

## Ashfaq Rahman – Nova Education Trust



*“The responsibility is phenomenal, but the rewards are also phenomenal, and the biggest reward for me is seeing more young people, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieving success.”*

### **Tell us about your career before becoming CEO**

I began my career as a maths teacher and became head of department. I subsequently secured a job as an assistant head, and then became a deputy head, leading on achievement. In that role I helped the school go from RI to outstanding, and in the top 2% of schools nationally. I also became a lead Ofsted inspector and a national leader of education, and found that I very much enjoyed supporting school improvement on a wider scale. I became an executive head and the vice CEO of Nova Trust in 2016. These experiences all helped to prepare me to become CEO of Nova Trust in December 2020.

### **What attracted you to apply for the CEO role?**

I wanted to have a positive influence and be part of enabling children and young people to have fantastic opportunities in life, and as a CEO you're able to do that at scale. The responsibility is phenomenal, but the rewards are also phenomenal, and the biggest reward for me is seeing more young people, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieving success. I also get a great deal of joy and excitement in seeing the staff grow, and have greater influence and impact, ultimately enabling our young people to achieve far more than they ever thought possible.

Another motivation for me was realising that I could serve as a positive role model for others. The area I grew up in was deprived, English is my second language and I spoke very little English until I started school. Despite my background I was able to become a CEO, and I hope that inspires others to see that irrespective of your race, your background, or the educational journey you've been on, it is possible to be a leader and be successful.



## **What are the main differences between the CEO role and your previous role?**

The main difference is that you have the privilege of setting the vision and the direction for the trust, and I've really enjoyed doing that with all stakeholders. Then it's about implementing that vision, leading strategic change, developing your leaders, and engaging in talent management.

## **What have you enjoyed most about the CEO job so far?**

Witnessing how our strategy, decisions, and actions have gone on to have a tangible positive impact within our schools and on our pupils. I regularly go into schools to speak to the staff and pupils, to get their perspectives on how I as CEO, and how we as a trust, can help to improve things for them. I always come away energised by what they have to say, and I've really enjoyed seeing staff smile and grow, and feel greater connectivity with the trust, and seeing pupils thrive in our schools which are improving all the time.

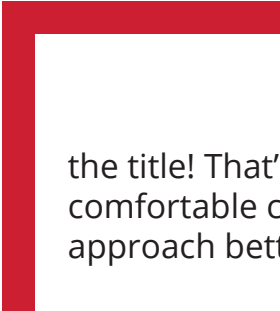
## **Where do you feel you have had the greatest impact so far, and why have you been so effective in this aspect of the job?**

I think the biggest impact I've had has been on the culture. I would describe my leadership approach as an empathetic one, which values honesty and trust. I try to encourage people through support and empowerment, and try to foster a culture of transparency, so that people feel comfortable to come to me and have honest conversations about what is going on for them and their school. That way we can work together to solve any problems. I've also encouraged a more collaborative way of working which, along with a culture of greater openness and transparency, means the schools feel much more comfortable opening their doors - both to the executive team and to one another - and being honest about where they need help. Because of this we can find ways to provide help and support from the trust as a whole, and keep developing and improving all of our schools.

## **What have you learnt since becoming CEO?**

The power of language; whether you are communicating with your team, your staff, pupils or parents, you have to be very clear in your communication and choose your words carefully and intentionally.

I also underestimated how the label of 'CEO' can affect how some people will perceive you and interact with you. Sometimes staff can be very nervous or cautious when I visit, or feel the need to impress, and there's no reason for that other than



the title! That's absolutely the opposite of what I want because I want all staff to feel comfortable chatting to me. I do hope in time that as they get to know me and my approach better, they will relax around me more.

**What has been the most challenging aspect of the job? How are you overcoming this challenge?**

Most definitely becoming CEO in the middle of a pandemic and having to deal with the constant changes coming from the government in response to the evolving Covid situation; and, on top of that, the trust suffering from a cyber-attack shortly after I took on the role! I had to very quickly mobilise the central team so that we were able to support our schools through those challenges. It was a steep learning curve, but I think it helped us to become a strong team even more quickly than we would have done otherwise, because we had to really come together in the face of adversity.

**What has been your greatest source of support and advice in taking on the role?**

I don't think I could have been so effective in my role so far if it wasn't for Forum Strategy's 'Being the CEO' programme, which really helped me to shape myself into the CEO that I wanted to be. I've also benefited from the support of a great coach. My chair of trustees and my executive team have also all been phenomenally supportive, and developing a network of other CEOs around me has also been key. In particular, a fellow CEO who is also relatively new to the role, has been a great source of support and advice.

Learning from other CEOs, both locally and nationally, is important to me, and that includes leaders from outside of education. I am part of a network of business professionals, and I find that immensely useful as it provides me with different perspectives, and different types of challenge.

**What would be your advice to someone about to take on the role for the first time?**

Being a CEO can be very challenging, so make sure you are prepared for that, and that you go into the role with your eyes open. If you're not careful you could be busy all the time, but still not be effective because you're focussing on the wrong things. That's why it's crucial to provide yourself with the time and headspace for visioning, strategizing, and reflecting on what's working well, and what needs to be done better.

Also, make sure you build a great team around you, made up of people who have diverse skills sets, and who are values driven.

