

The Norwegian Police – a Learning Organisation? The case of the Kongsberg 2021 Mass Casualty Event

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Armed confrontations represent the most extreme and demanding tasks faced by police. On 13 October 2021, an individual armed with a bow and arrows and several knives killed five people in Kongsberg, Norway. Following the incident and subsequent arrest, the Norwegian Police Directorate and the Police Security Service established a committee tasked with identifying learning points related to both the events leading up to the attack and the police's operational management of the incident. This paper examines the extent to which the committee's mandate and the subsequent follow-up actions related to operational police management demonstrate characteristics of the Norwegian police as a learning organisation. The study is based on document analysis of police directives and instructions, the Kongsberg evaluation report, the mechanisms for disseminating lessons learned throughout the Norwegian Police after publication of the report, and the degree to which this knowledge is received and used to adjust police and security service procedures to reflect newly acquired insights. The findings indicate a strong motivation at the management level across all Norwegian police districts to use the Kongsberg incident as a learning opportunity, as well as considerable interest among police emergency response officers. Nevertheless, despite clear evidence of learning following the events of 13 October 2021 and a willingness to draw lessons from the incident, there remains room for improvement in systematically identifying experiences and transferring knowledge throughout the organisation as part of a structured effort to modify police modus operandi in armed confrontations in line with new insights.

Keywords: Mass casualty event, Experience, Experiential learning, Collective learning, Learning organization

1. Introduction

The Norwegian operational police management system (PBS I) emphasises and justifies the importance of developing the police as a learning organisation (POD 2020, p214). Although the police have many effective routines for learning from experiences, further development requires more systematic and methodical attention (ibid). Striving to become a learning organisation entails drawing lessons from everyday activities at all levels of the organisation - including from armed confrontations – and integrating these experiences into the broader police organisation to support continuous improvement. Armed confrontations constitute some of the most extreme and demanding tasks faced by the police. On 13 October 2021, an individual armed with a bow and arrows and several knives killed five people in Kongsberg, Norway. In the aftermath of the attack and the perpetrator's arrest, the Norwegian

Police Directorate and the Police Security Service established a committee to identify lessons learned, both regarding the events leading up to the attack and the police's operational management of the incident. This study is based on document analysis of police directives and guidelines, the Kongsberg evaluation report, the mechanisms for disseminating lessons learned across the Norwegian police following the reports publication, and the extent to which this knowledge has been received and used to adjust police and security service procedures in light of newly acquired insights, that strengths and weaknesses of the responses is evaluated and remedial action taken based on this understanding" (Boin et al., 2017:15).

As early as 2009 an Official Norwegian Report (NOU 2009: 12) highlighted the need for a reliable system to capture experiential learning and make it accessible to the rest of the police

organisation (NOU 2009: 12). Research also suggests that incidents involving life-and-death decisions by police officers are, to a limited extent, evaluated with the explicit aim of learning from experience (Hellesø-Knutsen 2013). Research has also addressed the challenges the Norwegian police face in systematically capturing experiential learning (Henriksen et al. 2022), and the development of learning systems at both the individual and organizational levels (Wathne 2012; Hoel & Barland 2020; Edvardsen and Hoel 2021). Thus, it is of interest to study to what degree the Norwegian Police use the mass casualty event at Kongsberg as a learning opportunity. This study examines the extent to which the Kongsberg mass casualty event evaluation committee's mandate, the report and the subsequent follow-up actions related to operational police management demonstrate characteristics of the Norwegian police as a learning organisation.

Following this introduction, the conceptual framework and a brief methods chapter is presented. Then the results and discussions are presented and, finally some concluding remarks.

2. Conceptual framework

Learning involves the detection and correction of error. As Argyris argues, learning occurs when we take effective action, when we identify mistakes and correct them (Argyris 1993, p3). He further asks, "How do you know when you know something? When you can produce what it is you claim you know" (ibid.). In this sense, learning is tangible and may directly be linked not only to action and change, but also to governance.

Dewey is often associated with the maxim "learning by doing," emphasizing that there is an "intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey 1938:20). In this sense, experiential learning is grounded in the dynamic relationship between experience and learning. Similarly, Kolb (1984) underscores the central role of experience in the learning process. He defines learning as, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p38). Kolb conceptualizes learning as involving both integration and substitution: individuals must incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge while also revising or replacing prior understandings. His experiential learning model

is structured as a four-phase cycle (1984, p68): Concrete experience: we experience the world through our own senses. Reflective observation: we understand the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them. Abstract conceptualisation: we use logic, ideas and concepts, emphasizing thinking as opposed to feeling. Active experimentation: we focus on actively influencing people and changing situations.

