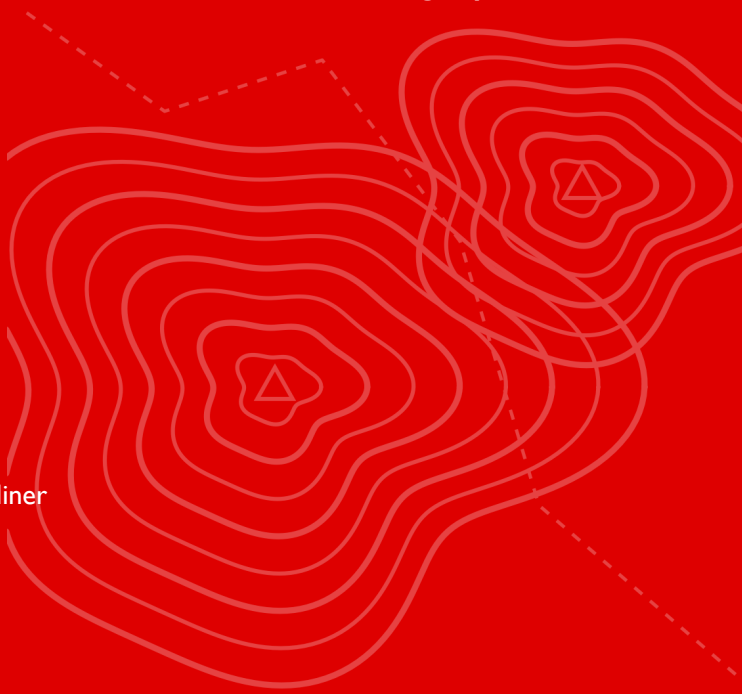
Avanti | Profiles

ABOUT THE INSTRUMENT

Avanti Political Acumen 360

Read the terrain of power well, and travel it with integrity.



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Avanti Change Ltd
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INTRODUCTION

What this instrument is for

Every public leader works in a political landscape. In councils it is the politics of elected members, parties and manifestos; in central government, ministers and their priorities; in health boards and charities, the dynamics of boards, funders, regulators and partners. Shared outcomes for people and places depend on leaders who can read that landscape accurately and work within it ethically. Yet political acumen is rarely talked about openly, and many leaders receive little honest feedback on it.

The Avanti Political Acumen 360 offers that feedback, in the form of a map. Six areas of acumen describe how a leader reads and travels the political terrain: Reading the Landscape, Understanding Members, Building Alliances, Influencing with Integrity, Navigating Conflict and Holding the Line. The leader rates themselves, and colleagues, members or board members and partners rate them, against the same 36 statements on a scale of 1 to 10. The report shows the leader's own view against others' combined view and each rater group, with the gap between them clearly labelled.

The instrument extends the Political and Stakeholder Awareness competence in the Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360, and can be used alone or alongside it. It is built on a clear premise: political acumen is never manipulation. It rests on integrity, on the Nolan Principles of public life and on respect for the boundary between political and professional roles. It is a structured development tool, not a clinical or selection instrument, and it is always used within a supportive, facilitated conversation.

A 360 feedback map of how a leader reads and travels the political landscape across six areas of acumen, from reading the landscape to holding the line, as seen by the leader and by colleagues, members, boards and partners.

Built around values and outcomes

The Political Acumen 360 rests on a simple belief: political skill in public service exists to serve the public interest. Reading the landscape, understanding members and building alliances matter because they help good outcomes for people and places happen. Influencing with integrity and holding the line matter because the way those outcomes are achieved shapes public trust. The Nolan Principles and the impartiality of public officials are not constraints on political acumen; they are what makes it legitimate.

Community, lived experience and co-production run through every area. The landscape includes communities, not only institutions. Alliances should share power with people who have less formal influence. Conflict should be navigated so that quieter voices are heard fairly. And members should be helped to stay connected with the people their decisions affect. The instrument is grounded in Welsh values of humility, service and dignity that sit at the heart of how Avanti works.

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Values	Integrity, honesty and the public interest come first. Each instrument asks how people behave when values are tested, not only when they are easy to live.
Social outcomes	We look past activity and outputs to what actually changes for people and places, and ask leaders to hold themselves to that test.
Community	Communities are partners in public service, not audiences for it. Every instrument has a view beyond the organisation's own boundary.
Lived experience	People who use services, and those who have been failed by them, hold expertise that no professional can replace. We treat it as evidence.
Co-production	Designing and delivering with people, not for them. We use Arnstein's Ladder of Participation to be honest about where practice really sits.
People-centred change	Change is something people live through. How it is led shapes trust, wellbeing and whether the change lasts.

