How to become a good response officer

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Sergeant Richard Horton talks about what it takes to become a good response officer on our Inside policing podcast

News 5 mins read

Sergeant Richard Horton is a recently-retired police sergeant with more than 29 years of service across several areas of policing, including working as a detective and handling informants.

Podcast transcript

I posed the question via social media: what makes a good cop? Over 3,000 of you responded to this question and we had literally hundreds of people wanting to share their opinion on this important subject. Policing has changed so much in the last few years. We've seen the introduction of new entry requirements, fast track schemes, direct entry to detective programmes and also apprenticeships. Every one of these is designed to increase the diversity of the workforce, increase the quality of our future police officers and professionalise the role of a police officer. Then we also have the things you just can't teach. How valuable are these when you become a police officer? To help me, I am joined by Sergeant Richard Horton. Richard is a police sergeant with over 29 years' service as an officer. He himself has worked in many roles, such as a detective, targeting, handling informants. And if we could gather those who have seen the best and sometimes worst of policing, I imagine Richard would be right up there with them.

Richard, thanks for agreeing to go through social media responses with me today. I think it's really important to have someone such as yourself go through these with me. Sometimes it's important that we test even our own theories and use opportunities such as this to question or challenge what is right for policing. I know you are very vocal at times on social media. But also I admire the way that you use Twitter, for example to challenge and debate some of the ways in which you've seen policing change over the years. I want to start with your own response to my question. You said that there is no cop template and that sometimes it could be easier to identify the negatives, the things that can make a bad cop almost. What did you mean by some of those?

The good cop is not like a cookie cutter template. It's a broad church. You have a very wide range of capabilities within the team. At one end you have somebody that is perhaps a borderline super recogniser, somebody that is very good potentially down the intel side, football spotting side, physically quite a robust cop. Public order and dealing with street disorder and drunkenness. At the other end, you have the cop who, if you absolutely positively had to guarantee the safeguarding of a vulnerable DV victim, that's who you'd send, if they were available. But if they weren't available, you'd expect the other members of the team to be able to pitch it and deal with it because it should all be within the competence of an officer. But some are better at other things than others.

And what is the basic training that you would expect somebody to come on your team with once they've come out of the classroom?

They come from the classroom and from that, I would expect a decent basic legal knowledge. I think on response, it's fair to say you are dealing with probably the same 30 offences over and over and over again. I would expect them to go through the tutor con process and to be comfortable with working by themselves, to be comfortable with dealing with members of the public. So I would expect a basic level of physical presence and ability to look after yourself physically. For better or worse, policing is where society puts the lawful use of coercive force. And for better or worse, you have to use that most shifts for something as simple as actually putting handcuffs on somebody to having to fight with and overcome somebody, deploy PAVA, deploy a Taser, use the baton.

You know, there is no shying away from the need to get stuck in every now and again, is there? I can recall a few hairy moments myself. Times when there was a need to be able to physically restrain somebody, or dealing with a violent offender or some pretty hairy football matches too. And some of those occasions, I remember I was on my own. And on Twitter, we had some responses and some of those responses said that a good cop needed hard fists and a hard jaw, for example. How important is this in becoming a good cop? And do you see this as presenting a challenge in policing at the moment?

I'll say the physical side is a challenge for all of us. I come with certain advantages, if you will. I'm big, still relatively strong, trained in jujitsu, which helps tremendously when you have to go hands on with someone. Not that many recruits come with that particular set of skills already before they joined the job. Sometimes you are going to get the wrong side of a physical confrontation and it's

going to hurt. And it’s going to hurt whether you’re male, female, whether you’re 5ft 1 or 6ft 1. And there's no guarantee that you’re going to win and there’s no point sugar-coating that. It’s part of the job and it’s an expected part of the job. You would hope there is backup. And certainly my comms teams in South Lancashire very keen as of supervision to ensure officers don’t go to confrontational jobs on their own. That there is backup there. But that’s a good effort, but it ain’t perfect. It’s a part of and a hazard of the job because the job does involve the lawful use of coercive force.

We had that conversation in an earlier episode about officer safety, and there were some really, really good points, particularly around some of the work that’s been done by Operation Hampshire and through the services such as the National Police Wellbeing Service. How important is it, in your view, the role of a sergeant for new recruits and this development of a good cop?

It’s absolutely crucial. If you know them, then you know what their work is, you know where their soft spots are, where they may need support, they may need lifting up. They may need to be, for example, put them working with another officer who is good at what they’re not so good at and see if we can get a bit of sort of osmosis learning going on. The other thing with the sergeant is to ensure that they don’t fall over too much. There’s a typical thing where a new probationary constable will take on all the work in the world because they want to show keen, they want to show willing. About four to six weeks after that decision, they’re generally overwhelmed. They’ve got too much on their screen in terms of ongoing investigations. And so typically you take them off the road for a few shifts and just let them dig themselves out, help them dig themselves out. Some of the jobs that they’ve got probably can be closed, for example, or can be progressed fairly easily. And you’re showing them that and how are you closing it, and what’s the rationale, or these are some steps you could take that would close off this job that you’ve got. Then you’re using the PDR system as well, where you’re speaking with them, and looking to set goals and aims both for their self-development and for development you want to see in them. And again, steps where that could be done and monitoring. You can’t just let these things drift.

As you’re building these capabilities in your team as a sergeant, I suppose one of the real opportunities that you have is how good your tutor constables are. Those tutor constables are someone who teaches a new recruit how to do the job, normally for the first eight to twelve weeks of their career when they leave the training centre. And some people call it street craft, don’t they?

The skills you only pick up through the experience of doing the job. How important are those tutor constables?

I was lucky I had two different tutor constables. The first one was very much about powers, procedures, definitions and to be expected to have your boots shiny, creases in the right place in your trousers. This officer was also very good around the paperwork side of things, around getting statements, looking professional, around organising a file of evidence. That was a terrifically useful grounding for me to pick up those things. The second tutor constable I had was, as you said, the street craft, the trade craft constable, and taught me the different ways of resolving situations with people, dealing with people, talking with people, getting to the right level. And I picked that up from him and again, it was just a terrifically useful grounding. I couldn't have got both from the same officer.

