

# Public Sector Complaints and Service Improvement

‘Encouraging Ownership, a Positive View of Complaints  
and Challenging ‘The Blame Culture’  
Not Just Surviving but Succeeding

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# Carnoustie's Finest Complaint Consultant

- PoV consumer interest – Which?/ Consumers' Association-staff and Council member
- Regulatory perspective – Office of Fair Trading
- Customer advocacy – Timpson Shoes Customers' Friend
- Consumer representation – consumer panels, patient participation NHS
- Complaint handling – introduced modern complaint into UK handling based on TARP US model: 'Consumers in Business pub. NCC 1982'
- Work with various Ombudsman schemes – private and public sectors

# 40 Years On

- A Lesson Learnt?
- If not, why not?



# The Dark Kingdom of Blame – aka The Game of Groans



# My Approach Today

Will take a look at answering these questions:

- Why is it so hard to do well?
- How to win the Blame Game?

# Complaints – emotions hidden by/ disguised as process



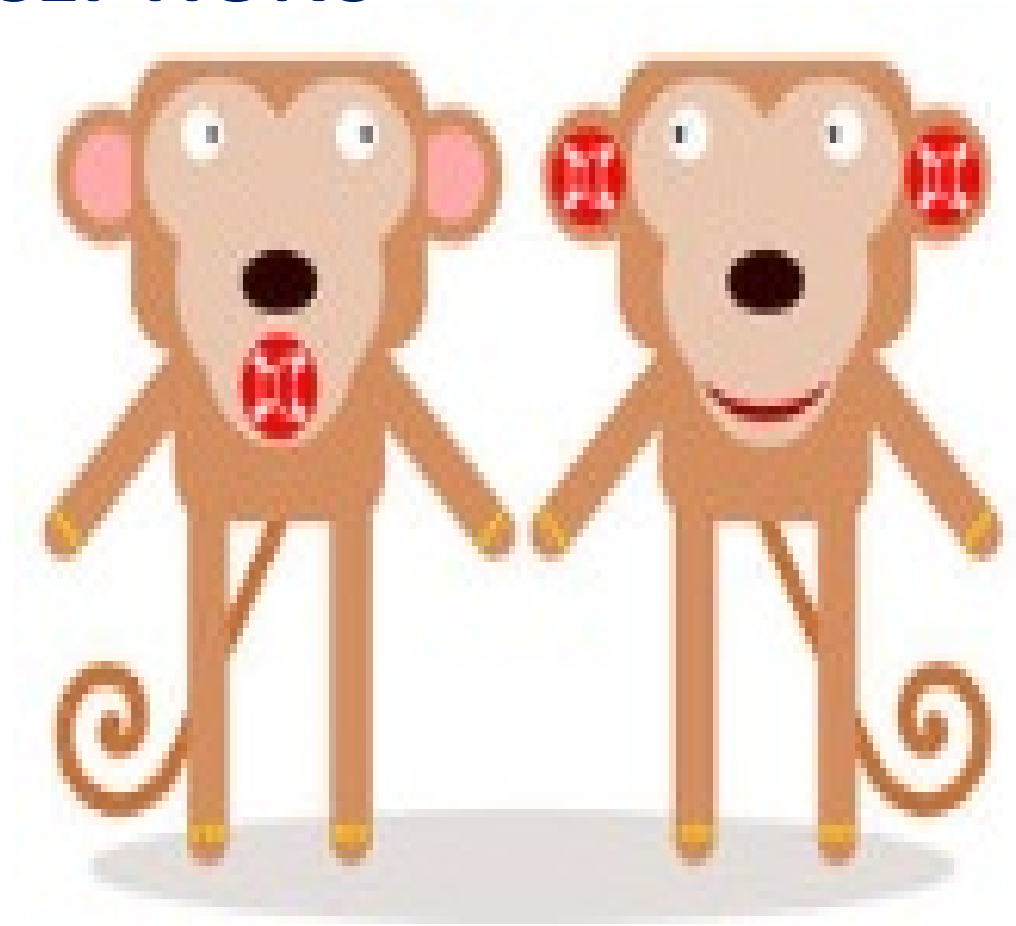
- Emotions of both customer / user and complaints handler
- A process shared/ not controlled
- Shared now in public - social media
- Capacity to subvert goals/ visions of organisation

