

Governor Support Service

Soft skills for managing school complaints and conflict resolution

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Learning outcomes

- How to manage difficult parents and people generally with different personalities
- Investigations – a brief overview
- Recognise trigger points for anger and diffuse aggression
- Understand what people really want - the roadmap to a solution - and fine-tune listening skills
- How to use words and phrases to assert your position
- Introduction to assertiveness - 'I' statements and self care

Introduction

- Ice Breaker
- What school are you from?
- How long have you been a governor?
- What sort of governor are you – LA, Staff, Parent, Co-opted?



More complaints than ever!

Hard Facts.

- How much do you think complaints have gone up by?
- How many are considered **not** worthy of further investigation?
- What percentage lead to an actual snap investigation by Ofsted?



The answers

- Complaints to Ofsted about schools rose by a quarter last year, but more than two-thirds were deemed to not warrant further investigation.
- Ofsted received 14,900 complaints about schools this year. This marked an almost 25% increase on the previous year, when 12,000 complaints were made.
- But less than 1 per cent led to follow-up inspections, with more than two-thirds of complaints deemed to not warrant further investigation.

Source: Schools Week

Concerns versus complaints

The DfE guidance explains the difference between a concern and a complaint:

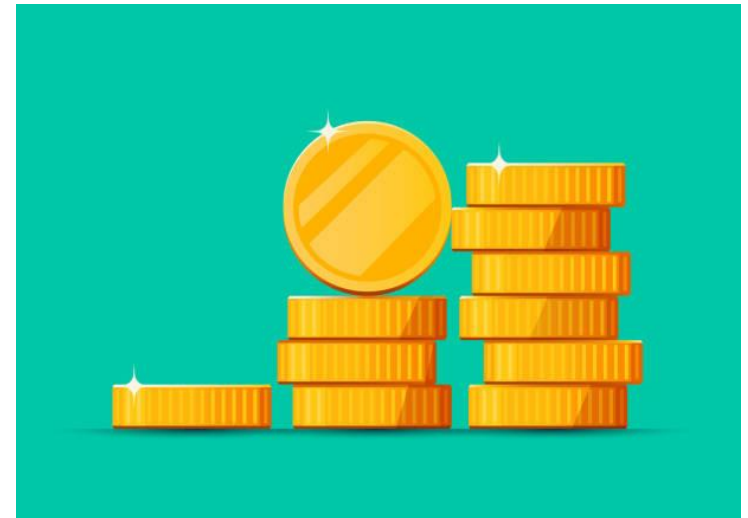
- A **concern** is defined as “an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought”. The school will resolve concerns through day-to-day communication as far as possible
- A **complaint** is defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction however made, about actions taken or a lack of action”

Complaints policy

- How well do you know yours?
- Are you kept informed of the number of complaints and at what stage they are at?
- If you are a staff governor, do you know what to do if a parent approaches you in the playground/by phone etc?
- Have you got enough governors – non staff or parents to sit on panels?
- Have you had any training specifically on complaints?

The cost of complaints

- Stress levels of all involved – complainer and complained about!
- Staff time in financial terms
- Staff distraction away from other duties
- Loss of faith in leadership and stretch of resources of governing body members
- Sickness and associated costs
- Investigations
- Legal fees – tribunals!



Key messages

- Treat the person – not the process
- It is not about you, it is about the problem – so let's avoid making it about you!
- We are all on the same team – the team of the child



What people complain about

- Bullying in school
- Special needs support
- Racial slurs
- Homework
- Remote learning - school comparisons
- EACH OTHER!
- Safeguarding
- School web site
- Dress code
- Issues around parental responsibility

How do you like to be treated?



Shared experiences

- When did you last receive a poor reception when you complained?
- What prompted you to complain?
- How was it handled?
- In your experience what was good/bad?
- How did it leave you feeling?