This notion of life experience. How much of it do we need to be a good cop? What does life experience mean? How has this changed, or has it changed, in your view?

When I joined the job, everybody looked kind of a bit like me; 6ft 3, male and fairly tough. On the bigger teams you could have one or two female officers, still referred to as WPCs back then, which has totally changed now. I think what we're looking now at a lot more female officers on teams, but a lot more people from minorities on teams as well. We're not there yet, but it's happening. But some of the great people I work with also have been graduates, have been from a whole range of jobs and backgrounds. My background before policing was accountancy. So it gets down to my broad church thing as well. What experience do you bring? Well it's variable for everybody. We shouldn't be expecting people to bring an experience to the job. There's value in all of it. As long as what goes in at the start comes out as a police officer at the end of that two years' probation, you're happy to sign them off as being this person is competent in the role. They're fit for independent patrol; they are an effective police officer.

I'm really interested if we can turn to maybe those who don't make it through initial training or realised during their training that policing just isn't for them, after all. And as a sergeant or a tutor constable, there are some really difficult conversations to be had, isn't there, on those occasions?

They are difficult to have, but you've got to have them and you've got to be straightforward. And it's got to be recorded and evidenced because you don't want to be wrongly accused of bullying someone when actually what you're telling them is you have these urgent development needs and if they're not met, you're not going to make it. And we're trying to support, I'm trying to help and we do everything we can, we bend over backwards really to try and make sure that the development needs are met. But at the end of it, if somebody hasn't made it to the required standard for independent patrol, it's time for paths to part. It's two things with that. It needs to be properly evidenced and, from our side as an organisation, we need to have done what we can properly to support them to make sure that they do get through, or that their development needs are addressed. If that's all done, then hand on heart, you know, and with a clear conscience, you can say, I'm sorry, this is not for you.

In any walk of life, whatever job you are in, and particularly in policing, making mistakes that can be the making or the breaking of somebody, depending upon what happens next and the individual responsibility. Craig Simmons tweeted about the ability to admit when you were wrong, even providing donuts for the team as punishment, which I know is quite a police cultural thing, isn't it? If somebody makes maybe a daft mistake on a team or something slightly embarrassing for the individual, there's always a cake fine or buying donuts for the team. My question, Richard, is probably more about those times when cops do make mistakes because, like any job, they can and they will happen. What would your advice to a new recruit be when trying to be a good cop if they make a mistake?

One of the frequent things that I would get when I was running the team, would be a call on my radio: 'Sarge? Can I just run this past you?' And it'd be an officer at a job and they think that they had a solution to resolving the job that they've been sent to, but they just didn't quite have the confidence in themselves to say, 'yes this is what I'm going to do'. So he wants to run it past the sarge and I'm really happy with that. Your sarge is kind of there as the backstop, as a repository of experience and decision making. So run things past that experienced member of your team whose judgment you trust. If you made a mistake, if you've done something that's wrong, you need again to speak to your sergeant about it. Nobody likes surprises, least of all sergeants when a complaint comes in that they're not necessarily ready for or where some criticism comes in regarding the officer's work that you're not necessarily ready for. Speak to your sergeant, because almost always

it will be salvageable and it should be a learning experience for you.

Because when you're a police officer out on the beat, particularly if you're on your own, you are reliant upon making quite swift decisions, aren't you? And very often that decision can come back at you at some point. I remember that I always had a pocket notebook and I was told very early on, you record absolutely everything about your decisions, about why you came to that decision. Is the pocket notebook still as important today as it was maybe 10 or 15 years ago?

I don't think it is. I don't think it's as used. I think we've moved on to electronic devices. In Lancashire we have the Samsung smartphones. What is still important, though, is that rationale. If it wasn't written down, it didn't happen is the well-known phrase. For each incident there is a log and the officer's able to input to the log under the collar number and get your rationale on there, if nowhere else. If you're reporting it as a crime incident and you're taking no further action, you get your rationale down there, but get the rationale down at the time. There is nothing more frustrating, I would think, than going back into something that is eight or nine months old and trying to figure out why the bobby made that decision at that time and there being nothing to tell you.

So we've talked about three stages of becoming a good cop, I suppose, one of those being the basic training. The second one being the tutor constable and the sergeant and the really key role that they play when somebody comes onto a team. And then we've got actually that bit about learning on your own. Would you agree that these three areas were where we can really start to shape, nurture and identify what makes a good cop?

That's absolutely what it's about, Rob. Those are the areas where you can mould them. They've got to be acceptable at everything. But what are they good at? And it's finding that what are they good at and nurturing that and training that and developing that. It makes them better, perhaps more fulfilled as an officer. It makes the team that they're working with better because they have a patchwork of skills, abilities, high abilities throughout the team that everybody knows and you should acknowledge them. This is the person who I'm going to send to vulnerable DV victims that don't want to give the statement because I know that's our best chance of getting the evidence.

Now, one of the issues that comes up from time to time is the subject of, let's say, dancing cops, especially when these things go viral. The reality of being a good cop in today's society is

understanding that everything we do, whether it be on purpose or by accident, can end up on the internet or on the news. And we accept that as a consequence, or even as we said earlier, a part of the job. This is about that engagement with the community. Even people on this conversation have stated that a good cop needs to be able to communicate, to engage and to connect with the community. I'm just interested in what have you learned or observed about this particular issue? Because where do we see those lines become slightly blurred and how can we try to stay within them from a practical frontline point of view?

