

How to manage change as a headteacher

There is no stasis in teaching. The complex lives of teenagers throw daily curve balls into even the best-oiled machines and you are only ever one key resignation away from a recruitment crisis.

But when I opened an email one day to read that my school had been given notice to leave our current premises, I knew that I was facing change on a scale that I had not yet experienced as a leader.

I have been headteacher of a community special school based within a hospital setting for four years now. Taking on the headship, I'd known that there was nothing permanent about our setting – no formal agreement around the premises and nothing to 'future proof' us beyond our ongoing relationship with the hospital and the local authority, but I'd had no idea that I would find myself in this situation so soon.

In times of great upheaval all eyes will be on you as a headteacher to manage the change effectively. But how do you do this when you are facing a change that you have no prior training or experience in? For me, this was a steep learning curve.

Give yourself space

When managing change, you need the freedom to step back and take an overview. In smaller teams, where each person wears many hats, this can be challenging. When there is always just one more job to do, you risk becoming purely operational and it is easy to place so much time on 'doing' that you don't leave room for thinking.

It takes discipline to step back, but I quickly discovered that granting autonomy and genuinely delegating elements of leadership to individuals within your team will buy you a degree of trust and the space you need. This left me free to spend time simply observing and consulting with staff. There was a lot of thinking to do and making time for this suddenly felt crucial.

Be transparent

You need this time to gather yourself, because at some point, you will have to be the person who says: "This is it. This is what we are going to do next." At these moments, it pays to be transparent with colleagues and to explain your thought processes in as much detail as possible. This doesn't take confidence in yourself as much as confidence in the relationships you have with others; it is the confidence to express doubt, even where you feel the limits of your competence might lie.

Don't fight it

Admitting your doubts is an important step towards accepting that change will happen. The instinct to fight against the prevailing tide can be strong, but sometimes there are situations completely beyond our control and not of our making. Rather than attempting to control these situations, we need focus on how we can adapt to them. This forces you to stop worrying and leads you to something that does fall under your control: what not to do.

In my case, I realised that being a small cog in a huge trust with numerous essential services all vying for attention meant that we needed to be able to adapt in order to thrive. Hard deadlines or brinkmanship seemed unlikely to pay great dividends at this stage, so these were what I needed to avoid at all cost.

Focus on the potential for positives

After accepting that I couldn't direct the change itself and acknowledging to my staff that I did not know everything that was going to happen, I was able to find positives in the situation.

For example, the process of making a detailed space planning application to the NHS trust actually proved to be a very valuable learning process. The governing body and I were forced to approach the question of the school's intrinsic value in a forensic way – looking at how we might generate further income or support further research and training. The questions went

well beyond those of an average self-evaluation form and the process renewed my commitment to growing a small provision through ambition and innovation.

This meant that we were well-placed to take action when we learned that the CAMHS unit at the hospital had just begun to solidify plans to leave for new premises. I began ticking off another mental checklist of what not to do, and the immediate priority seemed to be not placing the working relationship between the two provisions in any danger. So, we agreed to scramble together an outreach service and a few months in we now have the beginnings of a potentially thriving provision. Staff on both sides feel reinvigorated. And none of this would have come about without the initial forced change.

As I write this, we still have not reached a resolution around the premises. However, this no longer causes me anxiety, because the hard work of 'future proofing' the provision has largely been done, and I know that my school is stronger for it.

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