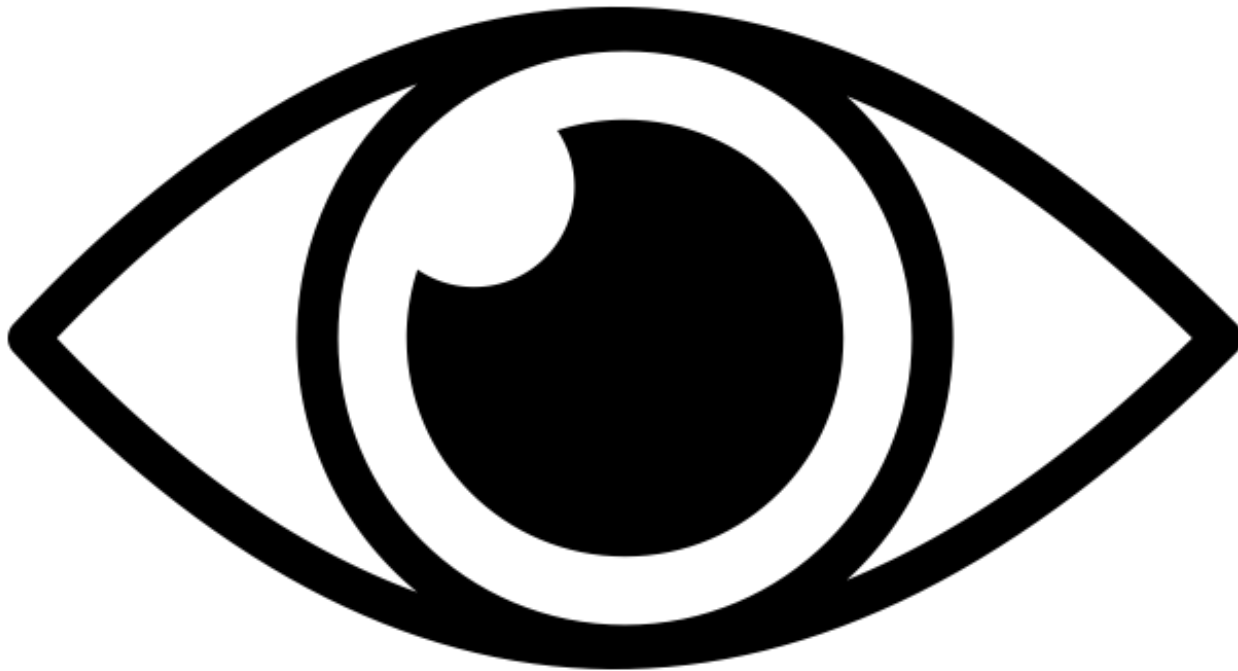
The benefits

- Process of listening to and resolving complaints can contribute to school improvement
- Schools may identify underlying issues that need to be addressed
- A tool to evaluate a school's performance
- Stress-testing the existing policy
- Well handled complaints can win you your best advocate!
- Question to ask yourselves afterwards – what was our learning outcome?

