

# Good Instinct/Bad Instinct

(Or: Why Our Politicians Are Hard-Wired To Make Terrible Decisions)

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*'There is no limit to the amount of intelligence invested in ignorance  
when the need for illusion runs deep.'*

Saul Bellow

Top of the UK media agenda in recent weeks has been the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust 'scandal'. The crux of the story centres around a government report confirming that above average mortality rates in the Trust were due to a 'systemic failure' of management. The report had been commissioned in the light of whistle-blowing members of the public who had, in a series of tragic cases, lost relatives being cared for by the Trust. Staff at the hospital, the whistle-blowers claimed, were 'looking up' at their bosses and financial targets and not 'looking across' at the patients under their care. To the outsider it looks like a classic case of a dysfunctional system. One that, 'clearly' – said every politician looking to jump on the 'outraged' bandwagon – needed something to be done to fix the problem. Politicians being politicians, and the public being the public, what then very quickly happened was people began conducting their own personal, largely un-informed root cause analysis, in order to be able to start making public pronouncements about 'the solution'. Which, in the case of Mid Staffs, rapidly descended to become the wonderfully sound-bite-worthy 'duty of candour' idea. Staff inside Mid Staffs, apparently, had seen things going wrong but, for fear of being punished if they blew any whistles, they hadn't said anything. By introducing a 'duty of candour', 'therefore', people would be compelled to speak up when they saw things going wrong.

Now, if you're hearing this sad, depressing story for the first time, you're probably already thinking that this doesn't sound like the smartest solution in the world. Expressions like 'knee-jerk stupidity' are probably somewhere on the tip of your tongue. But before despairing too soon, put yourself in the position of the politicians and Trust managers that are now under pressure to be seen to be 'fixing the problem'. From their perspective you can probably also start to imagine that, in the absence of anyone coming up with any better ideas (which, so far, in public at least, they haven't), a chain of events gets put in place that will quite likely lead to some form of 'duty of candour' 'system' being put in place in the coming months. Purely because, a) it demonstrated positive action was taking place, b) it was defensible in the sense that it fits a 'common-sense' view of the world that says 'if people are doing wrong, they should be forced to do it right', and c) the good old 'plausible deniability' phenomenon found in much of our post-GFC world, the politicians and managers can safely state that 'it was the only solution on offer'.

One has to have a degree of sympathy for the politicians and managers in this kind of situation. Mid Staffs is on the press radar today, but we know that in a couple of

months time it will inevitably be something other 'crisis' or 'scandal' (amazing how everything very quickly gets escalated to this kind of emotionally-charged language these days). The tragedy in all of this is that few if any of the politicians and managers concerned is equipped to meaningfully tackle these kinds of issue. Worse, the system they operate within almost fundamentally prevents them from dealing effectively with just about any situation they're expected to face.

At the heart of the problem here is that societal situations are inherently complex. That's 'complex' in the mathematical meaning of the term: a complex system having no guaranteed rules, no such thing as root-causes, and being very prone to unexpected non-linear effects. To paraphrase the words of the oft used cliché, what we have here is a butterfly flapping its wings in Whitehall, leading to a likely tornado in Mid Staffordshire and quite likely the rest of the NHS.

According to Malcom Gladwell's modern classic book 'Blink', when dealing with complex situations, the most effective people for are those that have developed highly tuned instincts. Typically, Gladwell observed, these kinds of instinct required around 10,000 hours of committed effort to develop the right kinds of expertise.

The thesis of this article is that our politicians are almost inherently prevented from ever being able to develop such expertise and therefore never develop the instincts required to formulate and execute any kind of meaningful change to the complex systems under their care.

