



# ***Flying High***

A new look at local government leadership,  
transformation and the power of conversation

w w w . s o l a c e . o r g . u k

*society of local authority chief executives and senior managers*



# Contents

---

Preface	3
Introduction	4
The narrative	5
“What I found” – the context	6
Getting started	8
Step change	11
Analysis	18
Personal skills	19
Transformational change	21
Red Curve/Green Curve	22
The transition zone	25
Thinking about people	26
The political interface	28
Drawing the threads together	29
Think Tank members	30
Further reading	30

## Flying High

### Preface

We've all read the academic books on leadership until we're blue in the face. This paper is different. It has been written by practitioners for practitioners and takes as its foundations the results of some 30 detailed interviews with council chief executives from all corners of the country and from every conceivable type of local authority. It recognises how the jobs of chief executive and senior manager have changed radically over the past couple of years, with the impact of leaders with cabinets, directly elected mayors and the introduction of Comprehensive Performance Assessments. The experiences of chief executives are extremely varied, but what are the critical success factors? Everyone finds the job at the top demanding, to say the least, but why do some of us derive such satisfaction from our jobs whilst others are hanging on by the skin of the teeth, or just not hanging on at all?

The paper has been written with existing and future chief executives in mind but we hope it will be of value to everyone who is committed to the success of councils. The early sections take us through the 30 interviews with a narrative that highlights the experiences of chief executives in their own words. Many of the quotes are delightfully whimsical in nature and all of them show spirit, energy and commitment. We have also been surprised by the willingness of chief executives to share their most private thoughts and speak so candidly about their triumphs and failures; what motivates them; what it feels like to be under the spotlight; or how they are adapting to elected members with executive powers. We believe traditional heroic and hierarchical models of leadership are proving to be less satisfactory. Improvement tends to be patchy if based solely on centrally-driven initiatives or conventional improvement models such as Best Value. Our jobs have become much more complex, we function in leadership systems and networks and power is being replaced by influence. Cabinet and committee meetings will always be important, but it is the numerous informal conversations that take place in an organisation which shape opinions and the future.

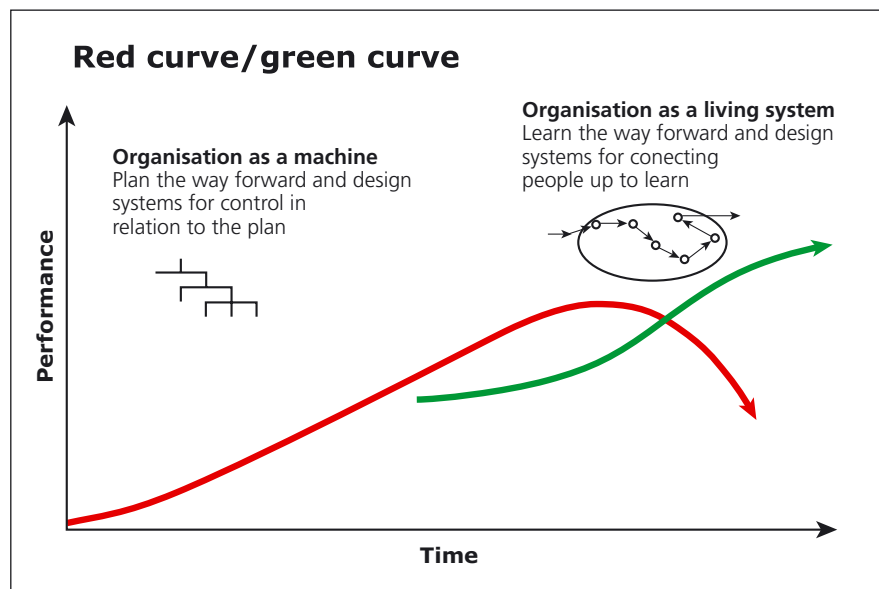
This paper goes way beyond the usual list of competencies and explores complexity, post-conventional thinking and the WHAT, HOW and WHO of transformational leadership in a local authority context. Leadership is not a job title or a position, it is something we earn everyday from the staff we support and inspire. We investigate what it is really like to be a chief executive and how to improve your chances of thriving; handling the unexpected and staying in control of your life and career. Whilst confronting the problems, we also remain entirely optimistic and upbeat about the opportunities and the future. There is no better job!

**Michael Pitt**  
**President of SOLACE**

# Introduction

Councils change continuously but they transform far less often. When they do transform, led by an effective leader, the question always hangs in the air... "Just how did they do that?"

In this paper we explore ideas of organisations as 'machines' and 'living systems' to illustrate different states in which a local authority can exist. We hope to explain how chief executives can help bring about the transition from one to the other with a step change in performance. Getting this right can have far reaching consequences for working with members and colleagues, the sort of people we appoint, how we react when things go wrong and the examples we set others. It also has a bearing on our relationships with other organisations, especially central government. It is the antidote to 'flogging the system,' (as the Prime Minister describes it) and command and control tendencies.



But before delving into the 'Red Curve/Green Curve' and other aspects of leadership, what have chief executives been saying to us?

## Flying High – The narrative

---

Local government exists to represent and serve people. Whilst this paper concentrates on what it is like to be a chief executive, we must avoid the danger of becoming too self indulgent. Our personal development matters but only as a means to an end, with the aim of becoming better equipped to meet the challenges and drive up the quality of front line services. Throughout, the writing of this paper has concentrated on the contribution chief executives make and the impact they can have on the quality of life of the public they serve.

The following narrative is illustrated with stories, word pictures and quotes drawn from interviews with chief executives from unitaries, mets, districts, counties and London boroughs. Each quote is linked to the full interview, which appears on the SOLACE website at: [www.solace.org.uk](http://www.solace.org.uk).

---

**“On my first day as a chief executive when the door to my office was shut and I was left alone for the first time, I was left wondering what to do next. I phoned my mother.” (A7)**

---

We have broken down the experience of being a chief executive into a set of different stages:

- **“What I found” – the context**
- **Getting started**
- **Step change**

Again, the emphasis here is on creating a narrative, illustrated by actual experiences. Quotes are highlighted and as Frank Carson put it, “It’s the way I tell ‘em” that’s important.



## **“What I found” – the context**

---

All chief executives' jobs are unique and nothing can more graphically illustrate this than the first reactions of these leaders in local government as they open the door into their new job. The corridors of power all look wildly different and each town and county hall hinterland has its own feel. No amount of careful research can prepare you for the shock, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not so pleasant, of some authorities.

