

INTERVIEW—TEACHER TO HEAD TO CEO— SHIFTING ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Mark Ducker

Mark Ducker recently retired CEO of the STEP Academy Trust reflects on the journey which took him from primary school teacher to CEO of an outstanding multi-academy trust.

WHY DID YOU ASPIRE TO HEADSHIP?

My choice of career was heavily influenced by my parents who encouraged my brother, sister and me to pursue occupational pathways which we would enjoy and, importantly, make a positive difference to society. Heavily influenced by my mother's passion for education, herself a preschool teacher, from a relatively young age I was drawn to teaching.

The aspiration to headship, which became stronger as my career developed, has much to do with working under two inspirational school leaders. Although they had very different leadership styles, both instilled in staff the importance of their roles and the potential impact they could have on improving the life chances of children. Serving under them, at pivotal periods in their respective headships leading the rapid improvement of vulnerable schools, I was inspired to have the widest impact possible. Successful headship would enable me to achieve this ambition.

WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE YOUR HEADSHIP SUCCESSFUL?

Establishing and nurturing a strong team ethos has been central to my leadership approach. Recognising that schools are emotive often pressured environments, I have always sought to create a dynamic whereby the needs of the team always trump those of the individual. When articulating the importance for this ethos, I have frequently referenced the New Zealand rugby union team, the All Blacks. For well over a century this relatively small nation has dominated the game, in large part due its embedded culture; one which suppresses ego, encourages humility and requires an unconditional commitment to the team. Players are seen as custodians of the shirt they wear building on the achievements of those who have gone before. No one, however talented, is bigger than the team. To emphasise this, all the players take responsibility for cleaning the changing room at the end of a

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game – a tradition known as ‘sweeping the sheds’. Within the teams I have built, humility and appreciating the contribution of colleagues are requirements.

Given the importance of a positive ethos, I have always been intentional about developing and embedding a culture which enables and drives school improvement. Recognising that a strong team ethos doesn’t happen by accident, it has always featured prominently in strategic planning processes; discussed and signed off by governors and trustees.

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT A GOOD LEADER TAKES RISKS – DO YOU TAKE RISKS?

Ironically, as it is certainly not a natural personal attribute, another leadership trait has been a willingness to take calculated risks in the pursuit of continued improvement. This is grounded in my belief that schools cannot stand still, only improve or decline. If leadership energy is cautious, focused on maintaining the status quo – that is to say, what has worked in the past – opportunities for improvement are invariably missed. As a leader, I have always sought to challenge myself, and those I lead, to think differently. Whilst not every innovation was successful, empowering leaders to be creative in the pursuit of excellence, facilitated a vibrant, no-blame culture.

Perhaps the best example of risk-taking was the decision to take responsibility for a vulnerable neighbouring school, despite initial reservations from governors, who were understandably concerned about reduced capacity and, therefore, a decline in standards of provision. However, recognising the potential long-term benefits of a symbiotic partnership, the changing educational landscape and, most importantly, that it was morally the right thing to do, stakeholders supported a union which became the genesis of STEP Academy Trust.

WHAT WAS KEY TO LEADING YOUR STAFF TEAM AS YOU IMPROVED YOUR SCHOOL?

Critical to improving any organisation is being clear about the “why” and “where” – the mission and vision. So often, particularly in vulnerable schools serving deprived communities, day-to-day challenges obscure these inherently motivating factors; the organisation’s very purpose. Arguably, my greatest skill as a leader has been an ability to construct a narrative which connects stakeholders to a collective purpose; reminding them why they come to school each day and motivating them to work through challenging times. Once again, my upbringing has been influential in recognising the role of belief. A Methodist minister by profession, every Sunday I listened to my father speak passionately about the faith that inspired

him and saw the impact his words had on the congregation. Although a different context, I have always considered instilling belief as critical to a headteacher's role; a belief and confidence that things can and must improve.