I like the idea that we don't get involved with the politics of the situation. We had a situation recently where an unfortunate officer maybe got a little bit carried away at a demonstration and started saying things that he might regret in support of the cause. I don't think we should ever get involved in that. I think sometimes spontaneous stuff happens outside. I've seen the YouTube video of a support unit. It's the big riot van type vehicle. Those officers getting out and taking over the drums of a samba band at a protest. And it was a decision that was taken, they were offered, 'why don't you?' And they went, 'yeah', and they did. And it was good. It was spontaneous. It was in keeping with the sort of public order policing they were having to do. It helped get the crowd and members of the crowd onside with policing. It humanised people who were otherwise just coming out of a riot van. It was great. We have officers that are perhaps spontaneously dancing at Notting Hill Carnival and they can dance. No issues with that. It's again engaging with the public. I kind of quite like that. Where we get these sort of organised TikToks of people dancing around the cars in the backyard, I'm not so convinced. That doesn't seem to be organic, doesn't seem to me to serve any great, useful purpose. I just think we don't like that sort of dancing cop. But where it's just happened within operations and it's a spontaneous thing and it's been appropriate, and it's brought the police closer to the people around them and humanised us, I think that's got to be a good thing.

As you come to the end of your policing career, do you remember starting and looking young and people assuming that maybe you were too young to respond to anything? And if so, what advice would you give to any new youthful cops coming into the career for the first time?

I joined at the age of 27, which is possibly older than some in the job. However, I would say that first time that I walked out with the big hat in Blackburn town centre, I felt young. I felt quite nervous. It occurred to me fairly early on. Being 6ft plus with the big hat on, some of the lower

hanging street signs and stuff in the city centre can knock your helmet off if you're not careful about it. There was a vulnerability about it, if I'm honest. It was still though that training equipped me so that when I went to my first shoplifter, I dealt with it competently, got them in, got them processed through custody, got the file in, got all the basics done. And that was me. There was no support there. The first time you do that, it's a little bit heart in mouth and 'what have I forgotten? What have I not done?' But you get through it. And the second time it's not as impactful on you and it becomes everyday business fairly quickly. It's a getting of experience, but it is daunting, no doubt.

And Richard, you are no stranger to discussing policing and the realities of the challenges faced for the front line. And for those who don't know, you were a well-known commentator about policing. You were known under the pseudonym of the Nightjack. Can you tell us a bit about how your real name became public knowledge, but also tell us a bit about, if you can, maybe some of the learning you took from your experiences. And more importantly, are you still writing?

Yeah, I was a police blogger known as Nightjack. Nightjack in Lancashire, and possibly elsewhere, is the single detective that is left covering the night shift in the division. I wrote for about two years on policing and on Home Office policing policy anonymously. I was outed by the Times who, it had turned out, had hacked an email account of mine, unsurprisingly, and got my address and proper details from that. At the time, knowing what was coming down the lines, I spoke to my inspector, made a full and frank admission to Professional Standards Department. And what they said to me was, 'Richard, if it's racist, sexist or homophobic, you are going to get sacked.' Well I'm still here so it's none of those things. I ended up with a 12-month written warning. Lancashire Police were actually really supportive once they'd got onside with the fact that it was public interest blogging and not ranting and not racist, sexist, homophobic, or personally abusive to people. That thing I was saying about if you're in the deep and smelly, go and speak to your supervision. That definitely paid dividends for me. Supervision were really supportive. I think if you're open and you're honest and you're not facing the sort of consequences that are going to put you out of the job, the job's going to be pretty supportive to you in my experience. Down the line I managed to prove the Times journalist had hacked me. I got some compensation and I was able to start writing again. The issue, really, after I've been outed, I could never really get the taste for writing again. And now I have and I'm writing some pieces for Kansas City Chiefs' support site, American Football League, and really enjoy being able to write again and it just flowing from me the way it used to in the past.

Places like the College of Policing and also lots of the national stakeholders that we work with can really learn something from listening more to people on the front line. And this is one way in which we're trying to do that. So we do really, really appreciate your input on that. And I just want to say a special thank you for that.

It's been a pleasure, Rob, it really has. Thank you.

Sergeant Horton believes there is no template for a good cop and that everyone brings something different to a team.

However, all new response officers should have a basic level of training when they leave the classroom, he explains.

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Another important part of becoming a good cop is learning from tutor constables, explains Sergeant Horton, who play a key role in shaping new recruits.

> *I was lucky I had two different tutor constables. The first one was very much about powers, procedures, definitions and to be expected to have your boots shiny, creases in the right place in your trousers. This officer was also very good around the paperwork side of things, around getting statements, looking professional, around organising a file of evidence. That was a terrifically useful grounding for me to pick up those things.*
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Finally, all new recruits need to learn and work on their own. Mistakes are an inevitable and important part of development – but your sergeant is always there to talk things through, he says.

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Sergeant Horton's parting advice for any new recruits coming into the police would be to get stuck in and to remember your training.

> *That training equipped me so that when I went to my first shoplifter, I dealt with it competently, got them in, got them processed through custody, got the file in, got all the basics done. And that was me. There was no support there.*
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Listen to the podcast

Listen to the full episode about what makes a good cop.

Podcast transcript

Hello and welcome to the official College of Policing podcast. My name is Rob Flanagan and every episode I'll be joined by frontline officers and experts to discuss the issues affecting policing in England and Wales today.

I posed the question via social media: what makes a good cop? Over 3,000 of you responded to this question and we had literally hundreds of people wanting to share their opinion on this important subject. Policing has changed so much in the last few years. We've seen the introduction of new entry requirements, fast track schemes, direct entry to detective programmes and also apprenticeships. Every one of these is designed to increase the diversity of the workforce, increase the quality of our future police officers and professionalise the role of a police officer. Then we also have the things you just can't teach. How valuable are these when you become a police officer? To help me, I am joined by Sergeant Richard Horton. Richard is a police sergeant with over 29 years' service as an officer. He himself has worked in many roles, such as a detective, targeting, handling informants. And if we could gather those who have seen the best and sometimes worst of policing, I imagine Richard would be right up there with them.

Richard, thanks for agreeing to go through social media responses with me today. I think it's really important to have someone such as yourself go through these with me. Sometimes it's important that we test even our own theories and use opportunities such as this to question or challenge what is right for policing. I know you are very vocal at times on social media. But also I admire the way that you use Twitter, for example to challenge and debate some of the ways in which you've seen policing change over the years. I want to start with your own response to my question. You said that there is no cop template and that sometimes it could be easier to identify the negatives, the things that can make a bad cop almost. What did you mean by some of those?