**“I’d underestimated the patois of the squirearchy.... I hadn’t been in post long when someone rang me up and called me by my surname. He said, ‘I guess you’ve heard of me’. I said, ‘no’. He said, ‘about time you bloody did then’. Then he said, ‘anyway, the Axxx, what sort of a bloody road is that? The M1, there’s a bloody road. Do something about it’.” (A24)**

---

There is no easy or standard way of dealing with members and groups. The political set-up can be slim or fat controlling majorities or NOC. Some chief executives have had to deal with rapidly changing factions and groups. The interests and personalities of leading members vary! The switch to a new controlling party can throw up all kinds of opportunities.

**“It’s a very volatile set-up. The independents have a reputation for crossing the floor to switch allegiances.” (A9)**

---

But other authorities are unwilling to accept that change is needed and seem half asleep.

**“It is a contented borough where it has been difficult to get things done because people like it the way it is. Council meetings are short, lady members wear seamed stockings and sometimes hats.” (A19)**

**“When I first arrived I was aware the borough had a good reputation. The problem was it was not a reputation that was deserved.” (A11)**

---

Many councils are desperate for change and they look to the new chief executive to deliver it and deliver it yesterday. And then there’s the money. Some authorities are still recovering from years of plenty when the sale of assets allowed them to buy, for instance, fleets of minibuses to take people to hospital. (A1). While others find the coffers a little more empty than expected.

**“What I was not fully informed of was the financial mess the authority was in and this had to be tackled in parallel with the organisational and cultural changes.” (A3)**

---

## The narrative – “What I found”

Whether you have done the job before or are a fresh-faced newcomer, one thing is perhaps common to all these jobs – often nothing is as it seems.

**“I was appointed chief executive of the new authority, which hadn’t yet come into being, so for a while I was the only employee. We weren’t allowed into County Hall so we were working out of cramped offices in the town. They were so grotty that one Saturday I came in with my son and painted my room. The message was that the chief executive was ready to get their hands dirty, and that the conditions we work in are important.” (A21)**

---



## Getting started

---

So, if you have a desk and you have got your feet under it – what next? What is evident from this collection of personal accounts is that there is an imperative to establish yourself and your place in the new council.

**“On Day One I felt excited but not too anxious because this is a sound authority. But I had to look in charge from Day One. It’s like being in showbiz, you have to make an entrance onto the stage; everyone is watching you. You are it. People are making up their minds. You have to be your own person.” (A2)**

---

Excitement and first reactions soon give way to an over-riding impulse. Act, act positively and excite the organisation.

**“I had to get members to wake up and smell the coffee. In Week One I thought this is going to take three years, by the end of Month One I thought it would take much longer than that.” (A11)**

**“I had to avoid buying into the culture – all the reasons why change wouldn’t be possible. I got a huge lever on what I was trying to do from a number of inspection reports which were very poor.” (A26)**

---

There is also often a need to establish a limited, sometimes very limited, set of priorities or guiding principles.

**“In my first few months I spent time with members, staff, and external stakeholders sharing aspirations, which resulted in a document that set two priorities: providing excellent services and involving the community. And these have been useful guiding principles throughout the five years of change which has followed.” (A13)**

---

And then there are the perks of the post.

**“When I was appointed as chief executive, I decided never to write a detailed committee report again. I wanted to be able to stand back and let others take a lead.” (A13)**

---

Throughout the interviews there is, simply put, a conviction that people matter. The accounts from these leaders are smattered with thanks either to the organisation as a whole or to individuals. ‘I didn’t do it on my own’, ‘I couldn’t have done it on my own’ are phrases that crop up again and again. However, it is also true that getting rid of the people who do not help or who work hard to undermine you can be a crucial part of getting started.



**“Within the early months I dismissed two senior managers. People said ‘you can’t do that he’s one of us’.” (A16)**

**“I got rid of the committee Robber Barons.” (A10)**

---

There is a clear split between those incoming chief executives who plough straight into an organisational review and others who believe they need to tackle cultures and evolve into a new structure (A23, A8) before attempting more dramatic change.

**“We put a structure to Members, but they wanted 20% of the costs taken out, so we took out tiers of management, and ended up with a very lean structure.” (A21)**

---

In many cases there is an effort to reconfigure the existing set-up and break down barriers and resistance to change.

**“When I arrived there was a pronounced lack of trust between officers and members. I organised a brainstorm between key officers and members, telling each in advance to ensure that when they sat down they had an officer (or member) on either side; to split up the tribes.” (A12)**

---

For one chief executive the answer was to park structural changes, massive reviews or a revision to the political organisation of the council. This person felt that the main potential for change was wrapped up in the staff and started by initiating a wholesale investment in the people who worked in the council. Others built up support and support staff (A28). But the opportunity to start off positively did not present itself to some who inherited staff and councils badly damaged by inspections, best value reviews or CPAs. They had to limit the damage and revive the spirits of the organisation straight away.

**“Best Value was a nightmare; it was too service driven, people couldn’t stay within their review scope. It had the effect of demotivating a lot of people.” (A24)**

---

Almost without exception the people interviewed said they dealt with members early on; their hopes, their anxieties and their demands. Some had to learn hard lessons in order to get their relationship with members right.

**“In the early days I used to have shouting matches with one of the group leaders – until his group members made it clear to me that they couldn’t help me with him unless I changed the way I handled things!” (A21).**

---

## The narrative – Getting started

Stocktaking, tours of wards with members, meetings and strategic papers for groups were of real importance. (A9). If first attempts failed, either with staff, members or the public, new ways were thought of and put into action.

**“Opposition from one of the political groupings didn’t help. It got better after that. We trained 62 staff – angels we called them, as in community planning angels. We mapped out all the groups in the community and the angels conveyed the messages and listened to the response to the plans we were making.” (A24)**

---

Perhaps the most inspirational of all the start-up stories is the one told by a new chief executive of a brand new council.