Before getting into the details of why this is so, it is worth diverting for a second or two to think a little deeper about Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule. Not every 10,000 hours is the same as every other 10,000 hours. I'm pretty certain I, for example, have spent pretty close to 10,000 hours playing my guitars. Alas, however, that time hasn't made me into an expert. Far from it in fact. More often than not I still feel as if today is the first day I ever picked an instrument up. When I look back at my 10,000 hours, I can safely say I enjoyed nearly well all of them – otherwise, why do it? playing the same chord progressions over and over again and generally noodling around is great relaxation. But having fun and relaxing has almost nothing to do with building expertise. Building expertise comes through putting yourself through painful, out-of-comfort-zone experiences, from failing time and time again, learning from those failures such that eventually you manage to not fail. I'm not sure I'm prepared to put myself through what's necessary to get to the sort of expertise professional musicians attain. I might never be an expert guitarist, but I am absolutely an expert in my role as an innovator. I say that not because I'm bragging, but merely because I can think about all of the pain, misery and learning that being outside my comfort zone pretty much for the whole of the last 17 years has done for me in terms of allowing me to see what works and what doesn't. My guitar playing instinct is poor; my innovation instinct is highly tuned. Highly tuned instincts fundamentally come through experiencing as many of the unusual and uncomfortable situations as you can put yourself through. Physicist Niels Bohr probably said it best, 'thank heavens we have found a contradiction, for now we might make some progress'. Finely tuned instincts come, in other words, from finding and solving contradictions.

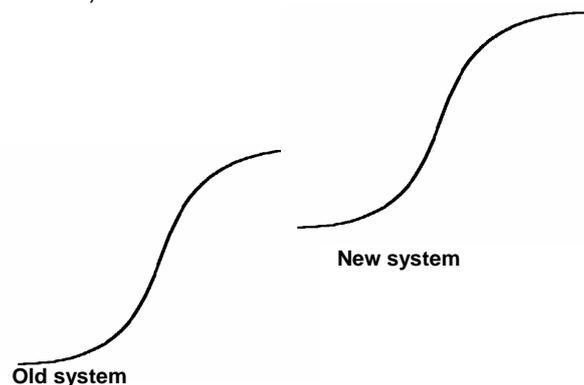
Now let's see how this fits into the world of a politician working inside any kind of democratic system. There seem to be three main problems that need to be addressed:

Problem 1: in most countries, while politicians might ultimately accrue their requisite 10,000 hours as a politician, it is extremely unlikely they will ever accrue anything like 10,000 hours within any given Department. In Gladwell's terms, Barack Obama might just have accrued enough hours by the end of his second terms as a President to be an 'expert' at the job. Jeremy Hunt –responsible for the Department of Health in the UK since September 2012, will be lucky if he's allowed more than a couple of years in the post. He has no chance to accrue that necessary amount of time.

Problem 2: most democracies work using a Socratic debating system, in which everything those in power tell us is one way, those in 'opposition' are expected to argue it's the other. Overall, this is not such a bad thing. Another great quotation, this time from Winston Churchill had it about right: 'democracy is the worst system of government ever devised. Apart from all the others.' It's definitely good that 'someone' is forced to take on the devil's advocate, negative, side of a debate. The problem, though, is that it's someone else and not you. Once Jeremy Hunt has 'weighed up' the evidence and made a decision about what the Department is going to do, it becomes his job to defend that decision. And for the Opposition parties to attack it. What, therefore, kicks in is a society-wide case of confirmation bias. We're all affected by this phenomenon every moment of our lives. Once we've made our mind up about any kind of issue, our brain tends to filter out any information that contradicts that opinion, and to only look for the information that confirms it. It happens to all of us whether we like it or not. It happens to politicians because their job actually demands it. Politicians in effect work under a Socratic system of compulsory confirmation bias. Once Jeremy Hunt's Department make a decision that 'duty of candour' (or whatever they eventually decide is the 'positive action' the need to demonstrate to the public turns out to be) is the right way forward for the NHS, they are forced to become blind to contrary evidence. Worse, the more the Opposition tells them they're wrong, the more entrenched they become in their current views.