The good cop is not like a cookie cutter template. It's a broad church. You have a very wide range of capabilities within the team. At one end you have somebody that is perhaps a borderline super recogniser, somebody that is very good potentially down the intel side, football spotting side, physically quite a robust cop. Public order and dealing with street disorder and drunkenness. At the other end, you have the cop who, if you absolutely positively had to guarantee the safeguarding of a vulnerable DV victim, that's who you'd send, if they were available. But if they weren't available, you'd expect the other members of the team to be able to pitch it and deal with it because it should all be within the competence of an officer. But some are better at other things than others.

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In any walk of life, whatever job you are in, and particularly in policing, making mistakes that can be the making or the breaking of somebody, depending upon what happens next and the individual

responsibility. Craig Simmons tweeted about the ability to admit when you were wrong, even providing donuts for the team as punishment, which I know is quite a police cultural thing, isn't it? If somebody makes maybe a daft mistake on a team or something slightly embarrassing for the individual, there's always a cake fine or buying donuts for the team. My question, Richard, is probably more about those times when cops do make mistakes because, like any job, they can and they will happen. What would your advice to a new recruit be when trying to be a good cop if they make a mistake?

One of the frequent things that I would get when I was running the team, would be a call on my radio: 'Sarge? Can I just run this past you?' And it'd be an officer at a job and they think that they had a solution to resolving the job that they've been sent to, but they just didn't quite have the confidence in themselves to say, 'yes this is what I'm going to do'. So he wants to run it past the sarge and I'm really happy with that. Your sarge is kind of there as the backstop, as a repository of experience and decision making. So run things past that experienced member of your team whose judgment you trust. If you made a mistake, if you've done something that's wrong, you need again to speak to your sergeant about it. Nobody likes surprises, least of all sergeants when a complaint comes in that they're not necessarily ready for or where some criticism comes in regarding the officer's work that you're not necessarily ready for. Speak to your sergeant, because almost always it will be salvageable and it should be a learning experience for you.

Because when you're a police officer out on the beat, particularly if you're on your own, you are reliant upon making quite swift decisions, aren't you? And very often that decision can come back at you at some point. I remember that I always had a pocket notebook and I was told very early on, you record absolutely everything about your decisions, about why you came to that decision. Is the pocket notebook still as important today as it was maybe 10 or 15 years ago?

I don't think it is. I don't think it's as used. I think we've moved on to electronic devices. In Lancashire we have the Samsung smartphones. What is still important, though, is that rationale. If it wasn't written down, it didn't happen is the well-known phrase. For each incident there is a log and the officer's able to input to the log under the collar number and get your rationale on there, if nowhere else. If you're reporting it as a crime incident and you're taking no further action, you get your rationale down there, but get the rationale down at the time. There is nothing more frustrating,

I would think, than going back into something that is eight or nine months old and trying to figure out why the bobby made that decision at that time and there being nothing to tell you.

So we've talked about three stages of becoming a good cop, I suppose, one of those being the basic training. The second one being the tutor constable and the sergeant and the really key role that they play when somebody comes onto a team. And then we've got actually that bit about learning on your own. Would you agree that these three areas were where we can really start to shape, nurture and identify what makes a good cop?

That's absolutely what it's about, Rob. Those are the areas where you can mould them. They've got to be acceptable at everything. But what are they good at? And it's finding that what are they good at and nurturing that and training that and developing that. It makes them better, perhaps more fulfilled as an officer. It makes the team that they're working with better because they have a patchwork of skills, abilities, high abilities throughout the team that everybody knows and you should acknowledge them. This is the person who I'm going to send to vulnerable DV victims that don't want to give the statement because I know that's our best chance of getting the evidence.

Now, one of the issues that comes up from time to time is the subject of, let's say, dancing cops, especially when these things go viral. The reality of being a good cop in today's society is understanding that everything we do, whether it be on purpose or by accident, can end up on the internet or on the news. And we accept that as a consequence, or even as we said earlier, a part of the job. This is about that engagement with the community. Even people on this conversation have stated that a good cop needs to be able to communicate, to engage and to connect with the community. I'm just interested in what have you learned or observed about this particular issue? Because where do we see those lines become slightly blurred and how can we try to stay within them from a practical frontline point of view?

I like the idea that we don't get involved with the politics of the situation. We had a situation recently where an unfortunate officer maybe got a little bit carried away at a demonstration and started saying things that he might regret in support of the cause. I don't think we should ever get involved in that. I think sometimes spontaneous stuff happens outside. I've seen the YouTube video of a support unit. It's the big riot van type vehicle. Those officers getting out and taking over the drums of a samba band at a protest. And it was a decision that was taken, they were offered, 'why don't

you?' And they went, 'yeah', and they did. And it was good. It was spontaneous. It was in keeping with the sort of public order policing they were having to do. It helped get the crowd and members of the crowd onside with policing. It humanised people who were otherwise just coming out of a riot van. It was great. We have officers that are perhaps spontaneously dancing at Notting Hill Carnival and they can dance. No issues with that. It's again engaging with the public. I kind of quite like that. Where we get these sort of organised TikToks of people dancing around the cars in the backyard, I'm not so convinced. That doesn't seem to be organic, doesn't seem to me to serve any great, useful purpose. I just think we don't like that sort of dancing cop. But where it's just happened within operations and it's a spontaneous thing and it's been appropriate, and it's brought the police closer to the people around them and humanised us, I think that's got to be a good thing.

As you come to the end of your policing career, do you remember starting and looking young and people assuming that maybe you were too young to respond to anything? And if so, what advice would you give to any new youthful cops coming into the career for the first time?