**“It was a great time – high excitement, high risk stuff. There was so much to do in such a short time – everyone was having to run. The directors welded into a team, we were all in the same trench. We were a real corporate team, and we were determined not to lose it. At that stage I had to be very hands-on, a small-team leader, looking out for the resources we needed. It was direct leadership – the team wanted decisions. There were a lot of late nights and bonhomie – everyone knew each other very well. On the whole we kept our sense of humour – humour was a good barometer of stress levels.” (A21)**

---



Changing a multi-million pound, multi-function organisation takes nerve, skill, and a vision, but above all it takes leadership. The change may be rapid or slow, radical or simple. Here we look at what lies behind the changes the 30 chief executives have achieved by addressing the following issues:

- **Tried and tested methods**
- **Changing the culture**
- **The vision thing**
- **The chief executive/member relationship**
- **Engaging the community**
- **Dealing with partnerships**
- **Barriers to change and inspection**

We also take a look at how people have, or haven't, maintained a work-life balance. And, as one chief executive puts it, we will "get less sidetracked by the things that didn't go so well."

### **The tried and tested methods**

The management of wholesale change is a subject that clearly takes time. To some the pace of change is the main concern.

**"The most significant thing that I would have done differently is that I would not have taken the view that the council could not reorganize both managerially and politically in the same year. I now consider that the capacity existed." (A27)**

---

While others want services and structure knocked into shape before change is attempted in a more evolutionary way.

**"The majority of my achievements during my time in post were associated with the introduction of 'modern' management structures and arrangements, and to address specific quality issues raised by the District Auditor. This root and branch transformation of the council would now pay dividends in dealing with the modernising agenda, CPA." (A20)**

---

As referred to before, one chief executive – in post for a year and a half – has set structural and political management aside in order to create a unity of purpose throughout the council's staff. Creating 'one front line', as far as the citizen is concerned, is this chief executive's priority. Another recognised that once the change was bedded in, the potential to do things differently could be realised.

## The narrative – Step change

**“After two years we handed the running of the organisation over to the Senior Management Team, so that we could work more strategically. We’d worked closely with heads of service, so they knew exactly what we thought.” (A21)**

---

### **Changing the culture**

Many chief executives home in on the culture of the organisation (and we say much more about this vital subject later on).

**“Changing culture is very little to do with structures – it’s to do with attitudes and behaviour. People can get focussed on the wiring diagrams and lose sight of what it’s all about.” (A9)**

**“The job is all about relationships. You have to work out what to do, keep it simple, communicate until your teeth bleed with the boredom of saying it. And you have to appoint the right people. The right people is the most critical thing.” (A2)**

**“The cultural change has been brought about through creating a much more relaxed and open attitude. The cultural change has moved the authority from a position where members saw themselves as service providers. Now they see themselves as a voice for the local community, understanding, leading and representing the community with others.” (A18)**

**“It’s up to you to help set the climate and culture for other people to do their best work.” (A27)**

---

### **Seeing vision clearly**

George Bush owned up to not quite grasping what he called “the vision thing”, but for most chief executives it is imperative to have vision. Finding, or establishing, the central purpose of a huge organisation can be a tortuous process but it forms the cornerstone of many a change.

**“The biggest culture shock for people was to realise that the organisation needs a vision for itself – what’s our business, what are we here for, what are our values, what kind of organisation are we? Staff hadn’t expected to be consulted on something like this.” (A28)**

---

### **The relationship with members**

The full integration of members into the process of achieving a vision can be one of the most difficult. In-fighting, envy, and just plain political hatred can wreak havoc across a council. To some the problem has become almost intractable. Decisions are taken to spite or bully an opponent or officer. But as one chief executive puts it, “If it was straightforward we wouldn’t need them”. (A9). The negotiating skill, tact and diplomacy of the leading officer are put to the test and the outcome is vital to the progress of the authority as a whole.

**“Don’t be too deferential. They pay you to tell them what you think – even if they don’t want to hear it. If you always say ‘yes’ it’ll come back on you.” (A28)**

**“If I didn’t have 60 members exercising political hatred, I would have the best job in the world.” (A14)**

**“You have to respect members, and see things through their eyes.” (A26)**

**“Because we’ve been honest, we’ve developed mutual respect. When we get things wrong, we own up to it.” (A21)**

**“Accept without question the primacy of the politicians. Not enough chief executives have got there. Understand the politicians’ motivation and pressure without being driven by them. The relationship needs to be warm but reserved, leading but co-operating. We’re paid to transfer the manifesto into real life. It’s a wonderful job!” (A2)**

---

### **Engaging the community**

Convincing the community you are listening and getting them actively to support the council’s vision is another thing altogether – especially if your area is in the middle of a riot zone. One chief executive who found himself in this crisis saw winning the confidence of the threatened community as vital to success (A9). Being riot-free gives leaders more time and space to engage people but the task is often no less difficult. Research, consultation and brokering are just some of the methods used.

**“We introduced one-stop shops into the market towns. We said they had to be building society standard – decent carpets, kit and equipment, and nice waiting areas and desks rather than counters with screens. We’ve never had a serious incident in one of our customer service centres, and that’s about the design of the buildings and about treating people like human beings.” (A21)**

---

## The narrative – Step change

### **Promoting partnerships**

Gluing together and influencing a plethora of partnerships, or creating an umbrella LSP (Local Strategic Partnership) has produced dilemmas for many authorities. The success of some LSPs is matched by the failure of others. One chief executive has established himself as ‘a broker of last resort’ (A6) standing to the side of the partnership process. Another council has driven the whole process by teaming up with a private telecommunications partner.

**“One of the most innovative strategies that the council has embarked upon is a strategic partnership. The aim is to sort out the ICT position and it is both mine and the Leader’s view that if we are to attain a world-beating level then a partnership such as this is the only way. The partnership will last for 13 years and the estimated net savings to the council will be £30M with 300 fewer jobs.” (A25)**

---

### **Barriers to change and inspection**

So far we have heeded the warning of the chief executive who said we should get less sidetracked by the things that didn’t go so well. However, it is instructive to look briefly at some of the challenges.

The hours that people work is an issue of concern to many. A district council chief executive who has told staff he does not want them working more than 50 hours a week is stymied by one thing:

**“Evening work is the biggest problem. If you want people who are active in society as members they’re mostly working, which means evening committee meetings, which contributes to a cycle of long hours.” (A28)**

---

A less confident chief executive could have easily been knocked off balance by the external image being projected in the media.

