# Psychological safety in policing

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Long read: exploring how senior leaders can create psychological safety within their force

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Psychological safety is increasingly recognised as a vital component of high?performing teams. However, it can be particularly difficult to achieve within policing. Unique challenges include the profession's:

- cultural norms
- hierarchical structures
- exposure to risk, trauma and public scrutiny

I'm interested in the tension here, between what we know enables teams to thrive and the realities of policing. This prompted me to explore the subject in more depth through a master's degree in leadership and management at the University of Portsmouth, which I completed in September 2025.

## Background

As a superintendent, I have learned through experience just how strongly people's wellbeing, confidence and sense of value influence how they perform. Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to lead teams that felt empowered and engaged. I noticed early on that teams are more effective, resilient and adaptable when individuals feel able to speak openly, question decisions and admit mistakes without fear.

I have also observed the opposite. I have seen colleagues remaining silent despite having concerns, holding back ideas or disengaging because of hierarchy, fear of judgement or previous negative experiences. In a profession where the consequences of error can be significant, that silence can be harmful, not only to individuals, but also to organisational learning and performance.

These experiences shaped the focus of my studies, which examined psychological safety within a police force, specifically, the role of senior leaders in creating it. I sought to understand what

officers and staff require from senior leadership to feel safe, valued and heard. I also wanted to identify whether those needs differ between ranks or between warranted officers and police staff employees (PSEs).

# Literature review

Psychological safety refers to a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In policing terms, it means that colleagues feel confident in, for example:

- raising concerns
- questioning decisions
- disclosing mistakes
- contributing ideas without fear of ridicule or repercussion

Although psychological safety has become widely recognised in business leadership, its origins and most robust evidence base come from healthcare research. Studies have shown that clinical teams working in high?pressure, high?risk settings perform better when people feel safe to speak up (Edmondson, 1999; 2002; 2018).

Early work with hospital units demonstrated that teams who reported more errors actually had better outcomes. This was not because they made more mistakes, but because they felt safe enough to be honest about their mistakes and to learn from them.

This mirrors policing, where we also work in trauma?exposed, time?pressured environments. Healthcare literature repeatedly shows that fear of speaking up leads to poorer outcomes, confusion and reduced team learning, which are all directly relevant to policing.

Psychological safety later gained global attention following research by Google’s Project Aristotle. After hundreds of teams were analysed, psychological safety was found to be the strongest predictor of team success (above experience, rank or technical expertise). These findings reinforced the idea that high performance is built on interpersonal trust and openness. Information sharing, rapid decision?making and team cohesion are critical in policing, so the relevance is clear.

International policing research offers valuable parallels. In Canadian police organisations, studies have found that police staff employees report higher psychological safety than officers. This is

largely because their environments are less influenced by rigid rank hierarchy and paramilitary command structures (Workman?Stark, 2020; Pozzobon and Scott, 2024). This aligns with observations from UK research, which shows that hierarchy and ‘rank etiquette’ can inhibit challenge, especially upward challenge (Tourish, 2013; Grant, 2021).

Alongside these insights, policing scholars have highlighted the impact of traditional command?and ?control leadership styles and ‘heroic leadership’ expectations. These can damage psychological safety by reinforcing distance, infallibility and fear of speaking up (Davis, 2018; Davis and Silvestri, 2020). Their work emphasises that culture and leadership behaviours, rather than organisational charts, determine whether challenge is welcomed or silenced.

Across sectors, the evidence is consistent:

- psychological safety improves performance, learning and ethical behaviour
- leadership behaviours, such as openness, integrity, visibility and genuine support, are the strongest drivers
- hierarchical cultures make psychological safety harder to achieve, as people feel status differences more acutely
- psychological safety collapses quickly when leaders dismiss challenge or fail to act consistently with stated values

For policing, where risk and accountability are ever?present, these findings make psychological safety not only desirable, but essential.

# Methodology

I wanted to understand:

- what senior leaders think they should be doing to enhance psychological safety
- what officers and staff across the force need from them

I used a simple two?stage survey approach within a UK police force.