I joined at the age of 27, which is possibly older than some in the job. However, I would say that first time that I walked out with the big hat in Blackburn town centre, I felt young. I felt quite nervous. It occurred to me fairly early on. Being 6ft plus with the big hat on, some of the lower hanging street signs and stuff in the city centre can knock your helmet off if you're not careful about it. There was a vulnerability about it, if I'm honest. It was still though that training equipped me so that when I went to my first shoplifter, I dealt with it competently, got them in, got them processed through custody, got the file in, got all the basics done. And that was me. There was no support there. The first time you do that, it's a little bit heart in mouth and 'what have I forgotten? What have I not done?' But you get through it. And the second time it's not as impactful on you and it becomes everyday business fairly quickly. It's a getting of experience, but it is daunting, no doubt.

And Richard, you are no stranger to discussing policing and the realities of the challenges faced for the front line. And for those who don't know, you were a well-known commentator about policing. You were known under the pseudonym of the Nightjack. Can you tell us a bit about how your real name became public knowledge, but also tell us a bit about, if you can, maybe some of the learning you took from your experiences. And more importantly, are you still writing?

Yeah, I was a police blogger known as Nightjack. Nightjack in Lancashire, and possibly elsewhere, is the single detective that is left covering the night shift in the division. I wrote for about two years on policing and on Home Office policing policy anonymously. I was outed by the Times who, it had turned out, had hacked an email account of mine, unsurprisingly, and got my address and proper details from that. At the time, knowing what was coming down the lines, I spoke to my inspector, made a full and frank admission to Professional Standards Department. And what they said to me was, ‘Richard, if it’s racist, sexist or homophobic, you are going to get sacked.’ Well I'm still here so it’s none of those things. I ended up with a 12-month written warning. Lancashire Police were actually really supportive once they’d got onside with the fact that it was public interest blogging and not ranting and not racist, sexist, homophobic, or personally abusive to people. That thing I was saying about if you’re in the deep and smelly, go and speak to your supervision. That definitely paid dividends for me. Supervision were really supportive. I think if you’re open and you’re honest and you’re not facing the sort of consequences that are going to put you out of the job, the job’s going to be pretty supportive to you in my experience. Down the line I managed to prove the Times journalist had hacked me. I got some compensation and I was able to start writing again. The issue, really, after I’ve been outed, I could never really get the taste for writing again. And now I have and I’m writing some pieces for Kansas City Chiefs’ support site, American Football League, and really enjoy being able to write again and it just flowing from me the way it used to in the past.

Places like the College of Policing and also lots of the national stakeholders that we work with can really learn something from listening more to people on the front line. And this is one way in which we’re trying to do that. So we do really, really appreciate your input on that. And I just want to say a special thank you for that.

It’s been a pleasure, Rob, it really has. Thank you.

I’d like to welcome to the show now Michelle Wright. Michelle has got 10 months in the job with Greater Manchester Police. And I wanted to speak to Michelle to find out how her first few months in the job have been, what her expectations were for joining the police. And now she’s had a little time to experience life in the cops, whether those expectations have changed. And ultimately, what does she now think makes a good cop? So Michelle, welcome to the show. Thanks for joining us. Tell me a little bit about your history and how you came about being a police officer.

So I've been interested in law since I was 16. I was going to take law as an A level, but I was advised to take another subject. So I took psychology and that was sort of then took me on a path where I became sort of interested in how psychology and law combined. That took me to the University of Liverpool and down the path of studying investigative psychology with the renowned Professor Canter, who was based at Liverpool. When I'd finished my master's, I did get an application form to join the police, so I was 21 then. Read through all the application form and just had a massive panic really. And I thought, I don't think I can do this. Don't think I've got the skills, the confidence to be a frontline officer. So right at that point, I was more interested in investigative work and the detective side of things. So, as a result of that, I went down an academic path. And for the last 20 years, I've been really privileged to work with and alongside officers, detectives in a number of research-based roles. And over the years, I've really been struck by the dedication, drive, professionalism of all the senior investigating officers I've met. Two years ago, I made the decision to finally join. It was now or never. I was in a role where I was advising students that joining the police was a good career option. So I decided to practise what I preach, follow in the footsteps of those officers who I'd met and admired.

So what's the first 10 months been like for you? Can you tell me about your experiences so far? And more importantly, was it everything you expected of that role?

It's everything I expected and more. The training was quite challenging really at first because it was during COVID times, so the majority of it was online, which meant that we were just going into the training school one day a week. But the three trainers that had delivering to our class were absolutely fantastic, so they really made the most of delivering sessions over Zoom. So it did take some adapting and some getting used to being based at home and doing all the learning. Being really honest, even though I'm from an academic background, I found learning all the legislation quite overwhelming. So it was a lot more than I imagined it would be. But again, sort of getting into the studying side of it to prepare for the multiple-choice question and exams, it was interesting getting back into that, but I had the support there from the trainers. Absolutely loved personal safety training. It was probably the best two weeks of my training by far because it was, yeah, hands on getting used to the cuffs and all the tactics. And I think as well, actually, having had everything online to then have two weeks with the rest of my classmates as well, and doing the very tactical training made it, you know, exciting and interesting as well.

Like you say, the job has been everything you expected and more. But was there anything that really took you by surprise, you know, particularly in the respect of the role of a police officer being out on the streets and your expectations of that role?

Yeah. So I think now that I'm on response, I've had my 10 weeks in tutorship and I'm just in my fourth week now as an independent on response. I think the two things that have really struck me is, firstly, the amount of time that we spend dealing with people in mental health crisis. So we are often the first ones there to deal with individuals in all levels of distress I've seen in the last 14 weeks. Secondly is the amount of administration work, reporting back in. So for example, if we have dealt with someone in mental health distress, the care plans, the one to eights that we have to put in. After, you know, we've dealt with an incident can take time looking at the history of the person and as well putting the case file together for the CPS as part of our response duties.

You went through a tutor constable period, which is normally about 10 weeks, isn't it? And during that 10 weeks, did you receive enough time to learn what you needed for the job? We've spoken to a sergeant who's got 28 years in the job, and they've really kind of hammered home the fact that actually as a police officer, you never stop learning. And that even after 28 years, you're still learning. So did you get enough during that 10 weeks to prepare you for independent patrol?

