

# Words that work: tackling ethical dilemmas in policing

### **Acknowledgment**

The Office of Police Integrity (OPI) wishes to acknowledge Associate Professor Dave Webb (and his students) from the University of Western Australia and also the Police Reform Advisory Group who workshopped this material with OPI's Corruption Prevention and Education Unit in November 2011 and May 2012.

This resource is based on the *Giving Voice to Values* curriculum – a collaboration between the Aspen Institute and Yale School of Management.

Also see Mary C Gentile 2010 *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right* Yale University Press.

For more information on this material visit: <http://www.givingvoicetovaluesthebook.com/other-writings>

**August 2012**

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## How to use this resource

'Words that work' is designed to help you, as a member of police, deal with unethical behaviour you might see in your workplace. It provides scenarios and common excuses that stop people from acting on their core values and speaking up about things that aren't right. It encourages police to recognise and challenge these excuses, building integrity and a resistance to misconduct.

This resource presents you with a number of common ethical problems. It provides examples of alternative ways of thinking about these problems and suggests phrases you could use to initiate conversations and speak up about the ethical issues. You can use these ideas yourself or suggest them to anyone seeking advice from you about how to handle a difficult situation. The suggested phrases are intended to provide a starting point for these conversations. The resource is intended to assist police at the time an ethical problem arises.

In some scenarios, more formal action may also need to be taken, for example, where the behaviour of an individual involves misconduct. If you believe the situation involves serious misconduct, the *Police Regulation Act 1958* requires you to report this to a more senior officer.

The resource is part of a broader suite of resources developed by the OPI designed to help police address ethical challenges in policing (see OPI's Education Resources available at <http://www.opi.vic.gov.au/index.php?i=20&m=211&t=1>).

'Words that work' is specifically designed for policing scenarios. It is a living document that can be added to and refined. If you develop a response to an ethical problem that worked for you, please share it with others. You can also have it added to this resource by contacting us at [education@opi.vic.gov.au](mailto:education@opi.vic.gov.au).

# Problems, excuses and alternative ways of thinking

This table gives you examples of typical excuses police may use to justify not speaking up about behaviour they want to challenge, along with some alternative ways of thinking to challenge these excuses. It also provides some suggested phrases for you to use if you want to challenge a person's actions. You should take care to choose words that you are comfortable with using.

Common ethical problems	Common excuses for keeping quiet	Alternative ways of thinking to encourage action
Being asked to falsify running sheets.	<p><i>I don't want to rock the boat by drawing attention to the issue.</i></p> <p><i>Perhaps this is a one-off. I don't want to overreact.</i></p> <p><i>I better do what they say or it might cause trouble.</i></p>	<p>If I make my position known, my colleagues will eventually respect me for it.</p> <p>What if the running sheet is needed as evidence for something serious down the track?</p> <p>I need to draw a line about this right now because if I change this running sheet, what will I be expected to do next?</p>
Becoming aware of inappropriate behaviour, sexual behaviour or a relationship with a victim of a crime or a witness.	<p><i>It's not my business, I don't want to get involved.</i></p> <p><i>They are all adults, they can make their own choices.</i></p>	<p>I should speak up because the people involved have obviously lost perspective on how inappropriate this is.</p> <p>This creates a definite conflict of interest. I should speak up before problems arise.</p> <p>This police member is taking advantage of the person and misusing their power. They might end up compromised by this, or worse.</p>
Witnessing rudeness or incivility to members of the public.	<p><i>It's probably just a product of frustration.</i></p> <p><i>That police member is more experienced than me and may know what works with the public better.</i></p>	<p>There are very good reasons why it's better for police to be courteous even when it's difficult. It's an important part of the job.</p> <p>That over-reaction might be an indication of a deeper stress-related issue. Maybe my colleague needs some help?</p>

No, I can't do what you are asking. My mate got pinged for that and got in real strife for it.

This situation could become very complicated. Have you really thought about the implications?

This job takes a lot of patience. It's better to stay cool and remember that we might need that person on-side one day.

