



Preparation makes perfect, Carrie O'Connor – transcript

My name's Carrie O'Connor and I'm a director of Hayes Leadership. Hayes Leadership has worked with the National College for School Leadership over the last three years, supporting NPQH graduates on their journey to becoming a headteacher.

The support has taken the form of one-to-one coaching sessions where we give candidates the opportunity to practise answering competency-based interviews based on the National Standards for Headship. By allowing them to practise answering competency-based questions, we can listen to their answers and give them feedback, both in terms of the content of what they are saying, and also, most importantly, how they're delivering their answers.

So over the last three years we have performed nearly 1000 consultations and what we've found is that even the very best candidates often fail to perform at their very best at interview, and there are lots of common mistakes that people are making but they tend to fall into three main categories:

- Firstly is just a general lack of experience when it comes to interviews of this type, and often people won't have been on an interview for maybe five or 10 years of their career.
- Secondly people feel personally that they are lacking in confidence. That in some way or other their work as a deputy head has not prepared them for work as a headteacher.
- And thirdly, that candidates are preparing for interview in the wrong way. So they are preparing in a theoretical, almost revision-based way, thinking about what a headteacher should know or understand, the latest education initiatives etc, rather than looking back at their experience as a deputy head or as an assistant head, and thinking 'How have my experiences prepared me

for headship?’ and ‘How do I have skills now that are transferable when it comes to becoming a headteacher?’

OK, so if I take each of those points in turn, the first point then is about lack of experience. The fact that you may be going for an interview and you’ve not been for an interview for five or ten years. Maybe you’ve been promoted internally in your current school, or maybe the last interview you went on was seven or eight years ago, when you got your most recent post. So that in itself is going to cause you a problem, but also, you will have a problem with the fact that a headteacher interview is very, very different to any interview that you’ve ever been on before. Now the reason for that is it’s quite a unique set-up. It will be the first time that you will ever have been interviewed by a panel of interviewers who are made up of solely school governors. Now school governors may well not be educationalists, so they will often be working from pre-prepared interview questions, and they’ll ask you a question, you will be expected to deliver a full and detailed answer and then they’ll move on to the next question. So you won’t have a chance to get into a conversation. The panel won’t ask you follow-up questions, so if you don’t give a full and detailed answer right from the start then you’ll have missed your opportunity. You probably won’t get a chance to do it again.

The other thing to bear in mind is that if you are being interviewed by a panel of governors who are non-educationalists, just be wary of not using excessive jargon that perhaps they won’t understand. It’s also important to remember that for a governing body, this is the most important task that they will ever have to do. Recruiting a headteacher is a vitally important job for them, and quite often they won’t have ever done it before either, which means that they could well be just as nervous – if not more nervous – than you on the day. So the reason it’s important to bear that in mind is because you might be being interviewed and thinking ‘I’m not getting any eye contact, no one’s smiling at me’. Now it may well be that that’s because they’re very nervous, as opposed to the fact that you’re not doing very well at interview. So if you can remember all of those points, perhaps you’ll be a little more prepared for what will happen on the day and the events of the day.

Moving on to the second main category that we found candidates have problems with at interview, is this one of lack of personal confidence; feeling that in some way my experience as a deputy head or as an assistant head or working as an adviser for the local authority, hasn't prepared me sufficiently for the role of a headteacher. And what you need to think about here is no governing body is going to expect somebody who hasn't done the role before to necessarily be the finished article. It is perfectly acceptable that you may ask for support and guidance and help, and with the new leadership models now, many deputy heads who come into their first headship are being offered coaching and support from more experienced headteachers, either in informal or formal settings. So it's perfectly acceptable to ask for support and to expect to get that support in your first headship.

The other thing to bear in mind is that being a successful and effective headteacher isn't about having done everything before. It isn't about having met every single challenge that you could possibly face. It's about having the right skill set that is then transferable into your new role. If you're a good leader as a deputy head, there's no reason to think that you won't be a good leader as a headteacher. So that's what you need to really build on and think about to build your confidence in preparation for the interview. Think about what makes you good in your current role. Can you lead people; can you inspire and influence them? Can you ensure that they're held accountable for their performance, and can you make sure that the projects that they're working on are a success? And if you meet problems along the way, how do you cope with them? And if you have those skills, those are the skills that you'll need to take forward and to take with you as a headteacher.

So the final area then that we have seen people have problems with at headship interview is the way that they prepare for the interview itself. So many people that I have spoken to have prepared by almost revising what they think a headteacher should know. They're focusing very much on latest education initiatives, leadership models and trends, Every Child Matters agenda, the new 14–19 curriculum... really trying to make sure that they're not going to get caught out at an interview, that they're not going to be asked a question at an interview that they somehow would

look lacking in terms of not understanding, and that's all the preparation often that they do. Now that causes a problem, because really, a headship interview is about showing, as I said before, the skills that you have and particularly the leadership skills that you have. So what you really need to do is to prepare – rather than in a revising way – is to actually look at who you are and what experience you have got and what evidence you have got from your career that shows that you have these skills.

