
Protect Rogue Thinkers



By Gilles Hilary , INSEAD Professor of Accounting and Control, The Mubadala Chaired Professor in Corporate Governance and Strategy

The experience of an undercover cop teaches us that we should protect and support those willing to take risks, not leave them out in the cold when it goes wrong.

John (not his real name) used to be a police officer, who joined the force to make a difference. While working as an intelligence officer, he was approached by one of his informants to supply police uniforms for a bank robbery. He contacted the specialised unit who wanted to organise a sting operation.

John refused as he considered that the risks of the operation were too high. As a consequence, he was reassigned to a lower profile position. Naturally, he also refused to supply the uniforms to his informant. This upset his source who manipulated his boss in the mafia. As a result, the mob put a contract out on John's head. At that point, disillusioned with his treatment by police command and physically threatened by the criminal underworld, John resigned. The costs had become too high.

For years, John had been involved in intelligence gathering, trying “to get into the heads” of organised crime affiliates. In the process, he had learned

to think like a criminal, able to predict their behaviours and compromised on his value system to fit in.

Undercover despair

Some officers go undercover to gather intelligence. The police person may operate under an assumed identity for extended periods of time to infiltrate criminal networks. Studies have shown that undercover operations are more stressful than many other police activities. In particular, the termination of the relation is a dreaded emotional let-down when agents acknowledge the betrayal of their criminal friends. John notes that “dealing with Stockholm syndrome (which is often a consequence of undercover work) is harder than dealing with PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder].” Coping when the mission is over is also difficult. Some individuals cannot relinquish their former central role and maintain an inflated ego while others, affected by continuous stress, display regular emotional outbursts.

On the positive side, studies also suggest that a majority of agents report positive personal gains from their experience, a sense of satisfaction, an enhanced confidence and a personal growth. Perhaps Nietzsche was right, what does not kill you makes you stronger and to a degree more cynical, rationalised as being realistic.

John’s work went beyond interviewing and interrogating people but he did not go undercover using an assumed identity. He cultivated sources using his real name. Cultivating this type of relationship takes officers on a slippery slope. In an interrogation, they largely connect with the suspects through their own words. Outside the interrogation room, their actions carry more weight and they have to convince their sources that they are “one of them”. Often, criminals would test officers by using illicit drugs in front of them, starting a spiral of increasingly illegal acts.

“First, you take a bite of the apple and it is still an apple, then a second and third one. At what point does it stop being an apple?” John wonders. Academics call this process the normalisation of deviance. For John, it is all too easy to go rogue, all the elements of the so-called “fraud triangle” were there for him. Opportunity was there; you were a police officer but operating outside the normal chain of command. Rationalisation was simple. Sure, you were doing drugs but it was to fight drug trafficking. There was also pressure to do it right lest it end up badly for him.

Going deeper

In John's opinion, cultivating sources under your name is more challenging than doing undercover work because you cannot use the shield of a fictional character to distance yourself from what you are doing. Conversely, you are to a great degree distancing yourself from your own integrity by rationalising technically illegal acts through a utilitarian code of ethics; "The greater good for the greater number", which justifies 'collateral damage' which sometimes includes yourself, by compromising your own values through illicit drug use for example.

John also remembers operating in a grey cultural environment. The world of organised crime had its own code of ethics but the police force also had its own ways. For starters, cultivating an unregistered informant was not officially sanctioned, even though it was well-known and an informally accepted practice among a select few that were able to demonstrate value through a significant number of high-profile arrests. The way John sees it, if you play by the rules, you would get less result, but as long as you minded your "three Ps", you were OK: paperwork had to be under control, property had to be logged and personal relationships had to be managed properly.

In contrast, one could get arrested for engaging in behaviours associated with cultivating an unregistered informant. If everything went well, the hierarchy would applaud the results but if there was a problem, you were on your own.

Which way is up?

Dealing with uncertain threats requires unconventional thinking that may go against organisational culture. Doing this comes with an individual cost, both in terms of psychological well-being and in terms of organisational integration. For example, studies have indicated that more than a third of police officers have subsequently disengaged from the police department after finishing an undercover operation. Organisations and leaders who truly want their employees to do this need to take these costs into consideration. Individuals have to be protected and supported, if only, through symbolic reward. For John, (and many others like John who sacrificed their own values to circumvent shortcomings in the operational policing model and dated bureaucracies), this did not happen.

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