9 top tips for teachers with leadership responsibilities

1. Establish expectations and priorities

As a middle leader, it is essential that you understand what is expected of you and where your priorities lay. Meet with either your head teacher or line manager to discuss their perception of the role of a middle leader in your school. Hopefully your job description should give you a good steer, but a face-to-face conversation will give you a stronger sense of your core role and what is expected of you. You can also use this as an opportunity to find out what they see as the immediate priorities in the area you lead.

2. Get a coach

Middle leaders can often be so busy thinking about the professional development of others in their team that they neglect their own. When it comes to building your leadership skills and becoming more effective in your role, having a good coach can make all the difference. If a coaching culture has yet to be established in your school you may need to consider looking externally, or better still, why not look to lead the development of such a culture yourself?

3. Audit your skills

Everyone has their own profile of strengths and areas for development. It is vital that you know yours; self-awareness is a sign of an effective leader. Consider which aspects of the job you feel most comfortable with, and which areas you are less confident in. Those that you consider to be areas for development can then form the basis of your own CPD plan or areas to explore further with your coach. It is also advisable to discuss your audit with a trusted colleague or your line manager to get an external view of your own evaluation. You may find our middle leader self- evaluation tool useful for this activity.

4. Identify the current state of play

What are standards like in the area you lead right now? Where are the strengths? What needs improving? Whether you have been in post for one week or five years, it is a good idea to stop and ask these key questions periodically. Your analysis should be based on evidence rather than just a ‘gut-feeling’. Once you feel you have a good picture of the current state of play, it is worth writing this down as a short ‘position statement’ which you can then share with your line manager.

5. Establish a network

Strong networks can make all the difference for a middle leader. Networks can exist at many levels. Being part of a strong internal network of middle leaders within your school will allow you to share challenges, frustrations and successes with colleagues in a similar boat to you. You can also tap in to the expertise and experience of others who can offer advice. If this doesn’t exist already in your school, consider setting up a regular meeting between middle leaders where there is an opportunity to share projects or initiatives that you are each working on. You may also want to consider establishing a network beyond your own school. This can be a physical network or a virtual one. Social media has made networking easier than ever. Groups such as #mltchat, #sltchat, #primaryrocks on Twitter are ready made networks of like-minded individuals that you can easily become involved with.

6. Begin to prioritise and manage your time

Let’s face it; before you became a middle leader it wasn’t as if you were sitting around twiddling your thumbs looking for things to fill your day! Life as a teacher is demanding, and now there are the leadership responsibilities to juggle too. The only real option available to you is to be ruthless in how you prioritise your time. You’ll need to consider carefully which tasks really matter and which will make a difference in the area you lead. Beware of the seemingly urgent tasks that will have little impact and try to focus as much as possible on those that will bring about lasting change. This is not easy as there is so much that needs doing in school, but without a bit of forward planning, there is a danger that you will never get around to doing the really crucial strategic stuff that will really make a long-term difference.

7. Establish routines and expectations with your team

Routines play a major role in any successful team. This includes your regular catch-ups, team meetings etc. Routines bring a sense of predictability and order to the team, which in the busy life of a school is very welcome! Alongside this it is important to establish what your expectations are of your colleagues. For example, the team will need to know what they are expected to bring to meetings and how you expect them to contribute. If you don’t communicate your expectations clearly, you can’t complain if people fail to meet them.

8. Become professionally informed

Recent research by LKMco and Teaching Leaders identified being ‘professionally informed and informative’ as one of the essential elements of being a successful middle leader. This is easier said than done. As a middle leader you are incredibly busy and trying to keep up to speed with the latest educational developments can feel like one of those ‘not urgent, not important’ tasks.

9. Look after yourself

Being a middle leader is a highly demanding job. As such, you must look after yourself. If you are exhausted or burnt-out, you will not be the effective leader that your team need you to be. Think of the airplane analogy where you are told to put on your own oxygen mask before helping those around you. Looking after yourself can take some planning and, ironically, a little bit of effort. Again, routines can help – establishing certain days when you will commit to leaving school a bit earlier is a positive step. Equally, maintaining hobbies and non-professional networks outside of school is important too. It is very easy to let these things slip when school life gets busy but, in the long-run, doing so will do you no favours. From a professional perspective, consider what will keep you rejuvenated and enthused. This will be different for everyone but professional reading, visiting colleagues in different schools or attending courses are all potential sources of inspiration.