

## The smart step up

# Moving from Middle Management to Senior Leadership

by Tyson Wood, Director of Smart Leaders

For many experienced middle managers, a promotion to senior leadership is within reach; you've worked hard in your current role and have shown a detailed understanding of how to bring benefit to your school. In doing so you have developed a wider knowledge base, collaborated with a range of teachers, implemented change and honed the skills needed to manage processes and professional practice.

You have successfully climbed one rung of the ladder and have the support of your line manager. You feel ready to embark on the next challenge.

As many experienced principals or deputies will say, moving into senior leadership is the first big step up in someone's career, far greater than what was required to move from an experienced teacher to a middle manager. Smart asked five experienced school leaders about the ins and outs of making this transition. Their tips will help test to see if you are ready and help navigate the steep learning curve ahead.

## Understand the Differences

Be mindful that senior leadership isn't simply middle-management on a wider scale. Norman Hunter, former principal of Hillbrook Anglican School in Brisbane, believes that understanding the difference between management and leadership is essential. "Middle leading," he says, "is essentially management, while senior leadership is leadership. The biggest mistake newly promoted people can make is to not realise the difference, and engage in micro-managing, so the big picture strategic leadership work doesn't get done."

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To better understand the greater complexity of senior leadership and prepare yourself, have a plan. Know the full scope of what constitutes senior leadership and identify your strengths, as well as where you need to enhance your skill set and fill any gaps you have in your professional portfolio. Build your understanding of the broader organisation, culture and how everything links. Mr Hunter says, "the biggest learning curve is understanding the complexity of big picture thinking and decision-making. Middle leadership tends to be more focused and straight-forward, while at the senior level everything in the organisation is linked and a decision in one area will impact other areas. This complexity is the biggest difference from middle level leadership." Marie Perry, Assistant Principal of AB Paterson College, adds, "it is important to be able to stand on the balcony and see the bigger picture and needs of the organisation. Being too narrow in your thinking will be a major stumbling block."

## Find Mentors, Build Your Knowledge

To help overcome the complexity of senior leadership, all the experienced leaders we spoke to recommended finding and maintaining professional mentors prior to taking the step up. Talk to your current line manager and meet people who have successfully made the transition. Take time to speak at length with your principal or deputy. They will know you, how you manage and can connect you to new experiences and professional development that will fill many of the gaps in your understanding and skill. Now that you have highlighted the areas you need to develop in your skills set, you can ensure the mentors you approach will give you a broad support network and develop you as a more comprehensive leader.

You can also build your knowledge through research and by speaking to the senior leaders from other schools. Focus your professional reading on leadership as opposed to management. In addition there are many broader professional development courses aimed at aspiring leaders. Linking with groups like QELI, Australian Council for Educational Leaders or the Australian Institute for Teaching and Schools Leadership is recommended.

If your pursuits are with the non-government schools, sector authorities such as Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ), Australian Independent Schools NSW (AISNSW) or Independent Schools Victoria offer many professional learning courses aimed at aspiring leaders. To fully prepare and give yourself the best chance to secure your first senior leadership job we recommend a formal qualification such as a Master's in Educational Leadership. Twitter can link you to a wide network of support – join the conversation with [#sltchat](#) which connects aspiring leaders to relevant topics on senior leadership.



## Value Senior Leadership Integrity

A passion for professional practice, a genuine commitment, respect and care for students and a collaborative nature are all essential attributes of a school leader. So too, is a value system steeped in honesty, trustworthiness and integrity, emphasises Ken Symonds, former Assistant to the Headmaster and Chief of Staff at All Saints Anglican School. For many new senior leaders, the value of senior leadership integrity can present a challenge.

At the middle management level, due to closer working ties and the strong focus on collaboration, friendships with teachers are more readily formed. Once promoted however, a senior leader will need to step away from these close relationships and the integrity of the senior leadership team must take precedence. For Marie Perry, "middle managers who are promoted from within the ranks often find it hard to move from friend or colleague to leader.

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This professional distinction is necessary as they may need to give some tough feedback to someone who is a friend. The separation between professional and personal can trip them up where they act in response to the friendship or act as an advocate for their team rather than as an advocate of the senior leadership."

Experienced Independent and International school principal Tim Waley adds, "maintain a firm, friendly and not too familiar outlook towards everyone equally. Yes, you may want to be appreciated and even liked, but informed and authentic decision making takes priority."

A good way to manage this transition is to utilise the skills of your staff and move forward as a team, as with finding appropriate mentors who can support you, your team of teachers and middle managers will have characteristics and professional portfolios with different strengths to your own.

By developing the teams below you and pushing colleagues to reach their own potential, you reduce the risk of isolating the senior leaders to the rest of the teams and promote a healthy respect for you as a new leader. Working as a cohesive unit and moving forward together creates a happier and more productive workforce. As Tim Waley warns, "never fall into the trap of thinking it always has to be "my way". Marie Perry adds, "taking the time to develop others in your teams is crucial. It may be more work initially but the payoff is that



you can delegate and trust others to pick up some tasks. This has the added benefit in helping others to develop their skills for future promotion too."

It is also important to consider the role ethics and values play in your leadership and work with other senior leaders to come up with a shared approach. You can still be honest, trustworthy and friendly whilst maintaining the integrity of the senior leadership team. As Norm Hunter recommends, "work from a framework of values that are explicit, ensuring that your decision-making is consistent, based on sound values and beliefs. One of the worst things people can say about a leader is I don't know what she or he stands for."

If you can overcome this challenge, your ability to lead will become more effective. Your senior leadership team will be more capable of managing change to boost professional practises and bring greater benefit to students and school. And though you may lose some friendships along the way, through integrity and overall stewardship friendships with fellow deputies and the principal will grow.

### Be Positive, Be Yourself

Once in a senior leadership role you will feel the heightened pressure that comes with increased responsibility and accountability. Though it may feel like the buck stops with you (and on many days it will) remember that you are part of a team. Building a close relationship with your senior leadership team and principal will help. So too, will involving wider staff in the implementation of change or key projects.

**"Never lose touch with the joy the education profession has brought you to date. It will help you stay positive."**

A key element to a successful leadership role is to take your time, develop your own professional skills whilst studying your new team and learning how you can support the culture and traditions of the school within your new role. Tim Waley highlights that "big change takes time, patience and perseverance."

For Tim Waley, "senior leaders need to be the positive, smiling friendly face each day despite uncertainties, frustrations and pressures. Show your 'human' side – your attitude, not aptitude will determine your altitude in all matters of school life."

If you are passionate about teaching and learning and genuinely committed and caring for students never lose sight of that. Don't forget the students. Teach lessons. Be visible. Talk with students and staff. When the big step up becomes especially challenging, spending time with students and teachers will remind you why you went into the profession in the first place.

***Tyson Wood** is a founder of Smart Education Australia and has recruited teachers and helped Australian schools in the recruitment of teachers and middle managers since 2003. He established Smart Leaders in 2014 and has since worked with many Principals and Boards to recruit senior leaders.*