The good news is that we have the National Standards now, so that's a great place for you to start your preparation. So there are six National Standards for Headship and what I suggest that you do is to take each one in turn and look at it and really make sure you understand it. Go back to your notes from when you did NPQH, look at 'shaping the future' and think 'What is this about, what does this mean? If I'm good at shaping the future, what is it that I'm good at?' It's about creating a vision, it's about being able to inspire and challenge people, it's about shaping the direction of a school or of an idea. So you need to take each standard in turn and think 'When have I done that, as a deputy head or assistant head, when have I done that? When have I had to create a vision for my team, for a part of the school? It may not be a whole-school initiative, but when have I had to do that? How did I do it and what were the steps that I took?'

Once you've had a chance to do that and you've gone through each of the National Standards, and you've looked at your own experience, you then need to think about how you're going to relate that at an interview. So what I suggest you do is you take your evidence and your examples from your own experience and try and work up stories that you'll be able to tell at interview, remembering that for a governing body you need to give full and detailed answers, so you need to be able to tell them everything you want to say. And I'd also recommend you try and use a structure for your story and the structure that I favour is a four-part structure. It starts with context, moves on to vision, then is action and finishes with impact. So context is what was happening before, before you started this new initiative or took on this management challenge. What was happening before? The vision then, is what were you trying to

achieve? What was your end goal? The action part of your story should be what you did and how you did it, really going into detail here with some specifics, about the conversations that you had – how you persuaded and influenced people. Show your emotional intelligence, show you understand how to get people on board. And finally don't forget to talk about impact. There's no point in having led a strategy that has had no impact on teaching and learning, no impact on results. It doesn't have to be all about hard data at the end; there can be soft data: people seemed happier, children were enjoying lessons more. It doesn't always have to be about results, but you always need to talk about impact at the end of your stories.

So, take each of the standards, work out your own evidence and experience, work out your story, use a structure, and if you have a couple of examples for each of the National Standards you'll then be able to chop and change them when it comes to the actual interview. So when you get asked a question, you'll be able to think 'Right, which is the very best story that I have to demonstrate my experience against this standard, and which is the very best story that I'll be able to tell to make sure that the governors are really clear on what I have to offer?'

Once you have your bank of examples, your bank of stories, you'll also be able to see that quite often they are transferable between the standards. So a story that you have for securing accountability may also work really well for developing self and working with others, or leading learning and teaching. So that's great, so you don't have to worry too much in the interview about 'This is now a shaping the future question, this is now a securing accountability question, so I need to use this example or that example' – you can really be listening for the question, and think 'Right, which is the best story that illustrates this particular question that will show me in the best light?'

Another thing to think about is how the question will be phrased, so some questions will be what we call competency-based, where the governors will ask you to give examples of your experience – 'Tell me about a time when you have...', 'Give me an example of when you have...' Now in those sorts of questions it's quite easy if you've

prepared your stories to answer accordingly, but what if you get a hypothetical question? What if governors say 'What would you do if...?' or 'Tell me about your thoughts on securing accountability...' You might be thinking 'Oh, how does that fit in with a story that I've prepared? I've not been asked to give a specific story', so my advice in that instance would be to say: 'Well, the best way for me to tell you what I would do is to tell you about what I have done and then perhaps to think about what I might do in the context of your school'. So it's just important to not panic when you get asked a question that's phrased in a different way to perhaps what you're expecting. You can still turn it into a competency-based question by saying 'Let me tell you about what I have done' as a way of illustrating the point.

And finally, in terms of preparation, I'd like to talk about the actual person specification. The person specification that you receive in your application pack should be a great tool for you to almost work out what the interview questions will be, so you really need to go through it with a fine-toothed comb, and we've found that a lot of people don't do this. It's a very simple exercise. So go through the person spec and have a look at what they're asking for. Look at what skills specifically the governors are asking for. So if it says in the attributes section 'We're looking for somebody who can manage change', it is perfectly reasonable to expect that you are going to get asked a question on how you have managed change in the past.

So again, go through the person spec and work out your stories, work out your evidence, work out your examples, so that you don't get caught out on the interview day and have to think on your feet, and then run the risk of not giving yourself the best shot of answering the question well.

So in summary, by understanding the uniqueness of a headship interview, by giving yourself a chance to build your own confidence, and by preparing in the right way, you'll give yourself the very best chance of performing well at your next headship interview. Good luck!