**“You look at what’s written (in local and national newspapers following a senior manager pay rise) and don’t recognise yourself. Is it worth it – all that hassle for yourself and your family? It shakes your faith in people you thought you had a good relationship with.” (A21).**

---

Inspection systems – best value and CPA – have attracted some criticism. CPA is “frighteningly bureaucratic” and “there’s tremendous scope to deflate and demoralise people.” (A9)

**“We mustn’t come back to a narrow view of the world – it won’t fit into little boxes.” (A26)**

---

However, many other chief executives give CPA a strong welcome and accept the system – “It’s here to stay.” (A20)

**“Projects like this are a way to develop capacity and bring new people in.” (A13)**

**“When I arrived the performance arrangements were very weak. We can use the prospect of external intervention to propel some action. It’s another opportunity to help us progress, and I’m keen to turn it to good effect.” (A9)**

---

One chief executive is even more forthright.

**“We have been coasting... I want it as a tool to manage change. It comes at a good time for me.” (A2)**

---

Another has a personal view of performance.

**“I want to get to the bits that are not performing. Not because some minister tells me that I have to but because I have seen performers come to work with a spring in their step. It is important that they continue to keep enjoying their jobs.” (A27)**

---

### **Three lessons learned**

Finally, in three areas, the 30 chief executives have defined the lessons they have learned. First, they explain what they feel are the skills and capabilities needed to be a good leader. The chief executive who has battled with groups of members who loathe each other says you need:

**“Tact, diplomacy, high analytical skills, political nous, a solution-based approach, a partnership approach and an ability to manage people and events.” (A14)**

---

Stamina is the essential ingredient for one chief executive working for a small district:

**“Short-term goals become medium-term successes...you need to accept it takes longer when you work for a small district. There will be times when nothing appears to be happening, but you have to keep working away.” (A18)**

---

## The narrative – Step change

Another opts for, among other things:

**“Having mental toughness to be able to sleep at night as the job is both mentally and emotionally challenging.” (A27)**

---

Secondly, the interviewees spell out the lessons they have learned from going through changes. Many have lists of these near the end of their stories, which you can read in full. Here are some examples:

**“Spend more time understanding politicians.” (A1)**

**“I should have responded more to my gut instinct on certain issues.” (A13)**

**“It’s a brave new world. We encourage risk-taking – not gambles, but risks, which means accepting that we make mistakes.” (A21).**

**“Better to be approximately right than precisely wrong.” (A12)**

**“Get acceptance that there are votes in social inclusion.” (A18)**

**“Don’t let the every day grind limit your ambition.” (A2)**

**“Leave an organisation well and in a position where it has capacity for further development.” (A7)**

**“Doing this job you get to be at the heart of it all, with the opportunity to make real social change. The chief executive has to be at the forefront, pushing change. If you’re standing still you’re moving backwards.” (A21)**

**“You put your family life on hold.” (A9)**

**“I have an appalling work-life balance, its all work and no play. But I feel anxiety about taking my hands off the tiller.”(A26)**

---

Thirdly, there are some personal thoughts and top tips – things to get you through the night – at the end of the interviews.

**“Never take work home at weekends.” (A13)**

**“Make sure you really want to be a chief executive. It’s a different job to being a director – for a start it’s a lonelier job.” (A21)**



## The narrative – Step change

**“I am here long hours, and I’m very emotionally engaged. I care passionately about it. I wouldn’t do the job otherwise.” (A26)**

**“The ability to manage ambiguity is crucial – you are dealing with a world of fudge and massage. It’s about creating latitude. If you approach the job in a rigid, task-oriented, managerialist way you are doomed.” (A9)**

**“I’d hate to come to the end of my tenure and have survived by doing nothing – I don’t mind getting into trouble by doing things. With hindsight some of the things we’ve done I’d have done a different way, but there’s nothing I wouldn’t have done.” (A21)**

**“If I won £20 million I would pay the Council to let me do the job as there is no better one to have.” (A27)**

---



# Analysis

---

At this point we could all be forgiven for feeling a little confused. The variety of contributions is bewildering, but that is perhaps not surprising. Each has experienced their unique circumstances and responded accordingly; there are no right or wrong answers, particularly when the questions themselves are so different. Who knows what might have happened in a parallel universe had the chief executive made a different move?

It is also at this point that most papers on leadership resort to a list of personal competencies as some sort of 'solution'. Acquire these competencies and all will be well, they argue.

But there is something else. By themselves, lists of competencies oversimplify the reality of life at the top of a modern local authority. They may even hold back individuals and organisations and stand in the way of step or transformational change. With this in mind, the list of what we have termed personal skills given below comes with a health warning. The list needs to be read in conjunction with the following sections of this paper which explore transformation, complexity and post-conventional leadership styles. It is the blend of the two – personal skills and leadership behaviours – that we believe is most successful.



Effective leadership in local government requires talent, taught skills and experience. It is quite different to management. Analysis of the interviews suggests that there are a number of key skills which come to the fore. They include:

### **Self awareness**

A knowledge of your own strengths and weaknesses, realistic self-confidence and an awareness of your impact on others.

### **Role awareness**

An understanding of what is expected or needed from you, including a contextual map of the authority, its history and its challenges. A belief in the abilities of others alongside a positive self regard. Business guru Richard Pascale has pointed out that Chief Executives don't give people answers, they just help them live more easily with their questions.

### **Political awareness**

"If you don't like the sea, don't be a fisherman!" Be aware of the key role politics and politicians will – and should! – play in the business. Working closely and effectively with councillors is fundamental.

### **Judgement**

A self-evident but essential necessity. The job is about choices, priorities and managing time.

There are, of course, other lists of personal skills which aspiring chief executives may wish to consider. Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe's "New Model of Transformational Leadership" lists transparency, integrity, decisiveness, charisma and an ability to think creatively and analytically as important personal qualities. She also suggests a need to show genuine concern for the wellbeing and development of others, to empower thoughtfully, remain accessible and encourage questioning and critical thinking.

And on top of that you will probably need to:

### **Listen well**

Pick up the messages – spoken and unspoken – from throughout your own organisation, the community and partner agencies and make sure they know you have got the message. Communicate, network, inspire and clarify.

### **Vision well**

Take the political and organisational aspirations and turn them into believable, respectable, persuasive pictures.

### **Make sense of complexity**

Be able to provide clarity of thinking, be comfortable with the certainty of ambiguity and remain confident when there is turbulence.

## Personal skills

### **Be adaptable and encourage adaptability**

Develop the ability to absorb new skills quickly so that you can keep pace with the world.