In policing, being a frontline officer and I'm sure it'll extend to when I'm in the world of CID as well, I say every day is a school day. So I'm still, you know, learning as I go and deal with different things. The 10 weeks, I was told, is a maximum, but it can change. So if I had not completed everything on my police action checklist, there was the possibility for that to be extended. And I have got colleagues who I know whose tutor period has been extended by a couple of weeks to make sure they ticked everything off. But based on my own experience, my 10 weeks was split; four weeks with a tutor based in the tutor unit, which was a lot slower paced. So the tutor constable I had for the first four weeks was able to select what jobs we went to. They were able to listen to the radio and decide what we went to. And that had a benefit in that we had the opportunity to talk through things in slower time before we went out to things, and then we do it and then review it afterwards. He was an absolute ball to be with, to be honest, we just laughed right from the offset, really calm, patient with me. You know, learned a lot about how to approach different things. My second tutor constable was on response. Met for the first time at the briefing on parades, but I had no contact

prior to that. So that was a bit nerve wracking. But he totally put me at ease from the first minute we met. He was actually born the year I left school, but we bonded over the club classic anthems on the radio. A lot of blue light runs in the car. It was my first introduction to response policing and that was so fast paced. So that meant it was more go out, deal with what we were faced with and then at the end of the shift review what we'd done and what we'd gone through. Straight away going on response, I like that way of learning because it was just deal with it and then deal with the next thing and deal with the next thing. And I think that's prepared me more for being independent now because we weren't allocated jobs. As the jobs came in on the radio, we were just going straight out to them. And I think that has, yeah, prepared me a lot more now for what I'm doing and the fast-paced nature and us not knowing what we're going to be dealing with when we get there. Both really experienced cops, both tutored a number of different students. So I really benefited from both of their approaches.

All of that taken into consideration: the training, the 10 weeks, the 10 months you've had now in the job. Can you tell me now what you think makes a good cop?

I've got a big list of things, so I'll try and keep it succinct. First is the ability to talk and connect with people. So to be a people person, to talk with people at their level and adapt to what they're telling you. The second is the ability to actively listen, which I think relates to the first point. Third, being empathetic and kind. Trying to put yourself in the person's shoes and understand sort of what they're going through, be that a victim, witness, suspect, offender. The fourth is having common sense, which I know is, how do we summarise what I mean by that? But I think the ability to perceive and make decisions based on what you're faced with. Fifth, attention to detail. Being alert to what's going on around you. Being able to accurately take notes, but also in terms of the process and administrative side when you're recording and checking what's on the systems as well. Six, self-awareness and the ability to connect and understand different types of people that you're dealing with, but also how that impacts on yourself. Seven is a sense of humour. I think it's a must. Dealing with very difficult things. And I think that's really, you know, important. Eighth, being a team player, I think one of the things that I've been really struck by is the amount of support that is available from my colleagues and doing the job well is doing it together. So being part of a team is really strong. Personal aspect, nine, is having resilience, and I think that develops over time. But if you do know how to deal with things and difficult things, I think that is important in being a good

cop. Final one is knowing when to ask for help because there's an expectation. We have to know a lot of things and deal with a lot of difficult things, and it's being able to speak up and say, if you don't know.

I reached out on social media and asked for officers who'd just joined the job, thank you so much for responding. I think it's been brilliant and the fact that you've put together this top 10, so many of those topics have come up in lots of different conversations. So to hear that from somebody who's only done 10 months is really, really reassuring that actually that message is getting through really early in training, which is fantastic. What's the number one thing you've learned so far out of all of those things? And what advice would you give to anybody thinking about applying or is about to join the job as the cops?

The first one is the ability to stay calm and focused regardless of what you're dealing with at the time, and that's something that I've learned actually doing the job. In terms of my advice, it would be go for it. Do it. It's the best thing I've ever done. I wouldn't say I'd rewind the clock because, you know, I've developed a lot of experience and life skills in the 20 years of not being a cop. But for those thinking of doing it, don't hold off. Do it now. And when you are doing it, ask for the help. You know, don't be afraid of saying 'I don't know how to do that' or 'I can't remember that'. Just speak out and say. Your teammates are there for you on relief. The sergeants are there.

Michelle, thank you so much for joining us. This has been a really exciting conversation for me to speak to somebody who is just so fresh in the job. And I really, really look forward to you maintaining that enthusiasm throughout your career. And I really look forward to speaking to you again soon. Thank you, Michelle.

Thanks, Rob. Really enjoyed it. Fizzing with enthusiasm here.

Joining me now is Marcus Griffiths from the College of Policing. Marcus is a policing standards manager, which includes ethics, integrity and professional standards. Marcus, thanks for taking the time to help me and to contribute to the question that we're asking in this episode. We've covered quite a lot already with others about key roles and also values and behaviours. And in our Twitter conversation on the subject, it was suggested we could also do well in identifying what makes a bad officer. This, I suppose, brings us into a conversation about ethics and the times when the

values or behaviours aren't upheld by individuals. So my question to you, Marcus, to get us going is, what is currently in place to help officers know the standards of ethical behaviour that policing expects?

So if you go on to the College of Policing website and take a look at the 'Ethics' page, you'll find on there a document called the Code of Ethics. It's a really helpful document that guides all those working in policing on what the ethical behaviours and standards expected of them are. Now, it was written in 2014, and it consists really of three elements. Firstly, there are the nine policing principles. These are derived from the seven Nolan Principles for public life. So those principles were selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. Now, when the Code of Ethics was written, a further two principles were added to that to make the nine policing principles. And those two further principles were fairness and respect. And the reason those two principles were added is that they were derived following research into procedural justice, and it was found that those two principles, fairness and respect, were particularly crucial to public confidence in policing. Secondly in the Code of Ethics, there are the 10 standards of professional behaviour. These standards of professional behaviour come from Schedule 2 of the Police (Conduct) Regulations 2020. Those standards of professional behaviour were first written in their current form in the 2008 regulations, and those in themselves were derived from what was earlier known as the discipline code for police. You go back that far, you'll find that there's always been a list of standards of behaviour that were expected of police officers, and some of those standards from quite some time ago still remain within the current standards. Now what the Code of Ethics does is it provides a narrative to explain what each of those standards means, and it also provides examples of when you would meet that standard to assist with an individual understanding about the standards that are expected in policing. Disciplinary procedures that exist within policing are about when you don't meet those standards of professional behaviour. So it can be the case that if you don't meet the standard that is expected, it could lead to disciplinary proceedings and that could lead to dismissal from policing. Now, thirdly in the Code of Ethics, there is the national decision model. So the principles that I've mentioned and the standards of professional behaviour that I've mentioned need to all be considered as part of decision making. Now I probably should say, you're not expected to know the Code of Ethics word for word. But what you are expected to do is to apply the intent of the code and particularly to your decision making. But really and simply what it is about, it's about doing the right thing in the right way. The Code of Ethics is currently