# How process-led policy creates negative culture

- Complaints processes focus on facts and not on emotions
- Emotion is discouraged on both sides
- Emphasis on process means the messiness is tidied away
- Tone is often adversarial
- The language of the whodunnit – find the guilty party
- Emphasis on process makes staff feel they are being fair but to complainant: experienced as indifference, condescension or exclusion – complainant feels ‘unheard’
- Designed for those inside the organisation not for the complainant

# PERCEPTIONS

- YOU DON'T LISTEN
- THEY CAN'T HEAR







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# The Pipe Bursts – The Emotions Flow

- Patients Association on Health Services Ombudsman:

Still and Silent  
– a very  
uninviting  
entity

Cold alone and  
frozen out

Inadequate ,  
untimely and  
unacceptably  
flawed  
investigations

Final and fatal  
mix of **that**  
**toxic**  
**culture**

# First Encounter is Critical

- Ombudsman response to criticism – redesign the front end
- New emphasis on the complaint and early dialogue with complainant – a therapeutic encounter?
- Previous priority – test eligibility of complaint
- Now focus on defining expectations and nature of complaint
- Complaint handling – the ‘intentional conversation’



## **BLAME IS EMOTION GONE TOXIC**

- FEAR
- DEFLECTING RISK

# Fear

- This is a personal attack on me and my colleagues
- This is an attack on my professionalism from an ignorant obsessive
- I am at risk if this complaint is found to be true
- This risk must be passed on to someone else
- Never mind finding root cause
- Let's shift fault to process or general organisational/budgetary failings
- from the specific to the generalised

# Deflection and Self-protection

- Blame is mechanism for trying to shift responsibility onto complaint handler ie focusing on alleged faults in process rather than on root cause e.g. the Ombudsman row
- Tactic is to create complaints about complaint handling – not about the issue that prompted the complaint – root cause
- If all else fails, then find someone else you can blame – Legal Department – usually a good option
- Now what about your own well-being?

# Essential to take care of yourself and your colleagues

- Not at the expense of complainants
- But cannot connect with customers if you feel blamed and abandoned
- Organisations cannot offer service better than their treatment of their own people
- Complaint handlers not dustbin
- If you give up on blaming yourself, that is the first step towards not blaming others and pushing back when they try to blame you.

