

The Power of Persuasion

*Most leaders have to contend with the careful management of different stakeholders and a degree of media scrutiny. For **Jane Furniss**, as former CEO of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), handling the two proved to be a 24/7 assignment*



At the age of 60, Jane Furniss is taking lessons to improve her swimming. It's fitting for a woman who has spent much of her career traversing troubled waters.

In fact, it doesn't come much choppiier than being head of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), the public body responsible for overseeing complaints made

against police forces in England and Wales, where she was CEO from 2006 until May this year. As CEO, she was responsible to the IPCC's chair who in turn, reported to Parliament.

The IPCC oversees complaints made against 42 police constabularies and a dozen other law enforcement agencies consisting of approximately 150,000 officers overall.

During her six years at the body, Jane has had to contend with transforming how the IPCC operates, while attempting to change the culture within the police force and reduce the number of deaths in police custody. The real achievement for Jane has been to use persuasion and reason to encourage different forms of behaviour especially as the IPCC itself has limited powers.

"If we do an investigation and make a recommendation the public would expect it to be implemented but our ability to make the police do things is extremely limited," she says. "You have to use influence and pressure. It's very frustrating... but you have to find a way to make as much progress as you can in spite of those limitations."

ENLIGHTENED PHILOSOPHY

Jane has had a lot of experience exerting influence in difficult situations throughout her career in the public sector. Her roles have included working as Director General in central government, leading a programme of reform for the criminal justice system as well as roles in the HM Inspectorate of Probation and with the probation service.

Some of the leadership skills she has developed include being able to challenge anyone "whether that's the home secretary or a chief constable"; an invaluable skill for enabling change. She also became a deft hand at dealing with rivalrous government departments and as a result has become good at bringing people together to solve a problem especially if they do not agree with each other.

"All the jobs I've done were preparing me for the [IPCC] job and I've drawn on them all when I've sat here over the last six years with my head in my hands thinking I have no idea how to deal with this or that situation," she laughs.

One thing Jane pushed hard during her time at the IPCC is "a programme of learning the lessons", which basically advised the police on how to work more effectively in particular situations.

She accepts that the police "don't want to treat people badly and don't want young men to die in custody" which is why the IPCC had begun to help them recognise what system changes they had to make and what training they needed to have in place.

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"We have done a lot to get them to change the way they manage people in custody because what's not known to the public is that many of those who end up in a police cell are already very ill," explains Jane.

"They are often people who have taken drugs, drunk too much, maybe a combination of both, or who have serious physical or mental illnesses. The skill is in making sure those people are identified and taken to hospital and not just put in a police cell so at least they have a chance of being treated."

Between 2004 and 2013, deaths in custody have dropped from 44 a year to 15. "I wouldn't claim the IPCC alone has done that but it's certainly something we have given very high priority," she says.

It remains something of a victory, especially as the culture of the police force can be a tough one to challenge. She says:

"They have a long way to go. As a public service the police probably don't deal with complaints as well as other public bodies."

According to Jane, one of the barriers to culture reform within the police force is the tendency to react defensively to complaints: "It's quite complex... One reason is that if you are a disciplined service like the police, you are a command-and-control kind of organisation so listening to the views of others is not instinctive. You don't ask people what they think before sending them out on patrol – you just give them orders. That approach is built into the operation of the body.

"Secondly, in lots of situations the police are not welcome and are involved because something has gone wrong and they have to impose themselves... so they are on the receiving end of a lot of anger and hostility and that makes them feel under siege."

Jane says the way to change this stubborn pattern of behaviour is by adopting a "confess and learn" culture which must be built into the systems, rather than a fearful one that does not admit errors transparently.

BAD NEWS DAY

It's an approach that Jane says she has enacted within the IPCC itself even if at times it has been hard to enforce when dealing with an intense amount of scrutiny. She cites an internal incident during the Mark Duggan shooting in Tottenham, which preceded the riots in London in 2011, as an example.

A press officer working under Jane made the mistake of telling a news reporter that there had been an "exchange of fire" on the night Duggan had been fatally shot and that a police officer had been injured,

when the facts of the incident had not been established. Within hours, this piece of information set off a spate of negative headlines for the police.

Jane says: “[The press officer] was tired, working late and he had been pressed, so he told the journalist this and it got reported that the IPCC had said it. It was human error but...the consequences of that were so serious.

“I do not believe the riots occurred because of that, but the resulting headlines fed a story that said police are trying to claim this guy shot at the cops even though there was no evidence Mark Duggan had shot anybody. I asked the employee to account for what he did in a non-blaming way and put it right as quickly as we could.”

Vital Statistics

Born:	Repton, Derbyshire, 1954
Married:	to David for 36 years
Music:	Classical music, Carol King, The Eagles, Simon and Garfunkel (especially Bridge over Troubled Waters)
Book:	<i>Ragged Trousered Philanthropists</i> by Robert Tressell
Film:	Casablanca
Best Holiday:	Peru
Education:	A BA in History and Philosophy at Bradford University and a Masters in Social Work at York University
Favourite drink:	Very strong coffee and Bombay Sapphire with Fever Tree Tonic

Shortly after the internal conversations had been had, the IPCC issued an apology and the press officer was defended rather than blamed and punished. “Then we discussed as a team how to safeguard against something like this happening again,” adds Jane.

A NEW VISION

It’s a calmer, more constructive and progressive approach for an organisation to take towards its employees rather than one of blame and punish. Certainly, her attitude to crisis management appears exemplary – although, to be fair, she has had plenty of practice over the years.

“I stay very calm under pressure... it’s rare that I lose my temper,” she reflects. “I generally have the view that things can be put right. Nothing is a disaster. My very first boss at the Probation Service taught me that. He would always be calm when I went to him with a problem and he would always say that a problem could be put right.”

As she talks about leaving the IPCC she becomes philosophical. “None of us knows what lies ahead,” she says. “I’ve got this instinct I won’t die of old age, and I want to really enjoy the next phase of my life and do some useful things.”

She adds: “I always planned to go once the new chair was appointed and she has a different vision for the organisation. I have no quarrel with that but she needs someone to develop that vision, the strategy and deliver it over the next five years. So all in all it seemed right for me to go and to support the chair to appoint her own chief executive.”

As Jane says goodbye to the IPCC, she wants to bring all her considerable experience and learning to the private

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sector, while she carries on other roles including a Deputy Chair position at homelessness charity, Crisis, and as a Criticaleye Board Mentor. She is also a NED of the Solicitors Regulation Authority and chairs its Equality and Diversity Committee.

She says: “The leadership challenges are more similar in the private sector to the public sector than I first thought. You are still dealing with things like culture, communications, crisis situations, reputation issues – all of those could apply to a large oil company or a bank.” ■

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Jane Furniss
Deputy Chair
Crisis

Jane was Chief Executive of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) from 2006 to 2013. She is a Board Mentor of Criticaleye and Deputy Chair of the highly-regarded homelessness charity, Crisis.

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