

The 7 things successful heads of department do

Assistant headteacher **Peter Smith** offers some guidance on how to make your department shine

Successful departments need to be led. Be the first to share ideas and encourage others to do the same.

Lead by example

All historians love a quote and that quite wise chap Gandhi once said: "You must be the change you want to see in the world." If you want a department where ideas are shared, students are enthused and [teaching](#) is dynamic, you have to take the lead. The job of head of department can be a lonely one; trying to be professional with your department members and therefore keeping a little distance (written by someone who married one of his department, this is more of a do as I say not as I do moment) and not always being taken seriously by SLT. Don't focus on you, instead put your efforts into modelling the very best practice. Be the first to share ideas; lessons, model answers, revision guides. Put all your lessons on the shared area, encourage others to observe you. Not because you think you're amazing, but because you want others to do the same, and if they see you doing it, they're more likely to return the efforts/opportunity.

Praise others, not yourself

While you should aim to be the best teacher in the department, you shouldn't publicise this. Go about your role with confidence, but let others work out that you're really good. If you go about listing your track record of outstanding observations or the time the local authority inspector cried at how beautiful your lesson on slavery was, it will only eventually demotivate and intimidate your staff. Instead praise your staff when you catch them doing something well or hear something good about their lessons. And pass these things on to the head; big up your staff whenever possible. By doing this you build their confidence. Linked to this, when you delegate roles out, leave what they produce alone. Resist the temptation to rewrite the revision guide front page as it doesn't quite fit with how you'd do it, or edit the material for the website. If it's correct allow the member of staff ownership of it rather than you taking the credit.

Don't do things for Ofsted

Ofsted is an important government body auditor and what they say about us is how we're judged as [schools](#). It is not an improvement body and until it is, it won't have my support or credibility (I hear Mr Wilshaw is devastated by this news). Ofsted is important, and I'm not saying disregard it, I'm saying do things for the right reasons. And if you do that, turns out Ofsted will probably like it. So ask for student input into the department if you genuinely care and you're going to reflect on the results. If you're doing it just because it looks good then frankly don't bother; it's a waste of your staff's valuable time and when the inspectors scratch below the surface they'll realise it's done purely for effect anyway.

Protect your staff

As a department they're your most valuable resource. Appoint wisely and then look after them. Keep an eye on how hard they're working, and if they look stressed relieve some stress by sending them home without work for a weekend or helping with their mock marking. Sometimes this will

put you in direct conflict with your line manager or headteacher, as sometimes you will be disregarding school policy. Be brave and stand your ground.

Deploy your troops wisely

Look at your subject. For example history really competes for students at GCSE and A-level and the more students the better; more resources, more specialist teachers, more status in the school. Make sure therefore that the people delivering your year 9 curriculum are those who are likely to make students want to study your subject and at year 11 – have your best teachers ensuring good results. This sometimes isn't an easy call to make, but your department lives and dies by results and numbers so get the staffing right.

Exploit what you've got

Exploit your subject matter to boost your profile. Again using the example of my department history lends itself to explaining current affairs, so shed the tag of being stuck in the past by keeping the department relevant. Ask to take over the Remembrance Day assemblies to publicise the importance of history, run a school election next time there's an election and make connections with the past, use your display boards to make links to current news stories, foster links with the primary schools. No other subject gives you as much scope to do this as history. Be as creative as you can, so in a World Cup year make a wall display of a footballing team from history and ask for students to contribute personalities who would be suitable for the various positions, Boudicca on the wing maybe?

Set, short, achievable goals each term/year

Most importantly, know where you're going as a department. Set the focus as a team of what you want to achieve; better GCSE results, higher numbers, better teaching. Then work out the steps to get there; better exam technique, revision materials, whatever. Next allocate jobs, but do more than your fair share. Finally meet regularly and discuss how you're getting on with the goal you set. Once it's achieved, celebrate, tell someone, and set another one.

Peter Smith has been teaching for more than 10 years. He is an assistant headteacher at [East Bergholt High School](#) in Suffolk. Taken from the Guardian Teacher Network.