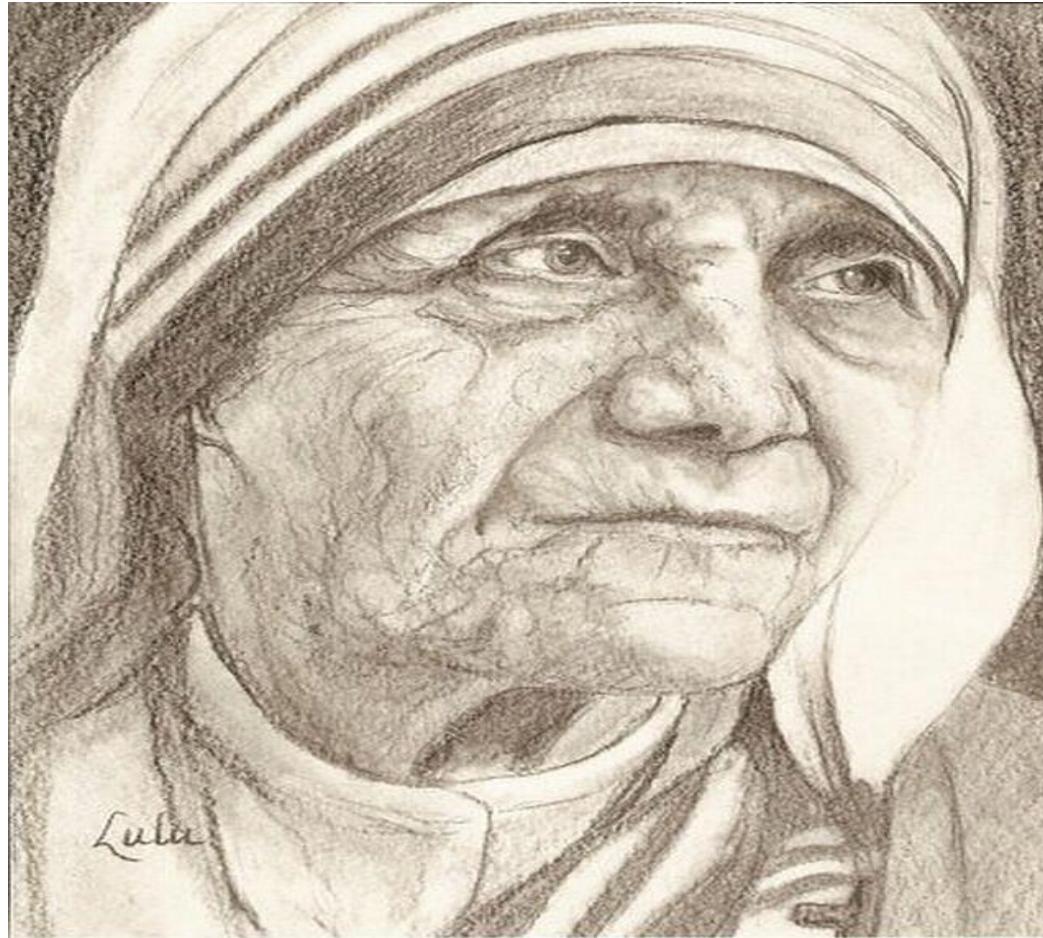
# Protecting Yourself

- If you are not OK, then the complainant cannot be either
  - Nonviolent Communication tenets based on anger/ sadness being the result of unmet needs:
  - Technique summary
    - Empathic connection
    - First with self - I am not a bad person
    - Then with user/complainant
    - Identify feelings
    - Identify need
    - How can those needs be met?

Take a look at <http://www.nvc-uk.com/>

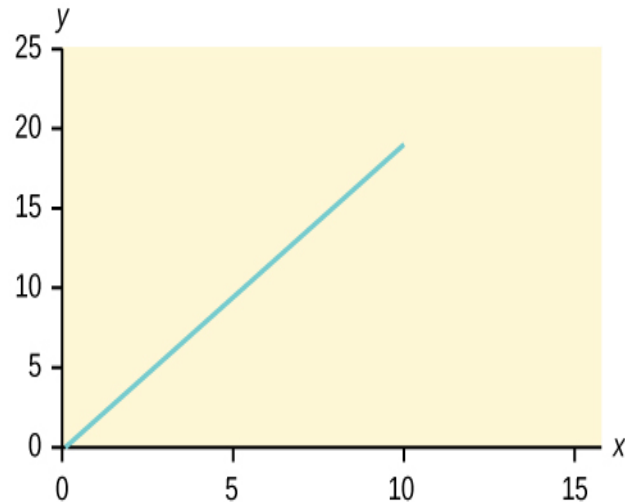


# SAY NO TO SAINTHOOD and DON'T BE A MARTYR



# OWN THE POSITIVE

- Own the means of improvement



- Not just the tales of failure



# User insight as intelligence

- NB – Not just the numbers – use the stories ie hold the emotion
- Resist the temptation to point the finger - reward success: not haunted by blame
- Make complaints into working documents – case studies for training sessions, quotes in the annual report
- Board members and senior staff should read samples of complaints
- Harvest other patient narratives from social media/ Patient Opinion/ Facebook
- Embed complaints in comprehensive patient/user feedback
- Put in perspective of broader organisational performance – clocking achievement as well as improvements yet to come

## FEEDBACK TO COMPLAINANTS

**69** YOU SAID  
WE DID

# What Is It All About?

- Remember relief as a first time father of coming across Bruno Bettelheim's advocacy of 'Good Enough' Parenting – realistic goals for real life
- Permission to abandon quest for perfection
- Is there an equivalent goal for complaint handlers?
- *The world is ..often terrifying, disgusting and tragic but it also beautiful. I should like to know how exactly each person would make it a tiny bit less disgusting and a tiny bit more beautiful.*
- Theodore Zeldin: The Hidden Pleasures of Life (pub MacLehose 2015)

# Our Details

You can find out more about the Millar Adamson Craig Partnership at <http://www.millaradamsoncraig.co.uk/>

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