

'YOU'VE GOT TO STOP HIM HITTING YOU IN FRONT OF YOUR CHILDREN!'



By Kristian Tomblin

Across our discussions in 2021 and beyond, we've heard about the many roadblocks that stand in the way of change. Kristian Tomblin writes here about his experience of challenging and changing the obstacles that stand in the way of reforming public services, including the deep-seated assumptions that prevent us from being our best selves.

I work for a Top Tier Authority. I am a Principal Commissioning Manager, that puts me above Commissioning Managers but below the Chief Principal Commissioning Manager. I work in a grade 2* listed Building. Its corridors are clad in Italian marble and its offices lined with oak panelling.

It reeks of patriarchy, tradition and old power.

In a definition taken from the internet, OLD POWER can be characterised by:

- Managerialism, institutional, representative governance.
- Exclusivity, competition, authority, resource consolidation.
- Discretion, confidentiality, separation between private and public sphere.
- Professionalism, specialism.
- Long term affiliation and loyalty, less overall participation.

I've spent a good chunk of my professional life in suits and ties, in formal office meetings poring over data trying to catch commissioned services out – it's a truth isn't it that 'providers' want to cut corners, shave costs, maximise margins. Commissioners know that. We want to squeeze the pips!!

I commission domestic abuse services. More specifically, risk management for people (women) at imminent, possible risk of being killed.

About five years ago, I had an epiphany. I spent time in the lives of people the services I commissioned were there to help. I sat in people's living rooms and kitchens and they told me their stories. I heard that our services don't talk to men or challenge abuse of power in relationships, we reduce complex human issues to a series of 'problems' or deficits our services are commissioned to deal with, we deal in crisis and fail to support prevention or recovery.

Access or eligibility to services is contingent on whether levels of distress and risk are assessed as severe enough!

The sorriest thing I heard of was social workers telling victims of domestic violence (always women victims) – ‘you’ve got to stop him hitting you in front of your children or we’ll have to take them away from you.’

The second sorriest thing I heard was that, out of hundreds of professional encounters, only a handful of people – and what they did – were seen as being helpful or valued. And all of these examples were because they went ‘above and beyond’. They were working outside of what was described in their job description! Or their ‘service specification’.

Their special skills, knowledge, job title, professional affiliation weren’t valued. The things that were valued were: being kind, compassionate, persistent and non-judgemental. Being Human.

People working in services frequently told me they weren’t able to work in accordance with their values. They paid a price for this in their energy, motivation and wellbeing.

Has old power-driven humanness out of human services?

My epiphany? That I was (am?) complicit in a system that causes harm. Looking from my perspective of managing commissioned services through my ‘old power lens,’ performance data, things looked great! Markets, competition, professionalism and specialisms work.

I was more naïve back then and I thought that presenting these stories back to the system would be a catalyst for change. How could we continue to hold in place a system that we know is routinely causing harm?

Well, it wasn’t, and we could!

I’m no expert in systems change but I’m learning. Understanding and working to reveal and change the dynamics of power is crucial.

I’m trying to develop my own practice in ‘new power’ as a means of exploring and bringing about transformation.

NEW POWER (as defined on the internet) can be characterised as:

- Informal, opt-in decision making, self-organisation, networked governance.
- Open-source collaboration, crowd wisdom, sharing.
- Radical transparency.
- Do-it-ourselves, ‘maker culture’.
- Short term, conditional affiliation, more overall participation.

I’m learning to challenge old power and build new. Building networks of fellow travellers seeking a paradigm shift.

And what does that look like? Well...

We’ve started a ‘trauma network’ – a place for people in our system (working in it and receiving support from it) to connect and build communities of practice, learn together and from each other, about how to better understand and respond to people’s distress.

We're moving away from competition and target cultures and instead building alliances where organisations cooperate towards shared ambitions. We're orientating towards valuing thoughtful reflective practice and learning as the key currency of our alliances.

We're listening to people who need support and learning about their lives. Not jumping to conclusions about the services they need but co-designing bespoke responses with them.

And we're learning how to tell the story of failure and waste inherent in many current models of service delivery and helping people ready for change to connect with a better way of working.

Kristian Tomblin lives and works in the beautiful county of Devon. He is a proud public servant and sees himself very much in the service of our citizens. He is increasingly drawn to recognising and embracing the complex nature of the challenges he works on and the importance of 'whole system' responses.

