



The catalyst star

by a director of operations

We were halfway through a two-day conference where we had assembled 30 chief executives from some of England's leading local authorities, together with some of their central government counterparts. The challenge was how they would move from an emphasis on leading their authorities to an emphasis on leading and shaping the places those authorities represented.

We had promised an interactive, sparky and challenging event where people would not be able to simply sit and analyse the input they received but would be forced to internalize it and thus change their personal approach. Overnight, I'd felt we were in reach of this objective but also that we would need to change something in ourselves the next day if we were to achieve greater depth. The event was called a 'deep dive'; it risked becoming a 'shallow paddle'.

I felt I needed space to gather my thoughts, so before the conference started on the second day I went out for a walk.

Central London lacks inspiring countryside and with little time to spare I wasn't going to make it into the parks. I did, however, pause outside a map shop. I love maps – I see them as pictures of possibilities – and I was amused by the metaphor. By the time I came back in, I didn't really know any better what I was going to say or how to play the opening session, but I did feel a lot calmer, albeit with that element of restless insecurity that makes the adrenaline flow.

As I started talking to the conference I moved off the podium and out onto the floor. The podium had distanced me from the people there and I needed to make a connection. I wanted to be honest with this group, to name the position we were in as I saw it and to challenge them to move beyond the comfortable position of the previous day. I was very conscious of my position as probably the most junior of them all, yet felt that by simply speaking truthfully I would offer them the opportunity to take things forward differently. My agenda became them and how I worked with them, not me and what I felt they should achieve.

Did it work? Well, yes and no. Some found powerful insights and some undoubtedly chose to follow a different route. Leading is about people and how we relate to them, their history, their differences and their aspirations. To do that we need to understand ourselves and how we must change in order to see the change we seek in others. If we aren't brave enough to take a long hard look at ourselves, then inspiring bold change in others remains unreachable.