### **Be passionate**

Deliver energy and excitement as well as rigour, and be brave and positive enough to celebrate success and communicate the unpopular message.

**Be comfortable with discomfort** while managing change in others sensitively and skilfully.

### **Be confident with success and failure**

Learn from the lessons that come with both and accept that leaders never stop learning. Accept that you will not always be popular or able to achieve everything everyone wants when they want it.

### **Have endless curiosity**

Be inquisitive and adventurous enough to make mistakes, to challenge and to be interested in the experiences of others. Leadership skills need refreshing constantly.

**Be able to inspire and be inspired** – continuously, in big and little ways, as you strive to get the best out of people. Learn how to challenge staff without demotivating them.

### **Recognise ‘Defining Moments’**

Some of our chief executives mentioned their experiences of crisis and a defining moment. These are occasions when our beliefs are challenged, but instead of sidestepping the challenge they have used the experience to move forward positively and learn.

### **Enjoy yourself**

Having fun is not a crime, and helps create perspective and energy in an organisation. The work/life balance – and getting it right – is becoming increasingly important, and chief executives are not immune from the debilitating effects of overwork and stress. Knowing when to switch off is perhaps one of the most important attributes for all of us.

Well, so far so good. We have been able to identify a set of qualities and competencies that underly the responses. You might, however, now well ask: “What’s different or transformational about that?”

## Transformational change

---

Some people wince when they see the word ‘transformational.’ It is overused and conjures up different ideas, especially when linked to ‘leadership’. Nevertheless, it is possible for people to distinguish in their minds the difference between steady progress and a ‘step change’ or breakthrough which happens when, quite suddenly, everything falls nicely into place. It is this difference that this section of the paper will explore.

We argue that the personal skills set out in the previous section are essential but insufficient by themselves. They indicate WHAT to do, but chief executives also need a deep understanding of HOW to bring these skills alive in ways that bring about significant and lasting organisational change and go beyond short-term fixes.

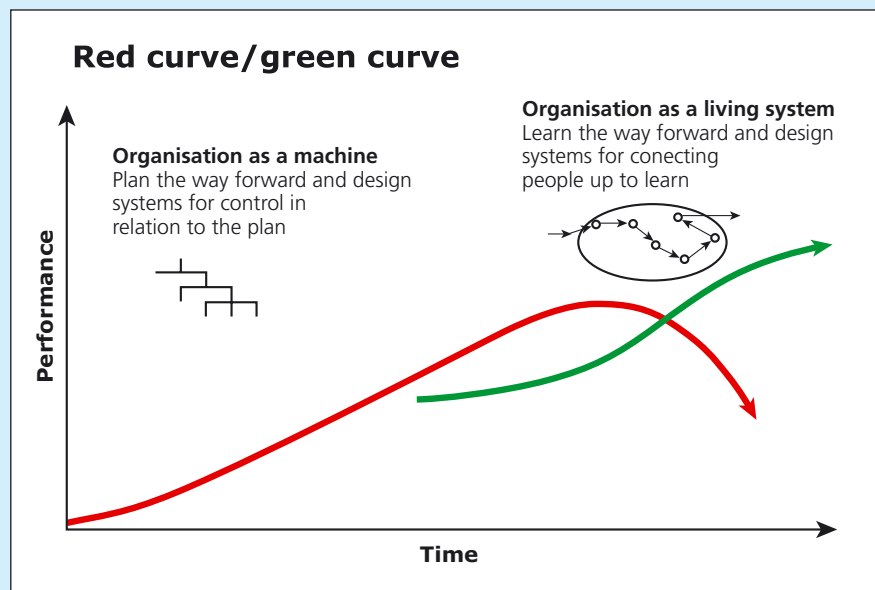
Most chief executives have confronted major problems at one time or another during their careers, when having to deal with budget difficulties, weak performance or poor staff morale. Traditional recovery strategies tend to be ‘transactional’, based on command and control from the top, forced through by strong political and managerial leadership and supported by logical management processes. These might include text book solutions such as medium-term planning, tough financial control, Investors in People, business plans, clearly stated political/managerial priorities, training and strong two-way communications. Although the turn-round happens and the organisation’s performance improves, such traditional methods have their limitations, especially if the challenge is to create organisations that thrive on devolved responsibility and initiatives that no longer have to be centrally driven. This is where the Red Curve/Green Curve comes in.



## Red Curve/Green Curve

Organisations on the Green Curve are displaying different characteristics; they have become post-conventional, with people at all levels feeling empowered to use their initiative and take risks. Complaints from the public, mistakes, problems and rule-breaking become opportunities for learning. Everything, even the authority and views of the chief executive, is up for discussion and challenge. Ideas and their development become core business and people are comfortable dealing with uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The organisation lives on its wits. Richard Pascale sees organisations as organisms which are at their most vulnerable when they are safe from external threats and become complacent. They are stronger when constantly adapting and fighting for survival.

The Red Curve/Green Curve reflects a fundamental shift in thinking that appears to be going on in the western world as we move from a mechanical or machine age view of the world to a living systems view. In the diagram, Red Curve organisations are seen to be those that rely upon centrally planned and controlled initiatives for their successes, with the organisation acting like a machine that can produce pre-determined and replicable products and results. This contrasts with Green Curve organisations that rely less on centrally driven plans and more on locally driven initiatives and the ability to self-organise and evolve by sensing and adapting quickly to changes in their environment.



Some underlying characteristics of these curves are shown in the table below.

Red Curve	Green Curve
Strategy is intentional, drawn up by experts and converted to plans for action	Strategy is a product of intention, learning and emergence
Achieve the goals laid out in the plan. Results are all that matter around here	Establish an agreed vision and be open and responsive to variations within the vision. Learning is as sacred as results
Advocate your position to win, don't lose, argue well, dominate and control	Skilful use of advocacy and inquiry to create learning and commitment in self and others
Breakdowns and dilemmas to be solved or, if not, then covered up	Breakdowns and dilemmas welcomed as rich sources of learning
Suppress emotions, remain invulnerable	Integrity and authenticity used to build relationships
Work heroic hours, take little or no time for reflection	Balanced life with time built in for reflection
Comply with decisions made up the line	Build commitment and coherence through meaning making and community
Be outwardly sure and confident and maintain the image	Be inwardly sure and able to use this as the springboard to inquiry and learning
Emphasise communication of goals, vision and mission to create alignment and action	Recognise the centrality of conversation as distinct from communication to create responsive and committed organisations

An analogy that fits the title of this paper may be helpful. Imagine a glider being winched up into the sky. Powerful forces in the cable create forward motion and lift, taking it up the Red Curve. Everything is in tension and under stress and, for a time, good progress is made. But after a while the cable becomes a problem and the moment comes to let go. The glider finds its own thermals, becomes self reliant and adaptive, and begins to soar. The experience becomes more fun, relaxed, intuitive and exciting. It moves onto the Green Curve.