Although learning often begins at the individual level through experience, it is also fundamentally a collective process. Within organisations, learning frequently occurs in smaller groups, often described as communities of practice. Wenger, McDermott and Schnyder define such communities as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (2002:4). They argue that employees and other individuals with shared goals, tasks and professional backgrounds naturally seek out like-minded people for professional dialogue. Within these interactions, collective reflection and knowledge exchange create important opportunities for learning.

Whereas communities of practice represent informal arenas for exchange and learning, Schein emphasizes learning at the organizational level. He argues that organizational learning occurs when basic underlying assumptions are questioned and transformed, while mechanisms are introduced that enable a cognitive redefinition of those assumptions (Schein 1987). Similarly, Argyris and Schön contend that organizational learning takes place when members continuously revise both their private understandings of situations and their shared images or representations of the organisation (1996). This process, in turn, reshapes the organisation's theory in use. In particular, double-loop learning involves questioning and potentially altering the organization's "theory of practice." By engaging in critical reflection on existing practices and assumptions, organizations may move beyond surface-level adjustments toward deeper, transformative learning (ibid.).

According to Dixon, organisational learning is built upon individual learning (2017) and cannot occur without it. However, individual learning alone is not sufficient to produce

organizational learning. Dixon conceptualizes the organizational learning cycle as a process through which shared perceptions and attitudes are developed. Central to this process are three types of meaning structures: The private meaning structures are at the individual level, unconscious or conscious. Accessible meaning structures, meaning structures shared by the individual with others. Finally, collective meaning structures, conscious or unconscious, meaning structures that individuals have in common with others, be it norms, values and perceptions of reality.

Organisational learning emerges when individual meaning structures becomes accessible and, through interaction, develop into collective meaning structures. According to Dixon, this process represents a transition, from individual to collective learning, facilitated by shared meaning structures, and conceptualized as the organisational learning cycle (2017). First, information is generated through collection of external data and internal development of ideas. This is followed by integration of the new information in the organization. The third phase, interpretation of information, is a collective process forming new collective meaning structures by collective participation, through seminars, conferences, staff meetings, etc. Finally, act is about taking responsible action based on the interpreted meaning.

Nonaka and Takeuchi use the term organisational knowledge creation to describe a continuous and dynamic interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge (1995 p70). In their model, socialization refers to the development of a shared field of interaction in which experiences and mental models can be exchanged, enabling the transfer of tacit knowledge. Externalisation is triggered by meaningful dialogue through which tacit knowledge, often difficult to articulate, is expressed and made explicit. The combination mode involves linking and systematizing explicit knowledge by connecting newly created insights with existing knowledge elsewhere in the organisation. Finally, internalization occurs through learning by doing, as individuals embody explicit knowledge and transform it into tacit knowledge through practice.

Learning organisations represent an advanced stage of organisational learning, where learning is embedded in structures, culture and practice. Nonaka and Takeuchi draw on Senge's

(1990) concept of systems thinking. This perspective shifts attention from viewing isolated parts to understanding the organization as a whole. Rather than relying on trial-and-error learning alone, it emphasizes reflective, systemic "learning with the mind" (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, p 10). Senge defines a learning organization as one "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (2006, p 3). Similarly, Garvin describes a learning organization as one "skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin 1993: 3). In this sense, a learning organization actively supports learning at all levels, fostering employee's commitment and capacity to learn, while ensuring that knowledge is shared throughout the organization (Senge 2006, p4). Senge further argues that such organizations are possible precisely because learning is a fundamental human capacity, that we are, at our core, all learners (2006, p4). Senge presents five core components or disciplines to innovate learning organizations:

- **Systems Thinking:** Seeing the big picture and understanding how parts of the organization connect.
- **Personal Mastery:** Individuals continuously focus on self-improvement and learning to expand their individual capacities to create desired results.
- **Mental Models:** Refine understanding through challenging deep-seated assumptions.
- **Shared Vision:** Creating a collective future vision or picture.
- **Team Learning:** Fostering dialogue and collaboration for shared insights or collective intelligence.

