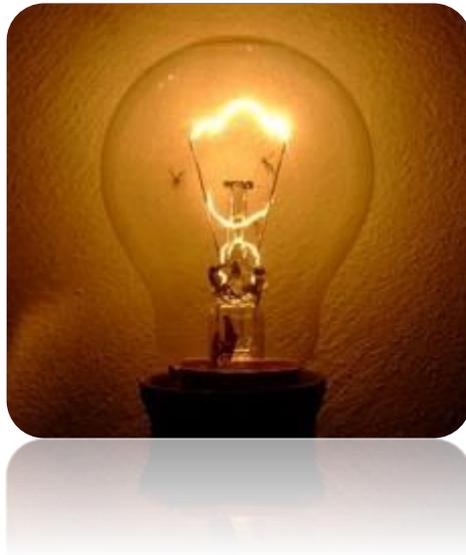


# Securing and Surviving the First Year of Headship



## A Practical Guide

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# Choosing the Right School

When applying for headships, candidates usually come in to one of two categories: those that are motivated to be a headteacher and want to climb the career ladder and those who want to increase their income. Both are valid reasons for going for that first post and when deciding which school to apply for consider the following factors below.



All of the above factors should form part of your decision making process because changing one of these variables within a position can make a huge difference. A good example of this is how long