Case study

# Becoming head of department: a personal account

By Sophie Hudson, head of history and politics (@misshudsonhist)

After four years of teaching, I became head of history and politics in September 2022 and began a rollercoaster of a first year in the role. I was nervous but I felt ready.

In the previous few years, I had been looking for the next challenge. The head of history job came up after my NQT+1 year and I felt I had to apply for it; I felt that it was what I ‘should’ be doing and I was told that these opportunities wouldn’t come up often. I didn’t get it and I was upset about it. Like any human, being rejected isn’t a great feeling. I received some great feedback and ultimately my new head of department was (and is) someone I truly respected and wanted to learn from. I learnt so much from her and she truly understood me. She knew I needed to be stretched and that I wanted desperately to be a part of a team. I cannot be anymore grateful for what I learnt from her.

I did, however, still feel I needed something more in my role. I wasn’t sure what this was; whether I wanted to be a head of department, maybe a head of year, even to move schools or leave teaching entirely. This would have been September 2020, and I was apprehensive to do the latter two because of the pandemic, so thought I would do some work on improve myself and my teaching.

I began the Historical Association’s Subject Leaders course, which was fantastic. It helped develop my own practice, curriculum planning and gave me a real pleather of skills that I could directly apply. I would highly recommend this to any history teacher who is considering a head of department role. Simultaneously, I completed my own schools subject leaders course which further cemented that this was the right direction for my career. I loved these sessions and I realised that even though I love pastoral work, I also love history and I wasn’t ready to step away from that. I wanted more creative control over the curriculum and planning and realised that a head of department role would cultivate this.

I met with my line manager at the end of the year and was transparent with how I was feeling; we discussed my need for a new challenge. I suggested perhaps taking on teaching A-Level history. However, my head of faculty suggested something else: a teacher in charge of Key Stage 3 role. It would be unpaid but give me experience and control over curriculum planning. The head of history was now acting as head of faculty due to maternity cover, and it was a great opportunity for me to step into and gain some understanding of the role.

I loved it; I genuinely felt like I was enjoying my job again. I had autonomy over the curriculum and lesson planning, schemes of work and began to lead some department meetings. I introduced new topics such as schemes of work on Medieval Mali and Medieval Women. I created centralised spreadsheets for data and new assessments. We spoke about skill development to prepare for GCSE and implemented these changes. I saw that I was good at this role and that I enjoyed it. I was enjoying my job again and it felt really good; I had spent time investing in myself and it was paying off.

In February 2022, I began NPQ in Leading Teaching. Only a month later, my Head of Department told me she was leaving and I was shocked. I felt like I had to apply for the job but I didn’t know if I was ready this time. I’d been rejected two years before and wasn’t sure if I wanted to go through that again. Deep down though, I couldn’t let someone else come and do a role I thought I could do. So, I applied. The more I wrote down what I’d done, the more I wanted it. The more I thought about the ideas I had and what the department needed, the more I wanted it. The interview process wasn’t easy. In many ways, applying internally felt harder. They already knew what I could do but I had to verbalise it in such to support my application.

The interview was straight forward. I had a tour of the school (silly, I know), taught a lesson (luckily to a class I didn’t or had never taught!) completed a data task on Year 11 data and next step actions and then had my interview. There was nothing to trick me or trip me up and I got the job

Two weeks later, we got the call.

History was being deep dived. I did all I could do to support the current Head of Department and teach my lessons as best as I could. It was hard and by the end of it we went from ‘Outstanding’ to ‘Requires Improvement’. Not long after I found out that another team member was moving on. This began the challenge of my first year as head of department.

Recruitment was difficult that summer and we ended up with some long-term supply teachers, which was difficult. I began the head of department role in September 2022 and had high hopes for the year, but I knew it would be hard. Ofsted’s judgement had a massive impact on our school. I had no teachers for years 7 to 10 who had taught history at our school before. I kept going.

This first year has been objectively the hardest that it could be; I lent on my support network more than I thought I would or could. I tried to be stoically independent and didn’t want to suggest I couldn’t do it but my line manager was and is amazing. I had to learn to separate myself from complaints. I had to separate my hopes from the reality on the ground and that I can be supportive as a leader whilst building a strong team.

It's hard to manage wanting to change everything, especially when you’ve been there for 5 years and know exactly what you believe needs changing or adapting. Changing the year 11 and A-Level curricula, with 2 experienced teachers, one who used to be head of history and the other who used to be my mentor, felt like something to ease into and not to do straight away. For me, it was easier to focus on Key Stage 3 and Year 10, as I had 3 new teachers and myself teaching those year groups. This meant that any changes wouldn’t even seem like changes to them but just what we did at this school.

This was exactly the right choice and, with these changes in place, I am now going into my second year as head of department with a focus on year 11. The biggest advice I can give any new head of Department is to not change things too quickly; you need to get buy in from your department first. Use department meetings to map out what works and what needs to change. Give responsibility to team members and build them up; this is pivotal to creating a team culture.

I have quite high standards and expectations – from myself, my students and my colleagues. I want every student to get the very best education. I have to learn to step back and let people teach, whilst simultaneously helping and supporting them. I’ve found the biggest way to support my colleagues is to reduce workload where I can, in order to allow my team to teach. This can be in small ways like setting up blank spreadsheets for data to be just filled in with formulas to do the hard work or creating centralised lessons and resources. One thing I have done for this September is allocate a year group to my team. This means that any adaptations and differentiation are centrally done. This is massive in reducing workload but also creating buy in and ownership for the team. These are just a few suggestions but do a lot to help.

The last thing to remember as a head of department is to try and be what you needed, wanted, or had when you started out, whilst remembering that everyone is different. Some people need nurturing and to be built up with regular praise. Others need space to grow or affirmation from afar. I strive to be the head of department that I needed in my NQT year. I hope to be the head of department I had in the two years before I took over. I want to be a better version of myself as a head of department each year.

# About

Sophie Hudson is a current head of history and politics at a school in North-West London and is going into her 6th year of teaching. She posts regular support and resources on her Twitter @misshudsonhist and her blog misshudsonhist@wordpress.com. As well as being head of department, Sophie has also completed an NPQ in leading teaching. She considers being a form tutor as one of her most important roles.