There are numerous barriers to learning. Argyris identifies defensive routines such as bypassing difficult issues, covering up errors, making excuses (1993), and a tendency to remain in single-loop learning (1997). In the context of crisis, Elliot and Smith emphasize additional obstacles, including the challenges of cultural readjustment following a crisis, and an

organisation's inability or unwillingness to learn from such events (2006). Other barriers to learn from crisis is summarized by Elliott and Smith (2006, p528): Rigidity of core beliefs, values and assumptions; Ineffective communication and information difficulties; Denial, centrality of expertise and the disregard of outsiders; Peripheral enquiry and decoy phenomena; Cognitive narrowing and fixation (reductionist).

Finally, it is necessary to consider the extent to which change becomes enduring. In his classic three-stage model of cultural change, Schein describes the process as involving unfreezing or thawing, cognitive restructuring, and refreezing (1999). The unfreezing creates the motivation and psychological readiness necessary for learning; however, it does not in itself determine the direction that the learning will take. This insight builds on the earlier work of Lewin, who emphasized the challenge of achieving lasting change, or the permanence of change (1946). Lewin observed that the effect of change initiatives may dissipate over time if they are not stabilized, highlighting the difficulty of ensuring that new practices and understandings become permanently embedded in the organisation.

3. Results

3.1. Learning in the Norwegian police

The Norwegian operational police management system (PBS I) presents guidelines for the police preparedness (POD 2020). More specifically, PBS I describes the assumptions, principles and mechanisms for the police's role, the vision of the police force, responsibilities and tasks within society's overall preparedness to prevent and handle incidents, in cooperation with other actors (POD 2020, p3). The guidelines present the police roles, the societal mission of the Norwegian police, guidelines for police emergency preparedness work, descriptions of the roles, responsibilities and authority of the various emergency preparedness actors. The guidelines also stress the principle of knowledge-based policing. This involves a systematic and methodical collection of relevant information and knowledge to make decisions about crime prevention and crime-fighting measures. Knowledge-based policing is furthermore rooted in a goal of developing the Norwegian police as a learning organisation (POD 2020, p214). More specifically, in chapter 16 of the guidelines, the

approach to experiential learning is described. Experiential learning, based on experiences from everyday policing connected to a learning framework, is to be the foundation for organisational learning in the police force. Organisational learning, in turn, is looked upon as a prerequisite for building competence across the organisation. According to the guidelines, organisational learning is to take place in everyday practical work across the organisation, through knowledge sharing, knowledge development and change. A specific learning task described is evaluation of achievement and results, that the police conduct systematic evaluations to quality-assert their own handling of specifically demanding incidents, evaluations through debriefings and defusing, but also systematic evaluations that results in more comprehensive reports covering the incidents in a more in-depth analysis. The overall aim is to build a learning organisation with a strong learning culture, involving all police employees' identifying and facilitating good learning arenas and opportunities for learning, providing the space for reflection and conscious evaluation of experiences. However, the guidelines do not only provide overall expectations for capturing experiences and turning them into collective organisational knowledge. The guidelines also point to the community of colleagues as an important learning arena, to the learning effect of small talk among colleagues influencing their norms and practices. Thus, the informal exchanges taking place at all levels of the work hierarchy creating space for experiential learning. These organisational and individual efforts may together foster new thinking and new knowledge, which should be captured, evaluated and formalized to achieve systematic learning (POD 2020, p220).

3.2. The Kongsberg evaluation

On Wednesday October 13th, 2021, the police received phone calls about a man shooting at people with bow and arrows in the city of Kongsberg in southern Norway (PHS 2022). Five people were killed, and others injured, before he was apprehended by the police some 30 minutes later (p5). The Norwegian Police Directorate and the Police Security Service soon decided to evaluate the security services and the police's handling in connection with the Kongsberg incident.

The evaluation was to be conducted in accordance with the Police Emergency Preparedness System I (PBS I, Chapter 16), with a purpose to learn as much as possible from the actions leading up to the mass casualty event, and the police handling of the event.

The aim of the evaluation was to identify lessons learned regarding what worked well and what could have been improved in relation to (1) the handling of tips by the police and the Police Security Service, (2) the management of information sharing prior to the incident by the Police Security Service and the police, and between the police and the Police Security Service and with other agencies, such as the health service, and (3) the operational management of the incident by the police.

In the conclusions a final point is mentioned concerning learning from the Kongsberg mass casualty event. The Kongsberg commission interviewed police officers with specific and hard-earned experiences from both preventive work and from the incident itself, experiences that are valid also for police officers all over the country. That said, the conclusions end with a statement of findings of inadequate routines forming a basis for structured learning in the police, it is important that these costly experiences be used in the further work of preventing and combatting serious criminal acts and incidents (PHS 2022, p214).