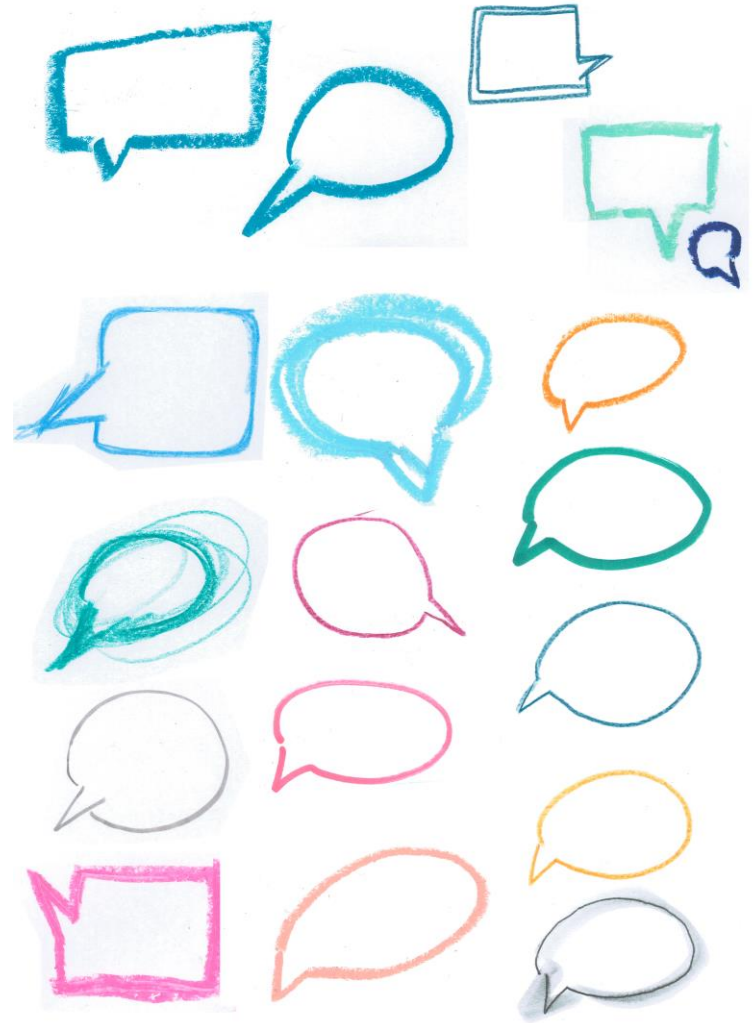
Worst case scenarios

- Cases going to tribunals have doubled from 28,000 in 2019 to 44,000 in 2020
- Judiciary ramping up its recruitment drives for judges
- Can take six years to process claims
- Costs of legal team, cost of compensation – claims can be anything from £80,000 to £780,000
- Reputational damage to school

The world through parents' eyes



The hidden stories behind the complaint



Barriers to understanding

- Cultural
- Language
- Emotional
- Fear of procedures
- Perceived power positions – both ways