being reviewed. I mentioned earlier it was first written in 2014, and obviously since then the policing landscape has changed and we want to make sure that the Code of Ethics is absolutely up to date, and it provides the best support that it can to all those in policing.

We have these standards that have been set as we've already said, policing expects those from all of its staff, whether it be police officers or indeed civilian staff who work in policing as well. When those ethics of an individual are found to fall short of what we expect as a policing organisation, does the College have a role in this process beyond the guidelines and the standards in which it sets? Or does it provide support to line managers and forces when an officer has committed an offence or is facing disciplinary?

The College has no direct involvement in disciplinary proceedings, but what it does do is it provides some product to support forces with professional standards. First of those products I'll mention is the guidance on outcomes in misconduct proceedings. Now, that guidance is there to assist those that chair misconduct proceedings and also those that work within professional standards who make severity assessments to assess the seriousness of allegations of misconduct. So what it does is it provides a framework that looks at the culpability of a person who looks at the harm caused, and it also considers aggravating and mitigating factors to assist in that assessment of the seriousness. With the introduction of the 2020 Conduct Regulations, it brought with it a much greater focus on dealing with matters through reflection and learning, rather than using disciplinary procedures where it was appropriate to do so. The College have produced support material to support forces in delivering reflective practice. The College also deliver training to those that work within professional standards to support their delivery, which is really crucial in maintaining public confidence and ensuring the standards we expect in policing are adhered to.

Just before you go, Marcus. Finally, I expect that some people listening to this podcast may be thinking about applying to become a police officer and will want to find some nuggets of information that they could take away with them from this episode to help them decide on their career or to find examples for their applications. What advice would you give to anybody who came to you and asked you the question, what makes a good cop?

I said earlier about doing the right thing in the right way. That is one of the things that absolutely makes a good cop, somebody who does the right thing in the right way, and that is determined

through their process of their ethical decision making. I think what I would add to that is my own personal views on what makes a good cop. And this is derived from going through my career in policing, things that I've seen. And I think there are some particular characteristics that really make a good cop, and there's three that always stand out for me. And I think those three characteristics are curiosity, empathy and reflection. Curiosity, so those individuals that are always asking those searching questions, they're searching for the truth, they're always asking why. They're not necessarily satisfied with the first account or answer that they're given. They really want to get to the bottom of something. Empathy, those individuals that can connect or communicate with others and really understand how another person can be impacted by something. They place themselves in that other person's shoes and really get an understanding about how an individual is feeling. And then lastly, I said about reflection. The really good cops are those that are always considering how they've done something. They're reflecting back on it and they're thinking, right, how did I do in that situation? How can I learn? How can I develop? How can I improve what I did? What can I do to be better? And so for me, those three characteristics – curiosity, empathy, reflection – absolutely make a really good cop.

I'd like to welcome now Louise Hodgson, the head of workforce development here at the College of Policing. Louise, we've been chatting with Richard Horton, an operational police sergeant. We've also been asking listeners and the public via social media their views on what makes a good cop. So the perfect place for us to start today would be for me to ask you, is there such a thing as the perfect police officer candidate? And what exactly do you look for?

The job of a police officer is pretty varied and so there isn't a particular type of person we look for. When somebody joins the police, they really get a comprehensive education and training to learn the skills and the knowledge that they need. So they don't have to come as a finished product. What we look for is that they can demonstrate the behaviours and values that make for effective performance as an officer in role.

And what are those behaviours and values that we look for then?

Like in many organisations, they take the approach of determining the competencies or behaviours that everyone should demonstrate. For example, communication, collaboration, strategic thinking. And within the last few years, there's also been a sort of stronger focus around selecting people

who share the values of an organisation, particularly around integrity or openness. The College has developed the competencies and values framework or what's otherwise known as the CVF for policing, which sets out six core categories or behaviours and four values which we expect everyone in policing to demonstrate. And that's what we look for at the recruitment stage. So there's no need to have any prior knowledge or experience in policing, as these are the behaviours and values that people already have or can develop outside of policing, whether that's in education or in other work environments.

OK, so could you give me some examples of that?

So within each competency, there are three levels. And at the entry level, analyse critically is about being able to quickly take in information, decide what's important or relevant. But it's also about solving problems, making decisions based on evidence and recognising where there might be gaps in information. And then at the highest level, this is about sort of making complex decisions at an organisational level based on evidence and with sort of full consideration of those impacts. And then in terms of the values themselves, there are no levels. We expect the same of everyone, regardless of their level or seniority within the organisation. The value of integrity means that we act in line with our Code of Ethics and do the right thing even in the most challenging situations. It's about being open to challenge and challenging others who don't live up to those expectations, as well as some of the things the public would always expect, such as declaring conflicts of interest, using their authority appropriately.

All of these values and competencies sound like they are definitely the right type of things to be targeting to ensure that we get the right people into police then, that they can evidence and show the right type of candidate. But what I'm interested in is how do we assess people on things such as competency and values?

