

# Paul Shanks - Eastern Multi-Academy Trust



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## Tell us about your career before becoming CEO

I achieved my first headship in 2003 working in a large school in Kings Lynn town centre. In 2009 I left that role to work at the national strategies for two years as School Improvement Regional Adviser and then Deputy Senior School Improvement Adviser, both for the East of England. That work whetted my appetite for supporting wider school improvement and wider system improvement. In 2011 I took up my second headship, and it was in 2017 that I joined Eastern Multi Academy Trust, initially as a Regional Director, then Director of Primary. Earlier this year I was made acting CEO, and in October I became the substantive CEO.

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

It was the opportunity to have a positive impact on more children, and to support and empower colleagues to deliver really high-quality education. Also, the opportunity to think at a more strategic level, and to see strategy through from its conception to its delivery, hopefully leading to whole scale impact.

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

The CEO role is significantly more strategic; you have to do far more horizon scanning, thinking and planning ahead. It requires a real change in mindset because you are no longer ‘the doer’, in the sense of getting immersed in the operational day-to-day running of the schools. That change has been a learning curve for me, but also for the people around me, who have had to adapt to me making that shift and moving into a more strategic (rather than operational) space since taking on the role.



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

I've enjoyed the opportunity to bring the trust together in such a way that we now truly feel like one organisation, rather than a group of single academies working under a trust 'umbrella'. Each academy is still unique, but there is now a powerful recognition that they are all part of one single entity. Colleagues now feel that they're part of something bigger; they can see the direction the trust is moving in, and the role they are playing in that.

## **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?**

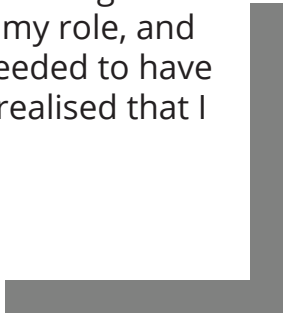
Involving all stakeholders in our strategic plan, and in the strategic direction of the trust. I've worked hard to make sure there is buy-in from stakeholders at all levels, and to make sure that they don't feel 'done to' but 'done with'. It's been a real priority for me to ensure that all stakeholders understand exactly what it is we're aiming towards as an organisation - in terms of the positive impact we want to have on our pupils - and help them to develop a better understanding of what their own role is in achieving the strategic direction of the trust.

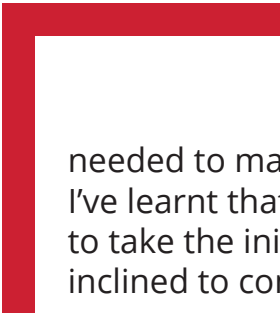
## **What have you learnt since becoming CEO?**

That you can't do it all yourself. Sometimes I think you can place unrealistic expectations on yourself as CEO; that somehow you should be the fount of all knowledge, and you should be able to do everything. But I've learnt that that's not what being a CEO is about. Instead, it's about having the strongest team possible around you, with people who are better than you at what they do - and that you should rely on the team! It's never just about what you as the CEO can deliver, it's about what the team can deliver together. You need to make sure you have a diversity of skills, strengths and qualities across the team to be able to deliver at the highest level.

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

It's something that I touched on earlier; stepping away from the operational aspects of my previous role in the trust, and stepping into the more strategic space of CEO role. This has been a particular challenge for me I think because I became CEO of the trust I was already working in. That has meant there has had to be a shift in my professional relationships with colleagues, which has taken some getting used to on both sides. For example, when I first became CEO, colleagues were still coming to me for advice around operational matters, even though this was no longer my role, and I was inclined to respond as I always had. This made me realise that I needed to have honest conversations to explain that the dynamics had changed. I also realised that I





needed to make it clear that I trusted them to make these decisions for themselves. I've learnt that a little validation goes a long way, and when you support people to take the initiative and to feel more confident in their own abilities, they're less inclined to come to you for reassurance.

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

Being a part of a network of CEOs has been the most important thing for me, because when you come across a problem, chances are you know someone in your network who has come across it before. Forum Strategy's 'Being the CEO' programme has been a great source of support, and a fantastic opportunity to get to know a group of CEOs. Being able to pick up the phone and talk to colleagues, and to give and receive advice and support from one another, is invaluable.

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

Know that it's ok not to know. Develop your network and don't be afraid to reach out to colleagues. If you're not careful being a CEO can become a bit of an insular role, so creating the opportunity to not only be able to share your successes, but also to share the challenges with colleagues, can really make a difference.