What makes us angry

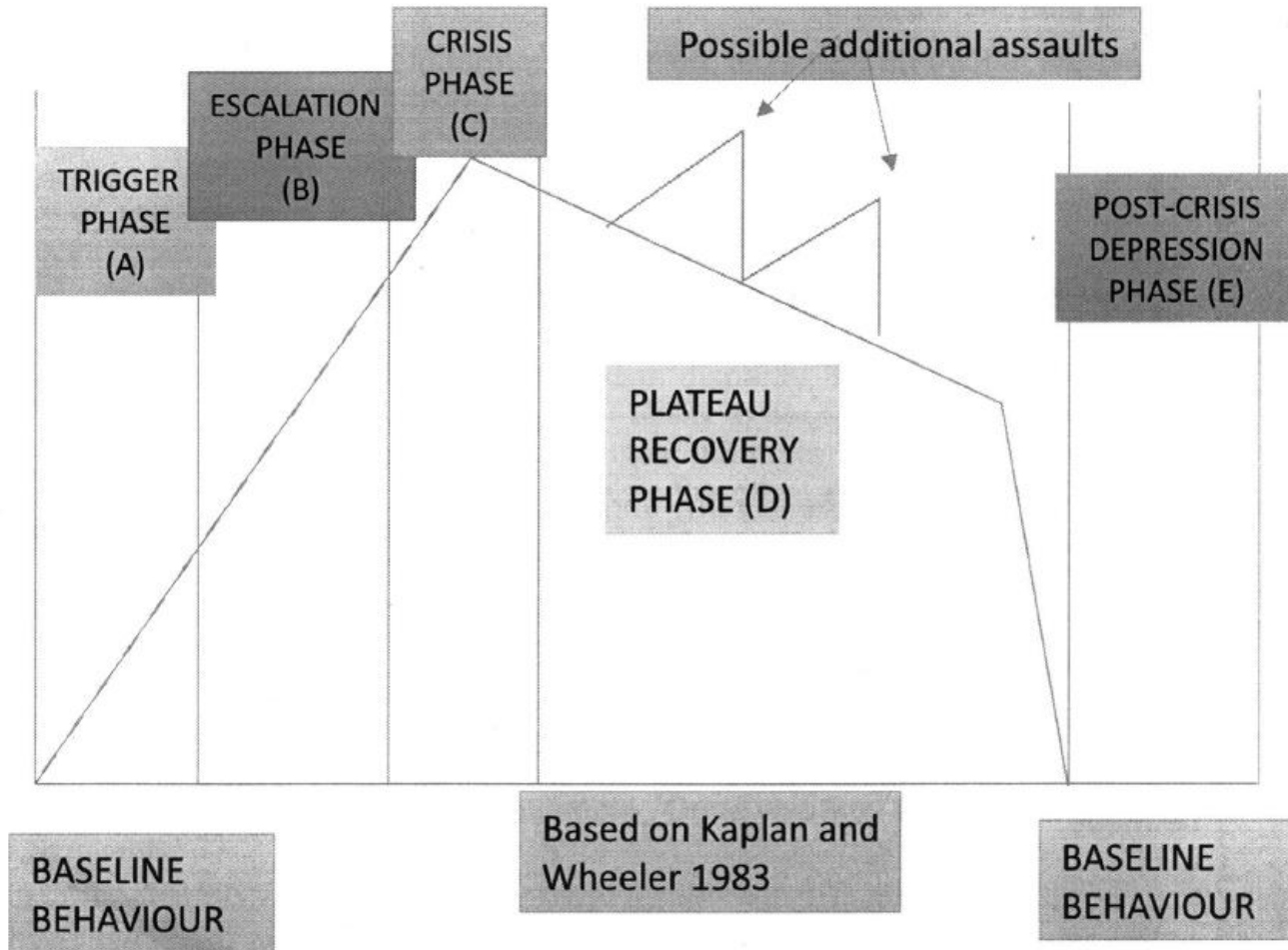
Discussion



Anger and what it looks like



Typical assault cycle



Assault cycle explained

- Triggering
- Escalation – person becomes overly focused on one issue
- Crisis phase – physical and emotional arousal
- Recovery – can be threat for up to 90 minutes
- Post crisis – weepy, remorseful, guilty, ashamed

After the storm

- Acknowledge the concern
- Apologise for distress
- Avoid making the child/person the problem
- Identify both parties' interests – we all want this resolved
- Keep in mind cultural and class differences
- Show them respect but don't over-analyse
- Eliminate anger statements – eg 'you make me feel...'
- Do not point/shake finger

Roadmap out

- ‘Thank you for bringing that to my attention’
- ‘I am sorry you feel like that’
- ‘Let’s see what we can do to work towards a solution’
- ‘It is not about you – it is about the problem’

Anger in written form

- Emotive language – ‘I can’t believe you allowed this to happen!’
- Accusatory language – ‘I believe you just don’t care’
- Inflammatory/threatening language – ‘just wait to see what I can do to this school’ – legal threat? Prevent?
- Passive aggressive language – ‘this school will be the end of me’

When you will have a difficult conversation

- Parental complaint
- Restructuring / union staff
- Medical capability
- Dismissal
- Tribunal
- Investigating a complaint

Key words

- Never be afraid to use these words to build trust and empathy:

Please

Sorry

Thank you

Body language

- Sit in the listening position – lean forward with hands apart and with open body language
- Do not touch
- Never sit directly opposite; if possible, sit alongside
- Do not constantly hold eye contact – look away occasionally
- Do not stand up when the person is in anger stage – can be interpreted as squaring up – sitting down softens
- Physically move yourself away to a safe place

