

# Stepping up: what makes a great head of department?

I was thrown in at the deep end when I first became head of department but soon learned from fellow middle leaders how to succeed. Here are the key lessons I learned on the job

Stepping up into leadership: give your team the right balance of support and challenge and trust them to do their job, says Jill Berry. Photograph: Martin Godwin.

When I became a head of department I was thrilled. From my early days in [teaching](#) I had seen the appeal of being a team leader, able to communicate my enthusiasm for my subject not just to the students I taught but, through the rest of the department, to all those studying the subject across the school. I have to say this seemed far more attractive to me than the responsibilities of senior leaders, some of whom appeared to spend several days investigating who threw the first toilet roll on the school bus.

And I did enjoy being a head of department. But I don't remember very much by way of preparation and support in advance of taking up the role; I think the view at that time was that if you had enough about you to get such a post, you had enough about you to work out how to do the job effectively.

I recognised early on that to do the role well you needed to work hard on relationships and communication. This was all about trying to get the best from each individual member of the team, respecting their different skills so that the impact of the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. A good team was composed of people with complementary skills, and when appointing a new team member it was important to consider what each candidate would bring to the group, not to gravitate naturally towards someone you recognised was like you.

There were administrative tasks, but I could see that the best departmental leaders were so much more than efficient and effective administrators; their skills lay in helping others to be the best they could. It was all about the success of the team and making their particular domain as strong as it could be.

The best heads of department didn't even need to be the best teachers in the team – though they had to be good enough to be credible. What they were really good at was seeing the best in and getting the best from others. It wasn't about ego; they saw the true sense of the Harry S Truman quotation: "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit".

The best team leaders struck the right balance of support and challenge – helping and guiding the members of their departments but not afraid to hold them to account too, as they themselves should be supported and challenged by the senior leaders within the school.

They didn't over-protect their teams, defend them at all costs and fight their corner to the exclusion of all else. The best heads of department were committed specialists, with impressive expertise and passion for their subject, but they also had a wider perspective and could see the big picture of the students' whole educational experience. They didn't spend their time railing against the system and moaning about "the management", either. They used their communication and relationship-building skills to ensure their particular domain was an example of excellence, and this then gave them the credibility to lead change from that position – they were respected and

listened to by the senior leaders because they were seen as successful middle leaders who were responsible for co-ordinating the achievements of strong teams across the school. I learnt from these positive examples, rather than having any formal training, I think.

In due course I moved on to become a head of sixth form, deputy head (and I served my time establishing who threw the Coke can from the bus) and then a headteacher. But I did try to spot talent, identify potential in aspiring middle leaders and help them to clarify their vision of the kind of leaders they wanted to be, and then to make that a reality.

Once I had the "right people in the right seats on the bus", as Jim Collins puts it in his book [Good to Great](#), I tried hard to give them the right balance of support and challenge and to trust them to do their job, a job which has the greatest impact on the standard of teaching and learning across the school.

Middle leadership is challenging and rewarding. Is it for you?

Taken from the Guardian Teacher Network.