

Moving from deputy  
head to headteacher  
in the same school:  
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Moving from Deputy Head to Headteacher in the same school. Did the advantages outweigh the disadvantages to enable a cultural change?

This case study will analyse leading a change in culture.

To set the scene, I had been Deputy Head for three years at Harmondsworth Primary when the Head informed me that he was retiring. He encouraged me to apply for the Headship post. I was undecided. This was only my eighth year of teaching and I was unsure if I was ready. I was uncertain what stakeholders felt about my role as Deputy Head and I was unsure if they would support a move to Headship. Jill Berry makes this point in her book 'Making The Leap.' 'Can you demonstrate that, although being established within the school (and the longer you have been in post more difficult this may be) you can still see the school with fresh eyes and particular its capacity for growth and development?' (Berry, 2016, p. 43).

I also needed to consider how different the position would be to my current role of Deputy Head and I was concerned about having overall accountability. 'Deputies are far more operational, often preoccupied with the smooth day-to-day running of the school, solving problems and keeping the wheels oiled'. (Berry, 2016, p. 3). Despite regularly being in charge in the Headteacher's absence I was used to having someone to refer problems and difficult situations to. 'However, much autonomy and responsibility a deputy is given, ultimately there is always someone to stand behind, the head to whom they defer (Berry, 2016, p. 3).

At this point, I started to consider the advantages and disadvantages of knowing my setting and the possible disadvantages of applying for the role.  
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I felt I had a good understanding of what I would be taking on. I had an excellent grasp of where the school was at and I was realistic about its strengths and weaknesses. Jill Berry points out 'What makes headship distinctive? It is undoubtedly a big job. You need a clear glass grasp of the big picture-what the school stands for and where it is going-because no school stands still.' (Berry, 2016, p. 11). I needed to consider what my vision and values would be, how they differed to the current atmosphere, and how I would embed these. I also had to consider how I would reinvent myself in a new position and step up to a new role. 'Whether you are internally or externally appointed to Headship, one of the things you will need to address is the difference between the professional identity of the Deputy and that of the Head.' (Berry, 2016, p128).

I had felt some frustration, for some time, in my role as Deputy Head at the school. Perhaps this indicated I was ready for Headship. There were often situations, that occurred, that I would have dealt with differently and new initiatives that I wanted to pursue. I knew that the school needed change. I had already been struggling with the current climate and culture at the school to the point where I had been considering leaving myself and had been actively looking for new roles. My predecessor was nearing the end of his career. It became apparent that he had not fully anticipated the situation the school was in when he joined four years previously. When this became clear, he simply didn't have the energy or the drive to make the changes that were needed. After some reflection, I recognised that I had been striving to make a change to the current culture as soon as I had arrived, but as

Deputy Head, my attempts were futile and it was impossible to tackle from this position.

Before deciding to apply, I also had to consider the external views of the school and how this differed from my own view. I was all too aware that the school was professing to be something that it wasn't. Externally, in the community and Local Authority, it was perceived as doing well. As Deputy I was aware of the internal culture and challenges the school was facing. The changing cohort and community, the antiquated systems and low morale were all concerns. The school wasn't adapting quickly enough in the current educational climate. This was a major concern and I could see, that without key changes, the school would continue to struggle.

Louise Stoll in her chapter 'School Culture: Black Hole or Fertile Garden for School Improvement?' (Prosser 1999) highlights her research, with Dean Fink, regarding the current effectiveness of schools and have categorised schools in two dimensions, effectiveness –ineffectiveness and improving –declining. (Stoll ed. Prosser 1999, p. 38). Stoll also refers to Rosenholtz's (1989) model in which he identifies four categories of school: cruising, moving, struggling and sinking and related these to ineffective, effective, improving and declining. Despite the school looking like it might be effective, I knew it was standing still. 'Strolling schools are neither particularly effective nor ineffective. Moving towards some kind of school improvement at an inadequate rate to cope with the pace of change, it therefore threatens to overrun their efforts' (Prosser, 1999, p. 39).

