

Keynote speech: Today's and Tomorrow's Leaders

Sara Thornton, Chief Constable, Thames Valley Police

Sara presented a background of slow progress for women in leadership positions in the police force:

- 1829 – no women; the Police Act required 'fit men'
- 1915 – Edith Smith became the first police woman
- 1975 – the Discrimination Act brought fundamental changes and more integration; it still felt lonely for women – 'a sisterhood without any sisters'

Women police often have better qualifications than men. In Sara's own force, all women have a degree and 64% of men. The majority of women are still in the lower ranks.

In 1986 Sara joined the Metropolitan Police as a graduate entrant. She had to 'dumb down' to survive.

She and the environment have changed in the last 10 years. Currently there are five women out of 43 Chief Constables. In meetings of the Chief Constables' Council there is an unspoken pecking order. Sara is political, caring, assertive: in Hillary Clinton's words, 'hair matters'.

She talked of the importance of language and thought processes and 'self-limiting language'; 'playing the game'. She illustrated this point with a quote from her 1989 diary, when she was a sergeant. "CID wanted pretty things to laugh at jokes; was too willing; loved it – being included, but at what price?"

She used the quote "you were born original; don't die a clone".

Sara went on to talk about costs and choices for women leaders: 24 hour availability unless on annual leave; the demands of her position; a lot of women police are married – probably half have children; getting to the top you achieve your identity through a long uninterrupted career pattern.

Sara's success story tells of a movement in Regulation II. To become a chief constable, you cannot be a deputy, assistant and a chief constable in the same force. ST had already disrupted her family life, moving from London to Oxford. She challenged the regulation, and now it has changed to make allowances in exceptional circumstances, called 'Sara's law'.

So what has helped Sara as a top leader:

- Doing things you hate doing e.g. being on TV – you practise and you get better
- Mentoring and coaching
- Key supporters and friends
- Being firm about the difference ability and loyalty
- Making critical decisions

Sara concluded with a question: who was more famous – Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers? Yes Fred Astaire. And Ginger Rogers did everything he did, only in high heels and backwards!