YOU SEEM TO HAVE BUILT A VERY “TIGHT” TEAM

Taking the time to build and deepen relationships, with all staff, was always very important to me as a headteacher. Making everyone feel special and that they have a unique contribution to make to the team, whatever their role, is a great way of communicating collective purpose. Framing healthy working relationships, I have also seen the transformational impact of an agreed, shared language. A good example is the MAT values – passion, urgency, positivity, aspiration and commitment (PUPAC) – developed and implemented early in my headship. Each value was carefully chosen to encourage desired behaviours and facilitate a climate for improvement. Spoken about daily, they became the benchmark against which we held ourselves and each other to account; or the heartbeat of the school, as it was often referred.

HOW DO YOU FIND THE RIGHT STAFF?

‘Getting the right people on the bus’, to quote Jim Collins, is a principle that underpinned the recruitment strategy. This is grounded in my conviction that the moral compass of an individual is far more important than the skills and experience they possess at a particular moment in time. As such, I tended to favour a ‘grow our own’ approach, with a strong focus on professional development which enabled talented professionals to progress their careers within the school, and later across the trust. Whilst there are multiple examples, one of the best is a colleague who joined as an NQT and over a 20-year period progressed to headship of two schools within STEP Academy Trust, before moving into an executive leadership role.

WHAT DID YOUR EXECUTIVE HEADSHIP LOOK LIKE?

My own journey into executive leadership happened very suddenly, with little time to prepare. Indeed, it was within a week of being asked to support a neighbouring school that I was introduced as executive headteacher. At that time, the role of executive headteacher was in its infancy, with few precedents to follow and even fewer training opportunities. I think it would be true to say, certainly in the early weeks and months, I was making it up as I went along!

Despite the unfamiliar context, intuitively I understood my leadership style had to change; how I led as headteacher would not necessarily work as an executive headteacher. Of course, many headship attributes and traits were still relevant:

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instilling a belief that things can improve; building a team; getting the right people on and off the bus, etc. However, the methodology of how they were delivered had to be different. Rather than leading from the front, as tends to be the case with a headteacher, executive headship was more about leading from behind, through others.

In this instance, I was fortunate that the school had a highly regarded deputy who immediately stepped into the head of school role. The challenge was to quickly establish an effective working relationship, where levels of trust and loyalty were high. For me, I needed to know that she could be relied upon to deliver the messages the community needed to hear and then drive the agreed improvement strategy. Investing time into the relationship was critical, frontloading meetings and ensuring lines of communications were constant. Throughout, I remained in the background careful not to undermine the head of school's authority, empowering her to become the leader the school needed. In the early days, this approach required time and patience; indeed, at certain points it was frustrating for both of us. However, it was not long before the investment paid dividends, with less and less of my time being required.

EXECUTIVE HEADSHIP BROUGHT ABOUT SEPARATION, NOT BASED IN ONE SCHOOL, GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE, A ROLE THAT WAS IN ITS INFANCY NATIONALLY. HOW DID YOU SEEK TO DEVELOP THE ROLE OVER TIME?

The model of executive headship at STEP, which had its origins in my early experience of the role, was primarily developed to drive the mission of the trust – 'committed to improving the life chances of children, where there is the capacity to make a difference'. STEP's purpose is to utilise its combined capacity to improve vulnerable schools, rapidly and sustainably. The role of the executive headteacher is critical to this process.

Two aspects of the role are worth highlighting. The first is to unleash the school improvement capacity of the whole trust. This requires a cultural shift whereby the school ceases to see itself as a separate, autonomous entity, but instead a context within the wider trust – a team within a team. Communicating agreed trust messages, ensuring cultural alignment across the organisation, is perhaps the most important element of the executive headteacher's role. Additionally, their role overseeing the deployment of the trust's school improvement capacity ensures immediate and targeted access to support.

The second is that the executive headteacher's goal should be to make them themselves redundant. By building leadership capacity, over time empowering leaders through intensive coaching and support, the role should cease to be necessary. As such, the trust can flexibly deploy proven school improvers, as

executive headteachers, to provide targeted strategic leadership where and when required; also facilitating the growth of the trust.