We'd start by making sure we have the right level and then, depending on the role, we look for opportunities to get a measure of the competencies and the values in the context of the role and the level of the candidates applying. At the initial recruitment for PCs, we have a number of exercises which give candidates scenarios in which they can demonstrate the behaviours we're looking for. So as an example, a briefing exercise in which they are asked to take ownership of a problem and consider some possible solutions, and the candidates are asked to verbally respond to

the scenario that's presented and consider what they would do as the scenario develops. We also have an interview in which we ask candidates to tell us how they've demonstrated these behaviours in the past. They don't have to have experience of policing, but it's great if they've been able to demonstrate how they've worked collaboratively with others or have been able to help manage a tricky situation by understanding others' emotions as an example. And they don't have to be able to score highly on all these areas. We use an assessment centre style process where you can still pass if you're doing well on some things but less well on others.

OK, and how does this ensure then that we get the right people into policing?

Those who pass the assessment process have been able to demonstrate that they share the values of the police service and that they can demonstrate the behaviours that make for effective police officers. They have to pass medical and vetting too. Once they join their force, they have to undertake and pass their training qualification. And having demonstrated the competencies and values, they've shown that they have the building blocks that will help them in training and then once they're then fully in role.

And this leads us then nicely into the initial training of a police constable. What do we cover in that training and how is it applied specifically? How do these skills help officers within their role?

So the formal training for new police officers was developed and released back in 2006. So much of it is out of kilter with what police officers have to face today. So as an example, there were very few mobile phones around. The smartphone was really just something that was on the horizon. So there was no scope in the learning for digital crime and collecting digital evidence during the investigation of a crime. When we redeveloped the learning with the support and engagement of subject matter experts and stakeholders across the service, it also became clear that we needed to engage with higher education providers to ensure the learning was set at the right level, but also to bring in accreditation. This was something that police officers have told us would be valuable, a transferable and recognised qualification that they could take with them on leaving the service and a form of recognition for the complexity and sensitivity of the roles that they perform. So just to be clear that there is no expectation that existing officers need to go off and get a degree. It's recognised that their experience on the job is commensurate with this level, and the College has put together information around recognition of that experience to help those officers who want to

achieve academic accreditation. So just moving to this new learning programme, it covers everything that was in the old programme, but to a greater sort of depth and breadth. Looking at why police officers need to take certain actions, not just the what and the how. The programmes are also designed to develop an officer's critical analysis and problem solving so that they can continue to learn and develop beyond the initial learning. The new programmes are also designed to be highly interactive, with close integration between what the officer learns in the classroom and with the opportunity to practise in an operational environment under the supervision of a tutor. This has been a new concept for forces and learning providers they're working with, so there's more to do in this regard. But we are already hearing good things about new recruits coming through the new programmes. And one additional element we've built into the new programmes is an introduction to coaching and mentoring so that those officers coming through will have the ability to support the new officers coming on behind them right from the outset. And the skills involved in coaching, mentoring have the added benefit of equipping new officers with softer skills that will enhance the way they approach their day job.

When we were talking to Richard Horton, who's a police sergeant, about his experience of a team, and these teams would often see new recruits. He was in that unique position of seeing officers on the ground develop. And I know from my own experience also that it can take many years to become proficient as a police officer. And so this programme of education from the College of Policing is just the start, is it not? And I think we can all agree that initial training will always have its limits. And there is a real key element here about the quality of opportunities that continue to learn far beyond initial training for officers.

Yeah, I wouldn't disagree that the expectation is that officers continue to learn and develop throughout their policing career. The intention of these new learning programmes, alongside providing new officers with the knowledge of policing, is also to equip them with the skills to help them continue to develop. So, research skills so that they can use evidence-based policing techniques to develop solutions, critical analysis and problem-solving skills to help them manage complex situations are all integral elements of the new learning programmes. So new police officers will be equipped with the skills to be reflective practitioners, continuing to learn as they gather experience day by day.

And so this leads us into the quality also of two specific people that we've spoken about previously, and those are both the sergeants and the tutor constable. And the support that these roles give to new recruits is critical, is it not? And I think what I'd like to know is, what work is the College doing to support the role of both tutor constables and sergeants in this area?

So the College of Policing is committed to continuing to provide up-to-date guidance and support to tutor constables across England and Wales, who play a vital role in developing new recruits and ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge to best protect the public. The College has created a new professional profile, which sets out clearly what is expected in terms of responsibility and knowledge and skills requirements for the role. We've also developed a new learning standard for the role. This has been accompanied by an online learning programme. We've produced guidance as well for those who are undertaking or managing the role. And all this has been based on the latest academic research and feedback from forces. And then earlier this year, we provided further support to tutor constables by developing supervisory guidance and instigating a regional panel process. This is to ensure that tutors are supported in making standard decisions about the progress of the student officers. We're also running a pilot of the national available learning programme for assessors. This is to ensure that it meets the needs of tutors who are undertaking the assessment of student officers and those outcomes will be reported early next year. We've also just commenced support for a research project that's been undertaken by the Open University and Leeds Beckett University into tutor constable roles, to develop more guidance on how forces might approach this key function. And we continue to host networking opportunities, the most recent of which has just taken place to bring tutors, assessors and supervisors together just to discuss issues, good practice and any concerns. And these have been really well attended and the information suggestions have been gathered and will be disseminated to all forces in the coming weeks. And we'll also be updating current guidance to reflect the latest innovative practice that we are hearing from forces. And lastly, we've also conducted a survey of tutor resources across all forces and shared the outcomes with the Police Uplift Programme, who are aware of those forces dealing with increased levels of demand and the tutors, the number of tutors that are required to support this.

Louise, thank you so much for your time with me today. It really does sound like there's a lot going on in the College, both for support for new recruits and also those who come into contact with them

on a first level basis, I suppose, which is your tutor constables and your sergeants. Just before you go, and while you're here Louise, I would like to ask for a few words from you personally. Could you sum up for me what you think makes a good cop?

It is really multifaceted. And for me, it's almost that culmination of a bringing together and the application of lots of different things. So the values, the behaviours, the knowledge, experience and applying that in day-to-day situations, each of which will be very different and varied. And it's about self-reflecting and continuing to draw on that such extensive experiences.

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