

Local Authorities are engaged in the search for people to lead 3,500 Children's Centres by 2010.

This is a reflective and critical account of one person's experience of applying for a Head of Children's Centre post, including suggestions for reducing the waste of talent, time and money in the quest to fill these leadership roles.

Mind the Gap

By Diane Ward

I am an "almost there." I got as far as the final interview when I applied for a Head of Children's Centre post. The whole experience has got me going, so I decided to write about it using what I call my rant-writing technique.

When I did the [National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership \(NPQICL\)](#) course last year we were encouraged to keep a journal of critical incidents for reflection and analysis of our leadership behaviour. I took to it like a duck to water. I have since become a kind of Bridget Jones, with enough material to launch "The Setting" as a serious contender for a follow up to "The Office." My journal entries can range from "This woman is driving me mad; when will she retire?", to recipes for refrigerator cake and hair loss preparations, to serious stuff, like how to develop my staff appraisals. Here's a typical musing from my journal during the NPQICL course.

"I have completely changed my view about what effective leaders are, there is no universal leader template - they are as varied as their life experiences and exist in incredibly diverse surroundings. Leaders use a hundred languages like children, or like an amoeba they change shape to relate to many situations every hour. Sometimes that relationship is protective, wrapping around, other times exposing and filling up gaps or retreating so others can move forward or standing still, or stretching to touch the stars, or moving on at the speed of light. On a good day I dance like this."

The Week before the Interview

High priority: must get my hair right. Last time I had an interview I went for a geometric bob to look neat and "leaderful" but my best friend said I looked about eleven, like a school photo from the fifties. Sal at the hairdressers says to trust him and shows me a picture of Meg Ryan. We go for a softer, feminine look but the next time I wash it I can't get the flicks and it looks like it always has, but chopped about a bit.

The policies and documents are piling up beside my bed. Some are brown and crinkled from where I spilled my morning cuppa. The little ball of tension in my stomach is growing every day and I tell myself that this is helpful, the body's way of saying "Get on". I remember a headteacher I used to work for who greeted most complaints from staff with that very phrase.

The tension at home is growing, too. My salary, should I be appointed to a Head of Centre job, has clearly been noted by the family, and each member has identified in personal terms the delivery of one of the priorities of Every Child

Matters – economic well-being. For example one outcome will be that Mum will pay for driving lessons. One of my children is doing origami for a “hands on” idea I had for part of my job presentation, while another has sent out for pizza because he has given up on Mum cooking anything while she’s in this state. They look at me sideways, wondering if I am going to crack, explode or cry. I do not disappoint them and do all three at various times daily.

I need a good song. Nina Simone’s “Ain’t got No/Got Life” hits the spot, but I realise I’m only doing the “ain’t got” bits, and have to purge such defeatist words by belting out the “I got” chorus while waiting at the traffic lights.

I don’t particularly like job interviews but there is something valuable in putting everything down in an application. There’s a kind of “taking stock” when you apply yourself to a person spec which makes you dig at what you are professionally. When I think about what I’ve done, it boils down to twenty-odd years in a range of jobs, working at the coal face of early years. An application forces you to consider what you feel deeply about, and there is reassurance in having something to offer as you build each bullet point response.

Interview Day

I have left in plenty of time and planned the journey using a link road. Today there is maintenance going on which has closed the road, so I get lost on the diversion route and arrive just in time. The interview goes well, the panel conducts itself faultlessly; putting me at ease, and I am able to deliver most of what I want to say. I come away feeling encouraged and relieved. THE CALL will come sometime that evening, so I stay close to the phone. My neighbour comes over in tears, her dog has died after eleven years and I find myself in a soup of emotions both for her and me. The phone goes and it’s my student daughter telling me her credit card has been declined, she wouldn’t mind, she says, but for the shame of it, it was at Primark! Not only am I a ranter, but I have produced one too. I interrupt her firmly to say “Child, get off the phone, I’m waiting for “THE CALL.”

At 7.23 pm I get the call - the Chair of Governors is gracious, and delivers the news carefully. I didn’t get the job; they loved my enthusiasm; I did very well, but they thought the responsibility would be a bit much for me and they thought I would make a great deputy (I have previously been a deputy, and have been leading a University nursery for over four years). I thank him for the opportunity and ask him to send my best greetings to the successful candidate, but he says they did not appoint anyone. My son is secretly sitting at the top of the stairs and when he hears he calls out, “Don’t worry Mum, you’re the best, you’ll get the next one”.

Am I bovvered? Of course I am, but tomorrow is Saturday and I will cook a nice meal for everyone, if I can still remember how. When the formal feedback is given on Monday by another governor he is clear and honest and I am able to identify two areas of weakness and gain a better idea of where I am aiming to end up.

The Gap – The problem – and a suggestion

There’s something else niggling me, beside my own failure. I think I’m falling down a gap, and I think this may be happening to others too. If it was addressed the result would be to stop an appalling waste of talent, time and money spent on recruiting, interviewing and re-advertising of leadership posts.

The problem: Many mature, experienced early years leaders are retiring or moving away from school-based jobs, and new Children's Centres have not yet appointed their leaders. There are not enough people with experience at Deputy Head level to fill the Head of Centre vacancies and some deputies will not apply. So people like me apply for the posts; people with a wide range of backgrounds and experience.