It was true that in the past, the school had once been very successful and effective. This was an aged reputation. Traditionally it had been a school of choice. Stoll points out that culture, positive or negative can be deeply embedded over time. Stoll also refers to Schein (1985) who identifies three significant periods in a business organisation's life. Stoll points out that in the early years new schools have clear values and culture. 'Culture is the 'glue' that holds everyone together'. (Prosser, 1999, p. 34). She describes a succession phase 'where differences occur between conservative and liberal forces and new people take leadership roles' (Prosser, 1999, p. 34)

Harmondworth Primary School was a case in point. Historically, it had had very strong leadership but as leadership became less consistent it was clear that the 'glue' was weakening.

I believe the school had then entered its midlife and this led to weaknesses. 'In 'midlife', the school is well established, but needs to continue on a path of growth and renewal. Changes may have occurred to its external and internal contexts, altering strengths and weaknesses. The most important aspects of culture are now embedded and taken for granted, and culture is increasingly implicit. Subcultures have sprung up.' (Prosser, 1999, p. 34).

It was clear that taking on the Headship was going to be a challenge. There was a difficult core group of staff who had been difficult and challenging to a number of previous leaders and Headteachers. Unhealthy subcultures had developed. 'As an incoming head you inherit a great deal. You inherit existing ethos and culture-for example, a set of values and vision and the core behaviours which underpin this. No schools vision and values are set'.

(Berry, 2016, p. 43)

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The majority of staff had been through a lot of change and were suspicious of any new leaders. They felt certain that no leader would last for long and I had experienced this atmosphere as Deputy Head. It was a major advantage that having been in post I had a grasp on the present culture of the school and how I felt it should change. With a succession of leaders, each with their own vision and values, all in post for a relatively short amount of time had resulted in the school developing a negative culture which had not been addressed. The school had four Headteachers in ten years, it had lost its way. I came to the conclusion that I felt that I could change this and knew what I wanted to achieve. You will want to fulfil the role in a way which is consistent with your educational philosophy and your vision and values of the leader. '(Berry 128)

I also had to consider that perhaps being an internal candidate could also be a disadvantage. Stakeholders could have already made up their minds about me and this would be difficult to overcome. I did feel that I generally had good relationships with my peers, but this could change when reinventing myself as Headteacher.

After considering all of this, I felt that I was in an invaluable position to apply. With the knowledge I had, I was different from other external applicants. No one externally would have the inside knowledge that I had. After a successful application and interview I was awarded the position. This was a term and a half before I took over. It was important that I had the support of the Governing Body who accepted my concerns about the current situation. Their support was invaluable. ' The Governing Body, perhaps in conjunction with an organisation such as an overarching trust or a local authority, have <https://assignbuster.com/moving-from-deputy-head-to-headteacher-in-the-same-school-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

appointed you. They should have confidence in you, be committed to your success and strongly invested in supporting you as you manage the transition.’ (Berry, 2016, p. 88). During this transitional time, I began to think more intensely about where the school was at. This period gave me the opportunity to work with the exiting Head to assess areas of weakness or areas where I had gaps in my experience. It also gave me time to understand key members of staff and work on relationships.

It was also important to realise that despite areas of concern there were aspects that were going well and pockets of excellence within the school and this was another advantage. Chip and Dan Heath in ‘How to Change Things When Change Is Hard’ (2010) point out the importance of identifying what is going well. They suggest that often too much time is spent on identifying what is broken and endeavouring to fix it. They recommend that it is more effective to identify what is going well and to do more of it. This transitional period gave me time to identify ‘bright spots’ in terms of colleagues that I knew would be on board and areas of excellent practice within the school. ‘Bright spots are so essential, because they are your best hope when you are trying to bring about a change.’ (Heath, 2010, P. 33).

I knew that I would have to make change, I wouldn’t be able to step into the role and continue as things were. Matthews and Crow (2003) describe the difference between ‘role-taking’ and ‘role making’. They argue that heads who take over effective schools are more likely to concentrate on copying the routines and systems of the outgoing head and concentrating on sustaining existing standards. They describe this as role taking. They

suggest that heads who take a new post in more challenging circumstances, <https://assignbuster.com/moving-from-deputy-head-to-headteacher-in-the-same-school-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

for example succeeding an inadequate leader or a school in difficult circumstances, will have to be role making-having to make substantial change. I knew from the outset that I would have to be role making.

