Relational Aggression (Leader Version)

Blue Ground

Relational aggression is one of the most culturally corrosive forces inside policing. It rarely looks like overt conflict. Instead, it shows up as exclusion, subtle undermining, back-channeling, and small acts that fracture trust.

These behaviours are often minimised or dismissed because they are quiet — but their impact is loud.

Leaders who can recognise and interrupt relational aggression early protect team culture, psychological safety, and operational performance.

Why This Matters

Relational aggression erodes trust, fractures teams, and increases burnout and turnover. Leaders who intervene early prevent cultural drift, protect high performers, and create environments where people can speak up and stay steady.

Who This Is For

- Supervisors and team leaders
- Senior leaders and executives
- Wellbeing and HR teams
- Anyone responsible for operational clarity or team culture

What You'll Learn

- How relational aggression shows up in policing
- Why subtle harm is often missed or minimised
- Leadership behaviours that prevent relational aggression
- Scripts and tools for clean, early intervention

Relational Aggression in Policing

Relational aggression is a pattern of behaviour designed to harm someone's social standing, confidence, or sense of belonging. It is often:

- indirect
- subtle
- deniable
- socially reinforced
- culturally normalised

In policing, relational aggression thrives when:

- teams are fatigued
- leadership is inconsistent
- communication is unclear
- back-channelling is tolerated
- high performers are not protected

The impact is significant:

- reduced trust
- fractured teams
- increased turnover
- psychological distress
- operational errors

How Relational Aggression Shows Up

A. Subtle Undermining

Eyerolling, dismissive gestures, withholding information, or quietly questioning someone's competence.

B. Social Exclusion

Leaving someone out of conversations or decisions; forming cliques that control information flow.

C. Back-Channeling

Side conversations that erode trust; "just between us..." narratives; gossip framed as concern.

D. Performative Support

Public agreement paired with private criticism; pretending to support someone while quietly sabotaging them.

Leadership Behaviours That Prevent Subtle Harm

A. Set Clear Standards

Leaders must explicitly state that relational aggression is a form of harm — not personality conflict.

B. Make Communication Visible

Encourage decisions, updates, and feedback to be shared openly, not through side channels.

C. Protect High Performers

Relational aggression often targets those who excel. Leaders must actively protect them.

D. Intervene Early

Small behaviours become cultural patterns. Early intervention prevents escalation.

E. Model Clean Communication

Calm, direct, transparent communication reduces relational friction and sets the tone for the team.

Practical Tools

Tool 1: The Clean Interruption Script	Tool 2: The Visibility Reset	Tool 3: The Behavioural Boundary
A simple, leaderly script for interrupting subtle harm in the moment: **"I'm noticing a pattern that could impact trust. Let's bring this into the open so we can stay aligned."** This script is calm, non-accusatory, and resets the tone.	Use this when you sense back-channelling or exclusion. **Steps:** 1. Bring the conversation into a shared space. 2. Clarify the facts. 3. Re-establish the shared goal. 4. Set the next visible step. This restores transparency and reduces relational distortion.	A short, clear boundary that leaders can use: **"We don't do side conversations that impact team trust. If something needs to be said, we say it in the room."** This sets a cultural standard without blame.

The Clean Interruption Script

Relational aggression often hides in small, deniable behaviours. The Clean Interruption Script allows leaders to intervene early without blame or heat. It resets tone, restores visibility, and signals that subtle harm will not be ignored.

Structure of a Clean Interruption

- Name what you're noticing.
- Name the impact on trust or alignment.
- Bring the behaviour into the open.
- Reset the tone.

This keeps the intervention calm, neutral, and leaderly.

Operational Examples

- "I'm noticing a pattern that could impact trust. Let's bring this into the open."
- "I want to pause — this feels like it needs to be discussed in the room."
- "Let's reset. We need clarity, not side conversations."

Why It Works in Policing

- It interrupts subtle harm before it escalates.
- It protects psychological safety.
- It reinforces cultural standards.
- It models steady, transparent leadership.

The Visibility Reset

Back-channeling and exclusion thrive in low-visibility environments. The Visibility Reset restores transparency and reduces relational distortion.

Structure of a Visibility Reset

- Bring the conversation into a shared space.
- Clarify the facts.
- Re-establish the shared goal.
- Set the next visible step.

This resets alignment and reduces confusion.

Operational Examples

- "Let's bring this into the room so we're all working from the same information."
- "Here's what we know, here's what we need to clarify, and here's our next step."
- "Let's reset the visibility — this needs to be shared openly."

Why It Works in Policing

- It reduces misinformation and distortion.
- It stabilises team rhythm.
- It protects high performers from quiet sabotage.
- It reinforces fairness and transparency.

The Behavioural Boundary

Relational aggression often persists because leaders avoid naming it. The Behavioural Boundary sets a clear, steady expectation for how the team communicates.

Structure of a Behavioural Boundary

- Name the behaviour.
- Name the impact.
- Set the expectation.
- Hold the line.

This creates clarity without heat.

Operational Examples

- "We don't do side conversations that impact trust."
- "If something needs to be said, we say it in the room."
- "This team works in the open — no back-channeling."

Why It Works in Policing

- It prevents cultural drift.
- It protects trust and alignment.
- It reduces relational friction.
- It models steady, consistent leadership.

Relational aggression is a cultural risk. Leaders who recognise and interrupt subtle harm protect trust, psychological safety, and team performance.