

“The Toughest Beat”

Investing in Employee Well-Being at the Denver Sheriff Department

Practitioner Guide

ELIZABETH LINOS, JORRIT DE JONG, AND GAYLEN WILLIAMS MOORE

Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, “The Toughest Beat: Investing in Employee Well-Being at the Denver Sheriff Department.”

Role of a Facilitator

The facilitator leads a conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization’s challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there is no right or wrong “answer” to the case—cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different

ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus; just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopsis

Denver Sheriff Department (DSD) Chief of Administration Sonya Gillespie was responsible for the recruitment, training, retention, and general well-being of the department’s employees. DSD had been struggling with staffing shortages, safety and equity concerns, and widespread burnout among deputies and staff for years. A wide variety of programs, initiatives, and reforms had been established to address these issues, but little progress had been made, and challenges continued to mount.

Department leaders, eager to improve the day-to-day experiences of employees and incarcerated people, recognized that deputies often felt only fellow officers truly understood the difficulties of the job. With this in mind, they decided to pilot a new peer support program. In a randomized controlled trial, employees were assigned to either a peer-to-peer group or an individually focused group. Participants received email prompts aimed at strengthening connectedness and belonging or individual wellbeing, respectively. Gillespie and other department leaders hoped to see measurable shifts in staff morale and attitudes toward the people in the department’s custody.

When messages on the study’s online peer-to-peer platform started turning into critiques of leadership and challenges to policies and safety protocols, DSD leadership had to decide whether to prioritize the integrity of the experiment or step in before things got worse.

Conversation Plan

Note: To prepare for discussions of this case, consider using and adapting these [“Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics”](#) from the University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching.

Part 1: Exploring the Case (20-30 minutes)

The goal of this part of the conversation is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *What problem was the DSD trying to solve?*
- *What would you do to address staff burnout and how would you test it?*

Part 2a: Diagnosing Challenges (20-30 minutes)

This part of the discussion invites deeper thinking about the DSD’s approach to the staffing and morale challenges it faced. Suggested questions:

- *What hypothesis was the DSD testing?*
- *What were the potential benefits of this intervention? What were the risks?*
- *If you were in Chief Gillespie’s shoes, what would you advocate for at the end of the case? Should the department continue the experiment? Modify it? Call it off?*

Part 2b: Application (10-20 minutes)

If time allows, in plenary or in small groups, brainstorm employee support interventions participants could test out. Once a few ideas are on the table, ask them to evaluate them in terms of feasibility and potential impact and how they might design an experiment to test their ideas’ effectiveness.

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (10 minutes)

Share the post-case outcome: DSD decided to continue with the pilot period as planned. Post-intervention surveys indicated that deputies who received the peer-focused wellness program:

- had increased feelings of self-efficacy, job happiness, and feeling understood, but no significant difference in burnout. (The intervention took place during the pandemic, however, which was a complicating factor.)
- were more likely to indicate that they shared values and beliefs with incarcerated individuals under their care. (Note that this addressed a concern that strengthening belonging among deputies would harden an “us vs. them” dynamic with incarcerated people.)

Ask participants:

- *How do you interpret these results? What questions have been answered? What new questions do they raise?*
- *How do you evaluate DSD’s problem-solving process? Did they make progress? If yes, how? If no, why not?*
- *If you were to lead the next phase of this process, where would you focus your energy?*

Sample, high-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Invite those who are most impacted to help you understand their challenge and define success.
- Choose an entry point that is:
 - *meaningful* given the nature of the problem;
 - *actionable* given available resources, authority, and time;
 - *acceptable* given the stakeholders and their interests/concerns; and
 - *provisional* so that you might learn what to try next. (e.g., design an intervention to target a specific organizational unit, rule or practice, resource or support, or behavior.)ⁱ
- Commit to using data to test solutions and invite others to interpret the results.
- Commit to adopting and scaling what works.

Suggested Reading

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) offers [practical resources for randomized evaluations](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/research-resources?view=toc), <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/research-resources?view=toc>.

For more on developing a “theory of change,” see Alnoor Ebrahim and V. Kasturi Rangan, “[What Impact? A Framework for Measuring the Scale and Scope of Social Performance](https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2014.56.3.118),” *California Management Review* 56, no. 3 (May 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2014.56.3.118>.

ⁱ See suggested reading section for de Jong et al, “Cross-Boundary Collaborations in Cities: Where to Start.”

For more on “entry points,” see Jorrit de Jong, Eva Flavia Martínez Orbegoza, Lisa Cox, Hannah Riley Bowles, Amy C. Edmondson, and Anahide Nahhal, “[Cross-Boundary Collaborations in Cities: Where to Start](#),” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, July 6, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.48558/D74P-TG75>.

For resources on process facilitation and codesign, see this [compendium of tools and guides from the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation](#), https://oecd-opsi.org/toolkits/?_toolkit_discipline_or_practice=process-facilitation-and-co-design.

For information on “human-centered design,” see Lauren Landry, “[What Is Human-Centered Design?](#)” Harvard Business School Online Business Insights (blog), December 15, 2020, <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/what-is-human-centered-design>.

For more on uptake of evidence-based innovations, see Stefano DellaVigna, Woojin Kim, and Elizabeth Linos, “[Bottlenecks for Evidence Adoption](#),” *Journal of Political Economy* 132, no. 8 (2024): 2748-2789, <https://doi.org/10.1086/729447>.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative’s self-paced learning module: “[Using Data and Evidence as a City Leader](#)” serves as a companion to this case.

Appendix

Optional Worksheet Pre-discussion Questions

1. *What problem was the Denver Sheriff Department trying to solve?*
2. *What would you do to address staff burnout and how would you test it?*
3. *What hypothesis was the Denver Sheriff Department testing?*
4. *What were the potential benefits of this intervention? What were the risks?*