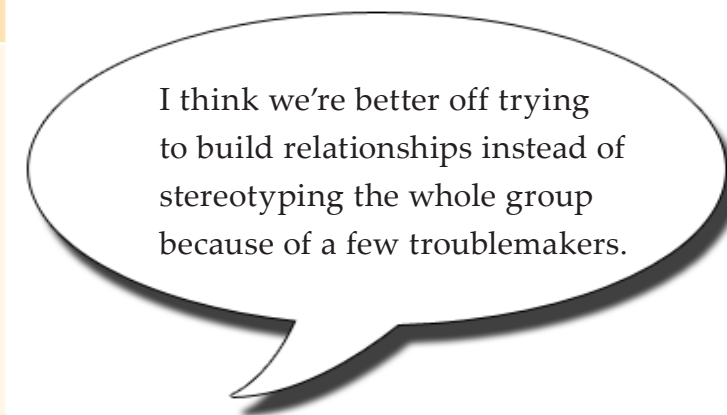
Common ethical problems	Common excuses for keeping quiet	Alternative ways of thinking to encourage action
Becoming aware of misuse of police resources, credentials or time (e.g. for secondary employment).	<p><i>It's best for me to just look the other way. I don't want Ethical Standards coming down on us.</i></p> <p><i>What's the problem? That equipment was due to be replaced soon anyway?</i></p>	<p>I am not comfortable with that practice because it may have consequences we don't expect.</p> <p>I didn't join the job to stand back and watch this kind of thing go on.</p> <p>This affects all of us so I should speak up about it. We are under-resourced as it is.</p>
Becoming aware of police members accepting gifts or benefits.	<p><i>It doesn't really hurt anyone.</i></p> <p><i>This is just good public relations. I don't want to offend them by saying no.</i></p> <p><i>This shop has been giving cheap meals to coppers for years.</i></p>	<p>What does the giver expect in return? This is likely to create a conflict of interest which won't help anyone.</p> <p>That police member will be compromised by this practice in the long run.</p> <p>If I turn a blind eye then I may be compromising my own job.</p>
<p>Discovering that an offence by a colleague (e.g. drink-driving) has been overlooked or covered up.</p> <p>Becoming aware of a widespread issue (e.g. regular 'kickbacks' or 'green lighting').</p>	<p><i>Turning a blind eye to this is probably easier.</i></p> <p><i>I have no choice here, if I don't overlook this, I may lose the support of my colleagues.</i></p> <p><i>Making a report will bring Ethical Standards down on us all.</i></p>	<p>I shouldn't risk my own reputation covering up for someone else's bad choice.</p> <p>Someone needs to stand up and say something here.</p> <p>That person is wrong to put me in this impossible situation.</p> <p>This compromises the organisation it shouldn't be kept quiet.</p>

Is it really ok to be doing this? I thought it was against the rules – it's not fair to the other people on your shift.

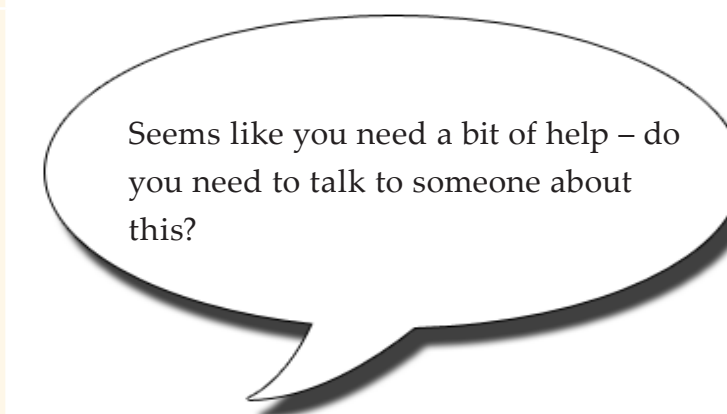
I think it's better to just refuse an offer like that – it creates 'conflict of interest' and your loyalties might be divided later down the track. What is that person expecting in return?

Sorry, I can't turn a blind eye to this – I don't want to risk my job.