the previous HT has been in post; if they have been there for a long time e.g. +10 years then it will probably mean that changing the mindset of the school will take longer to happen than following on from someone who has been there three years because they may have begun to initiate change. Both have their pluses and minuses but following on from a long established HT can provide a stern test in the first year. Only you can know which factors are more important than others but the key advice is to make sure you choose the right school that you will feel comfortable working at.

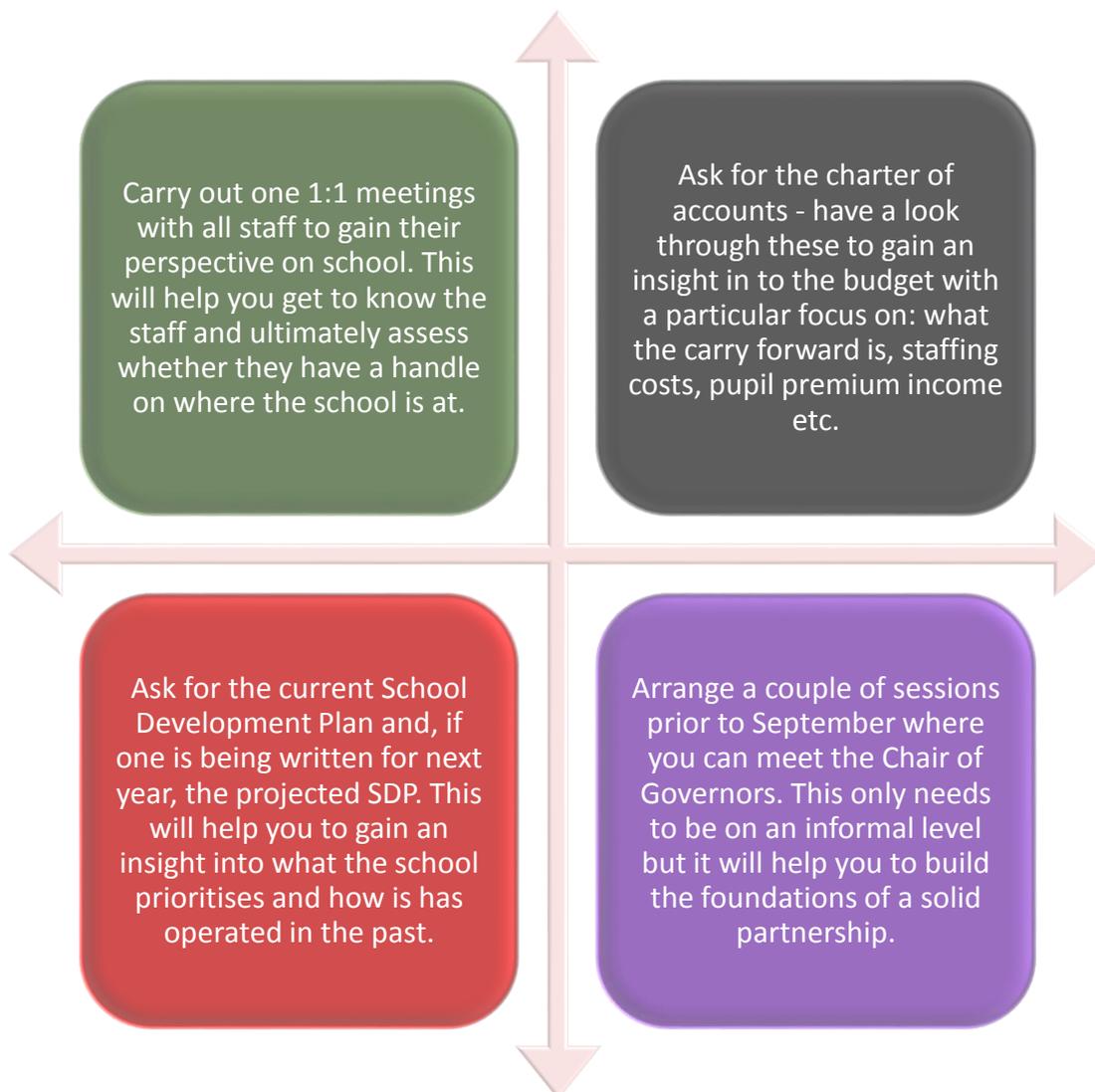
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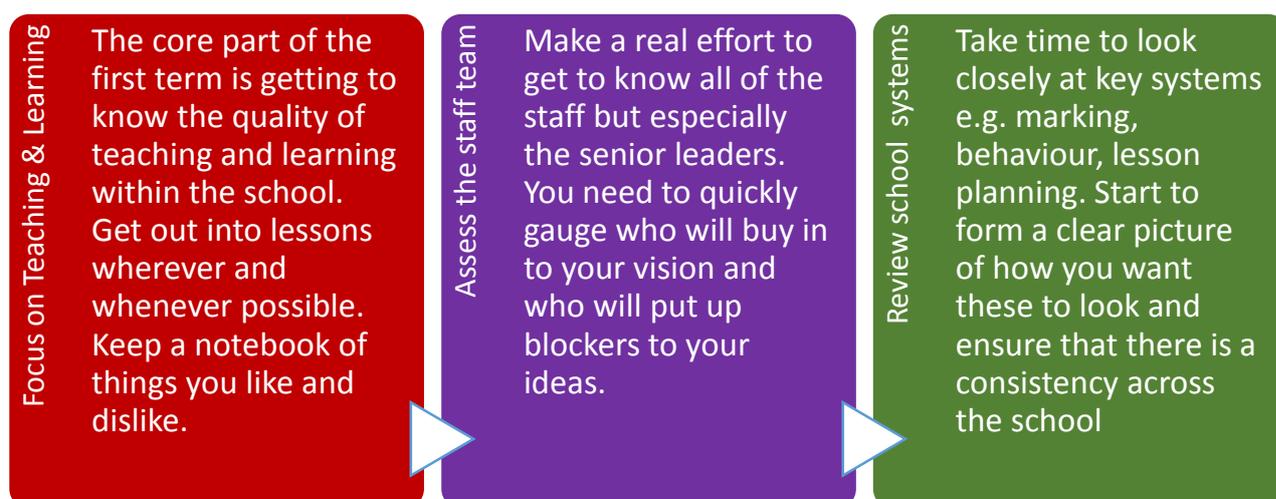
# The Waiting Game