3.3. The design of the commission's report

The evaluation report is structured according to the mandate – an evaluation with a purpose to learn as much as possible from the actions leading up to the mass casualty event, and the police handling of the event (PHS 2022, p 5), to identify lessons learned in relation to the Kongsberg mass casualty event:

- The mandate is presented initially, specifying the aim of the evaluation.
- A short introduction with a specification of the aim of the evaluation.
- A framework for assessment laying out the legal framework, specification of key issues on the police's education and training of operational personnel, a description of the police emergency management system, detailed descriptions of learning in the police, and a theoretical framework.

- A methods chapter specifying how data was collected and analysed, and strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation.
- One chapter on sharing of information, networks, and assessments of the activities the years prior to the incident
- A chapter on the police's operational management of the incident itself.
- A detailed chapter on learning points and recommendations
- Finally, concluding remarks.

3.4. The report's learning points and recommendations

The chapter starts with a discussion on learning from learning points, that the purpose of the commission's work is to evaluate the Police Security Services and the police's activities prior to and during the Kongsberg incident, and that this evaluation is aimed at learning, both in the Police Security Services and the police. The main body of the chapter is structured according to learning points and recommended follow-up of:

- the Police Security Service's and the police's reception of messages, information sharing and collaboration
- the police's operational management collaboration

Furthermore, the chapter is broken down in several specific points for retention, improvement, and recommendations, within areas such as learning from previous events, such as the Al-Noor Committee's recommendations (Evaluation committee 2020), operational and tactical level responses, planning, instructions and procedures, and learning in the police.

3.5. Communication of the report's findings

The evaluation report of the Police Security Service's and the police's handling in connection with the Kongsberg incident on 13th October 2021 was presented at a press conference with the Director of Police, The Chief of the South-East Police District, the Acting Chief of the Police Security Service and the main media houses in Norway. The Director of Police highlighted on the press conference that the report provides important lessons, specifically related to preventive efforts against mentally ill people who commit acts of violence (NRK, 2022).

The report is published online, available to all, both in Norwegian and in an English version. Thus, the findings are available for everyone that is interested, in the Norwegian police and Security Services, but also for the public at large, in Norway and abroad.

The main findings have been presented to different actors and stakeholders in approximately 30 presentations, with massive interest:

- The involved police officers in the South-East Police District, and all other police districts in Norway.
- The National Police Special Response Department.
- The Police Directorate (POD).
- The EU-HRSN (High Risk Security Network), established in 2017, connecting police units from EU Member States and associate members, as part of the European Commission's Action Plan to strengthen the protection of public spaces.
- SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) American police special forces.

The overall impression from requests for presentations, and from discussions during these presentations, is that it is an extensive interest in the key findings from the report (PHS 2022).

4. Discussion

Mass casualty events, such as the attack in Kongsberg, are fortunately rare. However, they generate hard-earned lessons and present critical opportunities for learning (PHS 2022). Knowledge-based policing is grounded in the ambition to develop the Norwegian Police as a learning organisation (POD 2020). Systematic examination of such events, aimed at identifying underlying causes and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the response (Boin et al. 2017), is therefore essential for refining operational practices and strengthening preparedness for future incidents of a similar nature.

4.1 Learning from learning points

It is reasonable to argue that the police officers involved in the Kongsberg mass casualty event gained valuable experience through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). The evaluation report identified a broad range of learning points and recommended follow-up measures (PHS 2022),

particularly concerning the Police Security Service's and the police's reception of information, information sharing and collaboration, and operational management coordination (Malone & Crowson 1994). The allocation of substantial time and resources to an evaluation committee tasked with mapping lessons learned from the event signals an institutional intention to learn. Learning occurs as an active, individual process embedded in practice, what Dewey (1938) described as "learning by doing." There is, therefore an intimate and necessary relationship between lived experience and education (ibid.). However, experiential learning involves more than simply reflecting on past events. A central question concerns the mechanisms through which individual experiential learning is transferred to the collective level. The Police Emergency Preparedness System I (POD 2020) emphasizes the need to extract as much learning as possible from police operations, including armed confrontations. Nevertheless, routine post-incident reporting following confrontations is only to a limited extent systematically evaluated for learning purposes (Hellesø-Knutsen, 2013). In contrast, the evaluation of the Kongsberg mass casualty event explicitly aimed to identify lessons regarding both effective practices and areas for improvement (PHS 2022). These lessons addressed information sharing prior to the event, operational management during the incident, and the dissemination of findings to a broader audience within the Norwegian police. At the same time, the evaluation highlighted the need for a permanent national system for data collection to serve as a structured foundation for organizational learning from experience (PHS 2022, p212).