## Stage 1: Senior leader survey

I asked all senior leaders (chief inspectors and police staff of grades H and above) to list the things they currently do, or wish they could do, to build psychological safety in their teams. From the 30 responses (representing 15% of those contacted), I grouped their ideas into 16 main behaviours or leadership actions:

1. Absence management – Ensure that all processes are consistently followed to maintain fairness.
2. Avoiding a blame culture – Emphasise learning from mistakes rather than blaming individuals.
3. Creating a respectful culture – Build a culture of respect, trust and kindness.
4. Creating a safe environment for feedback – Encourage directness and candid communication without reprisals.
5. Encouraging innovation – Promote trying new ideas and processes by ensuring there is no blame and providing support.
6. Encouraging participation and questions – Actively ask for questions in both one-to-one and team settings. Actively listen to responses.
7. Humour and stress management – Use humour to keep stress levels low and maintain a positive atmosphere.
8. Inclusive meetings – Ensure good participation by asking for opinions and providing alternative means for those uncomfortable in group settings. Maintain a level playing field in discussions to prevent negative voices from dominating.
9. Leading by example – Demonstrate principles, integrity and openness about your own fallibility.
10. Mentoring and professional development – Offer mentoring and provide growth opportunities.
11. Promoting decision-making and risk management – Empower your team to make decisions and take calculated risks with support, empathy and kindness.
12. Providing support and backup – Take responsibility for the team’s actions (‘top cover’), ensuring they feel supported and encouraged.
13. Recognition and praise – Highlight good practices and praise individuals who challenge constructively.
14. Regular communication – Hold regular formal and informal meetings to discuss work issues and personal wellbeing, and to build personal connections.
15. Safe and open communication – Be a safe person for team members to speak to without fear of judgement.

16. Standing up for what is right – Lead by example in standing up against wrong decisions and encourage your team to do the same.

## Stage 2: Force?wide survey

I then invited everyone in the force (officers, staff and volunteers) to rate the importance of those 16 behaviours on a scale from one to seven. On this scale, one was lowest importance, while seven was highest. I also collected details of each respondent's rank or grade, whether they were a warranted officer or PSE, and optional free?text comments.

In total, 440 colleagues responded (a varied cross-section of 6.2% of the organisation), allowing me to compare views across roles. I analysed the data to identify:

- which leadership behaviours were viewed as most important
- whether priorities differed between senior and junior ranks
- whether PSEs and warranted officers valued different things
- common themes in free?text comments

My aim was to identify where senior leaders should prioritise their efforts to have the largest positive impact.

# Findings

Across the entire force, three actions consistently came out on top for senior leaders to prioritise. These three behaviours had the highest agreement across all respondents, indicating that they are universal needs regardless of rank or role.

- Standing up for what is right. Respondents wanted leaders who act ethically, challenge poor behaviour, defend their teams when needed and role-model integrity. This aligns directly with current challenges facing policing. Colleagues want to see leaders demonstrate courage, fairness and moral consistency.
- Safe and open communication. Respondents wanted communication that is honest and two?way, and that feels safe. Colleagues want leaders they can approach without fear, who listen actively and follow through on what they hear.

- Providing support and backup. Support and backup were especially valued by warranted officers who face operational risk. They felt it was essential to know that a senior leader will provide ‘top cover’, take responsibility and support staff when things are difficult.

# What people said in their own words

Free?text comments provided powerful insight into lived experience. Themes included the following:

- visibility and accessibility of senior leaders – many respondents felt that leaders were physically or culturally distant
- inconsistent accountability – perceived double standards can undermine trust quickly
- promotion and career development frustrations – this was seen by some respondents as opaque or unfair
- bottleneck at mid?leadership levels – several respondents believed that feedback is filtered or softened by middle managers, meaning that the senior leadership team may not hear the full picture

These comments show that psychological safety is not only about individual leader behaviour, but also about how leadership behaviours are transmitted through the chain of command.

This research reinforces what other sectors already know, while adding important policing-specific nuance.

# Other notable findings

## No significant differences by rank

Senior and junior colleagues broadly agreed on what matters most. This is encouraging, as shared values are a strong foundation for cultural improvement.

## Significant differences between warranted officers and PSEs

Five areas showed statistically significant differences between officers and members of police staff:

1. PSEs placed greater importance on regular communication – This highlights a need for clearer, more consistent engagement from senior leaders, particularly as PSE roles are often more

removed from operational briefings and decision-making.

2. PSEs rated avoiding a blame culture and encouraging innovation higher – This likely reflects their work environments and their desire to feel equally valued despite not holding rank.
3. PSEs rated creating a respectful culture higher – This reflects the importance of fairness, equality and feeling valued within the organisation, especially where rank structures can create perceived divisions.
4. PSEs valued inclusive meetings more highly – This suggests a desire to feel heard and actively involved, particularly where traditional structures may limit their voice compared to warranted colleagues.
5. Warranted officers placed more emphasis on being supported and backed up operationally – Given their exposure to risk, this need is understandable and essential.