A major strength and advantage of being in the setting was that was I was able to recruit my own Deputy Head. This would not have been possible if I was an external candidate. This provided me with an opportunity to identify where my weaknesses were and what kind of person would complement my strengths and personality. I was able to discuss my values and visions with prospective candidates and attempted to ascertain if we could work collaboratively. It was important to remember that I had only been teaching eight years and definitely had gaps in my knowledge and experience. I felt it was the perfect chance to recruit someone who had experience in areas that I did not.

Kotter- why transformation agendas fail 1996

The reason the culture was so negative within the school was due to the fact leadership had altered so frequently. Consequently, the school in effect was being led by a small number of well-established staff and these colleagues were determining the culture. ' The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them(Schein, p22, 2010).

My ultimate aim was to bring a sense of agreement and constancy and to build a positive culture which allowed the school to move forward. ' School culture is one of the most complex and important concepts in education. In relation to school improvement, it has also been one of the most neglected  
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(Stoll ed. Prosser, p33). I knew that the culture within school undoubtedly had a direct impact on its success.

I had witnessed the damaging culture domineering the present Headteacher's efforts and was all too aware of the negativity this created. The school, like any schools or workplace was full of a range of diverse individuals with different experiences, mind-sets and cultures. Creating a cohesive, harmonious environment would not be easy and had not been achieved by my predecessors. The interaction of these individuals give the school its identity and 'feel' . ' School culture is not only particular patterns of perception and related behaviour, but also the system of relationships between those relationships' (Prosser, 1999, p. 7).

Whilst it was important that I understood the culture of the school, I needed to decide what I needed to do to enable a change in culture. Louise Stoll in her chapter: ' School Culture: Black Hole or Fertile Garden for Improvement?' (Prosser 1999) examines the importance of culture in the improvement of schools and why some school initiatives for development seem to vanish while others they provide nourishment for school growth. I knew my predecessors had introduced a wide range of initiatives, but most had not been successful. I had to consider a process of reculturing. ' Ultimately, the development of a fertile grade for school improvement is likely to depend on reculturing. (Prosser, 1999, p. 44)

I inherited a complex group of colleagues to work with, who had been subjected to a succession of weak leadership. An advantage of being in the setting was that I had spent time getting to know these people. Many were

disengaged and felt they knew best, particularly those that has been in the school for a long time. ' Each school has a different reality or mindset of school life, often captured in the simple phrase ' the way we do things around here .' (Deal and Kennedy 1982, p. 4).

There were a number of stakeholders at the school who were desperate for strong leadership. A lack of direction and robust leadership had been features at the school for too long and were recognised as being at the core of the problems. It was imperative that I was able to understand the current situation at the school, from the perspective of my colleagues.

As soon as I became Headteacher I scheduled meetings with all stakeholders. I already knew my colleagues, but I really wanted to find out more about what made staff ' tick' and what the general feel was towards me, particularly in my new role. It was also an opportunity for stakeholders to communicate where they felt the school was. In my role as Headteacher, this was an integral starting point. This is the key to the success of any leader, it is so important to know your audience. Buck (2018, p. 21) identified ' asking first' as a very important habit. ' If you want to understand yourself and your context better, you need to ask questions of yourself, others and your context.' (Buck, 2018, p. 264). Covey (2006) also agrees that to ' Listen First' is imperative to successful leadership.

The meetings, which included meeting Governors and parental representatives, confirmed what I already knew, the school was not able to move forward due to stakeholders being unaware of or having a belief in the vision, values, ethos and aims of the school. ' Change becomes much more

difficult because of less consciousness of the culture; it is harder to articulate and understand. Maturity and/or stagnation and decline is most problematical from the cultural change perspective. This stage is reached if the school has ceased to grow and respond to its environment. Dysfunctional elements have surfaced, but challenge of old assumptions is resisted.

