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## Exploring Zero Tolerance

We all want our colleagues to feel supported, safe and secure at work and the impact of unacceptable behaviour, whether bullying, harassment, assault or abuse, is hugely damaging.

"We have a zero-tolerance approach" is a phrase often used but what does this look like in reality?

H﻿osted by East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, this session aimed to explore how we can work together. We discussed how we can help stop unacceptable behaviour happening in the first place, and, if it does happen, what action can be considered to stop things getting worse or happening again.

T﻿his event was aimed at fire and rescue service staff and was part of events for International Women's Day 8 March 2023.

This report contains the results of a pre-event survey and key points from the breakout sessions involving the 45 attendees.

“Services need to better educate all their staff on the importance of diversity and inclusion, and to take a **zero-tolerance** approach to bullying, harassment and discrimination.”

HMICFRS State of Fire Report 2020



**Survey results Break out sessions feedback**

**Question 1 - What does Zero Tolerance mean to you?**

* Not letting people get away with bad behaviour that goes against the values.
* even the slightest smallest issues are not tolerated, tiny things that may already be "let go" are addressed
* Putting an immediate stop to unwanted or unacceptable behaviours
* That action will be taken and shown to be taken where necessary. However, using it as a statement no longer resonates internally or externally. A much better approach is to put humans interest story telling at heart of work being done by communications teams which showcase exemplar behaviour to inspire others to do the same. Need to encourage the what's in it for me behaviour change - ie reduce stress, increase productivity and teams working together. Trust and transparency.
* Having clear workplace policies, backed up with clear processes to follow, and that they are followed every time. Having clear communication across the workplace that sets out the standards of behaviour required (not just buried in policies), the reasons for these expectations, and what will happen if expectations are not met - EVERY TIME. And for regular conversations to take place, so that people get used to hearing / reading about it.
* Staff feeling safe at work
* Unacceptable with immediate consequences
* To not let unacceptable behaviour slip under the radar, whether it is meant in jest or it's only an off hand comment. Zero Tolerance means approaching this behaviour appropriate to the situation.
* Absolutely no allowance for unacceptable behaviour especially using get out clauses such as 'fun, banter, harmless'. This would lead to an open, transparent and level workplace
* There isn’t an opportunity to consider education or training that anyone found to behave in the unacceptable way applied to zero tolerance will be dismissed

**Question 2 - How we can help stop unacceptable behaviour happening in the first place?**

* Better education and awareness of what is unacceptable.
* encourage and model dignity, respect & kindness, build a culture where feedback is continuously sought and viewed as positive by everyone
* There is already lots of training in place. I personally think that people don't understand the IMPACT of their behaviours - especially over a period of time. Most things are not a deliberate act, more acts of carelessness, ignorance or stupidity. We don't want to drive behaviours underground, we want them discussed and the impacts understood.
* Understanding workforce. What is their background, level of understanding already, their willingness to change their behaviour and encouraging them to change because they want to rather than because we want them to. They need to be enlightened about what is right and why, otherwise we are just paying lip service and nothing will ever fundamentally change. Empowering others to take action and being supported to call out unacceptable behaviour - rather than expecting victims to have to do this - is when you know you have an inclusive culture that works. Disengagement at work is distrust ultimately. Employee engagement needs to be front and centre in everything we do.
* It's about culture which can take such a long time to shift. We need to talk more about the effects of unacceptable behaviour. We need leaders and managers to recognise it and to feel more able / confident about calling it out. And in the fire service with a higher proportion of leaders / managers being male, they all need to become allies for women.
* Creating culture where it is unacceptable both in and outside of work.
* Nurture mutual respect and understanding
* Create a space where everyone can talk about what is acceptable and what isn't. To create an ethos and a culture that would support an environment where acceptable behaviour is the typical behaviour. Regular team and wider meetings discussing current cultural issues either internally or externally with open discussion.
* In my opinion the old boys network needs to be broken up and we need to start with good staff at training school so those new to the services are not exposed to old school training.
* Education, talking about it, role modelling

**Question 3 - If unacceptable behaviour does happen, what action can be considered to stop things getting worse or happening again?**

