside the organization, they're not going to stay," said Bevan. "We wanted to make sure that we had a workplace where they would come, where they would thrive, where they would be successful, and where they would be good ambassadors back to the community about what it was like to work for the Ottawa police service."

Trevor Wilson, president of the Toronto-based diversity consultancy TWI Inc., helped make that link. Although he was initially reluctant to work with police organizations — he had prejudices about them being traditional, conservative and reactive — he quickly saw that "this organization was ahead of the curve."

What he saw at the Ottawa police was a chief who understood that to make a deep-seated change in mindset, a leader had to be out in front championing the change. And contrary to the popular notion that communication on a change initiative is most effective when it cascades from the top down, he saw chief Bevan spend time with both the senior ranks and the staff sergeants — the front-line managers in a police organization.

"That to me was enlightened thinking," said Wilson. "Most people take their communication from the front-line manager; they don't take it from the website or from what comes down from the senior manager. And for some reason (chief) Vince Bevan knew that. He meets with the staff sergeants on a regular basis and he ensures that they know exactly what's going on in the organization."

The outreach recruitment initiative also benefits from the full support of the union. Ottawa Police Association president Charles Mony said in his own experience as a detective, the police service needs to bring in people from different backgrounds and who speak different languages to be able to do its work properly.

Looking back at the resistance mounted a few decades ago to the hiring of women officers, Mony said, "I don't think it will take the 20 years that it took for women to be recognized in policing, for different minority groups from different backgrounds.

"I hope it takes only two or three years for people to come to the realization that, you know what, for operational reasons we need it. We need to make sure that the different communities feel they're listened to, and at the end of the day it's the right thing to do."

In terms of gauging the outreach program's success, Wilson said too often, organizations rely on the quantitative measure of representation. That's only one aspect of success, he said. The other aspects to account for would include whether people within the organization perceive inequity, whether they encounter harassment and discrimination, whether they see themselves having a better or a worse chance for advancement because of their belonging to a group, whether their managers treat them with fairness and respect — measures that inevitably relate back to whether police service employees see the service as an employer of choice.

Because representation is only one of the metrics used to measure the recruiting program,

“that takes it away from the notion that this is about quotas,” said Wilson.

And as the organization begins now to develop a census of its workforce, said Gravel, it will take a count not just of the four disadvantaged groups. “We’re not talking about the look, we’re talking about diversity in the fullest sense,” which would encompass sexual orientation, family status, socio-economic status and more.

“We want to find out, ‘Are you a single mother? Do you have parents living at home with you? Are you able to pay your bills?’” said Gravel. “That’s so we understand what we have available in terms of resources,” because if there’s a community meeting at a housing project to address problems around kids raised by a single parent, sending a single-parent officer to that meeting would be more effective in terms of coming up with a solution.

Seeing through an outreach program like this will be expensive, said Gravel, “but that’s what we need to do in order to fix the problems so that we don’t have to devote resources to it later.” That’s because at the end of the road, Gravel would like to see the police recruiter go back to processing applications. “Because then the filing cabinet will be filled with members of all sorts of communities, and that will become the new tradition.”

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