IS THERE SOMETHING YOU WISH YOU COULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

A valuable lesson learnt from my early experience of executive headship was the importance of generating capacity ahead of need. Prioritising the weakest, a principle to which I have always subscribed, led to the overcommitment of resources to enable the rapid improvement of our new partner. For example, several talented teachers and leaders were transferred or seconded and replaced by less experienced staff, temporarily reducing the quality of provision at my own school.

WHAT WAS THE RESOLUTION OF THIS ISSUE?

Although it was not long before the benefits of working in partnership were clear to all stakeholders, the experience had a significant impact on me and informed the approach moving forward. For example, shortly after establishing STEP, trustees supported my recommendation to utilise reserves and recruit a headteacher in readiness for the next partner school. Although there was no guarantee of a third partner, the calculated risk was designed to mitigate the capacity issues experienced in the early stages of the first partnership. In the event, the gamble paid off in spades, resulting in the appointment of an outstanding leader who has since led multiple schools within the trust, as headteacher and executive headteacher, served for seven years as Deputy CEO before, most recently, succeeding me as CEO.

HOW DID STEP COME ABOUT?

The initial motivation for establishing a multi-academy trust was to formalise the partnership between the two schools where I was headteacher and executive headteacher. Convinced by the long-term benefits of working in partnership, academisation offered the most practical, legally binding union. However, through conversations with stakeholders, a more expansive vision began to emerge. Guided by a mission, grounded in moral purpose, there was a belief and confidence that the trust could have a wider impact stretching beyond the immediate locality of the first partnership.

The choice of name, which bucked the trend at the time of calling trusts after the founder school, reflected our ambition. STEP, an acronym of Striving Together for Excellence in Partnership, aimed to serve as a rallying cry to partners who aspired to the very highest outcomes by working as one.

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HOW MUCH OF THE STEP VISION CAME FROM YOU?

I learnt early in my leadership journey that the most powerful visions are shared; both in terms of their formulation and delivery. Whilst not every stakeholder can be actively involved in their development and strategic implementation, it is essential all members of the team feel invested in their organisation’s purpose. A mantra within STEP has always been keeping communication simple, often visual, so that the important things, particularly the mission, vision and values are constantly referenced and remain uppermost in stakeholders’ minds. There is no point in mission and vision statements, however laudable, that no one can remember.



The evolution of the STEP Compass, the articulation of how the trust works as an organisation, is a good illustration of the shared approach taken to strategic development. The impetus for its creation arose from the very first training programme for trust CEOs. Acknowledging that there were a growing number of headteachers who had transitioned into very different roles leading multi-million-pound businesses, the DfE funded a pilot training programme, delivered by Future Leaders. Now commonplace in the sector, this was the first opportunity for ‘accidental CEOs’ like me to learn about building successful, sustainable organisations. Perhaps the most enlightening element of the programme was the opportunity to hear from pioneers in the sector; CEOs leading established trusts. It became clear through their input that the most successful organisations had addressed the following challenges: generating a strong sense of togetherness,

or unity; establishing a high degree of consistency across the group; providing comprehensive support for member academies, educational and operational; ensuring the trust's development, including growth, was carefully managed; and being clear about what was expected in all areas.

Returning to the STEP team, I shared with colleagues the challenges and discussed how as a trust we might address them. What followed was an exciting exchange of ideas resulting in a clear articulation of how STEP needed to work moving forward. Accompanied by a summary image, a narrative was developed which could be shared across the organisation, driving the trust-wide strategy. An example of this collaborative process was the naming of the image. Struggling to convey its purpose and role, in a moment of inspiration, STEP's CFOO suggested a compass, as its aim was to guide the future direction of the trust.

So, whilst it is true to say I played an important part in devising and driving the vision of the trust, my role was mainly that of facilitator. Presenting challenges, enabling creativity and encouraging diversity of thought, the aim was always to unlock the potential of colleagues for the benefit of the whole team. The STEP Compass, which has been of massive strategic importance, is very much a product of this approach.

AS CEO YOU HAD SEVERAL DEGREES OF SEPARATION FROM THE CLASSROOM – HOW DID YOU LEAD ACROSS MULTIPLE SCHOOLS?