It is true that organisations are complex and diverse and, in reality, need both Red Curve and Green Curve 'capacity'. Chief executives need continuously to be able to adapt their leadership style and behaviour according to circumstances. Understanding the difference and knowing when to switch is vital. Perhaps the challenge for us today is, how can we catch the thermals contained within such things as the CPA and start to enjoy the ride?

## Red Curve/Green Curve

You might now well ask, “Well, what's new in this, isn't this what we're doing?” Perhaps so, perhaps not. But we now have a framework for reflecting upon our thinking and our speaking which could help us see ourselves more clearly in our roles as chief executives, driving and being accountable for unprecedented levels of change.

Perhaps we could start this reflective process by looking again, through the lens of the Red Curve/Green Curve, at our responses outlined in the narrative session of this paper.

Do these responses reflect Red Curve or Green Curve thinking?

What might these responses indicate about where **you** are on the Red Curve/Green Curve map?

What feedback do you get, or could you get, that would help you locate yourself on these curves?

How do you respond when you find yourself in stressful situations? Do you reach back into Red Curve ways of operating or do you lean forward into Green Curve?

What have been your responses (both your internal conversations and your external ones) to this paper and the framework it is endeavouring to develop so far?

What do you do with material like this that you may disagree with?

Further use of the Red Curve/Green Curve map might also be obtained when you reflect upon the list of personal skills outlined earlier. In several instances this list could be viewed through a Red Curve lens which would lead to one way of expressing the skills, whereas viewing the same skill through a Green Curve lens would lead to a subtle but importantly different expression of the same skill with significant implications for the way your organisation performs.

For example, take the first Personal Skill of 'Self awareness' and 'realistic self-confidence.' Your view of what is 'strong' and what is 'weak' will be dependent upon whether you are viewing those strengths and weaknesses from a Red Curve or a Green Curve perspective. Self-confidence in the Red Curve context is more likely to relate to one's ability to use personal authority, power and eloquence and knowing when to drive things forward, whereas self-confidence under Green Curve conditions is more likely to be related to one's ability to create openness and learning through 'not knowing', to create conditions under which others take on the mantle of their own authority and power to drive things forward.

Differing characteristics will also show up if we apply the Red Curve/Green Curve lens to 'Role awareness,' 'Political awareness,' 'Judgement' and so on.

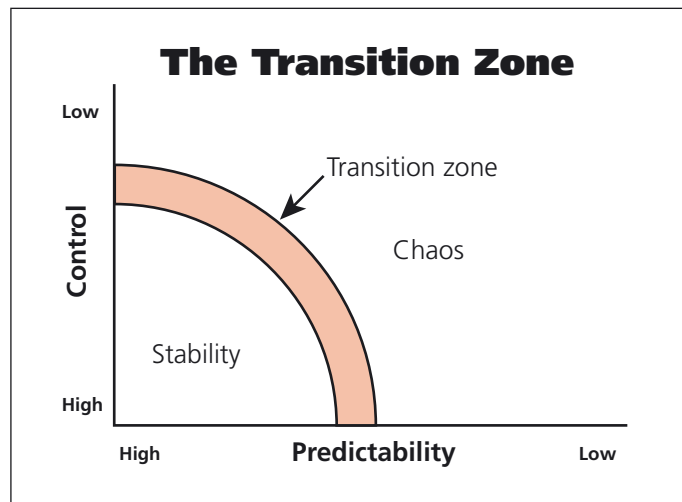


## The transition zone

Another illustration of Red Curve/Green Curve behaviours is the way we react to risk and uncertainty.

Well-established organisations, especially local authorities, are often risk averse and seek stability, or equilibrium. As soon as someone (usually an elected member or keen young officer) comes up with a radical idea, there is a temptation to reach for the Standing Orders or Financial Regulations. Huge forces hold the organisation static, persuasive arguments force Jack back into the box and equilibrium is restored. No wonder there is too little entrepreneurial flair and creativity.

On the other hand, the other extreme is even more damaging. "Basket-case" organisations run out of control, chaos reigns and services begin to fall apart.



The leadership challenge is to know when and how to hold the organisation in the Transition Zone, between stability and chaos; a place where systems, processes and relationships are continuously dissolving and reforming. Where there are periods of intense uncertainty, creativity, risk taking and learning. We need people in influential positions who thrive in this zone, with space to make mistakes and have an impact. Chief executives need to recognise such people, deliberately recruit them and know how to support them, since by their very nature they are challenging and can sometimes be very disruptive. Chief executives must endeavour to be comfortable within this state of unrest and hold their organisations in the Transition Zone. Understanding and developing leadership styles and behaviours provides one way of achieving this.

## Thinking about people

---

We started out by looking at WHAT we are doing, and reflecting on HOW we might adapt, using the above framework. The next logical step is to consider WHO may be the leaders (elected members as well as officers) to take our organisations into the Transition Zone and onto the Green Curve. Returning to the glider analogy, who can release the cable of centrally driven targets and controls and rise on the thermals of improving performance, expectations and change.

Research in both public and private sector organisations makes a distinction between conventional and post-conventional leadership. The interesting feature of this research is that organisations that try to change themselves without having some post-conventional leadership capacity at their senior and operating levels usually struggle with change. The evidence suggests that attempting significant cultural change without some post-conventional leadership capacity at senior levels may lead to failure.

Nine different leadership stages have been identified, emerging from the thinking of WR Torbert and S Cook-Greuter (see Further reading list page 30). These help define the differences between conventional and post-conventional leadership. Six of the most commonly-occurring stages are shown below.

Conventional	Post-Conventional
Diplomat	Individualist
Technical Expert	Strategist
Achiever	Magician

**The Diplomat** stage is characterised by behaviour that is based on achieving consensus. People at this stage tend to avoid conflict and work with an acceptance and understanding of protocol, using the established hierarchy in order to get things done.

