

Changing culture in the workplace

Published on 6 December 2025 Written by Sophie Warman, Deployment Manager, Dorset Police

Practice note: culture change workshops for contact management staff

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As I sifted through the hundreds of emails I had accrued during my year-long maternity leave, my eye was drawn to an email from the superintendent: "Volunteers wanted to assist in a cultural change workshop".

Things within the department were tough and not much had changed in the time I had been away. Demand was high, incident summaries were long and colleagues felt ill-equipped to carry out their roles.

Numerous people were off sick or leaving altogether, and frustrations were felt across every job role. A change in culture was most definitely needed, and I was keen to help be part of that change. So, I put my name forward optimistically.

Two months later, I was sat around a table with nine of my colleagues and the founder of Someone Else's Eyes (SEE), who had previously created transformational culture change workshops for the British Army.

Methodology

Through psychological techniques often reserved for a clinical setting, SEE used a '4D' methodology:

- diagnose
- design
- deliver
- test through?data

They immersed themselves in our working environment, speaking to everyone from call-handlers and dispatchers to the senior leadership team. Time was focused on understanding why the

department was in a challenging place, so that the underlying drivers of culture could be targeted.

Our group spent many days with SEE tailoring the workshops to our policing environment. The workshops were then delivered to us over two days. I had worked with most of these people for several years, yet the things we learned about one another during the workshops – not to mention about ourselves – were eye-opening.

We were encouraged to explore and discuss our personal and professional lived experiences, our thoughts and feelings on certain issues, and the causes of those feelings, including judgements and prejudices. We did this through a variety of exercises, including a 'thinking space', a group conversation stimulated by some short videos on policing.

We also created a 'mini-me', where we explored our experiences and hopes for the future through art and writing. It was very thought-provoking and at times uncomfortable. There were tears from almost everyone at some point, but also a great deal of laughter. We could all see the huge potential in this work and the positive changes it could bring – even those of us who were previously sceptical.

The programme is delivered through a train-the-trainer (T3) model. As facilitators, we were trained in-house by SEE on how to deliver the workshops to our colleagues. We were supported by manuals, videos and other learning aids, enabling us to expand the work to the wider department, with SEE providing supervision throughout.

Results

My team were the first to receive the workshops, and I was pleasantly surprised by the way that they embraced the work. Although no-one was obliged to participate, staff openly talked about their experiences and explored their vulnerabilities.

Afterwards, there was a noticeable change in the team for the better. They were kinder, more patient and laughed more together. Colleagues from other teams noticed this change too.

The change was not just in our team dynamics – we started to perform better and were meeting our response targets more consistently. Shifts were better staffed, as less people were taking time off. The workplace itself felt healthier.

Data analysis

SEE collected data through immersion, conversation and review of documentation. This provided a story of the culture of contact management in Dorset Police. The workshops were then analysed by SEE and University College London.

Police data has shown significant improvements in individual wellbeing (increased by 11% across the department) and group engagement (increased by 24% across the department) following the workshops. In addition, the retention of staff has increased, with staff turnover decreasing from 20% to 5%.

Shorter sessions are held periodically throughout the year to embed this approach into the culture of our workplace. Supervisors and team leaders are more aware of triggers and can provide the appropriate support at an earlier point. We ensure that staff attend debriefs wherever possible and understand the importance of talking to each other and making time for one another.

Learning

There was some learning to be gained from how different teams responded to the workshops. It became clear that this methodology was more successful and impactful for some people than others, and it did not appeal to everyone.

Some people understandably did not want to share such personal details about themselves with their colleagues. The buy-in of the middle leaders played a significant role in the success of the implementation.

I personally have learned so much about people from experiencing and facilitating these workshops, and it has changed my leadership style. I am more conscious of the impact that certain incidents can have on particular staff, and I endeavour to offer more targeted support to them when required.

I am more attuned to tensions within my team, and I will seek to make time for us to all sit down together and talk when needed. I encourage supervisors to focus more on the wellbeing and welfare of the team, understanding that this will lead to performance improvement. By making these

things part of the norm, our culture can change for the better.

- This article was peer reviewed by Jennifer Hutchinson, Wellbeing Lead, North Wales Police

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This article is from issue 11 of Going equipped.

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