

Taking up the reins: Things I know now that I didn't know then
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In this new series, Geoff Barton looks back after his first year of headship to offer tips, advice and support to those who find themselves appointed, perhaps not even for the first time, to headteacher posts.

If you've just taken up a new headship, one thing you won't lack is advice. Whether it's the garish green research pieces from the National College for School Leadership, the hefty resource packs from NPQH or New Visions, or just the comments of people around you, everyone will be happy to play the role of expert.

Whilst this might, occasionally, be flattering, it's also a reminder of how – as headteacher – all eyes are upon you. Every time you speak in a staff meeting or assembly or parents' meeting; every time you set foot in the staffroom; each recce around the school site – all the time, someone somewhere is making judgements about you.

That – for me – has been the most astonishing part of the job: its sheer visibility. Everyone expects you to do it all, from delivering inspirational assemblies, to controlling a tight budget, to sorting out stroppy parents, to judging the PTA talent show. Step into headship and you might as well wear a sign proclaiming “public property”. And, as a result, you can end each term feeling battered and discarded.

So, ignoring all the theoretical guidance (most of which I've read and much of which I've benefited from), here are six practical observations on becoming a headteacher.

1 Quick hits are essential

You'll receive conflicting advice from veteran headteachers. Some will tell you to go into the new school and make an immediate impact; others will caution you to spend a term or more getting inside the culture of the place, learning what it's like, and only then to make any changes.

Naturally, you have to do what's right for your context, but I think the appointment of a new headteacher brings with it expectations of change. Staff in particular will expect to see some evidence of your arrival, as will some parents. I would strongly recommend that you make some quick hits. These aren't change for the sake of it. They have important symbolic value: they establish your credibility for change. They show, in other words, that you have the appetite and drive to make things happen differently.

When I arrived at King Edward VI School, I was quite explicit with staff in signalling that there would be quick hits. I said in my opening spiel that I placed emphasis on uniform and discipline; felt that state schools should aim to be at least as good as independent schools; and that learning and teaching was our core activity.

The quick hits therefore flowed from this:

- an absolute blitz on uniform. No student is allowed into lessons if not properly dressed. If they arrive in trainers, we have a supply of plimsolls
- with Governors, we introduced a policy of not authorising family holidays
- a new accessible format for the fortnightly newsletter
- a complete overhaul of the website
- a daily Barton Bulletin on the staffroom noticeboard reminding people of what was going on and reinforcing key messages (not quite as New Labour as it sounds!)
- a new student planner
- a new format for many school documents – from assembly rotas to reports
- significant refurbishment during the first holiday – new staff toilets, large framed photographs of students on the walls, less institutional colours

These quick hits were partly symbolic. They showed that the school was under new management. More importantly, they established my credibility for change. I suspect there's only a shortish window of time for this – perhaps three months. This is the honeymoon period when everyone is still keen to impress and cautious about your perception. It's the prime time for quick hits and I'd recommend making the most of it.

Since then we have moved on to much more significant areas of change – switching to a three-period day from September 2005; a complete overhaul of the curriculum; Training School and Sports College status. None of these would have been so possible to achieve if early on I hadn't established my credentials with all members of the school community as someone who can manage change.

2 Big vision; small details

I've done NPQH twice. I did the original course and, erm, failed. I like to think it was on a technicality. Now I'm completing the New Visions programme for headteachers in their early years. Both courses are fine for the opportunity they give you to step back from the job and reflect on vision and values. But – like a lot of texts about headship – they can perpetuate the myth that being an effective headteacher is simply about having an effective vision. I suspect we've all worked with people in various roles who are strong on vision but weak on grasp of detail. The result: frustration.

My own view is that it's the day-to-day details that make the biggest impact on people. It's the organisational systems behind reports and cover; the ease with which staff can get hold of pupil data; the transparency and enforcement of deadlines; the quality of staff toilets.