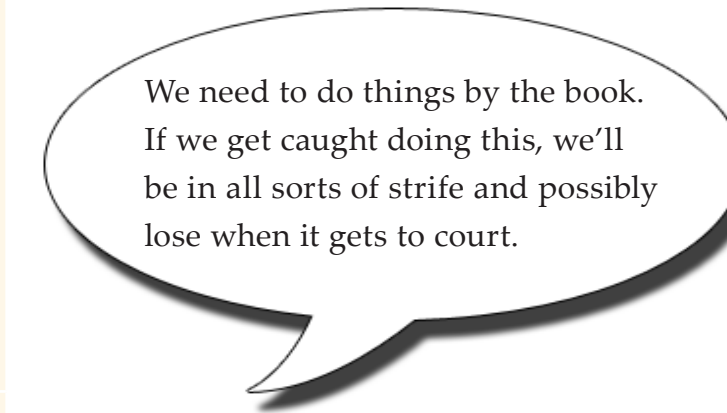
Common ethical problems	Common excuses for keeping quiet	Alternative ways of thinking to encourage action
Suspecting that police members are acting on the basis of racial stereotypes.	<p><i>This just reflects the views of the broader community. They are just as tired of this group's behaviour as we are.</i></p> <p><i>I've just started at this station – it's too early for me to make comments about this kind of thing.</i></p>	<p>Police should lead by example, treat people impartially and reject intolerance.</p> <p>It is my responsibility to speak up about this because I am in a position to encourage change.</p> <p>Someone needs to do something positive or the situation will get worse.</p>
Having knowledge of drug and/or alcohol use by other officers.	<p><i>I can't control other people's choices.</i></p> <p><i>It's not my business, I'll just stay out of it.</i></p> <p><i>What they do in their own time is their own business.</i></p>	<p>This is serious because as a member of police this person carries weapons.</p> <p>I have to speak up because this puts everyone at risk.</p> <p>This police member obviously needs help and turning a blind eye won't help them.</p>
Police ignoring or subverting due process.	<p><i>I guess sometimes we have to cut corners to get the job done.</i></p> <p><i>We can never get the job done if we don't bend the rules a little bit.</i></p> <p><i>The rules were written by someone who doesn't really understand the job.</i></p>	<p>The reasons for these rules may not be clear to this person, so they need to be explained.</p> <p>I didn't join this job to see power being abused.</p> <p>Doesn't this rule bending make us nearly as bad as the crooks? That doesn't sit well with me.</p>
Witnessing police being too heavy handed.	<p><i>That person pushed his/her buttons so they deserved it.</i></p> <p><i>Maybe he/she is just having a bad day.</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes police have to be assertive in these situations.</i></p>	<p>If I let this go it will get worse and someone might get seriously hurt.</p> <p>If I don't step in now, my colleague's behaviour may get worse and they could end up out of the job.</p> <p>That was not assertive, that was plain aggressive.</p>



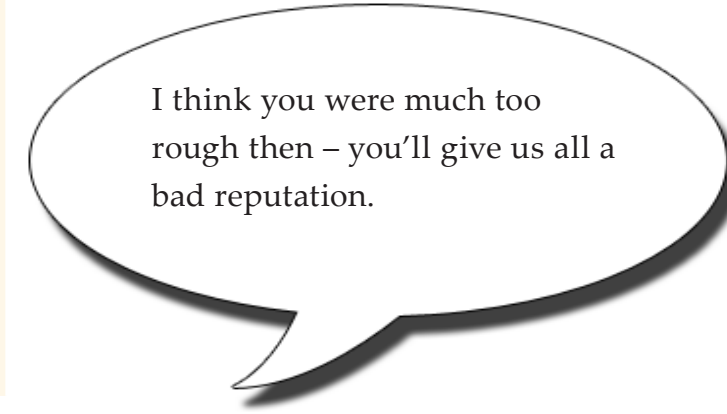
I think we're better off trying to build relationships instead of stereotyping the whole group because of a few troublemakers.



Seems like you need a bit of help – do you need to talk to someone about this?



We need to do things by the book. If we get caught doing this, we'll be in all sorts of strife and possibly lose when it gets to court.



I think you were much too rough then – you'll give us all a bad reputation.

## Remember...

The way a challenging message is designed and delivered is critical. Try to make sure any comments you make are framed so what you say will be listened to and make the other person think twice about what he or she is doing. It is a good idea to plan and practise the specific words you want to use.

Understand the needs, fears and motivations of the person you are discussing the situation with. Try to put yourself in the other person's shoes and think about how you would like to be spoken to in a similar situation – the other person may be initially defensive, but appreciate it if your motivation is clearly well-intentioned and is in everyone's best interests.

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