

How to Succeed in Your First Head of Department Role

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Introduction

Congratulations on your appointment as a head of department! Leading the teaching and learning of a subject you are passionate about is a hugely rewarding role.

This guide aims to support you as you establish yourself in the role and perhaps a new school or college too. We focus in on the parts of the role that might be new to you as you step up into a position of leading as well as teaching. But above all else, remember to enjoy it!

Good Luck!



Be Yourself

Be inspired by those you admire, but have the confidence to do your own thing

Stop and think carefully about your values as a leader and a practitioner and consider how you'd like working and learning to feel within your department. It can help to picture your department a year from now – if you do your job well over the next year, how will things feel for students and staff? Keep the end in mind as you make even your earliest decisions and you'll never deviate too far.

Have a personal mission statement, check in with this any time you're uncertain about a decision

You Could Try

Remind yourself often why you are here

Stop to consider honestly what you can uniquely bring to the role and lean into those strengths and idiosyncrasies

Relationships Matter

Strong relationships with students, staff and senior leaders are a firm foundation for success

Get to know both those below you and above you in the hierarchy at your school or college. Stop and really listen to them. Understand what makes them tick and look for commonalities as well as areas where their strengths may play to your weaknesses.

You Could Try

Laughter is a great way to build bonds; consider how to introduce a little lightness and laughter to departmental meetings

Most people love to talk about themselves so take the time to ask

Establish trust by being consistent and always following through on the things you say you will do

Clear Plan

What is your vision for your department, how can you make it happen?

Having clear aims and goals for your time as department head is really important but remember that this is a team effort. Once you have an established idea about your key aims, ensure that these align with those above you and work with your team to consider what part everyone has to play and how you'll know if you're on track.

Consider how you might quantify success within the department and how you can keep a track of this



You Could Try

Clearly define roles and responsibilities that your team members can step up to



Consider how you'll know if you need a change of plan – what early warning signs should you take heed of?



Lean on Me

If you admire someone, tell them and ask them to help you

You don't need to go it alone. If there are staff within your current school or college or one you've previously worked at whose approach you admire, let them know and ask if they'll support you in your new role. Most people will very willingly help when approached in this way. It's very flattering and chances are if they were inspirational in their role that's because they're passionate about making a difference, so they'll be up for helping you to do so too.

You Could Try

Find a potential mentor and ask them to support you in your new role

Carry out a skills audit of your team and lean on the strengths present within your department

Reach out to other heads of department and consider whether there is a benefit to the pooling of resources and ideas

Celebrate Success

Regularly stop, take stock, and acknowledge what is going well

Regularly celebrating what is working well and taking the time to pay specific, sincere compliments to staff members and students can rapidly build a cycle of positive reinforcement. This will not only help you to move towards your departmental aims but will also build relationships, trust and a positive culture and ethos within your department.

Consider carefully what matters most to you as a leader. Ensure you praise and acknowledge behaviour and actionsthat align with those values

You Could Try

Write thank you notes – real ones, with a pen!

Take time to note successes of every type in regular departmental catchups

Gift Mistakes

It's okay to make mistakes, it's what you do next that matters

There are many different ways of managing mistakes. You can pretend they didn't happen. You can find a scapegoat. You can rectify them or, if you're really brave, you can gift them. When we gift our mistakes i.e. we are open and honest about them and we tell others where we went wrong and what we've learned from that, we create a culture where all staff are more able to ask for help when needed and where they can confidently step beyond their comfort zone and grow within their roles without fear of failure.

You Could Try

Take a light-hearted problem-solving approach to issues as they arise, encouraging colleagues to support one another

Take regular time as a team to share lessons learned from what went less well

Focus on ensuring new staff understand the ups and downs of teaching life even for the most experienced members of the department; NQTs often assume everyone else has got it sorted

Content is King

Forget the bells and whistles until you've got the fundamentals right

Teaching is a fast moving profession and there's always a new idea, resource, technique or technology you could be building into your lessons. Sometimes this can mean we can fail to see the wood for the trees, so be careful not to focus on the detail until you've got the basics right. Having a solid curriculum which is fit for purpose and staff who have the skills, confidence and knowledge to teach it should be an early focus.

If you've changed things, work closely with staff to make sure they feel confident with new content

You Could Try

Carry out a curriculum review and prioritise areas for development

Explore whether there are any gaps in your team's knowledge or understanding or any areas where they'd appreciate a little more guidance

Carry On Learning

Always Seek to be learning in your role and you'll do a great job and enjoy it more

Congratulations on making it to head of department. Maybe you've worked towards this for some time and it feels like you've finally made it to the finish line. In fact, you're right at the start. Now you've got the role, the question is how can you keep investing in yourself to become the best leader possible?

You Could Try

Ask for recommendations of books, videos or training which will develop you in your role

Network with other heads of department (either in your subject or others) and learn from one another

Engage fully with the performance management process at your school or college, asking for and willingly receiving help and support as needed




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