In many ways the most difficult time after you have secured your first headship is the period in between accepting the job and taking up the post. This is often the time when it becomes increasingly difficult to focus on your role as deputy head due to the exciting and daunting realisation that you are about to become the ultimate leader of the school. You will increasingly find yourself strategizing about the job, thinking about what you will do, how you will go about things – this can become draining and below are practical tips you can act on before starting.



# The First Term

The start of the first term is an incredibly exciting time – I remember walking down the corridor on one of the first days and feeling elated that I could finally implement my vision for education. The very next day I walked down the same corridor and experienced a feeling of real anxiety run through me when I asked myself, “Am I up to job? Am I good enough?” The point is that those contrasting feelings spanning two days are a good marker for the first term – it is a roller coaster of emotions that nothing prepares you for. The important thing to know is that this is natural to headship and over time you learn to deal with the highs and lows a lot more effectively. Top tips for the first term are:



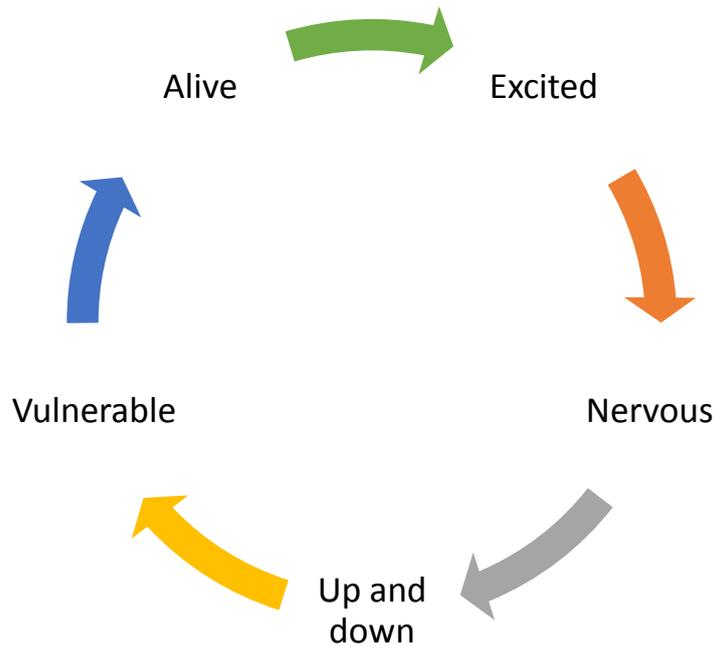
A final tip – ultimately because this is your first headship there are inevitably going to be people who doubt you. If you are delivering a difficult message e.g. informing the staff of a ‘good’ school that you judge it as ‘RI’ then it always helps to bring in outside verification in the form of the local authority or an OFSTED/HMI. It may sound tough but it adds to the credibility of the message being delivered.

# Practical solutions

The first year really flies by and below are a snapshot of strategies that may prove useful.

- **Develop a strong network.** I have four headteachers who I trust implicitly and who I can turn to. Each one has their own strengths: one is excellent at paperwork and has helped me no end in preparing for OFSTED, another is a realist about what needs to be done and when, another is a first year head who was in the same boat (good for comparing stories) and the final person is a HT who constantly shows faith in my ability. I turn to each of these people as an when I need them but without them the first year would have been a lot tougher.
- **Lead from the front.** I took over from a HT who had been in post for 29 years and was well regarded. From an early stage I wanted parents to know that I was equally ambitious for the school but had a different style. To help with this I put in place a couple of quick wins. Firstly, I stand on the gate every morning and welcome every child by name – it's a small thing but it shows your child centred. Secondly, I held a welcome evening for parents where I delivered my vision for the school and where I intended to take it. Finally, I created a blog [www.ht1parkhill.wordpress.com](http://www.ht1parkhill.wordpress.com) because I wanted parents to get to know me quickly and felt this was a good way. It has worked well and was not difficult to do. A plus side of this is that OFSTED trawled it when we were inspected and I quickly came to realise that I has created a library of everything that had been done at the school.
- **Hire a coach.** I have developed a real understanding of myself as leader in the past two years and part of this is knowing when I hit a low point. Headship is fantastic, don't let anyone tell you otherwise but it does make you doubt yourself. I know that in the last week of every half term I start to inwardly struggle – I doubt my ability, question decisions and generally become a little paranoid. I now hire a coach (£80 for two hours) every half term (I use the school budget for this) and meet with her in the penultimate week before we break for the end of term. It has made a huge difference and has moved my thinking on and allowed for more strategic thinking.

# How you will feel



Only you know how you react in certain situations but I'd say that it is a safe bet that you will go through all of the above emotions. Headship provides the greatest highs when the team unites, children make progress and things go well but it also provides lows and vulnerability like no other job. The key to remember, through it all, is that every HT has felt the above and in many ways still does. When taking over a new team I find the 'Storming, Norming and Performing' model helps me because it depersonalises a process – this was passed to me by Andy Brown and helps in the tough times. It is universally recognised that when a new leader joins a team they go through three phases:

- **Storming** – this is where the staff challenge the new way of working and in some cases openly oppose it.
- **Norming** – the team begins to see the merits of the new way of working and a number of staff support the new methods although there is still some resistance.
- **Performing** – the team embraces the new structures, believes in them and achieves real results.

The key is that all organisations go through this and I like to remember that when things get tough it would be the same for any new leader.

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## Turning the corner

As you come to the end of your first year you'll look back on it with a massive sense of achievement in what has been accomplished. You will know the school better, understand the community, know the children who attend and generally be in a much stronger position than when you started.

It is important that you remember that not everything can be achieved in one year and that it is important to implement the right thing at the right time. I really felt that the first year was a lot of underpinning of core practice whereas in the second year there has been scope to innovate although this will depend entirely on the circumstance of the school you take charge of.

One area that I particularly felt out on a limb was that of meeting with fellow headteachers in larger groups – I really felt that I was junior person (through no fault of theirs) and for a long time I lacked credibility in my own mind. To be honest, this was only really resolved when we finally had our OFSTED – I certainly haven't nailed the job but I now at least know that outside verification has shown that I am not totally out of my depth. Don't underestimate how much things like this matter when you are in charge.

Good luck in your search and take up of headship – it is a great job. If ever you would like to come and have a chat over a coffee or need a perspective then get in touch. It is a genuine offer.

Finally, in my office I have the quote below. It helps to remind to be strong and stay focused in what I believe is right for the children.

*Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*