OUR APPROACH

How every Avanti instrument works

The Map describes and never judges: every area of acumen starts from what a leader already does well, a lower reading is a place to grow, and different views are contributions. Political acumen here is always practised with integrity, in service of the public interest and the communities decisions affect.

Values-led	Integrity, the public interest and outcomes for people and places sit at the heart of every instrument. Community, lived experience and co-production are part of what we measure, not an afterthought.
Non-judgemental	We describe, we never diagnose. There are no good or bad profiles, only different starting points, and every result is offered as a perception to explore.
Difference as a positive	Different scores, views and styles are contributions. The richest conversations start where people see things differently.
Maximising potential	We look for what people and teams could become: the strengths to build on, the range not yet used and the contribution others are waiting for.
Individual to system	Each instrument connects the individual to the team, the organisation and the wider system of partners and communities.
Developmental	Every result is a starting point for growth and conversation, never a verdict. The instruments are not for selection, pay or performance management.

From individual to team, organisation and system

Each leader's map feeds a combined picture for a leadership team or cohort, which shapes how an organisation works with its members, boards and partners, and how trust is built across the wider system and with communities.

THE METAPHOR

The Map

The Compass shows your direction; the Map shows the terrain: the contours of power, the paths between interests and the places where the ground is unstable.

The Political Acumen 360 is built as a map. Six areas of acumen appear as six features of the terrain every public leader crosses: the contours that show the shape of the land, the landmarks of democratic and board mandates, the bridges that connect interests, the rights of way that honest influence travels, the unstable ground where interests collide and the boundaries that mark where political and professional roles meet. Your own rating is your sketch of how you travel this terrain; the combined view of the people around you is the surveyed map. Where the two differ, the gap is information, not a verdict. Political acumen here means reading the map well and travelling it with integrity, never cutting across other people's trust.

Illustrative sample: the picture below is drawn from synthetic data.



A1 6.1	A2 4.4	A3 5.4	A4 7.1
Reading the Landscape	Understanding Members	Building Alliances	Influencing with Integrity
Contours	Landmarks	Bridges	Rights of way
Established	Growing edge	Established	Established
A5 5.2	A6 8.1		
Navigating Conflict	Holding the Line		
Unstable ground	Boundaries		
Established	Signature strength		

In the Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360, the Compass shows a leader's direction across eight points of leadership, with Political and Stakeholder Awareness at north-west. The Map unfolds that one point into the full terrain. A compass tells you which way you are heading; a map tells you what lies between you and where you want to be: the steep contours, the places to cross, the routes that are open to everyone and the boundaries that must be respected. Experienced walkers in the Welsh hills know they need both, and that the map matters most when the weather closes in. Used together, the Compass shows how a leader leads overall and the Map shows in detail how they read and travel the political landscape. Used on its own, the Map gives a focused reading of political acumen for leaders whose work sits closest to members, ministers, boards and partners. In both cases, the same gap scale and the same rater groups make the two readings easy to set side by side.

FOUNDATIONS

Where the thinking comes from

Hartley and colleagues: political astuteness	Professor Jean Hartley and colleagues have researched political astuteness among public managers and leaders over many years, showing that political skill is a necessary and legitimate part of public leadership when it is used for public purposes and with integrity. Their work gives this instrument its central conviction that political awareness and ethical leadership belong together. The Political Acumen 360 credits their framework with gratitude; its six areas of acumen and all 36 statements are original Avanti work and do not reproduce their dimensions or scale.
Kakabadse: the political-professional interface	Andrew Kakabadse's research on top teams and on the relationship between political or board leaders and senior executives shows how much the quality of that relationship shapes an organisation's direction and performance. Dr. Jonathan Huish's doctoral research at Cranfield on top team leadership in local government builds on this work, and it informs Understanding Members and Holding the Line.
The Seven Principles of Public Life	The Nolan Principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership underpin the whole instrument, and especially Influencing with Integrity and Holding the Line. They set the standard against which political acumen is practised: skill in the service of the public interest.
Codes of impartiality and good governance	The impartiality expected of public officials, expressed in the Civil Service Code, local government codes of conduct and member and officer protocols, and the separation of board and executive roles in health and charity governance, inform Holding the Line. The instrument is written to work across all of these settings.
Arnstein: the Ladder of Participation	Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation reminds leaders that political landscapes include communities as well as institutions. It informs the instrument's attention to whose voices carry weight, alongside Dr Amanda Milliner's doctoral research at the University of South Wales on community engagement in public services.
Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360	The Political and Stakeholder Awareness competence in the Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360 is the starting point for this instrument, which extends it into six areas of acumen. The rating scale, rater groups and gap scale are shared, so the two instruments read naturally side by side.

