

Karen Burns – Victorious Academies Trust



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Tell us about your career before becoming CEO

I have always worked in education. I was a classroom teacher, and steadily progressed through leadership roles – I became a subject leader, then a key stage leader, and then went on to become a deputy head, and then a headteacher. I was an executive head before taking on my current role as CEO of Victorious Academies Trust.

What attracted you to apply for the CEO role?

I became CEO at the conception of the trust. It was a new, innovative project that I was excited to be involved in. I wanted to be the CEO because I knew it would be a unique opportunity to increase my leadership impact, and make a positive difference to a greater number of pupils, staff and school communities.

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

When you become CEO you have members of staff and personnel on your team who are accountable to you that do an entirely different kind of job to you, that you yourself are not qualified to do. For example, in our trust I work with an accountant, a lawyer, an HR specialist, and an estates manager who is an architect. It has been an adjustment to learn to manage people that have jobs that are quite far removed from my own experience as an educator. As CEO you have to rely much more on having professionals around you with very different skill sets to you; the key thing here is developing the skills and sufficient understanding and insight to both support them and hold them to account effectively.



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

I have really enjoyed being CEO of the trust from its inception, and helping to facilitate the growth of the trust to where it is today. We now have nine schools and we're currently in discussions to grow further. The fantastic thing about this growth is the opportunity it presents to positively impact more pupils at a wider scale. The other thing I enjoy about the role is the networking and collaboration that is now possible across all of our schools; I think that is the most beneficial and impactful element of being part of a trust. I get a lot of satisfaction from being able to enable and lead that collaboration, and from seeing groups of professionals working together, sharing good practice, benefiting from one another, and ultimately seeing the positive impact of that collaboration across the provision of the whole trust.

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 feel I've been able to have the most impact on the development of our headteachers, and I think that's because it's not that long since I was a head myself. My own experiences in that role have enabled me to support and develop those individuals effectively.

I also think I've had a positive impact on the financial situation of the trust. We're a lot stronger in that sense now. As we've grown we've been able to make savings through economies of scale. Another way I've ensured that we've made savings is by making the most of our 'in house' expertise within the trust. By effectively identifying and harnessing the skills and talent that are already present within the trust, we've often been able to facilitate improvement across all our schools in a way that doesn't require expensive external CPD or consultancy.

What have you learnt since becoming CEO?

There's no doubt that being a CEO is a challenging role to undertake. My first lesson was that I needed to be more protective of my time and energy if I was going to be successful in the role, and that I needed to be mindful of how much I was filling up my diary on a day-to-day basis. Over time I've also had to learn to be more resilient, and to look after my wellbeing as much as possible. Having a professional coach has really helped me in that regard, as speaking with my coach creates the necessary space to discuss challenges, reflect, and develop strategies moving forward.



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

One of the most challenging things has been trying to strike the balance between having enough consistency and harmonisation across the trust to make things robust, and to avoid any risk of slippage or vulnerability, while still enabling the schools to maintain their autonomy, character, and individuality. I've had to increase the number of non-negotiables as the trust has grown in order to minimise risk – such as assessment methods, recording of data, and our appraisal formats, and also stream-line governance, aligning the approach of each school.

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

I have a mentor, who is a more experienced CEO from a larger trust. My mentor is always there to give me advice when needed, and also to lend a sympathetic ear, and that's been invaluable. I've also really valued the support and information that's come from being a member of Forum Strategy and CST.

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

Don't try to be all things to all people and don't feel undermined or overwhelmed by the fact that you will need to surround yourself with people who are experts in very different areas from you, and who have very different skill sets. The key thing is to ensure you can both support them and hold them to account sufficiently, which comes with a strong board, good data and insight, and developing a sufficient understanding of each aspect of the organisation's work through ongoing professional development.