PSEs and warranted officers are part of the same organisation, but do not always feel equally valued or equally connected to senior leaders. A ‘one size fits all’ leadership approach will not work.

## Humour and stress management is highly divisive

Some colleagues described humour as a vital coping mechanism, while others found it unhelpful or thought it masked deeper issues. This confirms that humour must only be used thoughtfully and sensitively, and never as a substitute for genuine support.

## Regular communication is valued, but not equally

Senior leaders valued regular communication more than junior ranks. Junior colleagues placed greater emphasis on safe and meaningful communication, rather than frequent communication.

## The basics matter most

Standing up for what’s right, communicating openly and providing support might sound obvious, but they are not always consistently demonstrated. These behaviours are fundamental to trust, and trust is fundamental to policing.

## Rank etiquette remains a barrier

Calling someone “Ma’am” or “Sir” establishes hierarchy instantly. This is not inherently negative, as policing needs structure. However, leaders must work harder to reduce the unhelpful side-effects. These can include silence, fear of challenge, the belief that leaders are unapproachable and

‘leadership theatre’. This is when leaders appear supportive and engaging on the surface, but their underlying behaviours (especially under pressure) do not genuinely reflect this.

### Middle leadership is critical

Chief inspectors and equivalent grades often act as the ‘interpreters’ between frontline staff and the senior team. If they dilute, dismiss or fail to escalate concerns, psychological safety collapses. Supporting and developing middle managers is therefore essential.

### Cultural change requires consistency

Psychological safety cannot be something that leaders demonstrate only during crisis, in periods of scrutiny or after high-profile failures. It must be embedded every day, in briefings, decisions, mistakes and the small moments that shape trust.

## Conclusion

Policing stands at a crossroads. Public confidence, internal wellbeing and organisational resilience all depend on how well we adapt to modern cultural expectations. Psychological safety is not a luxury, it’s a requirement for effective, ethical policing.

This study shows clearly what colleagues expect this adaptation to look like:

- ethical behaviour
- open communication
- visible, supportive leadership

By focusing on these fundamentals, senior leaders can strengthen trust, performance and integrity across the organisation and help to rebuild the confidence that policing urgently needs.

## Recommendations

- Demonstrate ethical courage. Call out poor behaviour consistently, regardless of rank. Publicly reinforce decisions where you have stood up for what is right. This builds credibility faster than any written policy.

- Make communication safer, not just more frequent. Use plain language, ask questions and wait for answers. Thank people for raising concerns, especially difficult ones, and close the feedback loop: “Here’s what I heard, and here’s what I’ve done.”
- Increase visibility in a meaningful way. Do not just do a walk-through on a Friday afternoon. Be present where work actually happens. Join early briefings, sit with teams during busy periods and be seen having normal conversations, not just formal ones.
- Strengthen middle leadership. Equip supervisors and mid-level leaders with coaching skills, conflict resolution tools, training in inclusive leadership and confidence to escalate concerns without fear. These roles are essential cultural gatekeepers.
- Tailor leadership to the workforce. Emphasise operational support and ‘top cover’ for warranted officers. Prioritise fairness, inclusion, innovation and recognition for PSEs.
- Apply accountability consistently. Nothing destroys psychological safety faster than perceived hypocrisy. It’s important for consequences to be visible, fair and consistent.
- Treat humour with care. Encourage healthy humour, but do not allow ‘banter’ to be used as an excuse for exclusion or bullying. Make it safe for people to say when humour has crossed a line.

# Areas for further research

Several important questions emerged:

- Can leaders switch between supportive and command-style leadership without harming psychological safety?
- What impact does remote working have on psychological safety in policing teams?
- Are there significant differences between specialist units (for example, firearms, public order or investigations) and response teams?

Exploring these areas would support the ongoing development of leadership in policing.

# Final reflection

Psychological safety starts with leaders, but it grows through teams. As senior leaders, we set the tone. Our actions either warm the air or chill it. If we can harness what our people have told us clearly through this research, we can create a policing culture where people feel empowered, supported and safe to speak up. In doing so, we can strengthen our service to the public.

- This article was peer reviewed by Chief Superintendent Chris Foster, Greater Manchester Police

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