Problem 3: if the first two problems are bad, this third one is usually the killer. It's easily the most insidious of all three of the issues affecting our government systems. In theory, the problem of the here-today-gone-tomorrow politician stuck in the middle of Problems 1 and 2 gets solved by having a small army of 'permanent' civil servants whose job is to become 'experts' in their chosen fields. Jeremy Hunt might be a 2-year job incumbent, but the people he has advising him are likely to be people with, in some cases, several decades worth of knowledge about the Department of Health and the NHS. There are a host of people, in other words, who *have* accumulated 10,000 hours of experience. The question now is what kind of 10,000 hours have they accumulated - are we in a situation like my guitar playing or my work in innovation?. For the majority, sadly, a large part of their time has been spent in their noodling comfort zones. Doing what looks like and feels like 'hard work' I'm sure. I doubt anyone gets on the Tube after a hard day's work in Whitehall feeling guilty that they haven't earned their salary that day. After 30 years working with all kinds of people in every field of human endeavour, I remain convinced in the Deming quote, 'no-one comes to work to do a bad job'. I do firmly believe, however, that the vast majority of people come to work to do a job that allows them to remain in their comfort zone. One of the results of this is that most people have instincts that are extremely poorly tuned when it comes to change and innovation. For the most part, these kinds of instinct are so poor as to be to all intents and purposes nonexistent.

Here's how this problem tends to manifest itself for most people – including everyone in the Department of Health, and the staff and managers at Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust: when changes happen, our inbuilt expectation is that they will change in a linear fashion. For at least some of the time this tends to be true – the price of healthcare, like the price of fuel, food and utilities tend to go up over time. Our pay, similarly will tend to go upwards in some kind of inflation-linked manner. Or – if we work hard – by a rate better than inflation, but still pretty steadily. Historically, this kind of gradual, linear change has been a valid assumption. When my father left school, his expectation was that the profession he entered would provide him with a job for the duration of his working career. Today, for many of us, this idea sounds quite odd. In most walks of life, change is happening faster and faster. But it's also changing non-linearly. As in, like this:



**Figure 1: How Change Actually Happens**

Unfortunately, for most people, their linear-world instincts find it very difficult to imagine, never mind know what to do about, the discontinuities associated with a step-change shift from one way of doing things to another. One of the manifestations of this failure to comprehend discontinuity is that we propose solutions – like ‘duty of candour’ – that fail to take into the account that such a change might well create all sorts of unexpected step-change consequences. And worse, looking at the uncomfortable gap between the two s-curves, that those step changes might demand things get worse before they might have a chance to get better. Statements like that are very difficult to accept in all of our heads (for most people, their idealised life journey is often visualized as a slow, steady climb to reach the top of a high mountain). If you're a politician they're not something that you even want to contemplate. Especially if you're looking to the next election in three or four years time, when, if you have a desire to be re-elected, things had absolutely better be better than they are today.

We see this kind of ‘discontinuity-blindness’ across every aspect of our society's governance. ‘Common-sense’ (i.e. ‘linear’) solutions that get implemented that turn out to deliver sometimes wholly unexpected consequences. A couple of years ago we wrote about the rioting that took place in London in August 2011. The aim of that article was to try and highlight the folly of solution strategies that attempted to distill the riot problem down to a single issue. Everyone with an opinion made their own version of the ‘the problem is x and so the solution must be y’ logic. A logic that is totally inappropriate in any complex situation. In the aftermath of the riots (and our ignored article), Prime Minister, David Cameron oversaw the implementation of the ‘common sense’ solution of arresting and locking up the gang leaders. This was a ‘solution’ that obviously, one assumes, had a certain publicly defensible logic: the

riots escalated because the gang-leaders rallied their troops and organized trouble in an organized fashion, so therefore we need to get them out of the way.

Twelve months later – surprise, surprise, - David Cameron is standing up in parliament telling us all that the policy had back-fired; gang trouble was now more rife than it had been before. The ‘common-sense’ solution had demonstrated that there was no such thing as common sense – locking the gang leaders up had created a power vacuum in the gang world, and, nature abhorring a vacuum, lots of aspiring future leaders within those gangs began campaigns of terror and destruction to prove that they were worthy next leaders. If it wasn’t so tragic it would be funny.