Vocal soft and low



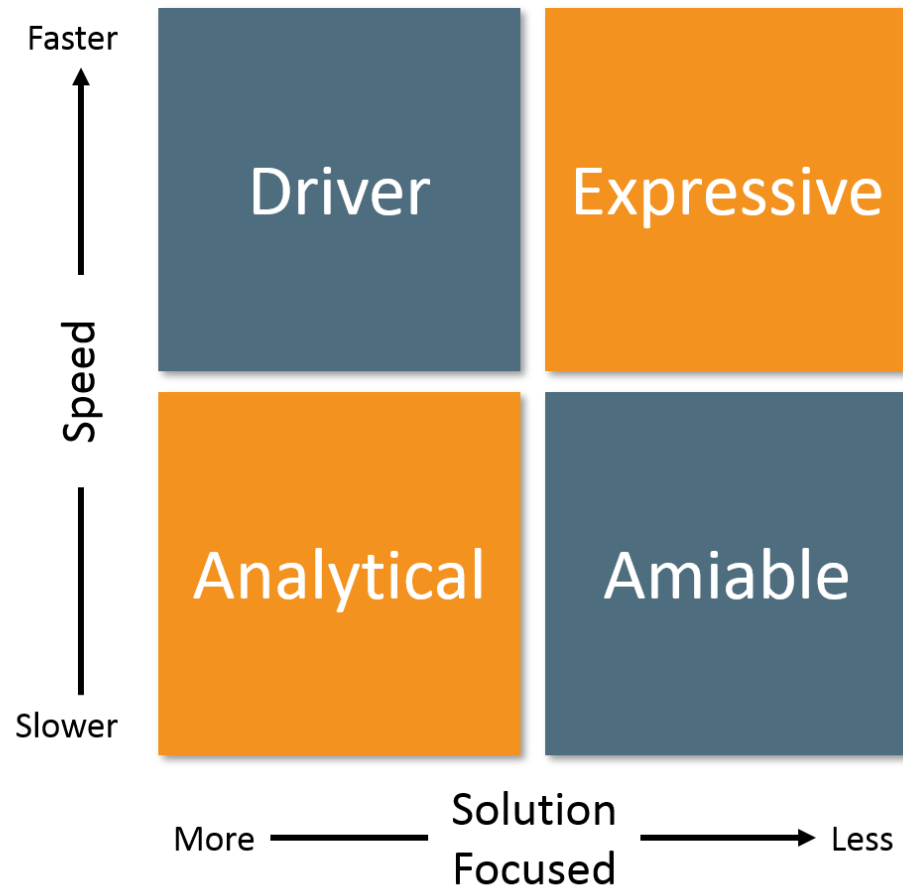
Knowing me knowing you

- Knowing ourselves to mirror best response
- How we *think* we are may not be how we *come across* to other people

The four behavioural styles

- **Amiable:** like others to like them – friendly, supportive; avoid conflict; casual posture and animated
- **Expressive:** flamboyant, like recognition, ideas people
- **Driver:** task driven, controlling, results driven
- **Analytical:** organised, methodical, facts and data driven, careful

Knowing me knowing you



Break out exercise

- What sort of person are you and how do you like information to be delivered?
- What is your social style?
- What is the style of the people close to you – in your school?
- What adjustments do you find yourself making to communicate with these people?

Listening exercise



Active listening skills

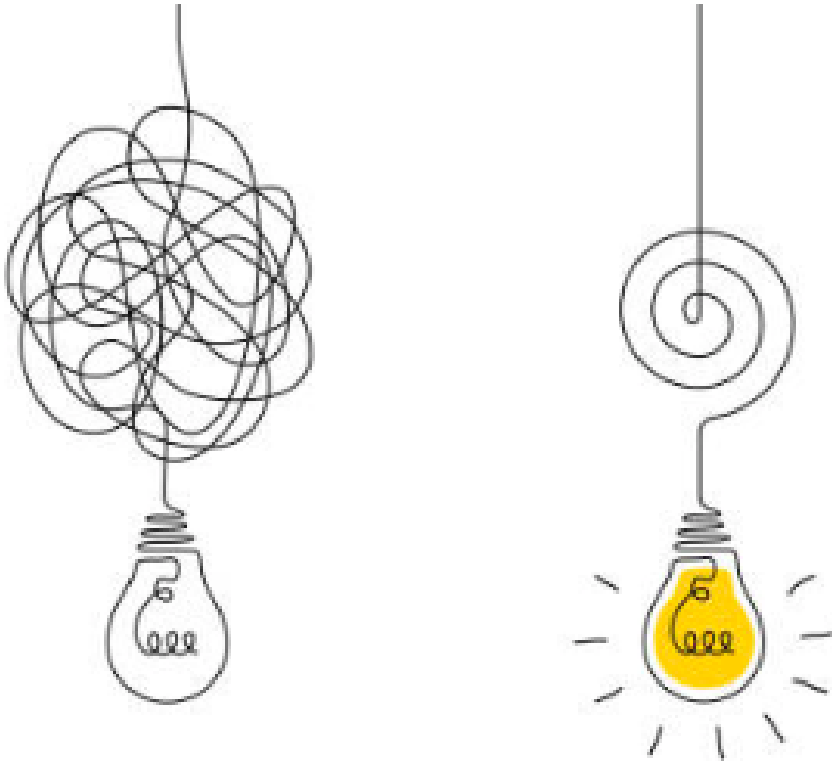
- Use eye contact appropriately
- Allow the speaker to finish sentence before replying
- Nod to show you are listening or by making short verbal comments (avoid OK and I see)
- Zoom skills
- Key – we listen to understand, not just to hear and respond