For a headteacher, setting the tone of a school is largely achieved through establishing strong relationships and leading by example. Throughout my headship, for example, I was insistent that the physical environment reflected our high aspirations. As well as touring the site each day to ensure standards were maintained, I developed strong relationships with the premises staff, impressing upon them the importance of their roles and what was expected. Of course, the same approach was unsustainable over multiple sites, but the underpinning principles remained the same; particularly clarity of expectations.

This is where the STEP Compass has played a critical role, ensuring consistent messages and expectations are communicated across the trust. For example, the first point of the compass conveys the importance of unity, something known as STEP First within the organisation. When schools join the trust, they cease to operate as separate entities, but rather embrace the notion that they are contexts within the wider trust. Staff too must see themselves as STEP staff, rather than members of any one context within it – STEP leaders, STEP teachers, STEP support staff, etc. Switching this dynamic has been critical to STEP's success, enabling colleagues to routinely move across the organisation. For me, it has facilitated increasing

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degrees of separation, over time, as I have been able to delegate responsibilities to aligned colleagues, committed to an agreed way of working.

AS YOU MOVED INTO THE CEO ROLE WHAT NEW RELATIONSHIPS HAD TO BE FORMED?

As trust grows a range of roles are created requiring new relationships to be formed. One of the most important roles in any business is the financial lead and, for a developing academy trust, this is certainly the case. Indeed, the dynamic nature of the sector requires a unique set of skills blending astute business acumen with an appreciation that the trust's 'profit' is not fiscal but instead improved pupil outcomes. Recruiting and developing an individual who could fulfil this role, for STEP a Chief Finance and Operations Officer, was one of my greatest challenges. Unlike education, at best I had a rudimentary understanding of finance. However, with specialist external support an excellent appointment was made, with my focus in the recruitment process being on making sure the successful candidate was a good fit for the organisation.

Had the appointment of STEP's CFOO taken place later in the trust's development, it is unlikely the services of an external consultant would have been necessary. But at the time STEP's governance arrangement was in a state of flux, which included building a team of skilled trustees who would have the capacity to support and hold the executive to account moving forward. As CEO, I have always seen the value of investing time into relationships with trustees, getting to know them as people as well as understanding how their skills and experiences could benefit the organisation. As a result, often during challenging times, I was able to draw on the counsel of some excellent trustees, particularly the chairs, knowing that their perspectives would add significant value.

As the reputation and profile of STEP grew, it was incumbent on me to establish external relationships, including with regional schools' commissioners, trust CEOs, local politicians and government ministers. Although an enormous privilege to represent STEP, I always found this aspect of the CEO role particularly challenging. Becoming personally synonymous with the organisation, 'the face of STEP', did not sit comfortably, often feeling inconsistent with the one team ethos I worked hard to promote. Admittedly, being a natural introvert also didn't help!

HOW HAVE YOU BALANCED THE IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN STEP WITH THOSE BEYOND?

Throughout my tenure as CEO of STEP Academy Trust, I was always acutely aware of the need to find an appropriate balance between being inwardly and

externally focused. It is true to say that, over time, the balance shifted considerably. Moving from most of my time being inwardly focused to a much more even split; a shift which perhaps reflects the dynamic and changing nature of the CEO role. Enabling the balancing of important relationships within and beyond the organisation was the development of a talented executive team, underpinned by robust succession plans.

DO YOU NEED TO SEE INTO THE FUTURE?

Covering off the ‘what ifs?’ has always been a professional obsession, perhaps linked to my belief that no organisation should be overly dependent on any one individual. Whether through nurturing strength in depth so that key responsibilities of an absent leader can be shared between colleagues, or by appointing a potential successor in preparation for a future role, my aim has always been to be one step ahead of possible scenarios. Once again, this requires a strategic and sustained investment in leadership.

