

Challenging misogyny in policing

Published on 30 May 2022 Written by Inspector Jade Hewitt, Thames Valley Police

My idea: To encourage confidence to speak out

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Following a police officer's recent dismissal for sexual assault, I began thinking about whether there would have been red flags throughout his length of service, and whether these could have – or should have – been identified by his colleagues. This led me to reflect on my own experiences about behaviours and attitudes that I have witnessed and sometimes dismissed as 'banter', but maybe should have challenged.

Having never worked in professional standards, I presumed that cultural debriefs and learning opportunities would form part of the process following on from a dismissal of an officer, but this isn't the case. My idea is to create a 'post-dismissal cultural debrief' to engage colleagues following the dismissal of an officer. The debrief would facilitate people to confidently and confidentially reflect and identify missed red flags, such as sexualised behaviour and language, recounting sexual experience in the crew room, inappropriate nicknames, unwanted hugs and comments on appearance.

My idea is to offer anonymity in terms of any feedback, to encourage candour and learning for the organisation and participants. A debrief would only take place once any appeal or criminal proceedings are concluded. A report would be created and shared with senior management of the local policing area, providing suggestions for improvement around culture and embedding the Code of Ethics. These suggestions may include coaching and mentoring, support networks or development programmes to improve confidence and ability to challenge behaviour.

Culturally, there's a lack of confidence in the reporting of inappropriate behaviour. Reluctance to speak out is felt both by victims and by others, who may hear or see things that they don't agree with or that make them feel uncomfortable. There is a tendency to minimise, excuse and avoid dealing with issues. Individuals are often fearful that raising an issue might have a negative impact on them – for example, by ostracising them from their team, affecting their chances of career advancement or causing them to be labelled as a troublemaker.

There is learning to be drawn from asking the person's colleagues whether there were signs that something was amiss before the incident reached the level of misconduct. Language is important. There is no such thing as 'casual' prejudice of any sort. After all, one definition of misogyny is 'a dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women'. By defining this as 'casual', it minimises the intention and impact on the individual or group.

Misogyny in policing can never be casual and we need to empower our staff to challenge these behaviours.

- This article was peer reviewed by Carolyn Rigby, Complaints and Hearings Manager, Lancashire Constabulary.

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