

Stepping up: five tips to succeed in school leadership posts

As September looms, many teachers will be entering or progressing in leadership jobs. **Matt Grant** shares his tried-and-tested strategies to help with the step up. School leaders need to be organised. Matt Grant uses a to-do list system that ranks task by urgency and required effort.

Come September many of us will be stepping up to take a [leadership](#) post for the first time, or taking on a new leadership role outside our comfort zone. This waiting period can be both an anxious and exciting time as we wonder what lies ahead.

I am about to move from a middle leadership post in a large secondary school to a senior leadership post in a smaller specialist provision. Reflecting on the past three years and the year ahead, there are a number of survive-then-thrive strategies I will adopt – things that helped me last time around and will no doubt help again.

Teaching

Most school leaders, particularly those in middle leadership roles, have a substantial teaching commitment to balance alongside their other duties. For me, as a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) in a large mainstream school, this dual calling to be a great teacher and leader has proved one of the greatest challenges over the past few years. We often find ourselves rising up the ranks because of the skills we've developed and demonstrated in the classroom. When we enter a pressurised leadership role, however, this is the first thing that can slip in quality.

Over the years I have saved up a huge collection of resources and this has helped no end in keeping lessons flowing. I also make a point every now and then of putting my other responsibilities on hold and taking the time to plan something brand new – it's important to still get that real buzz from teaching, a buzz that only comes when you're creative.

In the first term it's important to know your schemes of learning, deadlines and the behaviour for learning policy. It's also essential for students to know your routines, boundaries and expectations. Aside from the students being our main concern, this helps to maintain your own sense of credibility as someone who can lead other teachers and to prevent classroom management issues that will take further time and energy to sort.

You also have to be prepared, if you're moving [schools](#), to be the 'newbie teacher' again. This requires proactive work to establish yourself. After I got over my false pride – "I'm a teacher of X many years, how dare they treat me like this" – it was useful to return to behaviour strategy books, such as those by [Bill Rogers](#), from my PGCE days. The hard-fought relationships with my difficult classes in my first year have now grown into easy-going, fruitful relationships, and we can draw reassurance that this will be the case again eventually.

Take a term

While you work on your teaching, it's a good time to check the lie of the land. As an incoming leader, your colleagues will be anxious about the changes you might bring, no matter how on-board they appear. They will become even more anxious, and potentially resistant, if you parachute in and machine-gun them with ideas. I have often heard it's important to hit the ground running, but the best bit of advice I've received was to take time. By doing this you get to know members of your team and find out who your key allies are.

Timelines

Once you've gained a clearer picture of what you intend to change, it's important to map out your vision to help keep it realistic. When I first became a leader of a SEN department, I had a clear vision of where I wanted to take things based on my previous experiences and my observations of the particular situation at the school. It would've been easy to burn myself out trying to build the department in one big swoop. Instead, I was encouraged to break things down step-by-step on a timeline spanning two years.

A timeline template is easy to create or find online – or by buttering up a history teacher. From there you need to patiently try sticking to the plan and be mindful of mission creep. You also need to go easy on yourself if something doesn't happen according to the timeline – it's meant to be a helpful guide not a rod for your back.

To-do lists

Most people will create a to-do list during times when they are feeling overwhelmed. For school leaders this can be all of the time. Certainly in the first few months of moving into a leadership position I found myself hurrying around with an ever-growing to-do list stuck in my diary, making me feel increasingly like a hod carrier.

We routinely coach our students in good working habits but sometimes we need to coach ourselves. A psychological tip I have adopted is to always use a highlighter pen to identify the urgent jobs. Set the target so that as long as these things get done in good time, you can feel satisfied with your efforts. I also tend to grade jobs into 'needs to be great' and 'needs to be good enough', recognising that not everything can be completed to absolute perfection.

Another psychological trick I've adopted over the years is to finish each day by re-writing out the to-do list and screwing up the old one, so the done bits feel truly gone and tomorrow feels like a fresh start.

Time out

Being known as someone who gets things done is probably one of the big reasons I found myself becoming a school leader. The problem is that I naturally go the extra mile with my work taking over every weekday night, weekend and school holiday.

I learned my lesson the hard way, deciding to go into school one half-term to update some paperwork instead of going to visit an elderly relative. He passed away that week and I unwittingly missed my last opportunity to spend time with him: the paperwork felt a whole lot less pressing after that.

It's important for your wellbeing, and for those around you, to completely switch off and spend time doing something else. I enjoy short breaks in the Welsh and Scottish wilderness, and weekend walks in the Peak District, where laptop power cables and mobile phone signals struggle to reach, are the best way of detoxing from screen addiction. Pick what helps you switch off and make time for it.

Finally, it's also good to book yourself on conferences, courses and network meetings where you can take time out with other school leaders, reflect on the issues of the day – and your approach to addressing them – and just share a moan or two. Allow yourself to be reassured that everyone is in more or less the same boat – and we'll get there in the end.

Matt Grant is an SEN coordinator at [Thornleigh Salesian College](#) in Bolton. In September he will become assistant deputy head [Pendlebury Centre](#) (a PRU for mental-health issues). Matt has his own website, [Humans Not Robots](#), and tweets as [@HumansNotRobots](#). Taken from The Guardian Teacher Network.