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Design principles

Acumen with integrity	Every statement describes political skill used openly and ethically. The instrument never rewards manipulation, and integrity is built into every area, not confined to one.
Behaviour others can see	Each statement describes something raters can observe, written without a subject pronoun so the leader and every rater respond to the same wording.
Members and boards in the feedback	Elected members, ministers' offices or board members can rate as a group of their own, so those who hold authority help describe how the leader works with them.
Generic across public service	The wording works in councils, central government, health boards and charities with boards, so leaders can move between settings and still recognise their landscape.
Development, not judgement	Results are for reflection, coaching and growth. They are never used for selection, recruitment, promotion, pay or performance management.

THE MODEL

The 6 areas of acumen at a glance

	Acumen	In a sentence
A1	Reading the Landscape	Understands the political, organisational and community context and how it is moving.
A2	Understanding Members	Understands the mandates, motivations and pressures of those who hold political or board authority.
A3	Building Alliances	Builds relationships and coalitions across interests to move shared work forward.
A4	Influencing with Integrity	Persuades through evidence, relationship and timing, never manipulation, and is honest about what is unresolved.
A5	Navigating Conflict	Works through competing interests and disagreement constructively, finding workable ground.
A6	Holding the Line	Protects impartiality and professional integrity, advises candidly and respects the boundary between political and professional roles.

A1 READING THE LANDSCAPE

Understands the political, organisational and community context and how it is moving.

Contours show the shape of the land before you set foot on it: where the ground rises steeply, where it levels out and where the going will be hard.

Reading the Landscape is the ability to see the context a piece of work sits within: the political priorities of the day, the organisation's own pressures and history, the mood in communities and the timetables that shape every decision. Elections, budget rounds, board cycles, spending reviews, inspections and funding deadlines all change what is possible, and when.

Leaders who read the landscape well are rarely surprised. They notice when public concern is building around an issue, when a partner is under strain, or when a decision that looked settled is about to be reopened. They take local history seriously, because people remember how past proposals were handled, and they share what they see so that colleagues are not caught out.

Reading the landscape is not about second-guessing politicians or boards. It is about understanding the ground well enough to give good advice, plan sensibly and bring forward the right proposal at a moment when it can be properly heard.

Why it matters

Good work stalls when it arrives at the wrong moment or ignores the pressures people are under. A leader who reads the landscape accurately helps the organisation time its work well, avoid needless conflict and make better use of public resources on behalf of the people it serves.

Through a values lens: The landscape includes communities, not only institutions. Reading it with integrity means noticing how decisions will land for people and places, especially those whose concerns rarely reach a committee or board paper, and treating lived experience as part of the evidence.

When it tips too far: Constant scanning of the landscape can delay action, or lead a leader to wait for a perfect moment that never comes.

A2 UNDERSTANDING MEMBERS

Understands the mandates, motivations and pressures of those who hold political or board authority.

Landmarks are the fixed points travellers steer by: the democratic and governance mandates that give decisions their legitimacy and shape every route across the map.

Understanding Members is about appreciating the people who hold formal authority over public decisions: elected councillors, ministers, members of health boards, and trustees and board members of charities and public bodies. Each holds a mandate, whether from voters, from appointment or from a governing document, and each carries commitments, motivations and pressures that shape what they can support.

Leaders strong in this area take time to understand what members are trying to achieve for the people they represent, and the pressures they face from constituents, their party or group, the media and their colleagues. They build working relationships across parties and groups, not only with those in the majority or in office, and they prepare advice in a form and at a time that helps members carry out their role well.

Understanding members is not the same as agreeing with them or seeking their favour. It rests on respect for their legitimate role in setting direction and making decisions, alongside the professional's duty to advise honestly.