The four models of listening

- Downloading – listening to confirm
- Factual listening attending to new idea or data
- Emphatic requiring to see world through other view
- Generative listening – the way forward

Paraphrase

- The power of the paraphrase



Reflecting

- What you seem to be saying
- Correct me if I am wrong, however
- So, for you what is happening...



Summarising

- What I am hearing is....
- Let me summarise what I think you have said
- What I would like is and what you would like is

Open and closed questions

- What would you like us to do about that?
- Is there anything else we should talk about?
- What do you want from this?
- Do you want to go ahead with this?
- How does that sound so far?
- Can I check that?

Barrier mindset

- I am right
- I have the power
- You should change
- My needs are greater than yours

Bridging words

- Us, we, what do you think?
- Help me understand
- What would you say to...?
- What we can do here...
- Our joint interests are ...

Assertiveness

Respect myself/respect others:

- Recognise my own needs as an individual
- Make clear 'I' statements
- Allow myself to make mistakes
- Change my mind
- Ask for thinking time
- Ask for what I want

- **Recognise that I am not responsible for the behaviour of others**

Four different types of behaviour

- Assertiveness – I win, you win
- Passive – deferring to the will of others
- Aggressive – winning at all cost
- Passive aggressive - acting out aggression in an indirect way, sniping behind backs, sulking

Typical complaint

They were not doing their work, neglecting my child's SEN needs and their responsibilities that led to bullying of my son and that terrible stressful incident on Thu, 22 that influenced my child's mental wellbeing. It could have been prevented if they were acting in a professional way not just issuing detentions and suspensions and not knowing how to manage the situation in the class.



Further examples

- Johnny has been reprimanded for acting out in class. He says he was the only one that was singled out for bad behaviour. And, what's more, he is as good as gold at home. Why are you horrid to him? It is not fair picking on him. He's a good lad and you should know what he is going through at home right now. I can barely cope with all that – and now I have him in a state to put up with...
- I want to complain now and see the head, and if I don't get a response, I will go all the way to the top...



The investigation

Who can investigate?

- The head teacher (unless it is about them)
- HR expert
- A designated member of staff
- Chair of Governors
- A designated Governor

Resolving Complaints

At each stage in the procedure schools will want to keep in mind ways in which a complaint can be resolved. It might be sufficient to acknowledge that the complaint is valid in whole or in part. In addition, it may be appropriate to offer one or more of the following:

- an apology
- an explanation
- an admission that the situation could have been handled differently or better
- an assurance that the event complained of will not recur
- an explanation of the steps that have been taken to ensure that it will not happen again
- an undertaking to review school policies in light of the complaint

Further reading

Successful Difficult Conversations in School,
Sonia Gill/John Catt Educational, 2019

The Social Styles Handbook, Nova Vista, 2004

Brilliant Assertiveness, Dannie Lu Carr, Pearson Books, 2012

Questions?





**Governor Support Service
Based in Hillingdon and
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throughout the borough and beyond**

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The screenshot shows the homepage of the Governor Support Service website. The header features the GSS logo. On the left, there is a login section with fields for 'Username' and 'Password', a 'Remember Me' checkbox, and a 'Log In' button. Below the login section is a link for 'Governor and Clerk Vacancies' with a brief description. The main content area on the right has a 'Home' breadcrumb, a 'Welcome to the Governor Support Service' heading, a paragraph of introductory text, a 'More' link, and a group photo of five people. Below this is a section titled 'Our services' with a sub-heading 'Advice & Guidance' and a paragraph of text.