Dyslexia in police leadership

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Assistant Chief Constable and NPCC neurodiversity lead, Matt Welsted speaks about his dyslexia and how organisations can support neurodiversities.

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Introduction

As the demands in policing evolve, the wider value of neurodivergent leaders who excel in creativity, adaptability and big picture vision has never been more relevant.

I spoke with Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) Matt Welsted, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for neurodiversity. His insight offers a valuable perspective for current and aspiring leaders, as well as for organisations seeking to better understand and support neurodivergent talent.

Dyslexia in senior leadership

JB: Can you share how dyslexia has influenced your career progression and leadership style?

MW: The first thing to highlight is that I didn't know I was dyslexic until well into my policing career. I always knew there was something different about the way I thought. But I didn't go through the process of diagnosis until I was in my 40s when I hit the barrier of the senior executive selection process.

I've always known what I'm good at and what challenges I face. My neurodivergence has given me the ability to think differently and find solutions to challenges in ways that have proven to be successful. It's given me insights that make me stand out from those around me, and I've been fortunate enough to leverage those strengths to succeed in various promotion processes. It's fair to say, though, that I've also been unsuccessful at promotion processes. I'm sure I've failed more than I've passed, which is amusing to admit as an assistant chief constable (ACC).

Leadership is about working through others. I have found that being honest and transparent about both my strengths and weakness, and being human, has often helped me build powerful teams around me. These teams, and what we achieve together, are the real secret of success in policing.

JB: Why do you think it's essential to have more neurodiverse leaders at the table? And what impact can this have on policing?

MW: It's essential for two reasons. Firstly, our ranks are full of neurodivergent people, and it is important that they see themselves in their leaders. We need people who are already in our ranks to declare they are different, whatever that characteristic is, as getting our data right is one of the most important pieces for policing. Additionally, seeing leaders being open about their differences will give others the confidence to recognise that they are not unusual in this environment and policing is a home for them.

Secondly, it's around the skills neurodivergent people can bring to policing. We need innovators, problem solvers, fabulously inspiring people, people that are great at collaborating, people that can visualise solutions and have the resilience to drive forward and turn that idea into a reality. I believe these are the strengths of neurodivergent people.

Compartmentalising the challenges

JB: Dyslexia often comes with unique skills like strategic thinking and resilience. How can officers and staff harness these strengths?

MW: Just look at the challenges that we face in policing. It's a hugely rewarding and meaningful job, but we all have tough days and weeks, sometimes longer, because of the sorts of challenges that we face. So, resilience is one of those key strengths.

Personally, I've always enjoyed the ability to compartmentalise the challenges that I've been facing and benefited from good support from my family and colleagues. It's that combination of support networks, along with how I process information and challenges, which has given me the resilience to work through those dark days and make hay while the sun shines.

Policing has got its problems and there are things that we could do better. We need innovators. The resilient and tenacious people who will try things, who can visualise solutions, who can have that

personal confidence to keep going because they know that there is an answer there somewhere. When we look at some of the key advancements in policing, as well as society, there's very often neurodivergent people in and around that innovation.

Everyone is an individual

JB: What challenges has it presented at the level that you are at? How have you overcome them?

MW: I have to be realistic about the things that I do find difficult. The most obvious is a combination of the volume of reading and written work that is involved in being an ACC. Also, certainly more relevant now, the environments that I work in. This is of course my experience but someone else's neurodivergence may manifest in very different challenges. Please don't make the mistake of assuming all dyslexic people are the same.

I'm dyslexic but have strong ADHD tendencies. That intersectionality, the combination of the differences, manifests itself in certain strengths and weaknesses that might not be the same as someone else who is also dyslexic and has slightly different challenges. We must recognise that everyone is an individual and that individual nature of us is only exasperated by being neurodivergent.

When it comes to reading, I use a lot of text-to-speech technology and try to understand what the product is, and what I want to get out of it before I spend time processing it.

I also confess that I'm easily distracted. It's very hard for me to concentrate on things like written work, either writing or reading in busy, noisy environments. I therefore, try and pick and choose where I work, and what I work on at various times and locations. Of course, policing does not always allow this. But knowing that I work better in the right environment has helped me a lot over the years.

The point I want to make is that often, small changes have made a significant difference. So a little self-awareness and knowledge, and often small adjustments in the workplace and you can minimise the challenges, so that the strengths you bring can be unlocked.

Share your experiences

JB: Are there any particular strategies or resources you recommend for dyslexic officers and staff looking to develop their leadership skills?

MW: Absolutely. Firstly, take advantage of your force's neurodiversity support network. Nearly every force has one, and they're invaluable resources. By joining, you can connect with other neurodivergent individuals, learn from their coping strategies and share your own experiences. When you discover effective methods, become an advocate. Help others by sharing how you maximise your strengths and overcome challenges.

Secondly, explore positive online resources. Websites like 'Made by Dyslexia' offer inspiration and practical examples to try. These resources can provide valuable insights and strategies tailored to neurodivergent individuals in professional settings.