The creation and subsequent development of the Deputy CEO role is an excellent example of this approach. Prompted by my anticipated retirement timeline, trustees took the prudent decision to appoint an executive leader who could deputise in my absence and potentially offer a succession option when required. Over a seven-year period, we both invested an enormous amount of time into our working relationship, drawing on each other’s strengths and supporting our respective areas for development. For my part, I sought to delegate areas of significant strategic importance, including oversight of the education strategy – the design, development and implementation of STEP’s school improvement model. Acting as mentor in the early stages of our relationship, modelling when needed, over time my role became one of coach. As well as enabling me to manage the fluctuations between the inward and outward responsibilities of the CEO role, this key relationship prepared an exceptional leader as my eventual successor.

STEP HAS GROWN, INDEED IF YOU HAD ACCEPTED EVERY SCHOOL, YOU WERE OFFERED IT WOULD BE MUCH BIGGER. HOW HAS GROWTH HAD TO CHANGE YOU AND THE WAY YOU OPERATE?

The trajectory of STEP’s development certainly had an impact on the way I operated as a leader and, to some extent, as a person. My natural inclination is always to offer support, if asked. This has much to do with a personal sense of moral purpose, but also, if I’m honest, a natural tendency towards ‘people pleasing’.

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On occasions, this resulted in overstretching myself and, by extension, work colleagues. This personal desire to help was compounded by the organisation's mission, 'to improve the life chances of children', something we had all bought into. However, the caveat – 'where we have the capacity to make a difference' – became increasingly important as STEP grew. Stretching STEP's capacity too thin so that existing academies suffered, and new partners did not experience the transformation they desperately needed, would not be consistent with the organisation's moral purpose. So, I realised early in my CEO journey the importance of the word 'No'.

Having the confidence to decline growth opportunities, whether due to limited school improvement capacity at the time or lack of alignment, has been critical to STEP's organisational cohesion. Indeed, to protect the interests of the trust, as well as potential joiners, before academisation both parties routinely undertake a trial period. Covered by a memorandum of understanding, a non-legally binding agreement, it provides an opportunity for relationships to build before irreversible decisions are made. In all but one case, where there was a clear lack of alignment, the approach has resulted in the school or schools joining STEP Academy Trust.

WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN AT THE START OF THIS JOURNEY THAT YOU KNOW NOW?

I have learnt many lessons throughout my leadership journey, often the result of disappointments and setbacks. Perhaps the greatest was the importance of finding an appropriate balance between respecting the autonomy of leaders and establishing a high degree of consistency across the organisation. In areas such as finance and operations establishing consistency, even standardisation, is relatively uncontentious. School leaders generally appreciate the need for processes and systems that are common across an organisation. However, teaching, learning and the curriculum are heavily influence by context, including the leaders' pedagogical convictions. Leaders serving a deprived community in Peckham will likely choose different approaches to those leading an academy in more affluent Bromley. Which is why, from the outset, STEP aimed to empower leaders to determine what they believed to be right for their community; the caveat being that the trust's expectations had to be achieved. Although this principle remains a key element of STEP's vision, an early setback, where a STEP academy was downgraded by Ofsted from good to requires improvement, underlined the importance of centrally orchestrated teaching and learning intervention and support.

WHEN YOU RETIRED YOU LEFT A MUCH LARGER CENTRAL TEAM – IS THAT A GOOD THING?

At the start of STEP's journey, the executive team and trustees took the strategic decision to prioritise operational central services, quickly establishing support in finance, IT, premises and catering. By managing operations centrally, it was felt academy leaders would be able to focus more effectively on teaching and learning. Although certainly the case, we perhaps overestimated the capacity of school leaders to drive teaching and learning without additional and coordinated educational support. Recognising the flaw in STEP's model, trustees approved significant investment in the trust's central, educational capacity, which included the development of STEP Ahead Teaching School. Since its creation five years ago, the teaching school has provided quality training and development opportunities and facilitated the dissemination of evidence-informed practice. This has in turn led to far greater consistency in teaching and learning across the trust. So, whilst an earlier investment in centralised education capacity may have avoided the disappointing inspection outcome, the learning that arose from the experience was priceless. Without doubt it helped shape the successful organisation STEP Academy Trust is today; an organisation which offers partner academies comprehensive and bespoke school improvement support, operational and educational.