

Joining a new senior leadership team: the dos and don'ts

Emma Kell shares advice on how to make a good first impression when joining a new management team

'In my last school...' and other eye rollers. Assistant headteacher Emma Kell shares advice on how to make a good first impression when joining a new management team

There's a group of confident twenty-somethings in my head in about their third year of [teaching](#). They are passionate, competent, cynical (because they know it all) and fiercely loyal to their school and students.

Then in walks a new member of the senior [leadership](#) team (SLT). Much scrutiny, much snickering and plenty of mutterings: "So, what's this one got in store for us?"

I was one of those twenty-somethings once. Roll on fifteen years and here I am, on the eve of walking into a brand new school as a new member of a SLT in charge of teaching and learning. On the way to this point there have been many learning curves, a few hard knocks, a few triumphs, and a few zebra-stripes to my name.

Old arrogance has been replaced by quieter confidence, paired with a recognition that with each new challenge there is a whole load more to learn. A recognition that decisions in education are rarely black and white, but with an ongoing faith that if you scratch any teacher hard enough, you'll see they're in it to make a difference.

It doesn't take much imagination to work out how I'm feeling today. Part excitement, part determination, and a double-dose of apprehension. As a compulsive information-seeker, I couldn't help but ask others how to make the best of this new start. The words below are a combination of instinct, experience, and wise words from the Twitter and Facebook communities from within and outside management, and from within and outside teaching.

First and foremost, relationships

First impressions are important. Smile, firm handshake, eye contact. Get to know people – starting with support staff. Learn names of staff and students, and use them. Listen more than you talk: two ears and one mouth or a 70:30 ratio is recommended. Be interesting and interested. If you really have something to say, say it, but don't talk too much.

Ask questions, get a feel for the place, absorb and be open-minded. Make time for proper, face-to-face conversations. You may as well be yourself from day one; three months down the line, it'll be impossible to hide. Be visible and be available.

Remember what's important

The kids come first, however much the new role and responsibilities seem to dominate. Your most important role in the school is arguably as a teacher. Never forget a five lesson day – this has been on my wall since I took my first SLT post. Remember your inner fully-timetabled teacher, for these are the life blood of any school. Don't forget the days which chew you up and spit you out – offer empathy aplenty.

Balance confidence and humility

This is the really tricky one. Confidence is essential, but it's important to realise you don't know it all and communicate this. Don't apologise for not knowing it all, though don't be sycophantic and tell people they're great for the sake of it.

Actions and decisions

As a new leader, you'll be required to be decisive and "step up". But don't make changes for the sake of it and avoid rushing. Find what's great about the school and highlight it, building on the positives. I particularly liked this idea: "Ask people who their role model is in the school and what can be learned from them."

When leading discussions, ensure everyone contributes. The "blockers" (I've always hated that word) may well have good reasons for being that way, so listen to them too. Make time for the quieter people; they have lots to contribute and lots of support to offer.

And what to avoid?

This, from a Twitter colleague, is a good one: "Telling another member of the SLT they were born in the same year as your mum."

But the thing guaranteed to get most eyes rolling is the dreaded: "In my last school..." This is possibly going to be the toughest of all. My last school is a huge part of my teacher identity, and now I need to take that and transplant it somewhere new, with a genuine sensitivity to context.

Finally: "Don't forget to wash, don't be drunk, and make sure your skirt's not tucked in your knickers."

What can possibly go wrong?