Why it matters

Public decisions are made, or overseen, by people with a mandate. Advice that misreads their role, their commitments or their pressures is less likely to be heard. Leaders who understand members well help democratic and board governance work as it should, so decisions are better informed and more likely to stand.

Through a values lens: Respecting members' mandates is respect for democracy and good governance. Understanding members well also means helping them hear from communities and people with lived experience, so that those who hold authority stay connected to the people their decisions affect.

When it tips too far: Close attention to members' wishes can lead a leader to soften advice they ought to give plainly, which Holding the Line helps to balance.

A3 BUILDING ALLIANCES

Builds relationships and coalitions across interests to move shared work forward.

Bridges carry people across rivers that would otherwise divide them, and the best are built before anyone needs to cross in a hurry.

Building Alliances is the work of connecting people and organisations with different interests around shared outcomes. Very little in public service can be achieved by one organisation alone. Councils, health boards, government departments, charities, businesses and community groups each hold part of the answer, and progress depends on bringing them together.

Leaders strong in this area build relationships before they are needed, find the common ground between partners whose priorities differ, and give credit generously so that shared success is genuinely shared. They include community groups and people with lived experience as partners in their own right, not as an afterthought, and they keep their commitments so that alliances rest on trust that outlasts a single project.

Alliances built with integrity are open about their purpose. They are coalitions for a shared outcome, not private arrangements for narrow advantage.

Why it matters

The outcomes that matter most to people and places, from health and housing to safety and opportunity, cross organisational boundaries. Leaders who build strong alliances turn separate efforts into shared progress, and make the most of every partner's resources and expertise.

Through a values lens: Alliances can reinforce existing power or share it. Building them with integrity means bringing community organisations and people with lived experience into the coalition as genuine partners, in the spirit of co-production and Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, so that less powerful voices help shape what is agreed.

When it tips too far: The wish to keep every partner on board can slow decisions, or blur accountability for who is responsible for what.

A4 INFLUENCING WITH INTEGRITY

Persuades through evidence, relationship and timing, never manipulation, and is honest about what is unresolved.

Rights of way are the open, marked routes that anyone can see and follow: influence that travels them reaches its destination without trespassing on anyone's trust.

Influencing with Integrity is the craft of persuading others in ways that would stand up to full public view. Leaders strong in this area make their case with clear evidence and honest reasoning that others can examine. They choose their timing with care and frame their message for different audiences, but they never change its substance, never hold back information people are entitled to have, and never use pressure, favours or hidden agendas.

They are honest about what is uncertain or unresolved, even when certainty would make the case easier to win, and they stay open to being persuaded themselves by better evidence or a stronger argument. Their influence comes from credibility and relationship, built over time and spent carefully.

This is where political acumen and integrity meet most directly. Persuasion is a legitimate and necessary part of public leadership. Manipulation is not. The difference is whether the people being influenced would be content if they could see exactly how it was done.

Why it matters

Change in public service depends on persuading people with different views and interests. Influence built on evidence and honesty creates decisions that hold and relationships that last. Influence built on manipulation may win the moment but erodes the trust that public institutions rely on.

Through a values lens: Influencing with integrity puts the Nolan Principles of honesty, openness and objectivity into everyday practice. It also means bringing the evidence of lived experience into the case alongside data, and making sure communities can see and question how decisions that affect them were shaped.

When it tips too far: A careful focus on framing and timing can be mistaken for positioning, so it helps to keep reasoning and uncertainties visible.

A5 NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Works through competing interests and disagreement constructively, finding workable ground.

Every map has its marshes and loose scree: unstable ground that cannot be avoided, only crossed with care, a steady pace and a firm idea of where the safer footing lies.

Navigating Conflict is the ability to work through disagreement and competing interests in ways that move things forward. Public service is full of legitimate conflict: between budgets and needs, between places and priorities, between parties, professions and partners. Conflict is not a failure of leadership. How it is handled shows the quality of leadership, and shapes the trust that follows.

Leaders strong in this area bring competing interests into the open rather than working around them. They stay calm and constructive when disagreement becomes heated or public, seek to understand the reasons behind opposing positions, and look for workable ground that each party can stand behind with integrity. They keep disagreement about issues separate from respect for people, and help groups reach an agreed next step even when not every difference is settled.

Navigating conflict well does not mean avoiding it, or splitting every difference. Sometimes the right outcome is a clear decision that some will not welcome, reached through a fair and open process.