(Prosser, 1999, p. 34) I appreciated this was going to be a barrier and a great deal of change was on the horizon.

The culture of the school has been left to develop with no clear direction and was worse than I first thought. It was clear that I needed to change colleagues' values and beliefs. I knew there would be resistance, with so many changes to leadership it was clear that some colleagues felt that they were above any Headteacher. They were so long standing that new directives did not apply to them. This was going to be different, I was already part of the school, I was already informed. This made me more powerful than previous leaders, I was leading from a different start point.

I knew that change would take time and that, although I was keen to make change, I would need to consider its pace. 'Moral Purpose is usually accompanied by a sense of agency. Leaders in some such cases are in a hurry. If they are in too much of a hurry, they will completely fail-you can't bulldoze change. (Fullan, 2001, p. 9).

To ensure I would be able to deal with the resistance I knew I would meet, I understood that it was important to adopt the most effective leadership style. David Hargreaves in his chapter: 'Helping Practitioners Explore Their School's Culture' (Prosser 1999) argues that there are many different

leadership styles for changing the culture. ' Choose one that has a reasonable fit with your personality, and make sure that you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the one you prefer. No style is free from disadvantages, have your leaders manage change successfully was just style. (Hargreaves ed. Prosser, 1999, p. 61) Schein also links culture to leadership ' Culture and leadership are two sides of the same coin' (Schein, 2010, p22).

It became clear to all stakeholders that I was going to make changes. On reflection I think stakeholders had sensed that I had been trying to this since I joined the school. Perhaps due to my knowledge of the setting, I had the courage to confront the truth. Leahy (2012, p13) highlights this as vital. He emphasises that not confronting the truth and letting a weak situation continue is disastrous. I knew that the school needed to move forward to improve; change was needed sooner rather than later, to retain the staff that *were* valuable and to move the school on. I understood that making changes so soon was risky behaviour. I knew from experience that people do not like change. Buck (2018) highlights the importance of taking risks. Unfortunately, due to the turmoil the school had been in, colleagues had previously experienced ineffective attempts at change. They felt that this might be a repeat and this led to negativity. ' They become suspicious of the motives of those pushing for transformation; they worry that major change is not possible without carnage; they fear that the boss is a monster.' (Kotter, 1996, p17).

From the outset I demonstrated a transformational leadership style.

Transformational leadership has origins in research from 1978 when James <https://assignbuster.com/moving-from-deputy-head-to-headteacher-in-the-same-school-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

MacGregor Burns, often credited as the founder of modern leadership theory, described a transformational leader as one who “ looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.” (Burns, 1978, p. 4) I had, as Deputy worked hard to gain colleagues trust. The majority of staff wanted to see improvement; there were colleagues that were fiercely loyal to the school and wanted it to be successful. Transformational leadership is strongly related to the commitment of colleagues, leading change and improving confidence. It focuses on how stakeholders can be motivated, managed and directed. Transformational leadership, therefore, focuses on the needs of others, rather than the needs of the leader. I had a desire to achieve, but believed that any success would be dependent on how skilfully I could shape stakeholders.

I also was aware that there were times that I would need a coercive style.

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It became clear that effective Performance Management and consequently accountability was to be my priority to enable a cultural change. The performance management system I had inherited was ineffective and had very little impact on school improvement. My knowledge of the present performance management system was another advantage of being within the setting. Through my interviews, staff also demonstrated that this was well overdue. This is I felt, was the only approach that could change deeply embedded behaviour. The negative culture was too ingrained to be able to be a quick fix. I was determined to bring a sense of competence and proficiency to everything that happened at school. Fullan (1996, p420) uses <https://assignbuster.com/moving-from-deputy-head-to-headteacher-in-the-same-school-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

the term 'reculturing' and explains this as the process of developing new values.

Covey, in his book 'The Speed of Trust' points out that it is important to hold others accountable. 'In truth, people respond to accountability- particularly the performers. They want to be held accountable. They feel trust grow with bosses, leaders, team members, peers and other stakeholders as they are given the opportunity to account for performing well' (Covey, 2006, p. 203).

