

## Culpabliss - How to Help Sufferers Overcome the Condition

by Trevor Hilder \*

Stafford Beer wrote and presented his paper on culpabliss to celebrate his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1996. The condition he described has always been with us, but is more prevalent today in the English-speaking world than it was then, and perhaps more so than ever before. This is not a condition that can be cured by lecturing people about its evils, so what practical steps can we take to overcome it?

### Some diagnosis – what causes people to suffer from it?

There is a tendency in our culture to imagine that the ability to diagnose a condition confers the capacity to cure it. Perhaps the worst known case of this can be found in the works of Karl Marx. His *Das Capital* was an incisive analysis of the workings of capital and the logical consequences of untrammelled capitalism, which has recently been selling in record numbers. However, his capacity to diagnose failed to confer any capacity to resolve the issues he raised, as we can see from the catastrophic attempts to apply his ideas in Eastern Europe and the Far East. However, a bit of diagnosis is useful, so let's briefly examine why people in a working environment are prone to culpabliss.

Milgram's Torture Experiment and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment show how easy it is to get people to comply with the expectations of an authority figure, so that they will obey social expectations, even where these would be expected to contradict accepted moral values. This ought not to surprise us, given that we are all highly attuned to seek the approval of our peer group and our social superiors, particularly where the latter can reward us with elevated status and monetary reward or punish us by withdrawing them.

A working environment driven by the attainment of easily quantifiable targets exacerbates these tendencies. Henry Ford took advantage of the tendency of social groups to vie with each other for approval to increase productivity on his pioneering production lines in Detroit in the decades after he first devised them in 1913. He combined time and motion studies with the competition between ethnic groups (e.g. Poles & Hungarians) to crank up performance with great success. However, as Patrick Hoverstadt points out in his book *The Fractal Organisation*, this only works if

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the supervisors of the work know exactly what it entails and can monitor it closely enough to ensure it conforms exactly to their specification.

In a world of work which is information-intensive, where success depends on constant re-invention and a high level of personal service, this approach is disastrous, because it encourages the workforce to 'game the system', to do what meets the targets and to disregard the consequences of their actions. This creates the perfect conditions for culpabliss to rage completely out of control, creating institutions which are measurably 'improving' all the time, but are in fact in a constant state of crisis and liable to collapse.

Such organisations tend to become inward-looking, obsessed with meeting targets that have been imposed upon their workers, and with little regard for the real quality of service they provide to their customers. The strange paradox of our modern world is that these targets tend to be imposed upon people by using computer systems to capture information about their work to see if the targets are being met. But, if work was so easily quantifiable and simple to assess, why not get the computers to actually do it? After all, if you want a high-speed, rule-following idiot, isn't that what computers were designed to be?

### **The Importance of Humour**

In a post-industrial workplace, we expect our highly-educated, well-paid workforce to constantly re-invent how the work gets done, to ensure that the service they offer justifies its high price. So what are the conditions under which people act in this manner?

Henry Ford's workers were the poorly educated servants of a mechanical production line, where obedience to standardised work practices was demanded. There was little room for the expression of human variety. This is the very antithesis of what we need in a modern workplace. To create wealth in the UK today, we need to enhance the human variety that we claim to prize so highly.

So what breaks down obedience to authority more effectively than anything else, releasing our inner resources of playful inventiveness? The answer is *humour*. Real humour is the great leveller – it puts all the participants on the same level and abolishes obedience to authority. This does not imply that everyone has to be falling about laughing all the time, but lightness of spirit is a tangible and instantly recognisable feature in a genuinely inventive and productive work environment.

It is not a coincidence that the first people to be hunted down and harassed by totalitarian regimes of all kinds are the jokers, those who do not automatically respect authority figures. There is no more powerful antidote to authoritarianism than humour. It is also a powerful diagnostic for identifying 'power freaks' and ideologues, who cannot laugh at themselves.

## **Storytelling – a powerful antidote to Culpabliss**

Stafford Beer, member of this Club, was unarguably a polymath. Another member, and a mentor of mine, Idries Shah was likewise a polymath. His children Tahir and Saira now continue his support for the Club.

Idries died in 1996, He was probably the greatest authority on the world's story-telling traditions. Being fluent in dozens of different languages, and a great traveller, he collected stories wherever he went and presented them in impeccable English in over 30 books published during his long career. He also encouraged the re-establishment of the ancient tradition of oral story-telling in England, helping to found the London College of Storytellers in 1980.

Shah claimed that certain stories contain important teachings which cannot be expressed in any other way, and that these are an essential part of our human heritage. He re-established this concept of the Teaching Story in our culture, where it had pretty well died out, probably due to the disruptions of the Industrial Revolution. His works contain a treasure trove of such stories, some of which I will share with you during my talk.

## **How stories can inoculate against Culpabliss**

A good story establishes a pattern in the mind, which can act as a template to enable you to recognise a situation unfolding, and hence to recognise it for what it is. That recognition can enable you to respond to the situation effectively, instead of passively submitting and becoming 'conditioned' by it. One of Shah's stories includes the aphorism "A gnat's weight of demonstration is better than an elephant's weight of reputation". I hope to demonstrate my thesis by telling you a story which I believe captures the essence of the culpabliss phenomenon in a manner which nothing else does. If my thesis is correct, this will also help to inoculate you against this terrible affliction!

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