The NPQH model can make us assume we have to be all strategic all the time, whereas I think staff appreciate a headteacher who stalks the corridors, drops into lessons, does a share of lunchtime duties, clears up cups from the staffroom.

I'd like to think that once I lose interest in all of this nitty-gritty activity, then it's probably time for me to move on. I've learnt what my instinct always told me: that headteachers aren't like the chief executives of foundation hospitals or private companies. We need to be seen interacting with students, picking up litter, paying attention to behaviour. Credibility is an essential part of the job, and it's one reason that many of us have qualms about plans for "school improvement partners" (ie practising heads) to spend up to 40 days a year working with other schools. In my opinion, that won't work: a headteacher is, by definition, a head "teacher", which means being more than a chief executive. It means showing that we can tackle the daily grind of school life that we expect of the rest of our team.

3 Treat your office with care

I have to confess I haven't mastered this one. I can't easily sit and work in my office, certainly not during the school day. Stephen Covey (author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) wouldn't approve, but too many evenings I fill my bag with the contents of my in-tray, carry them home, shuffle them around a bit, and ferry them back to school the next day. The notion of the paperless office strikes me as a sick joke. Email and websites have increased the expectation of rapid response, increasing the pressure.

Instead, I spend most of my time talking. If I'm on the corridors I talk to staff or students; in my office there's a constant stream of people with things to discuss. I had the bold notion of blocking out a period per day for paperwork but couldn't settle. So – Ofsted team: no need to tell me – administration is a weak point.

But what I have learnt is that 15 minutes or so working with my personal assistant to look at the diary for the day ahead, scan the post and sort out priorities is fantastic. Secretly, I have to confess she runs the school, but this daily ritual reassures me that I at least play a small part.

4 Site enhancements aren't cosmetic

I used to assume that any money spent on the upkeep of the site was a cosmetic, superficial decision. It was a diversion of money from the classroom and therefore a self-indulgence. Now I think it's usually money well-spent.

The first impression we make, say with our Reception area, the look of the buildings, the state of the toilets – all of these are tangible representations of our values. I believe in high standards. How could I possibly stand up and say that if my exam desks contained graffiti or corridors were full of tatty displays.

Much of my energy, therefore, goes into shaping the appearance of the site, paying attention to detail, using interiors to showcase the achievements of students and staff.

And it's something I no longer feel guilty about.

5 Focus relentlessly on learning

This, of course, is easier said than done. One of the more surprising realities of headship is the way you get drawn into new areas of experience. I spent yesterday morning listening to contractors discussing the type of bricks they'll use for our new art centre. They wanted my opinion about the lettering on the signs outside. You get involved, endlessly, in discussions about litter, parking, painting, building, toilets, catering and finances. I have to say that this is what gives the job much of its charm: at its best, you're dealing with an endlessly changing agenda. Boredom is impossible because of this sheer variety of topics. Of course, it also means a sense of frustration at never having the chance to focus on anything properly, but that's been the nature of all my career in teaching and I'm resigned to it.

But it's easy to get distracted from the core business of our work. I aim to visit ten lessons a week, by which I mean walking into classes, seeing what's going on, and moving on. When things are particularly difficult in the job, I get out and about even more than usual.

6 Stick to your principles

Tony Blair, early in his premiership said "Saying no is much harder than saying yes. This is dead right. Most of the people who come in through the office door are after something – more pay, more resources, more non-contact time, more administrative support.

Once the honeymoon period is over, your closest allies will sometimes waiver; their resolve – especially in the hardest time of the year, the summer term - will begin to crumble. Stick to your principles. If you know you need to keep staffing tight, keep it tight; if appointing another part-timer would blow the budget in a year's time, avoid it.

This is the toughest part of the job, but I've found it helpful to look people in the eye, say "I know you may not agree with this, but here's the reason why" and then go on to explain the rationale for decisions.

This won't necessarily win you friends or supporters, but then that's not the main part of the job. It does, however, show courage, principles and leadership, and not many people can argue against those as core values.

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