Case study

# Succeeding as a second in department in history

By Rosie Culkin-Smith, Head of History (@misscs\_teach)

Behind every superhero is a trusted and valued sidekick. Since the first archetypal sidekick of Batman’s Robin, sidekicks have been a staple of the superhero genre since. So, what is it that is so important about a sidekick? They are there to fight alongside the superhero, someone who is reliable, knows what it takes and committed to achieving the mission. Like all great sidekicks, the second in department, working alongside a head of department, plays a vital role in department development. However, finding specific advice on how to succeed in this role is often difficult.

There is a plethora of excellent literature which offers practical and evidence informed advice on how to be a successful middle leader or head of department. One book in particular, Adam Robbins’ *Middle Leadership Mastery* (2021)is an absolute must for any aspiring middle leaders and is one that has inspired much of my own practice. Indeed, I have perhaps taken a funny journey into subject leadership, starting in two small whole school TLR positions, followed by a dip into the big (and extremely dynamic) world of pastoral leadership, and finally after moving schools mid-way through the academic year to find myself as second in department. Prior to beginning my role as second in department, I set about looking for books and articles that would help me prepare. What I found almost immediately is that there was very little literature about what it takes to succeed *specifically*, as a second in department. A simple google search will offer a suggestion of sweeping responsibilities and job descriptions of what it takes to be a second, or TLR holder, within a department, but I feel these are often quite generalised and feature phrases like ‘take a shared responsibility with…’ and ‘to support the head of department in..’.

I hope this short insight may offer more specific advice to those in post or aspiring towards becoming a second in department. It truly is an excellent role that not only allows you to make a significant impact on the life chances of students and professional development of others, but gives you a valuable insight into what it takes to lead a department.

## Managing up

It might seem a bit strange that I’m beginning with this, however you can’t be a second in department without having a head of department acting as your line manager. Heads of departments are the pace setters in any school and with these roles comes a complex set of challenges. Not only are these people curriculum designers and teacher developers, but they are also the budget controllers, trip coordinators, detention runners, attenders of meetings, senders of emails, literal extensions of the admin team, and probably can’t get down a corridor without someone saying ‘oh can I just ask…’. You get where I am going with this.

So, in this respect, being second in department puts you in a unique position. You will want to ensure that you are getting the most from your head of department whilst also providing a level of support to soften the pressure that they undoubtedly have from senior leaders. Managing up is a vital skill as a second, as a lot of what you are doing may often be dictated by your head of department, and in turn, from them the senior leadership team.

One of the first things to identify with your head of department is defining your areas of expertise and roles of responsibility within the running of the department. In some schools you may be asked to act as an appraiser for members in your team, or perhaps you will take a lead on a specific area of the curriculum. Knowing exactly what your role of responsibility is, is crucial for a positive and productive working relationship. Secondly, find space for regular meetings throughout the year to discuss your priorities and have time to offer suggestions.

Any good head of department will delegate and will rely on you for your insight on the running of the department, however it is also important that within these times you find time to discuss your own development too. Finally, and perhaps most importantly with this role, is finding common ground, (or the mission if we go back to the superhero genre) as this will be pivotal for moving your department forward. It is likely you will have differences in opinion or preferences, but ensuring you are both on the same page in matters of importance will allow for a well-functioning and productive history department.

## Driving the curriculum

Perhaps the most important and impactful responsibility of a second in department is to drive forward a powerful, knowledge-rich curriculum. This, woven together by historical concepts, ultimately allows students to make sense of their place in the twenty first century world.

When I started teaching, (way back in 2013) there was not much discussion about the curriculum itself and much time was spent instead focusing on student engagement, indeed this was the focus of my thesis for my MA Ed. However, in education today, the curriculum – its design, implementation and the monitoring of it – is the heart of what we do. Its responsibility lies firmly in the hands of subject leaders as the experts in their field. This does not only pertain to heads of department, but also to seconds in department or other key stage leaders who have specific and expert knowledge in subject areas. Being both an expert leader and teacher rests on your domain- specific knowledge and a continued focus on the development of this knowledge is essential as a second in department.

Staying up to date with current education research and subject specific knowledge is crucial, as this will not only allow you to drive forward your curriculum for the sake of your students, but also support others in your team. Equally as important, is engaging in subject communities which provide vital ideas and contacts you can utilise for the continued evolution of your curriculum. History teacher Twitter is an excellent example this, the history teacher community is second-to-none when it comes to collaboration.