I felt strongly that if I got Performance Management right then eventually, the cultural change I wanted would follow. 'Schools with clear accountability structures, systems and cycles, with quality assurance at every level, achieve great things' (Buck, 2018, p?). I was aware that some colleagues would be scared of it. I needed to ensure it was introduced in a systematic and collaborative manner. Developing a new system of Performance Management was going to take time. This draws parallel with Kotter's eight step process for initiating transformation from the top down. (Kotter, 1974).

The first step that Kotter suggests is to establish a sense of urgency. This was difficult to begin with as colleagues were not necessarily aware of the weaknesses of the current style of performance management. Creating a guiding coalition took time to achieve, but with a talented Deputy Head and newly invigorated Senior Leadership Team this was agreed upon and launched. Together we achieved step three, to develop our vision and strategy. Communicating the vision took some time and involved a series of INSET to roll out this new approach. Broad based action involved ensuring that all colleagues valued their participation. Generating short term wins

was successful due to celebrating early successes and advertising it. Over time step seven, of consolidating gains, was achieved and led to tweaking the system. Eventually we began to see gains in accountability and this in turn began creating a new positive culture.

It was important to remember the importance of getting into classrooms as this is where the most colleagues spent the majority of their time. ‘

Classrooms are the part of the school which school leaders are least able to implement and change’ (Hargreaves ed Prosser, 1999, p. 63). We designed an approach that involved a variety of ways of visiting classrooms; this included learning walks, paired observations, formal and informal observations.

It was imperative that performance management was a procedure that was carried out with staff not to staff. Stoll and Fink in ‘ Changing Our Schools’ argue that ‘ Linking appraisal and school review can result in a more powerful school improvement strategy because teachers can set their own appraisal within the context of their own appraisal.’ (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p. 157). It was important that colleagues felt in control and very much part of the process. It enabled strengths and weaknesses to be shared. It allowed successes to be celebrated and for limitations to be addressed. If teachers’ development is essential to school improvement, then it is the role of the school to ensure that climate is one in which ongoing adult learning can flourish and where adult learning needs can be met. (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p. 156)

The key feature was that over time colleagues felt happier with very clear expectations. In time accountability grew. Accountability builds extraordinarily trust in the culture when people feel secure in the knowledge that everyone will be held to certain standards. (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p. 204). Generally as time went on, the positivity spread and colleagues were appreciative of the structure that performance management provided. ‘ Social proof is one of the most powerful means of persuasion available to us. If other people are to be seen complying, our strong instinct is to go with them’. (Cialdini cited in Peter Ireland p. 86).

I also felt that enabling change in culture meant I had to lead by example. I had always, even as Deputy Head, made sure I got involved in all areas of the school and ensured I undertook tasks myself. This I felt was perceived as a strength by my colleagues. Myatt (2016, p61) refers to the honesty and authenticity with which leaders carry out their work and how this relates to the extent to which they get involved in essential, core tasks. This I feel gave colleagues a clear understanding of my expectations and what I was expecting others to do. I led by example. These tasks ranged from teaching classes, playground duty, running front of house, stepping into a support role when required and even serving lunch.

I had also always treated everyone, irrespective of their role, with the same level of respect. ‘ Whatever one’s style, every leader, to be effective, must have and work on improving his moral purpose. Moral purpose is about both ends and means. In education, and important end is to make a difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial. If



you don't treat others well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers. (Fullan, 2014, p. 13).