The real tragedy, though, is that how the story unfolded was totally predictable. Firstly because – per our analysis – could never have been a single-issue problem and the wrong symptom was selected for attention. But secondly, and more important, it would have been very simple to have conducted an exercise to explore the likely consequences of locking gang leaders up. What we’re heading towards here is a subtle variation on our longstanding Perception Mapping process. That process, for those that haven’t seen it involves formulating a question we’d like to have answered and then soliciting as many different opinions as possible about that question. If, in the wake of the ‘lock up gang leaders’ idea we had asked the question, ‘if we lock up gang leaders people will...?’ and written down what we thought different stakeholders in the problem (gang members, police, media, etc) would do, then it’s wouldn’t take long to identify the likely emergence of a power vacuum problem. Which in turn would either have told us to put in place counter-measures to solve that problem before it occurred, or – preferably – would’ve told us that locking gang leaders up was a dumb idea that should not have been taken past the dumb-idea stage.

There’s nothing worse than 20:20 hindsight of course. Especially if the words come from someone – an outsider that can’t know the ins and outs of the problem – like me. So rather than reproduce the gang-leader faux-pas story, let’s shift back to Mid Staffs and try and look forward to the likely consequences of introducing a ‘duty of candour’ ‘solution’ to the problems that exist at the moment.

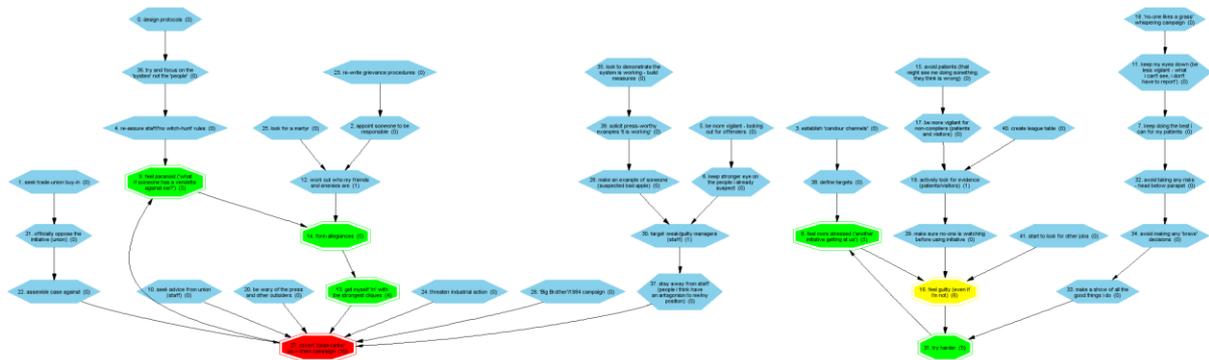
As usual we start the Perception Mapping with a question. In this case ‘if a ‘duty of candour’ policy is introduced, I will....?’. Then we need to think about the various perspectives of the assorted spectrum of stakeholders – in this case the Trust managers, trade-unions, staff, patients, visitors, media, and politicians. Without going in to the details of who might have said what, the following table details the main answers we thought would be revealed if we were able to tap in to both the tangible, spoken, answers that people would give, plus the intangible ‘real’ answers they would probably be more reluctant to share:

0	design protocols	21	officially oppose the initiative (union)
1	seek trade-union buy-in	22	assemble case against
2	appoint someone to be responsible	23	re-write grievance procedures
3	establish 'candour channels'	24	threaten industrial action
4	re-assure staff/no witch-hunt' rules	25	look for a martyr
5	be more vigilant - looking out for offenders	26	'Big Brother'/1984 campaign
6	keep stronger eye on the people i already suspect	27	covert 'close ranks' us-v-them campaign
7	keep doing the best i can for my patients	28	make an example of someone (suspected bad apple)
8	feel more stressed ('another initiative getting at us')	29	make sure no-one is watching before using initiative
9	feel paranoid ('what if someone has a vendetta against me?')	30	target weak/guilty managers (staff)
10	seek advice from union (staff)	31	try harder
11	keep my eyes down (be less vigilant - what i can't see, i don't have to report')	32	avoid taking any risks - head below parapet
12	work out who my friends and enemies are	33	make a show of all the good things i do
13	get myself 'in' with the strongest cliques	34	avoid making any 'brave' decisions
14	form allegiances	35	look to demonstrate the system is working - build measures
15	avoid patients (that might see me doing something they think is wrong)	36	try and focus on the 'system' not the 'people'
16	feel guilty (even if i'm not)	37	stay away from staff (people i think have an antagonism to me/my position)
17	be more vigilant for non-compliers (patients and visitors)	38	define targets
18	'no-one likes a grass' whispering campaign	39	solicit press-worthy examples 'it is working'
19	actively look for evidence (patients/visitors)	40	create league table
20	be wary of the press and other outsiders	41	start to look for other jobs

