The success of the New York City Police Department (NYPD) in significantly reducing all crime during the mid-1990s was the envy of other police departments throughout the nation. The overarching question was whether the “New York miracle” could be transferred to other cities. When I became the police commissioner of Philadelphia in early 1998, that question was put to the test. Little did I know that although I believed that the policies were indeed transferable, they would come with a high personal cost for many. Going in as a change agent always sounds great, but in reality, there is often nothing on
offer but disincentives. It is much easier to glad-hand, go along, and get along than it is to rock the boat.

The NYPD was an ideal organization for the changes and innovations of the mid-1990s. For instance, when it came to promotions, the NYPD used a bifurcated system. The first three ranks were based on scoring well on a civil service exam. The next six ranks were appointed to serve at the pleasure of the commissioner and were based on merit. The better you performed, the higher you rose in rank. Additionally, different ranks were represented by different unions, which meant that they often had conflicting agendas opposing one another.

The Philadelphia Police Department (PPD), on the other hand, was a less than ideal organization when it came to accepting change. In the PPD, one union represented all of the ranks. This often meant that if it opposed anyone, it was usually the police commissioner. In addition, the PPD was a pure civil service system. Promotions were based on how well a person performed on a civil service exam. The police commissioner was only given the power to appoint two deputy commissioners. This greatly limited his or her ability to reward top performers and to create a merit-based incentive system.

One of the key elements to the success of the “New York miracle” was the CompStat process. This was where precinct commanders came to headquarters on a weekly basis and were held to account for crime and quality of life issues within their precinct. A successful performance by a precinct commander at these meetings could lead to a promotion. In fact, in the first two and a half years of CompStat, one precinct commander was promoted three times. It was clear to me that while police officers made top-notch arrests, detectives performed great investigations, and chiefs asked the right questions at CompStat, it was the precinct commanders who were steering the ship. Talk about an incentive to perform!

When I went to Philadelphia, I was determined to replicate this process and make the district commanders the central force behind change within the department. However, a major impediment was the fact that I did not have the ability to promote top performers. Because promotions were based on civil service exam results, hard work, creativity, initiative, bold thinking, and great decision making had no impact on a person’s career trajectory. If you were serious about getting a promotion, the least appealing assignment would be that of district commander, who was constantly on the hot seat and worked irregular hours—not necessarily an environment conducive to studying for the next exam.

Fortunately, I was able to create some incentives outside the civil service system for those captains who were willing to assume the responsibilities of a district commander. Of 110 PPD captains, 26 were district commanders. It took about a year, but I was eventually able to fill all of the districts with captains who eagerly sought out the assignment and were above-average performers who embraced change.

A quick lesson here is that you should never underestimate the importance of wanting to be on a winning team. Many individuals rose to the challenge. However, there are always those who will not make a winning team. As a result, they may become envious and go out of their way to throw roadblocks in the path of change. Worse than that, they will likely pull other malcontents into their orbit. Before long, the cancer spreads through the organization.

In Philadelphia, the first indication that malcontents were at work was the appearance of leaked stories in the press that attempted to undermine the competence and integrity of the organization. The police union jumped to the fore, ready to defend underperformers and clog up the disciplinary system with appeals, allegations, and dubious investigations. Sometimes spurious allegations were made against top-performing supervisors, which also provided a not too subtle warning to other high performers that they could be the next targets. We have all heard of charges made by unions that management is intimidating subordinates, but I certainly saw examples of the reverse—subordinates intimidating managers.

In spite of all of the obstacles thrown in our path, we had four very successful years in Philadelphia. Violent crime, police corruption, and police shootings were all significantly reduced, while quality-of-life issues were improved. I felt we had put together a strong team of managers to lead the department, but the question remained whether our success would last. Toward the end of my tenure, I could sense a corrosive effect on some supervisors from the allegations, leaked news stories, and second-guessing that had gained momentum over the past four years.

Was our progress the result of the transference of the New York policies and strategies, or was it merely attributable to the sheer dint of personality of a loud-mouthed, obnoxious New Yorker who had been brought in to force change any which way he could?

Impossible jobs are actually possible to do. However, what makes such jobs so difficult is not the challenge of the task at hand, but rather the bureaucratic and political intrusions that eat away at the winning teams’ initiative, desire for change, imagination, and innovation.

Within a year after I had left Philadelphia, violent crime rose dramatically, as did police shootings and police corruption.