* Challenging it straight away. Stop it, explain why it is unacceptable, explain what is acceptable.
* Encourage conversations. Sometimes these are labelled as "difficult conversations" but really we need to get to a point where they don't feel difficult, they are easy conversations that are not adversarial, confrontational and challenging. We could equip people with some standard example phrases to put into practise, where someone can say " I want to tell you that what happened/what you said was unacceptable to me, this is why..... the impact on me was, the potential wider impact of that is..........., please can you not do that again, instead could you......and then also some escalation techniques/phrases
* Appropriate sanctions must be put in place. But each of us will have a different perspective as to what is an appropriate sanction! Too many times I've heard "they don't mean it, it's just how they are" or "they're good at their job" (operational) or similar - almost as if there is an excuse. We need to put everything else out of the context of the behaviour when looking at sanction.
* Need to understand why this behaviour started in first place to then understand how to deal with it. If it was malicious and intended then action in terms of gross misconduct needs to happen - quickly and visibly. If it was misguided, then need to look at educating and promoting what good behaviour is and why. Leaders need to model the way and take a consistent approach, but not fear failure. Being honest and having a vision of what success in this area looks like will help drive change. No one expects perfection, but they do expect learning.
* Being transparent about incidents, without breaking confidentiality.
* Creating correct culture, training and finally discipline if required.
* Targeted training
* Open discussion with parties involved, anonymous case studies within teams or wider, reiteration from senior leaders on what is acceptable and what isn't. Anonymous reporting.
* Investigation needs to happen and there needs to then be consistent action across all services. Things are not dealt with openly and consistently. I think the HMICFRS investigation will show that.
* People need to feel confident in the processes for raising concerns, that action will be taken and victims and supported

**Any other comments you would like to make?**

* Looking forward to it!
* I think it will be an interesting discussion due to the fact that zero tolerance will mean different things to all of us - and may in fact be impacted by the severity of the behaviours in question. I'm looking forward to it!
* There needs to be an acceptance from leadership that fire services are not good in terms of culture and behaviour. This is endemic. There is institutional racism and misogyny and by owning this then we can move on. If we are saying to community we adhere to diversity and inclusion in everything we do then we need to show this is the case. We need to emphasise the positive action work, we need to bring forward change and we need to not be apologetic to those who are not adhering to this change within our current service, making it clear to them to change or leave. We need to embrace a culture of understanding around unconscious bias and a positive learning culture where people can be themselves at work. Banter is not acceptable if it denigrates another human being, and this needs to be front and centre in calling out behaviour which does not fit with 21st century FRSs. Being inclusive means to everyone, not just to the majority rule.
* I'm not entirely 100% sure about using the phrase 'zero tolerance'. It can be seen as quite hard line and divisive, whereas I'd prefer to see people being brought along on the journey.
* I am writing an anti-sexual harassment policy (but really I shouldn't have to because it should be obvious!)
* Action needs to be real not just empty words.



**Break-out sessions feedback headlines**

**Prevention**

**What do staff need to know to prevent unacceptable behaviour? What barriers exist and what solutions are available to remove them?**

* Policies and processes to ensure clarity around behaviours and values, and these should be visible throughout the worlplace
* Support for managers in particular – for example crucial conversation training and coaching to be confident in dealing with “low level” poor behaviour. This would also help to ensure that those who raise concerns get the best response first time.
* Understanding that there should be room for growth within zero tolerance – the motivation of an individual is key, and the next steps need to reflect this. Is it just one bad day or a series of actions? Is there an underlying issue which needs addressing?
* Knowing and seeing that there are repercussions for stepping away from positive behaviours and values, including the full range of possible outcomes.
* Understanding that there may be emotional shock after experiencing or witnessing unacceptable behaviour and that it is not too late to speak up.
* Zero tolerance reframed as a positive rather than negative concept – it’s creating a healthy workplace. Remind colleagues that we are great at looking after the public and we need to be the same with each other.

**Protection**

**What needs to be in place to support all involved? Who else needs to be protected during this?**

* Safe spaces and places, particularly if someone is away from the workplace during an investigation for example due to stress or suspension.
* People to lean into in times of need, who perhaps are not involved in the official process but can be allies.
* Consider the specific needs of people who may not regularly attend the workplace such as on call firefighters.
* Providing information about external support.
* Training for managers on what to expect when their staff have either raised an issue or are being investigated, and how to deal with questions from other team members.

**Response**

**What does "good" look like? How do you ensure timely and fair decisions? What action can be considered to stop things getting worse or happening again?**

* We all have good policies with timeframes, and we need to make it a priority to stick to them.
* Those investigating need support throughout to ensure they are able to stick to timelines. This may include relieving them of other work or providing them with mentors.
* The right balance between being thorough and proportionate may differ depending on the investigation, but be alert to “decision inertia” with investigating managers so concerned they will make the “wrong” decision they avoid making any at all.
* Encourage colleagues to share strategies of when to say when people express inappropriate things:
  + Ask people why?
  + Ask the person to repeat what they said to give yourself some time to think about a response
* Encourage more allies to speak out, highlighting that silence can be seen as acceptance of the behaviour.