Why it matters

Conflict that is avoided tends to return, often at a worse moment. Conflict that is handled badly damages relationships and trust across the system. Leaders who navigate it well turn disagreement into better decisions, and keep people working together after the decision is made.

Through a values lens: Conflicts in public service often reflect real differences in how decisions affect people and places. Navigating them with integrity means making sure communities and people with lived experience are heard fairly in the process, especially when their interests carry less formal weight than those of established organisations.

When it tips too far: The search for common ground can delay a necessary decision, or soften a difference that should be stated plainly.

A6 HOLDING THE LINE

Protects impartiality and professional integrity, advises candidly and respects the boundary between political and professional roles.

Boundaries are marked on every good map so that travellers know whose land they are on: the line between political and professional roles keeps everyone's journey safe and lawful.

Holding the Line is the integrity at the heart of political acumen. It describes the leader who gives candid professional advice, including advice that members or board members may not want to hear; who protects the impartiality expected of officers, civil servants and staff by treating members of every party or group fairly; and who knows and respects the boundary between political decisions and professional responsibilities.

In councils, this boundary is set out in law, codes of conduct and member and officer protocols. In central government, it is expressed in the Civil Service Code's commitment to impartiality. In health boards and charities, it lives in the distinction between the board's role in setting direction and holding to account and the executive's role in advising and delivering. Leaders strong in this area decline, courteously and clearly, requests that would compromise integrity or the proper use of public resources, uphold the Nolan Principles when pressure pulls the other way, and support colleagues to do the same.

Holding the line is not obstruction. It protects members and boards as much as officers, because decisions made on honest advice, through proper process, are decisions that stand.

Why it matters

Public trust depends on knowing that professional advice is honest and that public resources serve the public interest. Leaders who hold the line protect that trust, protect colleagues from improper pressure and protect members and boards from decisions that would not withstand scrutiny.

Through a values lens: Holding the line is integrity and the public interest in practice. It means remembering that the people and communities affected by decisions are owed honest advice and fair process, whoever holds power, and that impartial public service exists for their benefit.

When it tips too far: Firm attention to boundaries can come across as distance or resistance, so it helps to pair candour with visible support for members' goals.

TAKING PART

How it is completed

The questionnaire is completed online, with a paper version available where that suits people better. The leader completes a self rating and invites between 6 and 12 raters from five groups: their line manager, peers, direct reports, elected members or board members, and partners and community representatives. We recommend at least three raters in any group whose results are shown separately, so that individual responses cannot be identified; the line manager is told in advance that their rating will be visible.

Each person rates the same 36 statements on a scale of 1 to 10. Most people take around 10 to 15 minutes. There is space at the end for brief written comments. Where the instrument is added to the Leadership Behaviours 360, raters complete both in one sitting. Avanti manages invitations, reminders and confidentiality throughout.

How the results are reported

The Political Acumen 360 works in the same way as the Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360. The leader rates themselves, and between 6 and 12 raters rate them, against the same 36 statements: their line manager, peers, direct reports, elected members or board members, and partners and community representatives. The report sets the leader's own view against the combined view of all others, and against each rater group in turn, so the leader can see how their political acumen is experienced in each relationship. The difference between self view and others' view is shown as a number and labelled on a simple gap scale, from closely aligned to a striking gap. The instrument is designed as a deep dive that extends the 360's Political and Stakeholder Awareness competence. It can be bought on its own, or added to the Leadership Behaviours 360 for leaders who want a fuller reading of this part of their compass.

Rater groups: Line manager, Peers, Direct reports, Members or board, Partners and community.

Who completes it: The leader and 6 to 12 raters: line manager, peers, direct reports, elected members or board members, and partners.

SCORING

How it is scored

Each area of acumen has six statements, and its score is the average of those six on the same 1 to 10 scale. A score counts only if at least five of the six statements are answered; blank answers are left out rather than counted as low. We calculate scores separately for the leader's self view, for each rater group with enough responses, and for all others combined.

Each area is placed in one of three bands: Growing edge (below 5), Established (5 to below 7.5) or Signature strength (7.5 and above). The difference between the self view and others' combined view is shown as a number and labelled on a gap scale: closely aligned, a modest gap, a gap worth naming, a notable gap or a striking gap. There is no target to reach and no ideal profile; the report is always about this leader's map, not a ranking against others.

