

UK Metropolitan police: reverse mentoring in a small pilot programme aiming to build community trust

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Amy Moore and Rhys Johnstone wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Case summary

Research methodology: The case was written from secondary materials.

Case overview/synopsis: This case is designed to support learning objectives in a Human Relations class of a university management course. The case explores how the UK Metropolitan police, working with the Girls' Network, piloted a reverse mentoring programme for six months in 2021. Three senior officers were mentored by a trio of teenage girls from disadvantaged London boroughs. The aim of the programme was to address falling trust in the police by creating more understanding and empathy in the mentees for the issues facing the communities where the mentors lived, and to give the mentors more confidence from the experience of representing their communities. Each mentor–mentee pair focused on a specific policing issue that was relevant to the mentor's neighbourhood: knife crime, domestic abuse or social inequality. Through the process, the senior Met police officers gained a deeper understanding of the challenges in the communities they served. Now that the pilot had been completed, the Met faced a decision point. Should the programme be spread further through the Met? Through reading and discussing the case, students are expected to explore the importance of empathy in the workplace and how reverse mentoring, when having the right support and overall intent, could be used in organisations.

Complexity academic level: This case is appropriate for university management courses. This case has a difficulty level appropriate for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. This case could be incorporated into a unit on human behaviour, leadership or coaching.

Keywords: Mentoring, Human resource management, Leadership

In August 2021, London's Metropolitan Police Service (Met) reflected on a new initiative that had been tested over the past six months. Organised by the Girls' Network, an organisation that focused on providing mentoring to young women, this pilot was slightly different. It involved reverse mentoring: three 18-year-old girls from different disadvantaged London boroughs had just completed mentoring a trio of the Met's senior police officers. The intention of the initiative was two-fold: to provide senior Met officers direct access to the perspectives of marginalised young people and to enable the mentors the opportunity to represent their communities (The Girls' Network, 2023). The emphasis of the mentoring programme was on building trust between the police and these communities. The hope was that the mentees would better be able to meet the needs of the communities they served through hearing a different perspective to challenges associated with their work, and that the mentors' personal confidence would grow during the time spent with their mentees (The Girls' Network, 2023). Now that the pilot had been completed, should it be spread further through the Met?

The metropolitan police service – seen as not understanding communities it serves

The Met was established in 1820 and operated in greater London, with more than 32,900 (Metropolitan Police, 2021a) officers who covered an area of 620 square miles and an estimated population of eight million. Trust in the police had been declining over the past few years according to surveys conducted in England and Wales (College of Policing, 2020). When asked whether the public had confidence that the police were dealing with crime issues that mattered, averages fell from 61% in 2017 to 55% in 2019 (College of Policing, 2020). The near ubiquitous presence of social media also brought greater visibility to police conduct, often raising questions about traditional policing approaches, especially in areas that included strained police–community relations (College of Policing, 2020).

The link between communities and the police was considered to be the bedrock of British policing (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023). The model was formed with tangible links between citizens and police in regional areas through local policing such as the Met, combined with specialist services that operated at regional, national and international levels (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023). With evolving crime challenges, the 2025 local policing vision was set to be more aligned and, where possible, integrated "with other local public services to improve outcomes for citizens" (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023). Proactive preventative activity was one of the core tenants to the vision, working with local partners to help resolve issues (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2023).

But the Met often was criticised for being out of touch with their communities, with lack of trust often dominating headlines and tension between police and communities affecting everyday police work. Met Commissioner Cressider Dick announced in 2020 that one of her two operational priorities was "increasing public confidence in the Met, particularly the confidence of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities" (Lehmann, 2020). It was within this context that the reverse mentoring pilot programme was discussed and established.

The Met partnered with The Girls' Network, an organisation that was started in London in 2013 and now paired more than 1,100 girls across England with one-on-one female mentors

to help girls challenge stereotypes, build confidence and create access to opportunities (The Girls' Network, 2021).

Reverse mentoring: a new way to create understanding?

The three mentors Farheen Khan, Ishrat Hyssaub and Yasmin [1] were chosen by the Girls' Network as they and their communities (including Tower Hamlet, Newham and Brent [2]) had experience of the pilot focus areas, which included knife crime, domestic abuse and social inequality (The Girls' Network, 2023). The mentors were paired with senior female members of the Met: Deputy Assistant Commissioner (DAC) Amanda Pearson, Commander Dr Alison Heyardi and Assistant Commissioner Helen Ball. At the beginning, meetings were held virtually once a month, as Covid-19 impacted connecting face to face. Early time together was spent listening to each other, establishing rapport and creating common understanding, through sharing favourite quotes and personal stories. Thereafter, their specific topics were explored in greater detail from both the mentor and the mentee's perspectives (Metropolitan Police, 2021b).

Following completion of the pilot, learnings were debriefed. Initial impressions were positive. DAC Pearson said "I feel privileged to have been involved in such an exciting and bold initiative [...] which has prompted me to explore professional and cultural issues that I otherwise might not have truly understood [...] I have been able to access an entirely new perspective, and I have the experience and operational knowledge to know how to apply that perspective" (Metropolitan Police, 2021b). Commander Heyardi, who led the Met's neighbourhood policing and community engagement across London boroughs (Metropolitan Police, 2021c), said "seeing things from a young woman's perspective has enriched my view of how the police can more effectively collaborate with young communities to keep them safe and build trust" (Metropolitan Police, 2021c). One of the mentors voiced the impact she felt. They came to the realisation that "it's a good idea to share knowledge and skills because it's all about working collaboratively and being able to expand on each other's ideas" (Khan, 2023).

Taking the mentoring further?

While the formal mentoring programme had finished, further plans already included Hyssaub and DAC Pearson collaborating in developing a series of video testimonials by the police and young people aimed at raising awareness of the intention and impact of police stop and searches (Metropolitan Police, 2021b). But, should the pilot programme be taken forward to broader scale within the Met, which also would require intensive administrative support? What could the potential benefit be to both the Met and the communities it served?

Notes

1. Surname deliberately withheld in all of the publicity for the programme.
2. Tower Hamlet, Newham and Brent were all different Boroughs or areas of London.

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer. This case is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from published sources.

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