As an 'almost there' who gets to the final stages of selection it is quite important to know where 'there' is. But the trouble is that, like the signposts on my route to interview, professional advice and training are just not there. The [National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership \(NPQICL\)](#) course offers exceptional help but it is really only available to people working in designated Centres. Since many local authorities make the criteria of having NPQICL essential the pool of candidates qualified to apply for Head of Centre vacancies is extremely narrow.

The solution: I would like to offer the following suggestions to develop the leaders needed for Children's Centres by using the application process more effectively.

Suggestions for Local Authorities

1. What measures have you put in place to grow your leaders?
2. How do you identify them at an early stage?
3. What specific, individually needs-based training do you offer for those wishing to be leaders?
4. Do you have a designated leadership mentor?
5. How do you help "runner-up" applicants achieve their leadership goals?

Questions for local authorities

- *Do you let unsuccessful applicants walk off into the sunset with only a short verbal de-briefing?* That is not enough; you are missing an important opportunity. People who have reached this point are likely to have valuable leadership attributes which could be enhanced by "light touch" coaching or training on policy knowledge updating, premises management or finances.
- *Could you assign a mentor to unsuccessful applicants after each job interview to produce an Action Plan for Success with them?* The mentor could sit down with them and the job description and feedback detail from the panel for a thorough audit of the knowledge, skills and experience revealed during the interview; identifying gaps and setting targets for achieving through training, or job shadowing.
- *Have you considered a kind of 'House Doctor' mentoring?* This mentoring could help "declutter" aspiring leaders and cover details like voice delivery and PowerPoint.
- *How do you structure your feedback?* It is unhelpful if the kind of feedback received after an unsuccessful application is "Your vision was not clear enough". Candidates should probe further until the exact nature of their perceived weaknesses becomes clear, this can be uncomfortable but if there can be a frank dialogue at this stage, it could be crucial in turning the curve for a successful appointment next time.
- *Are you making it clear that you are committed to supporting future leaders?* Every final interview candidate should receive this message from the LEA in their interview letters. "In this authority we are committed to developing excellent leaders for all our schools. We have identified you as someone with valuable experience and would like to offer you the following support." (this to be followed by some of the proposals mentioned earlier)

Suggestions for interviewers

Here are some suggestions for local authorities to give as guidance to candidates for Head of Centre vacancies.

- *Be realistic.* You may have a departing head who represents a combination of Condoleezza Rice, Kofi Annan and Margy Whalley, but the fact is, they are leaving. Don't try to use the outgoing head as the benchmark for candidates – instead, try to distil their skills into the Job Specification.
- *Look for emerging leadership* in the candidates and for essential criteria. Acknowledge and appreciate what is implied in each candidate application and interview, as well as what is demonstrated and obviously well-developed.
- *Look for developing leadership* in your applicant, not necessarily fully formed, but full of potential. If the candidate is leading a setting on a smaller scale don't dismiss this as irrelevant, they may deal with most of the elements of the job already and be able to step into a larger context with confidence.
- Finally, go for people who work as much with their heart as their head. People can acquire many skills but if they don't have the personal characteristics which really are essential to integrated, multi-agency working no amount of professional support will make it work.
- I like the recent Job advert in the TES which said, "the people that matter at our school say you need to be: - Enthusiastic, nice, reflective, innovative, funny, approachable, inspiring."

To all "Almost theres"

To get this far you must be good; very good, and your country needs you. Don't give up, applying for these jobs is actually a great leadership exercise in itself in which your tenacity, patience, endurance, analytical skills and values can grow - the major qualities which you would need as Head of a Centre. Accept that the people who have interviewed you have all kinds of knowledge, "The parents at this school will eat her/him alive", or "If this leadership style is used I predict a riot!" So don't be too disappointed when you are not offered a job; they may have saved you from a life of misery as a square peg in a round hole.

Find ways to change the selection process to your advantage - make it two way, and ask them for precise information to help you improve. If you feel particularly bold you could ask them if they would like some feedback from you - some interview panels could really do with it! For example: "A smile would have helped to put me at ease", or "It might be better if you hadn't yawned in the middle of my PowerPoint!"

If you don't get the job, deal with the obvious reactions such as thinking "You are absolutely rubbish", "I'll never put myself through that again", and "Where is the chocolate?" One way to deal with these feelings is to write down all your negative reactions on paper. Word processing won't do because you need to have the full sensory experience of slowly crumpling the paper into a ball and throwing it in the bin.

Go and sit somewhere quiet and beautiful and write a list of why you want to do this kind of integrated work. For example, last week a Minnesotan Grandma of one of my nursery children sent me a signed Garrison Keillor book all the way from the States, when I mentioned I liked his books. This kind of sweet, random kindness from families I've worked with has to be near the top of my list.

Use a critical friend to whom you will be eternally grateful and available to for baby, fish, dog, or house sitting. Use them for "Will I look fat at the interview in this?", but also as an honest, sympathetic ear for practicing interviews and

presentations. Anyway, must dash, I think I have another interview and I've got to practice my flicks. The best of luck to everyone.

Three months later

The writer is delighted to say that the hair is looking good without the flicks and that since writing this article she has been appointed as a Deputy Headteacher of a wonderful Nursery School which will become a Children's Centre next year. The feedback from the interview was, " Why are you not applying for headship?"