

The first hundred days

Starting a new headship this term? Don't leave first impressions to chance – take **Jody Goldsworthy's** tips and set the right tone for your leadership from the start



At some point in their career, most headteachers will take up a new job in a new school. This might be through transfer or internal promotion, but either way, their performance in the first 100 days will be critical. Others will watch closely, looking out for signs of long-term success or failure.

Hay Group's work with school leaders at all stages in their careers has identified a series of common pitfalls to be avoided during the first 100 days. To make the best first impression, headteachers must carefully plan their entry into the school, and once on board, be highly visible, consultative, results-driven and above all, optimistic. Here are some practical tips for headteachers to help set the best tone from the outset.

Get to know people

Staff are a school's biggest asset. As a new headteacher, you will need to get to know your staff, and the best way is through a combination of research and personal conversations.

Review the performance history for all staff, then set up meetings immediately, starting with the senior team, to determine where strengths and gaps lie. Use this as an

opportunity to get to know staff personally. What do they believe in? What drives and motivates them on the job? Consider these against your own values and capabilities, determining who will complement you or compensate for your own skills gaps. This should also include your governors: who will help you get things done?

It's likely that some changes to structures or roles will be necessary, but avoid making these too soon. Most importantly, avoid hearsay and gossip, and make sure your decisions about staff are based on evidence. At the same time, do not be afraid to rely on your intuition; as an experienced leader you will quickly get a sense of who you will be able to rely upon.

Share your vision for the school

It might be too early to be too specific about your future strategy, but the sooner the vision and values are shared, the better. Some of the governing body may have heard sections of this at your interview; but make sure all employees hear it directly from you too. Be sincere, inclusive and realistic about how fast you'll be able to make changes. You will probably want to allow staff and stakeholders an opportunity to contribute to the detail



of the school's strategy and this initial briefing gives you a good basis for starting this consultation. Staff will be looking to you as the new boss and wondering what your expectations will be, how you will lead and how they can please and impress you. This is a good time to share your expectations as a leader.

Think about your leadership style

Leadership styles are the patterns of behaviour a manager adopts to plan, motivate, organise and control. Hay Group research has identified six leadership styles. The most effective headteachers are those who use a wide range of styles and adapt their use according to the demands of the situation.

The style a leader develops over their career depends upon their personal characteristics (e.g. personality, attributes and values), as well as:

- the styles they have seen bosses, mentors and other leaders use
- the organisation's espoused values regarding the 'right' way to lead or manage
- the specific management situations and people the manager deals with most.

Leadership styles

The six styles that have the greatest impact on the environment experienced by the people you lead are:

Directive – *'directives not directions'*

Visionary – *'firm but fair'*

Affiliative – *'people first, task second'*

Democratic – *'involving others'*

Pace-setting – *'follow me, do what I do'*

Coaching – *'long-term development'*

A new school calls for a review of your leadership styles and behaviours, and a check as to whether your usual way of working will be appropriate.

While there is no single combination of leadership styles that suits every setting, new headteachers will benefit from an immediate focus on the visionary style. This involves developing and articulating a clear vision for the school, asking staff for their perspectives, and persuading them by explaining the 'whys' behind your vision. It also involves setting standards and monitoring performance in relation to the 'big picture'.

Headteachers who have taken up new posts in underperforming schools may benefit from combining the visionary style with the directive style, which gives clear directives and expects immediate compliance, controlling tightly and ensuring close monitoring.

Find out how the school is perceived

The next task on your list should be to find out what is really going on in the community you serve. Even if you've come from a nearby location, every school is uniquely perceived. Schedule as many meetings as you can with governors, parents, pupils, the local authority and community groups. As well as being a great opportunity to communicate your vision, this sends a strong message to stakeholders that you value their feedback in order to help you plan. Ask them what they want from the school, and listen to their views about how you can improve the quality of provision for local children. Find out a bit about the history, about what's worked well and what hasn't. This will help you to build change around strengths and avoid change for change's sake.

Make sure local headteachers get to know you too, as this will set the scene for future partnerships and allow you to tap into informal networks as well as formal collaborations. If you have been a deputy or acting headteacher in the school, you may have blind spots that other headteachers or colleagues can uncover as they walk around your school.

Unpick performance data

As a new leader, you have the benefit of objectivity. You'll see and question things that long-term staff members might take for granted. Get your hands on as much performance data as you can and ensure that you have read between the lines and probe what the underlying reasons might be behind results.

Assess the school's strengths and weaknesses and break this down by key stage, subject or department. This will help determine where attention should be focused. Involve staff in goal-setting for improving teaching and learning, and in decisions about how to move forward. If you aren't completely new to the school, you may need to gain this perspective from others.

Start as you mean to go on

You will quickly get a sense of what the school culture is like – things like the values and beliefs that people uphold and the accepted behavioural norms. These probably won't match up to everything you'd like or expect – as the senior figurehead, you are the strongest role model in making changes. Set out your ground rules and share these with staff. As well as individual performance objectives, what are the behaviours you expect all staff to adhere to consistently? Explain these in addition to your underlying rationale.

These ground rules might be as straightforward as 'all meetings will start on time' or 'all staff will challenge pupils who aren't where they should be', or as complex as 'we will not permanently exclude children'. Be visible around the school, particularly in the first few months. If you see the rules being broken by adults or pupils, pick up on the behaviour immediately and constructively.

Match self-image and job demands

Regardless of the exposure they have had to a broad range of leadership challenges, many leaders experience shock about the sheer accountability they feel in the job when taking up their first headteacher post. Often, as well as getting to grips with the demands of the

job, these headteachers need to change their perceptions of themselves from a 'senior leader' to 'headteacher'. This might involve working on self-confidence, personal habits or making a shift from wanting to be liked to wanting to be respected.

Make some 'quick wins'

Too much change from a new leader can be overwhelming for staff, but addressing small but urgent needs can earn respect and credit quickly. This might be as simple as repairing a broken piece of important equipment, or painting over graffiti. The key is to avoid getting bogged down in these details by selecting those that will have immediate impact on the well-being of staff and pupils.

Set out your stall for performance management

Once you have the vision in place, and a strategy to help you achieve it, get your senior staff together. Involve them in discussions about how school objectives should translate into their own performance objectives. Cascade these into performance objectives for all departments and staff, including teachers and support functions.

By making clear to staff how their role contributes to the school's vision, and by setting challenging, achievable objectives, you have the best chance of raising standards and holding staff accountable for their contribution. However, you will not be able to do this alone. Ensure that all senior staff are clear on how the performance management system works and check that line managers have the skills to give honest feedback, make performance judgements and hold staff to account for their performance.

Give yourself a break

Finally, remember that headteachers are human beings too! You won't get everything right in the first 100 days, or indeed at any point in your leadership journey. Acknowledge mistakes, forgive yourself. Don't be afraid to change direction and move on with humility. This helps foster a culture that values calculated risk-taking and learning through experience. Make sure you have the support of a coach or mentor: someone you can talk openly to in your first 100 days and can trust to provide the balance between support and critical friend.

Rightly or wrongly, headteachers will be closely scrutinised in their first 100 days on the job. A strong first impression promises great things to come, and sets the tone and culture for the leadership future of the school.

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