Band	Range	What it signals
Growing edge	1 to under 5	These behaviours are already part of how this leader reads and travels the political landscape some of the time, with real potential to build on them.
Established	5 to under 7.5	These behaviours are a reliable part of how this leader works with politics and stakeholders, with room to extend them into harder terrain.
Signature strength	7.5 to 10	Others consistently experience these behaviours as a defining part of this leader's political acumen, practised with integrity.



USING THE RESULTS

Using the results

Results are shared in a confidential, facilitated feedback conversation with an Avanti coach. Together we look first at the leader's signature strengths, then at their growing edges, and then at where self view and others' views differ, including how different rater groups, especially members or board members and partners, experience the leader's political acumen.

From there, the conversation moves to choices. The leader selects two or three areas to focus on and shapes a practical development plan, using the reflective questions and development ideas in the report. Where a leadership team or cohort takes part, anonymised combined results can inform a team session on how the team works with members, boards and partners together.

WHEN TO USE IT

When to use it

New senior roles close to members or boards	In the first year of a role that works closely with elected members, ministers or a board, to understand how the leader's political acumen is landing.
Changes of political or board leadership	After an election, a change of administration or minister, or a new chair or board, when relationships and expectations are being reset.
Strengthening member and officer relationships	When members, boards and senior officers want to build trust and clarity about their respective roles.
Major partnership and system change	When leaders are building alliances across organisations, such as reorganisation, integration or new combined arrangements, and need to work skilfully across interests.
Deepening the Leadership Behaviours 360	When a 360 shows Political and Stakeholder Awareness as an area the leader wants to explore in more depth.

ETHICS

Ethics and good practice

Taking part is voluntary and based on informed consent. Individual rater responses are confidential: results are shown only for groups of three or more raters, except for the line manager, who is told in advance that their rating will be visible. Members and board members who rate are assured the same confidentiality, and their participation is never used to compromise the leader's impartiality. The leader owns their report and decides who else sees it. Data is held securely, used only for the agreed purpose and handled in line with UK GDPR. The instrument is a development tool, not a clinical or selection instrument, and it must not be used for recruitment, selection, promotion, pay, appraisal ratings, performance management or any decision about a person's employment. Political acumen as described here never includes manipulation, and the instrument is always used in a way that respects officer impartiality and the Nolan Principles.

Please note

This is a development instrument. It is not a clinical assessment and it is not designed or validated for selection, recruitment, promotion or performance management decisions. Scores describe perceptions at a point in time and are a starting point for conversation, not a verdict.

THE SUITE

Part of the Avanti suite

Avanti Leadership Behaviours 360	The Compass shows a leader's direction across eight points; the Map unfolds the Political and Stakeholder Awareness point into the full terrain. The two share a scale, rater groups and gap scale, and can be completed together in one sitting.
Avanti Strategic Team Behaviours	The Weave looks at how a leadership team works together. The Political Acumen 360 shows how each member reads and travels the political landscape, which shapes how the team works with members, boards and partners.
Avanti Role Lens	Role Lens brings a single role into shared focus. Where the boundary between political and professional responsibilities feels unclear, Role Lens can help clarify what a role calls for.
Avanti Development Framework	Ripples looks at leadership from the senior team to the whole system. Political acumen is part of how leadership ripples out to partners and communities.
Avanti Cultural Dimensions	Spectrums explores organisational culture. The Map shows how individual leaders navigate the political side of that culture, and where integrity and openness are lived day to day.

ABOUT US

About the authors

Dr. Jonathan Huish

Jonathan is a founding director of Avanti. His doctorate from Cranfield University studied top team leadership in local government: the conditions under which senior teams become genuinely effective and the things that quietly stop them. He is CIPFA qualified, has coached and mentored for more than twenty years, from first-line supervisors to chief executives, and brings a Tavistock grounding in group relations and reflective practice to how Avanti designs and facilitates its work.

Dr Amanda Milliner

Amanda is a founding director of Avanti. Her PhD from the University of South Wales studied community engagement in public services: what it takes for engagement to move beyond consultation into genuine co-production and partnership with communities. Her practice spans engagement strategy, leadership development and organisational design, with a particular focus on the relationship between organisational culture and the communities it serves.

About Avanti

Avanti Change Ltd works with leaders, boards and teams across public services: councils, health and care, housing and homelessness, mental health, harm reduction, emergency services and the voluntary and community sector. Our work is rooted in Welsh values of humility, service and dignity, and in the belief that how change is led matters as much as what changes.