**Figure 2: List Of Raw Perceptions For The 'Duty Of Candour' Introduction Story**

The next part of the process than takes each of these statements and asks 'which of the other ones would this one lead to?' As is often the case in these kinds of perception map, there are several possible candidate 'leads to' answers. The key here – where we are looking forwards in time and testing whether a proposed solution is a good one rather than looking at an actual or past situation as has more usually been the case when using the tool – is to choose the things that would occur *first*. In other words if statement A *could* lead to both P and T (say), but T would happen before P, the leads-to answer we chose will be T.

When we perform this 'leads to (first)' analysis for the Figure 2 statements, we produce the consequence map shown in Figure 3 below:

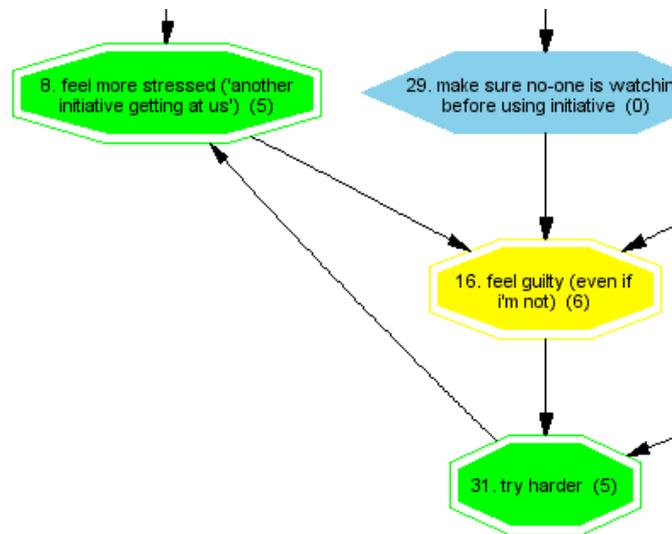


**Figure 3: 'Duty Of Candour' Consequence Map**

Without delving in to the detail of the map, it already gives a hint at the complexity of the situation. The map comprises two main loops. As in the usual Perception Mapping process, these loops provide us with a way to identify the most important of the statements written down. The reason they signify importance is that they reveal the self-re-enforcing cycles that will either cause virtuous or destructive spirals.

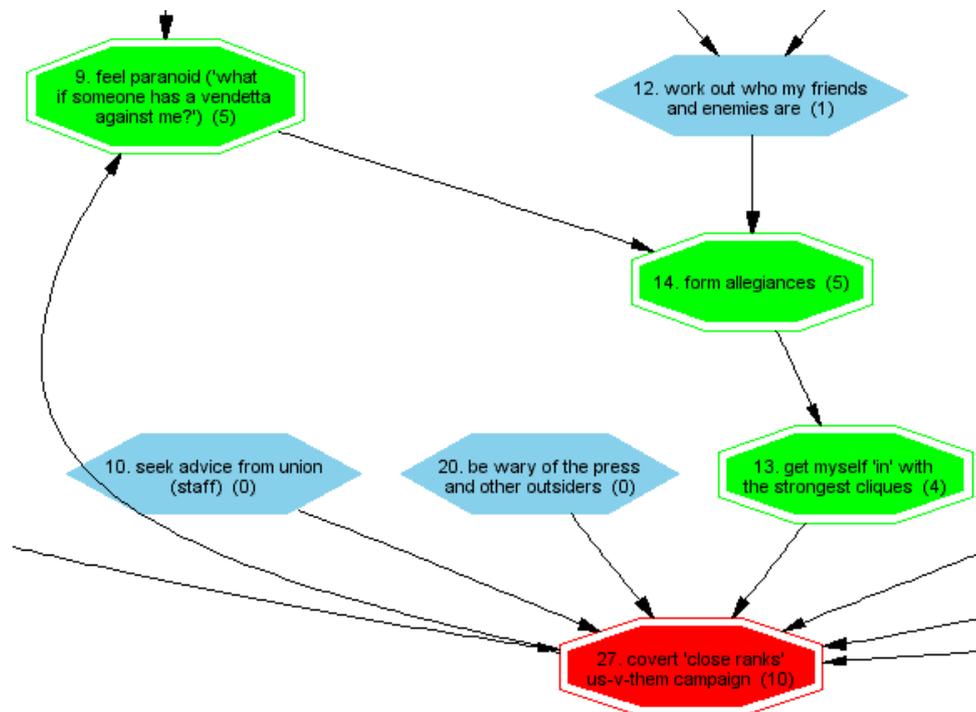
As shown in Figures 4 and 5 – which zoom in on the two loops produced by the analysis, for the Duty of Candour 'solution' both are very clearly downward destructive ones. Straight away the fact that there are two loops tells us there are two independent issues at play so there is no possibility of a single-issue solution.