**The Technical Expert** is immersed in the logic of their own specialised body of knowledge and continually seeks 'right' answers. Their interests are in problem solving, pursuing 'the facts' and getting 'it' right.

**The Achiever** is concerned with outputs (such as BVPIs) and uses innovative methods to get results. They move mountains and their energy often inspires others, believing deeply in a scientific approach and linear cause and effect. They are effectiveness and results-oriented and can see the possibility of getting a large number of Experts working together.

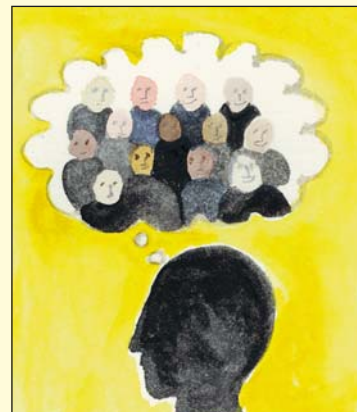
**Individualists** are post-conventional. They do not conform and can fiercely challenge convention and the smooth running of the organisation. They tend to go-it-alone, to be highly imaginative and are motivated by the discovery of new ideas and meaning. Individualists live for the moment, enjoy complexity, experiment and regard events as part of a bigger system. Often hopeful on the one hand and despairing on the other. They show an increased understanding of complexity and systemic thinking and start to appreciate multiple realities and perspectives.

**Strategists** are true system thinkers and are always looking beyond the immediate concerns. They are self aware, work well in collaboration with others, are flexible about how tasks are performed, see many sides of an argument and trust people to find their own solutions. Values, ethical principles and integrity are important. They will be concerned with what is happening at all levels of an organisation and identify long-term unintended consequences. They have worked through the crises of the earlier stages and are aware that 'reality' is self-constructed. They are generally self secure, internally resilient and have the strength to enable and include others.

**Magicians** are skilful in the creation of symbolic events (pulling rabbits out of hats) that convey new understandings and open up new possibilities. They are a living paradox in that they can be at once indifferent and committed, creative and destructive, humble and powerful, gracious and blunt (usually with humour).

An important step for chief executives is to be aware of their own leadership 'maturity', especially if they want to transform their organisation and work through many of the dilemmas of the Transition Zone within which there are periods of intense uncertainty and risk taking.

It is not always necessary for the chief executive to be post-conventional but it is important that they develop or recruit this capacity or give more time and space for those who demonstrate post-conventional behaviour. This is sometimes difficult, as quite often post-conventional individuals, by their very nature, will be challenging, disturbing of the status quo and more likely to be seen as 'mavericks'.

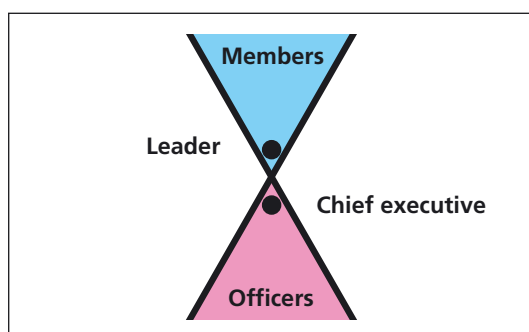


## The political interface

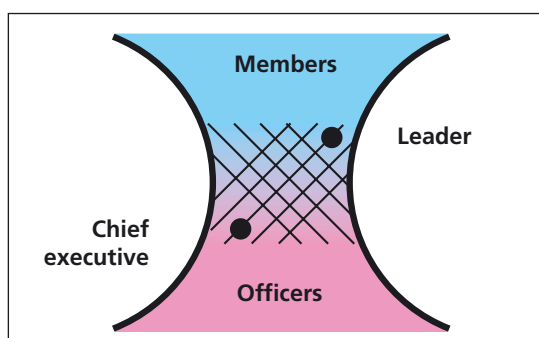
The one thing that separates out council chief executives is their very close working relationship with local councillors. As the interviews confirm, the nature of the relationship is quite fundamental and can impact heavily on the effectiveness of the chief executives. So, we are using this as a final example of Red Curve/Green Curve thinking.

It is not uncommon for the interface between members and officers to be volatile and to be viewed negatively. Some chief executives will want to 'control' what's going on, to be kept informed and to intervene personally in order to calm down a difficult situation. Pictorially, the organisation can be represented by pyramids, one above the other with the leader and chief executive holding absolutely pivotal positions.

The advantages of such a regime are clarity and focus, but such structures can become inflexible, lack capacity and depend too heavily on the views and ability of the very small number of people who occupy the nexus between the political and professional hierarchies. It is from such arrangements that heroic styles of leadership, reliance on structures and their inherent limitations are born.



Organisations on the Green Curve will see this interface in a very different way. Leadership will be viewed as a dynamic system or network of people whose position will change according to their contribution and the significance and frequency of their conversations with those around them. Such systems look more like cooling towers. This is a zone of creativity and innovation where information and ideas are constantly being exchanged and challenged. The ways things are done are largely left up to the individuals concerned and their own imaginations. Importantly, however, the system is not chaotic. All of the players and their activities are bounded by a clear understanding of the agreed outcomes being pursued. They understand the big picture, share values and are absolutely committed to the organisation's goals.



## Drawing the threads together

---

In this paper we have had a brief look at some aspects of the WHAT, the HOW and the WHO of Transformational Leadership.

We have taken three examples of seeing ourselves in terms of Red and Green Curve behaviours; handling risk and uncertainty (the Transition Zone), conventional and post-conventional people and the political interface. But how would you know if your own organisation had begun to change? What evidence should you look out for?

Firstly you might look at yourself and your own feelings. You might find yourself seeking less credit and recognition for what goes on and feeling less envious of the accolades showered on those around you. You will be less driven by ego, the limelight or the desire to be seen as a heroic leader. Everything you do will be designed to support and empower others; people leaving your office will feel trusted, able to take risks and responsibility, experiment with new ideas and do so without fear of failure. When things do go wrong you will relax and see them as opportunities for learning. You will not feel the need to know about everything that is going on.

Secondly you might look to the behaviours of people throughout the organisation as a whole. They will think their jobs are exciting and your council is a great place to work. They will surprise and delight you, trying new ideas without seeking formal approval; even breaking the rules to speed up or increase the chances of achieving an important outcome. High priority will be given to customer care and front line services. Your council will also be easy to work with and will empower other organisations, giving them the credit for shared successes ... and so it goes on.