Learning involves the detection and correction of error. As Argyris argues, learning occurs when individuals and organizations take effective action, identify mistakes, and correct them (Argyris 1993, p3). However, learning extends beyond merely detecting and remedying errors. The evaluation report highlights not only areas requiring improvements but also practices that the commission assessed as effective. This balanced assessment aligns with the committee's mandate (PHS 2022). That said, learning also involves actively utilising experiences as opportunities for development and contributing to the cultivation of a strong learning culture supported by effective learning arenas. However, the commission (PHS 2022, p212) concludes that the police still lack a satisfactory system for

systematically collecting and analysing experiences as a foundation for organizational learning.

4.2 From learning to learning organization

This raises the question of whether the Norwegian police can be characterised as a learning organization: an organization “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge 2006, p 3), or, alternatively, an organization “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin 1993: 3)? The Police Emergency Preparedness System I (POD 2020), the commission’s mandate, the evaluation report (PHS 2022), and the considerable attention given to its key findings all suggest that, at the individual level, police officers demonstrate a sustained commitment to self-improvement and learning. These includes efforts to expand individual capacities, challenge and refine mental models and engage in dialogue and collaboration to generate shared insights or collective intelligence (Senge 1990). Such learning is visible not only in formal structures but also in everyday professional interactions, informal conversations or small talk among colleagues in which experiences are reflected upon and learning opportunities are identified and facilitated (POD 2020). These arenas may be understood as communities of practice, as conceptualized by Wenger and colleagues (2002). At the organizational level, however, the question remains whether the Norwegian police is “modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights” in the sense described by Garvin (1993). While important learning processes are evident, there appears to be room for improvement in terms of systems thinking, particularly regarding the integration and interconnection of organisational units, and in developing of a shared vision across the organization, both central elements of Senge’s theory of the learning organization (Senge 1990)

4.3 The permanence of learning

According to Kolb, learning is a process in which individuals integrate new knowledge with existing understandings and transform experience

into knowledge; it is “...the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984:38). However, learning does not necessarily result in lasting change. Conceptualizing learning as a process of unfreezing, cognitive restructuring, and refreezing, as described by Schein (1999), highlights the importance of both motivation and psychological readiness for learning. Another factor influencing whether learning leads to durable organizational change is the extent to which the Norwegian police are willing to prioritize such change by allocating time, resources, and arenas broader learning processes. Examples of such prioritizations include The Norwegian operational police management system (PBS I), which emphasizes knowledge-based policing through the systematic and methodical collection of relevant information and knowledge (POD 2020); the mandate of the Kongsberg evaluation (PHS 2022); and the widespread engagement within the Norwegian police with the evaluation’s key findings. These initiatives may be interpreted as expressions of “unfreezing” (Schein 1999). The crucial question, however, concerns the extent to which cognitive restructuring actually occurs (Schein 1999); whether shared images or representations are revisited, as suggested by Argyris and Schön (1996); and whether individual meaning structures become accessible and, through interaction, develop into collective meaning structures, as described by Dixon (2017). Ultimately, when “refreezing” takes place following learning (Schein 1999), the key issue is whether new knowledge becomes internalised at the collective or organizational level in a manner that produces lasting change, consistent with Lewin’s (1946) conception of the permanence of organizational change (Levin 1946).

5. Conclusions

The findings indicate a strong commitment at the management level across all Norwegian police districts to treat the Kongsberg incident as a significant opportunity for organizational learning, accompanied by substantial engagement among emergency response officers. There is clear evidence that learning processes were initiated in the aftermath of the mass casualty event and that there was a genuine willingness to reflect on and extract lessons from the event.

However, despite these positive indications, there remains room for improvement in the systematic identification, documentation, and consolidation of experiential knowledge, and in particular in the effective transfer of insights across organizational levels and units. Strengthening these mechanisms is essential to ensure that lessons learned are not only acknowledged but embedded within formal structures and sustained efforts to adapt police practices in light of new knowledge.

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