Despite the introduction of performance management, ensuring I was an authentic leader and beginning to have a significant impact on culture, there was still a small group, of which most were support staff, who were finding life difficult. This group were holding back the new culture that my leadership team were working so tirelessly to build. Despite it being a relatively small group, their negativity was still having a big impact on the whole workforce. 'The greatest obstacle to a new cultural direction may be the existence of a 'resistance group' or 'rump', varying in size from a small, hostile group to sizeable proportion of the staff. (Hargreaves ed. Prosser, 1999, p. 60). The Harvard Business Review on Culture and Change (1999) also recognises these employees. 'Every manager is familiar with the employee who just won't change' (p37). The review explains that there are often employees that perhaps do not have the skills to change. In our setting this led to discussions about capability. The review also points out that perhaps the more difficult employees are those that do have the necessary ability and could change with ease but, 'inexplicably, do nothing'. It goes on to point out that a view point that perhaps employees such as these are not necessarily oppositional but the root maybe they are putting all of their efforts into a 'hidden' competing commitment. The resulting internal conflict results in what looks like resistance but in fact is 'a kind of personal immunity to change' (p37). There was at least two staff members that fell into this category.

It became clear that I had no choice but to assert my authority using a coercive style. I was always pleasant, but firm and made it clear that I would not be deterred. It was important to remain consistent and clear about our aims. I learnt not to take negative behaviour to heart; I had to demonstrate resilience. I had to continue to work on commanding respect and not spend time worrying if I was liked or not. This was evident and also encouraged the other staff to become resilient themselves. Along with high expectations, this approach meant that eventually colleagues realised I was in it for the longer term. No matter how hard they made it for me, no matter how many times I was knocked down I would always dust myself off and carry on. Eventually those staff had to decide – were they with me or not? Unfortunately, I did have to refer to the school's capability procedure and apply it where necessary. There will be times when you need to be clear about moving someone on when it is obvious, they are not performing (Buck, 2018, p. 225)

Over time, I successfully led a change in culture; it was the most challenging task I had faced in my professional career and at there were occasions when I feared defeat. It took a number of years to create a healthy, effective culture which meant the school could move forward. Schein ( ) describes a process of unfreezing, cognitive restructuring and eventually refreezing. This is the process I feel the school went through. Schein (2018, p. 332) points out that ' some change theorists argue that one must change beliefs and values first and the desired behaviour will then automatically follow; others argue that one must change behaviour first, and then beliefs and values will follow to justify the behaviour.' In this situation, beliefs and values were the priority and over time behaviour and attitudes changed.

I also noted a change in colleagues' behaviour, approach and attitude. As my Headship progressed, I felt that colleagues became motivated intrinsically and this was an important turning point. Mary Myatt (2018, p. 48) argues that 'top leaders understand the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They know that extrinsic motivation only takes an organisation so far'. Colleagues became more resilient and able to take constructive feedback to enable improvement. 'Top leaders create conditions where the critical guidance is not only accepted, it is expected, both at regular intervals and also *ad hoc*' (Myatt, 2018, p. 20).

In conclusion, I am certain that it was a significant advantage to have been Deputy Head before being Headteacher in this setting. Although there were a number of disadvantages, the negative culture was so deeply embedded that this situation required a level of understanding which would not have been possible to have gained if I had joined the school as a new Headteacher. This had already been evidenced by the number of Headteachers who had come and gone in the previous ten years. I am confident that the only reason I was able to lead a successful change in culture was due to the knowledge I had assimilated over my period at the school prior to becoming the Headteacher. I was able to penetrate beneath the surface as a Deputy Head far more than would have been possible as Headteacher. It gave me time to; observe, reflect, evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the workforce. I was able to identify those staff that would be malleable and those that would be resistant as well as to understand the historical context of the school, the current situation and to make valuable alliances. Without this period of time, I am absolutely convinced I would have

been unsuccessful in leading a positive change in culture. I believe that if I had been new to the school, I fear that Harmondsworth Primary School would have been advertising for yet another new Headteacher.

Leading a change in culture led the school in becoming an effective outward facing school which is still successful today. After thirteen years of Headship I am in total agreement with Schein who argues. ' The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture'. (Schein, 1985 p. 2). Harmondsworth Primary School continues to have a positive culture, with a shared ethos and values that underpin all that we do.

' You are strongly supported by staff who showed in their wholly positive response to Ofsted's online survey of their views, that they share your values. All the leaders I spoke to also share your values and have a firm grip on what they are doing'. (Ofsted, 2017).

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