



LEADERSHIP FOR CAREERS

Trust Vice Principal Roma Dhameja shares her reflections on how skills from industry transfer into educational leadership. An inspiring blog shared by #WomenEd providing career changers with insight and motivation.

Going into teaching in my 30s, after seven years in Marketing and Sales wasn't easy, but it has been fulfilling and has made me think very differently about what counts for experience and skill in the workplace. There were the obvious challenges such as the complete change in lifestyle, financial challenges starting as a trainee again, spending my evenings marking but what I also had to battle with was the fear of believing that I knew nothing and my previous experience was irrelevant, something I would discover not to be true. My first leadership role was as second in department at a comprehensive in Buckinghamshire where I was completing my NQT year. This was the first time I actually sat down and thought consciously about how my experience made me different and able to do the role. During the interview I stressed how I could use my experience of managing marketing projects to roll out a new qualification and got the job based on this and the reputation I had built in the school as reliable.

However, the real test came when I applied for a Head of Department role at a new school where they didn't know me. I had no experience of managing a team in education but I had managed complex teams and projects in my previous career. Also interviewing for the job were two men who had at least 10 years more experience

in education than me. At this point it was easy to get disheartened. However, I firmly believe if you can't compete on the same playing field you may as well stress your differences. In the interview I stressed my diverse and unique background, the unique challenges I had faced and also how I could use them to solve problems in the future. I got the job.

The Lionheart Academies Trust has a very clear career path: Head of Department/Year, Team Leader to try Leadership (which I think is incredibly important so you have the opportunity to make a conscious choice after a year in leadership whether it is for you), Assistant Principal, Vice Principal and Principal. In the past four years I have been Head of a struggling Department, Team Leader and Assistant Principal and am about to take on my first Vice Principal Post. How has joining the profession late helped me?

- My industry knowledge enhanced my teaching of Business and Economics making me a strong practitioner.
- My years in Sales and Marketing have meant that I love presenting – something I realised not everyone does. Whether this be at Inset Days, assemblies, awards evenings or my own classes. Those evenings preparing for sales pitches in my previous career now work in my favour. I throw my hat in the ring.
- This as a result has made me outward facing, something I believe is essential in Leadership in schools



and allowed me to build critical networks such as the Alumni Network I have developed which regularly offers careers talks in our school.

- Conducting market analysis and having worked for a data analysis company means I like spotting patterns in numbers and am comfortable questioning data—something else I realised not all people like to do.
- In a sales environment you have no end of difficult conversations, every person is accountable for a company's performance. Although not always exactly appropriate for education I am a firm believer in committing to a plan of action, reviewing regularly and everyone seeing it through for the benefit of students. Sometimes this means having difficult conversations and I've learnt not to shy away from them in order to ensure our students get the best deal in the classroom.

Ask yourself: What skills have my previous roles outside education allowed me to develop and how do I see them helping the school I am in, or applying to? What do these skills offer the leadership of this school? For example, when I applied for the role of Team Leader the school I was working for was going through an age range change. This allowed me to offer my marketing expertise, hold a series of events and initiatives to engage with the local community and reassure them that they could rely on the school to deliver a strong education across all key stages. I have been able to solve a specific problem for a school with my existing skill set because it was different. Will you doubt yourself? Absolutely. Three years into teaching I started leading on Teaching and Learning and still do to this day. There is not a CPD session before which I don't ask myself 'why would they listen to me?', they have more experience than I do.' And then I remind myself about problems I have solved, what I have to bring to the table and that teacher development is collaborative and I don't need to have all the answers, I need to manage the discussions and ideas that everyone can bring to the table.

I believe the unique challenges that schools are facing in the present day require different thinking and this often comes from outside the industry. This is great news for anyone joining the profession later in their life. In fact, a recent study published by the DfE in 2018 states **'the correlation between age and years since QTS is weaker for headteachers than that shown in the previous chart (2010). Headteachers with fewer years since qualification show a wider range of ages, which suggests faster career progression for those who enter teaching after a career change.'** [1] With 1 in 4 teachers who leave the classroom being women aged between 30-39 [2] we need women from different careers to step into education and bring their diverse knowledge with them.

Seven years into education and my previous career is a distant memory, I am having to make a conscious effort to pull from external experiences rather than follow the status quo so I continue to have something different to offer. Whether this be through reading autobiographies of leaders from all walks of life, watching ted talks, listening to podcasts or attending Womened. I also continue to develop my knowledge of the education sector completing my Masters in Education and Leadership. I have been extremely lucky to be supported by some fantastic managers who have not seen my lack of experience in education as a drawback and have encouraged my progression and been cheerleaders for it. In 2017 the Financial Times published an article suggested people prepare for 5 career changes in their lifetime, if told this 10 years ago I would have thought this would mean starting from scratch 5 times over but in hindsight I can see that this is not the case. Skills and experiences are transferrable and nowhere uses your skills and talents more thoroughly than education, whether that be preparing for a changing educational landscape in leadership meetings or standing in front of 30 inquisitive students in class firing questions at you.

[1] Department for Education, School Leadership in England 2010 to 2016: Characteristics and Trends, April 2018, revised July 2018.

[2] The Guardian, Teachers need flexible working to stop women leaving the profession, says thinktank, March 2016.