This paper can be no more than a summary and therefore the references on the next page are well worth reading when you have time. But perhaps the next step for all of us is to consider how this paper has influenced our thinking and when and how it might influence the next conversation we have.

If leadership is about communicating a vision, then each and every conversation we have can be mobilised to play its part in transforming our organisations. Think about those conversations that you have been wanting to have but have delayed, for fear it might upset the balance of the organisation or upset the status quo.

Is there a way to take the conversation forward in such a way that it leaves you and the other party more energised and able to ride the thermals of change? Can you mobilise your organisation's capacity to have green curve conversations that create energy, commitment, community and coherence?

The centrality of conversation can be the lifeblood of our organisations. We must take full advantage of our capacity to change those conversations and consequently our organisations – **one conversation at a time.**

## Think Tank members

---

The research and development of this paper was undertaken by a small Think Tank made up of SOLACE members, with some support.

### Members

<b>Michael Pitt</b> (Chairman)	Chief Executive, Kent County Council
<b>Tim Byles</b>	Chief Executive, Norfolk County Council
<b>David Clark</b>	Director General, SOLACE
<b>Andrew Coleman</b>	Managing Director, SOLACE Enterprises
<b>David Henshaw</b>	Chief Executive, Liverpool City Council
<b>Lin Homer</b>	Chief Executive, Birmingham City Council
<b>Bob Kerslake</b>	Chief Executive, Sheffield City Council
<b>Gordon Mitchell</b>	Chief Executive, Bracknell Forest Borough Council
<b>Annie Ralph</b>	Chief Executive, Braintree District Council

### Support

<b>Sol Davidson</b>	Penna
<b>Gillian Laidlaw &amp; Graham Taylor</b>	Consultants – SOLACE Enterprises
<b>Kevin Skinner &amp; Niki Luscombe</b>	Kent County Council – Policy Officers

## Further reading

---

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Alimo-Metcalfe, B.<br><b>Effective Leadership</b><br>Local Government Management Board - 1998   | Beck, D<br><b>Spiral Dynamics</b><br>Blackwell - 1995   |
| Alimo-Metcalfe, B<br><b>What is Leadership?</b><br>in Mark, A & Dopson, S (Eds) <i>Organisational Behaviour in Healthcare: the Research Agenda</i> , Macmillan - 1999   | Capra, Fritjoff<br><b>The Turning Point</b><br>Flamingo - 1983  |
| Alimo-Metcalfe, B & Alban-Metcalfe, R J<br><b>Leadership</b><br>in Warr, P (ed) <i>Psychology at Work</i> , (5th edition) Penguin - 2002  | Cook-Greuter, S<br><b>Postautonomous Ego Development: A study of its nature and measurement</b><br>doctoral thesis, Harvard University, Boston - 1999                 |
| Alimo-Metcalfe, B & Nyfield, G<br><b>Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness</b><br>in Robertson, I T & Callinan, M & Bartram, D (eds) <i>Organizational Effectiveness: the Role of Psychology</i> , Wiley - 2002 | Engler, J & Brown, D<br><b>Transformation is consciousness: Conventional and contemplative perspectives on development</b><br>Boston MA: Shambala New Science Library |

- Fisher, D & Rooke, D & Torbert, W R  
**Personal and Organisational Transformations through Action Inquiry**  
 (Copies can be obtained from the Harthill Group) EdgeWork Press Boston - 2000 (3rd ed)
- Ghoshal, Sumantra & Bartlett, Christopher A  
**The Individualized Corporation: a fundamentally new approach to management**  
 New York: HarperBusiness (Library of Congress Catalogue) - 1997
- Greenleaf, Robert K  
**On Becoming A Servant Leader**  
 Jossey-Bass Publishers - 1996
- Heifetz, Ronald A  
**Leadership Without Easy Answers**  
 Harvard University Press - 1998 (8th Edition)
- Kohlberg, L  
**The philosophy of moral development**  
 San Francisco: Harper & Row
- Maxwell, John C  
**Developing the Leaders Around You**  
 Nashville, Tenn.: T Nelson (Library of Congress Catalogue) - 1995
- McGee-Cooper, Ann & Looper, Gary  
**The Essentials of Servant-Leadership: Principles in Practice**  
 Pegasus Communications Inc - 2001
- Pascale, Richard T & Millemann, Mark & Gioja, Linda  
**Surfing the Edge of Chaos: the laws of nature and the new laws of business**  
 London: Texere (British Library Catalogue) - 2000
- Powell, G  
**Women and Men in Management**  
 (2nd Edition) Newbury Park, CA: Sage - 1993
- Rooke, D  
**Organisational Transformation Requires the Presence of Leaders who are Strategist and Magicians**  
 Organisations and People 4:3 - August 1997
- Sashkin, M  
**The visionary leader**  
 in J.A. Conger & R.N. Kanungo, (Eds)  
*Charismatic Leadership: The Elusive Factor in Organisational Effectiveness*, pp 122-160  
 San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass - 1998
- Spears, Larry C (ed)  
**Insights on Leadership**  
 John Wiley & Sons, Inc - 1998
- Stacey, Ralph  
**Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics: The challenge of complexity**  
 FT Prentice Hall - 2002
- Titchy, N & Devanna, M  
**Transformational Leadership**  
 New York: Wiley - 1986
- Torbert, W R  
**The Power of Balance: Transforming Self, Society and Scientific Inquiry**  
 Newbury Park  
 CA: Sage - 1991
- Torbert, W R  
**Organisation Development Journal**  
 Volume 16 Number 1 - Spring 1998
- Wheatley, Margaret J  
**Leadership and the New Science**  
**Discovering Order In A Chaotic World**  
 Berrett-Koehler Publishers Second Edition - 1999
- Zeleznik, A  
**Managers and leaders: Are they different?**  
 In W. W. Rosenbach & R.L. Taylor (Eds)  
*Contemporary Issues in Leadership*, pp 36 - 56  
 Oxford: Westview Press - 1993



ORACLE®



ZURICH  
MUNICIPAL

SOLACE  
Hope House  
45 Great Peter Street  
London SW1P 3LT  
Telephone: 0845 601 0649  
Email: [publications@solace.org.uk](mailto:publications@solace.org.uk)

society of local authority chief executives and senior managers

w w w . s o l a c e . o r g . u k