Secondly, the fact that both loops are destructive, downwards spirals, tells us that the 'duty of candour' 'solution' is not looking like a good one. Let's examine the two loops in more detail. The first one is a destructive cycle concerning what happens inside the mind of an individual:



**Figure 4: Personal 'Duty Of Candour' Downward Spiral**

The second destructive loop is more about a collective and tribal issue:



**Figure 5: Group 'Duty Of Candour' Downward Spiral**

We hold no inside knowledge when constructing this map (as ever, the robustness of the answer is always helped by having those involved in the situation to be a part of the process – and as such, as with our earlier riot article, we invite readers to contribute their thoughts on the Figure 2 list if they think anything is missing). It is

always dangerous to even hint that you have a 'solution' to a difficult problem without having had access to inside information, nevertheless, we think there is a likelihood that people can look at the two destructive loops and visualise their underpinning logic. If, for example, the problem was generalized away from the specific NHS issue to any kind of enforced reporting when people in the workplace see something being done wrong, we believe the traits and actions we've included in the analysis are coherent, robust and defensible ones.

What the map and loops indicate is that a 'duty of candour' policy would be stressful to individuals in the same way that people who are not guilty of a crime always seem to become when they perceive that they are being accused. And it would be extremely divisive within the organization, very likely causing the creation of increasingly segmented and isolated groups, none of whom trusted the other groups. In essence the policy would act to re-enforce a host of 'us and them' relationships within the Trust. Then, if the story is allowed to proceed down the spirals for long enough (like David Cameron's response to the 2011 riots) the system will eventually explode and give the media a new crisis to fill the front-pages, and an opportunity to attack the politicians for implementing yet another a disastrous 'solution'. Which in turn, will serve to exacerbate the three problems described at the start of the article, and they in turn will ensure that our politicians continue to be hard-wired to make terrible decisions. Plus ça change, as the French might say.

Ultimately, of course, the point of this article is not to intrude into a problem that is none of our concern. Rather, it is to achieve two things: firstly to create a wider awareness that when any of us are working on complex problems, our inbuilt linear-world instincts are most likely wrong. And then secondly – perhaps more positive than merely saying 'we're all rubbish at solving complex problems' – is that there are tools and processes we can bring to bear – Perception Mapping in this case – that allow us to meaningfully capture and work *with* the complexity. 'Keep it simple, stupid' never works in a complex situation. Keeping things simple by segmenting problems down into their DNA components and then allowing the complexity to emerge by exploring the 'leads to' causal relationships – which is fundamentally what the Perception Mapping process does – is a much more effective way of looking at the world. And exploring the viability of prospective solutions before we begin to devote lots and lots of resource to implementing them.

## Reference

- 1) Gladwell, M., 'Blink'
- 2) Mann, D.L., 'Root Cause Fallacies. Or: Why Did The UK Riots Escalate', Systematic Innovation White Paper, [www.systematic-innovation.com](http://www.systematic-innovation.com)