Finally, don't hesitate to initiate conversations with your line manager and HR department. Many forces offer support that you might not be aware of, such as coaching, courses and assistive technology. These resources can help mitigate challenges and unlock your full potential. Remember, if you don't ask, you won't know what's available to support your neurodivergent journey in policing and unleash your potential.

From isolated to indispensable

JB: Have you faced any misconceptions about dyslexia as you progress through your career? How did you address it?

MW: Absolutely, although things have got significantly better, certainly over the last decade. I think as society starts to understand neurodivergence a lot more, policing explicitly starts to realise that people who are different add value. When I first joined, anybody who was different, particularly anybody who was overtly neurodivergent, was quite honestly isolated and criticised. It was the culture at the time, but that was 28 years ago.

There's a lot of people who know that they're neurodivergent who won't talk about it. It's frustrating because if they would talk about it, it will help us all realise just how widespread in policing neurodivergence is. That's one of my key things I want to encourage. I want people to talk about being different.

There is still a lot of misunderstanding and even fear of talking about being neurodivergent and I want this to change. The sooner policing realises that we have a significant proportion of people who are neurodivergent already in our organisation, the faster it will change, and that can only be a good thing. Not least in improving the service we deliver to our communities, which of course also includes a significant number of people who are neurodivergent.

Information is power

JB: What advice would you give to dyslexic officers and staff members who may doubt their leadership potential because of their dyslexia?

MW: There's no reason anybody should doubt their leadership potential just because they're dyslexic. Lots of people want to be leaders and might not necessarily have those leadership skills. This is true whether they are neurodivergent or not.

However, I believe many neurodivergent individuals have great leadership potential if they confront their challenges and work with their organisation to get the support they need. Unfortunately, too many people suspect they might be neurodivergent but hesitate to get assessed or discuss it. Others who know they're neurodivergent either choose not to disclose it or are unsure how to do so. My advice is simple: information is power.

Getting assessed is valuable because knowing you are dyslexic, autistic or have any neurodivergent traits helps you understand your strengths and address your challenges more effectively. It provides you with the language to describe your experiences and opens doors to opportunities, support and growth.

So, my advice is this: work to maximise what you are good at. Understand who you are. If that aligns with leadership skills, then you should have no fear whatsoever to pursue this goal. Demonstrate what you are really good at and be proud of your strengths.

JB: What should non-neurodivergent/neurotypical senior leaders understand about dyslexia and neurodivergence, to better support their colleagues and create that inclusive culture?

MW: I don't expect anyone to be an expert in any neurodivergent condition. Very rarely is somebody 'just' dyslexic; they often have overlapping conditions. That's normal. They're lifelong,

they haven’t caught it. It’s not something that they did. They’ve always been neurodivergent, and they always will be.

It’s important that we don’t label people, but we see the individual that’s in front of us. Ask them. Talk to them about what they’re good at, what challenges they face and work together to maximise their strengths. Individuals learn more about themselves and develop strategies to improve themselves, deal with the things they find more difficult and unlock the things they are good at. It’s normal for the support that they need to change over time.

Often, I speak to officers and staff that have only gone through the realisation process that they are neurodivergent because they’ve seen it in their children. They’ve invested in their children being diagnosed and through that diagnosis they’ve sat there going ‘they could be talking about me there’. Knowing that they’re supported, and that people understand that they might also be going through things at home, is equally important.

Strength in numbers

JB: As the NPCC lead for neurodiversity, how do you see the future of neurodiverse leadership in policing developing?

MW: I’m really encouraged because of the progress that’s been made over the last decade or so in understanding neurodivergence. We might not have as many people as I would like declare that they are neurodivergent, but our ranks are full of neurodivergent people. If anybody doubts that, have a look around and you’ll see that policing is a home for people who think a little bit differently and who have those neurodivergent traits and skills. We are already filled with people in leadership roles and specialisms who are neurodivergent. Neurodivergence is probably our second biggest cohort of people outside of gender. It’s so abundant within policing that if we had the data there, we ourselves would see things very differently.

I am an optimist, of course. I believe all problems are solvable with the right people in the right roles and with the right skill set. Neurodivergent people bring a lot of those skills to the table, and I think we can solve once and for all some of those significant challenges that we face in policing today. Leaders in policing are coming to realise that neurodivergent people, when given the right support, add significant value. They are helping policing become more effective, more efficient and more

inclusive.

JB: What do you hope your work as the NPCC neurodiversity lead will achieve for the next generation of officers?

MW: If I can help the next generation of officers join policing because they know that it is a fabulous career for neurodivergent people, and that it is normal in policing for people to be neurodivergent, I think my role here will have been done.

Everything I'm trying to do across the various work streams that we're working on is about helping policing be a home that embraces people who are different and maximises their potential.

Find out more

The **Police National Dyslexia Association** (PNDA – affectionately known as Panda) is a privately run association comprising of UK police officers and staff. Its aim is to support police colleagues with dyslexia and other neurodivergent conditions in the workplace and in their day-to-day lives.

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