

Targeting capabilities

Addressing people's capability for behaviour change – including how to target understanding, confidence and skills.

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Practice points

1. When attempting to raise awareness, consider using messaging that demonstrates clear boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.
2. When attempting to promote understanding, consider using real-life examples that vividly show the emotional consequences of sexist behaviours, but also consider highlighting a tendency for people to downplay the impact of the behaviour to avoid feeling uncomfortable.
3. When fostering mental strength and confidence, consider messaging that helps the audience reflect on past successes, provides actionable tips and promotes use of social support networks.
4. When attempting to enhance social skills, consider messaging that involves concrete demonstrations of desired behaviours, promotes empathy, and encourages people to make small positive changes and monitor the effects.
5. When attempting to combat cognitive biases, it can help to show these in action in a way that the audience can relate to.

When targeting capabilities, we are often aiming to raise awareness, build understanding, promote mental strength and confidence, enhance skills, and challenge cognitive biases that lead us to inaccurate judgements or beliefs.

Raising awareness

A basic requirement of any behavioural intervention is that the audience knows precisely what behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable. Communications plays a vital role in ensuring this.

If organisations are unclear about what is – or is not – approved or not approved, this can inadvertently give individuals permission to continue with inappropriate behaviour (particularly 'everyday sexism' that is seen to be normal). Promoting clarity on what is approved or not needs to be balanced with ensuring that officers and staff retain a sense of autonomy, feeling that they have

a choice about their actions and ownership of the rules (Weinstein and others, 2023).

Unacceptable behaviours

While behaviours need to be considered within their contexts and relationships, the following have been identified as important types of behaviour that should not occur in any context.

- Disadvantaging a colleague in access to training, promotion, leave or tasks because of gender.
- Using gender stereotypes to allocate tasks or training (for example, automatically nominating a male officer for method of entry or a female officer to manage a case involving vulnerable children).
- Ignoring or downplaying the contributions, achievements and promotions of colleagues because of gender.
- Making unwanted sexual advances to a colleague or having unwanted physical contact with a colleague.
- Behaving towards a colleague in a way that is belittling, sexually provocative or threatening.
- Using negative gender-based language about a colleague or referring to a colleague's sexuality, sexual behaviour or appearance.
- Talking about gender-specific medical conditions (for example, pregnancy or menopause) or people's personal lives unless invited to do so.
- Making sexualised jokes or giving sexualised nicknames.
- Sending unsolicited messages or images of a sexual nature.
- Downplaying the negative impact of sexist behaviour.
- Commenting that a colleague has had preferential treatment because they are female.

For these behaviours, it is the fact that they are unacceptable that is key to awareness raising. This can be enhanced by using real-world examples, so that people can see the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable, and by explaining where the difference lies if possible.

Expected actions for policing

Police forces expect that anyone in policing who witnesses or hears about any of these behaviours will:

- disengage from the behaviour and not encourage it

- where possible, engage the person enacting the behaviour at the time or later
- if appropriate, help the person experiencing the sexist behaviour out of the situation and offer support
- seek advice from their supervisor or other sources of support
- in more serious cases, report the incident using the appropriate channels

To promote awareness of desirable behaviours, evidence indicates that showing the audience these behaviours in action, rather than just talking about them, is very helpful (demonstration as well as explanation). (Byrne and Russon, 1998.)

Promoting understanding

Unacceptable behaviours can arise because those enacting them may not fully understand the negative consequences of what they are doing. In this instance, it can be helpful to find ways of reminding people that nobody should be expected to tolerate, or be on the receiving end of, this kind of behaviour.

A lack of understanding can also arise from a need to minimise cognitive dissonance, the uncomfortable feeling that occurs when we have beliefs that conflict with each other (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). This can lead us to discount or suppress thoughts about the negative consequences of our actions.

Ways to improve understanding

Promoting understanding of the negative consequences of sexist behaviour may involve the following.

- Using real-life testimonies, vivid demonstrations and hard evidence to show the negative consequences of sexist behaviours that those enacting them may not have thought about. This can include the personal impact on an individual, as well as the wider impact on policing, such as women leaving the service.
- Addressing the tendency that we have to discount the negative consequences of our actions to make ourselves feel more comfortable – for example, explaining why someone might say 'it was just a joke' to make themselves feel better about what they have said.

Fostering mental strength and confidence

Research shows that an important factor in acting or failing to act in challenging situations is mental strength – the capacity of an individual to manage and navigate challenges, stressors and pressures effectively while maintaining emotional and psychological wellbeing (Robertson and others, 2015). An important part of this is what is known in psychology as 'self-efficacy' – a belief in our ability to achieve desired outcomes in the face of obstacles.

Mental strength and confidence could be important potential targets for messaging to combat sexism, both in terms of helping people resist peer pressure to engage in sexist behaviour and in challenging the behaviour when it occurs.

Ways to improve mental strength

Fostering mental strength is best achieved through intensive support programmes. However, there are ways in which messaging can foster mental strength to some degree, including the following (Shatté and others, 2017).

- Affirmative messages – positive affirmations can reinforce self-worth and capabilities, for example, 'you do the right thing even when it's tough' or 'intervening with wrongdoing is what you do'.
- Empowering questions – encourage introspection and self-awareness, for example, 'what strengths have helped you in the past?' or 'how can you use today's challenge as an opportunity for growth?'
- Actionable tips – offer tangible strategies or steps that individuals can apply.
- Visualisation prompts – encourage individuals to picture successful scenarios.
- Community-based messaging – emphasise the importance of seeking support or connecting with others.
- Framing challenges positively – instead of focusing on the adversity, emphasise the journey so far and the potential for growth.

Enhancing social skills

Sexist behaviours may sometimes arise because a person does not feel confident to resist peer pressure or challenge unacceptable behaviour in a respectful way without causing offence.

Helping people develop social skills is something that is mostly undertaken through training programmes and workshops. However, it may be worth considering using some of the techniques

in communications campaigns, such as the following.

Techniques for developing social skills

- Provide demonstrations of specific behaviours by people with whom the audience can identify (for example, demonstrating the language that somebody might use to resist peer pressure).
- Help people recognise themselves and their behaviours, and prompt people to make small changes (for example, not referring to gender when discussing a colleague's performance) and observe the effects of these (for example, noting how the alternative approach does a better job at addressing the problem).
- Promote empathy and the ability to view situations from others' perspectives.
- Prompt people to seek and provide feedback in a way that is supportive (such as showing an example of an officer who has made a remark to a colleague that could be sexist and checking whether it is acceptable).

Tackling cognitive biases

Cognitive biases are mental processes that lead us to form inaccurate beliefs and judgements (ScienceDirect, 2023). They often arise from ways in which we process information called heuristics (rules of thumb). Some important examples are as follows.

Examples of cognitive biases

- Confirmation bias – a tendency to pay attention to, or remember, information that fits with our existing beliefs. For example, only noticing when female officers underperform.
- Fundamental attribution error – when we see people doing something that we can't easily explain, we tend to attribute it to their personality or competence (rather than external factors), which can be detrimental. For example, blaming victims for not speaking up.
- Halo effect – a tendency when making judgements about people we do not know very well to overgeneralise about their good and bad traits so that if they have one negative or positive trait, all their other traits follow the same pattern. For example, seeing a female colleague slip up once and overgeneralising to their overall level of competence.

One way in which we can combat these biases through communication is to show them in action with captivating examples.

References

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Tags

Violence against women and girls