There are also incredible history teacher conferences such as HA, SHP (famously dubbed ‘History Teacher Glastonbury’) and TM History Icons in which leading practitioners, historians and researchers offer current and up to date research. Therefore, as a second in department you play a key role in contributing to a powerful knowledge rich curriculum that will allow all students the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

## Driving teaching and learning

As a second in department, you immediately become a role model for driving teaching and learning across the curriculum and this is something I really enjoy about this role. Not only will you be expected to welcome others into your classroom to watch you teach, but your priorities will now change as you assume responsibility for the practice of others and the performance of the whole department. The wealth of research on teaching and learning is vast, with a recent focus on memory, cognition and how students learn. However, one of key things about leading teaching and learning within a history department is defining, alongside your head of department, how generic pedagogy can be redefined for maximum impact in a subject specific way.

In my current school, we take careful time and consideration discussing what ‘x’ pedagogical element means for us in history, and from this were able to determine what subject specific pedagogy would drive our curriculum. We specifically focus on enquiry-based learning, retrieval (through lesson starters and conceptual thematic timelines), reading extended extracts and deliberate student practice; where we encourage students to write like a historian. This again has been a collaborative journey to identifying pedagogy which allows our students to experience a true induction to the discipline of history that sits as part of our overall vision for our history curriculum.

As a second in department, you will want to ensure you engage widely with generic educational research but take time and careful consideration when considering the implications this may have for the history classroom.

## Developing others

No matter how small your department, as part of being a second you will in some way be responsible for leading and developing a team. The first thing to remember is that everyone in your team is a unique person with their own way of operating, learning, and working. Getting to know your team on a professional level is one of the most important things you can do as it will give you an insight into how they work both individually, collaboratively, and ultimately allow you to develop a productive and positive working environment. Some leaders go down a more corporate style and ask their teams to complete questionnaires to determine how they work in a team, some of which you may have been asked to participate in include the Belbin Test and Insights. However, as a second the dynamics in terms of your leadership sit slightly differently to that of a head of department, and I feel that it is beneficial to get to know them as individuals and peers.

As a second you will also assume at least some responsibility for leading professional development for your department. All good heads of department should recognise this is a valuable part of your *own* professional development and they should be looking to harness your areas of expertise to aid the development of others. I’m lucky to work within a trust that has professional learning at its core. As a result, staff are willing to participate and in turn strive to do better.

Creating a culture of improvement is non-negotiable as, without participation from your team, you are fighting an uphill battle even before you begin. There are various drivers for professional development but for a second in department I would say they come two-fold. Firstly, day-to-day quality assurance processes, such as learning walks, will allow you to identify areas of strengths and weakness in which you can develop into foci for professional learning.

However, it is also equally important that, as a leader within a wider school community, you ensure that whole school narratives and foci of professional learning are woven into your own departmental professional learning structures, and that you work with your head of department to consider the implications these wider foci have for the specific teachers within your department. You may also have different dynamics within your team depending on your numbers of ECTs vs experienced members of staff. As you would with your students in your class, you will want to think carefully about catering your professional development for your individual team members based on the level of experience they may have.

Finally, make time for subject specific pedagogy sessions as part of your department meetings as not only will this have the biggest impact on your team, but also on students too. There is definitely a temptation to use meetings for logistical and procedural notices i.e. delegating tasks, paperwork etc., but much of this can be covered via email. Giving dedicated time to the development of others will not only enhance practice and the outcomes of students but make your team feel valued and nurtured.

## How to take the next steps?

The first thing you need to ask yourself is ‘am I an excellent practitioner of history’? This is perhaps the most important thing to consider before taking that step up to becoming a second in department. As I mentioned earlier, you immediately become a role model for the team you are leading and being an excellent practitioner in the history classroom is non-negotiable in this respect. As part of your role, you will be wanting to invite people into your classroom to observe you, and it may also put you in a position whereby you need to appraise the performance of others. As a result, not only does your classroom practice need to be outstanding but so does your knowledge of current subject specific pedagogy and the wider history curriculum. Additionally, in leading a team, your own classroom teaching often goes from being your main priority to a lesser one as you will assume responsibility for everyone’s classes and wider curriculum development priorities. Be honest with yourself here, as the old fable goes…don’t run before you can walk.

Finally, gain a taste of responsibility. Find opportunities to lead on small projects within your department or seek out smaller TLR roles within the wider school context. One of the most transformational roles I took on prior to being a leader within my curriculum area was Literacy Coordinator. The experience of leading and implementing initiatives across the school was invaluable to my progression. Included in this was working with key stakeholders across the school and securing buy in from colleagues in relation to implementing changes. This role provided me with invaluable experience of what it takes to be a leader but also gave me concrete examples of where I have implemented change, which could be used in interview.

## What can the role of second lead to?

Undoubtedly from being a second in department the most obvious pathway is to the role of head of history and one that many second in departments will undoubtedly do. However, taking the role of a second in department provides pathways to many different opportunities due to the experience and valuable skills you learn whilst in this role. Whatever your career ambitions, this role will provide you with a real taste of leadership that you can take with you into any interview.