

Simon Bramwell - Vantage Academy Trust



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Tell us about your career before becoming CEO

I was appointed as a deputy in 1990, becoming a headteacher in 1992. I moved to SS Simon and Jude’s - a primary school in Bolton – in 2008 and took that school from special measures to outstanding. We became a NSS in 2011, and academised in 2012, and at that point I became the CEO. In 2013 we took our first two MAT projects gaining good and outstanding judgements, we have now grown to 10 schools. In 2017 I received an OBE for Services to Education.

What attracted you to the CEO role?

My moral driver was improving, in particular, special measures schools, because children in those schools aren’t getting the opportunities they deserve; I wanted to be a part of providing them with a better education and better opportunities. This has widened now but still with the same aim of providing greater life chances, for as many children as possible.

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

As a CEO you need to develop a team of experts around you who compliment your skill set. Over time you are able to curate an expert executive team, who are better at certain aspects of the job than you are. I really enjoy the operations side, so I’m more active in that sphere. However, my School Improvement team are excellent and spearhead trust improvement.



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

Having a positive impact on more children, as a result of being part of the trust; I take great pride in that. I enjoy working with the great people I have around me. I also feel I'm able to do some things much better as a CEO than I could as a headteacher, because I continue to grow in, knowledge, and experience now.

Where do you feel you've had the greatest impact so far and why have you been so effective in that aspect of the job?

Our greatest impact has been on the schools who joined our trust having got themselves into difficulty, either educationally or financially. I think we're successful for two reasons; we never over-promise, and we always deliver on what we promise.

We also have a strong evidence base of what works in schools. We have been able to put an authentic case to schools who are thinking of joining, and to explain to them what changes will need to be made and what the impact of those changes will be.

What's something you've learnt since becoming a CEO?

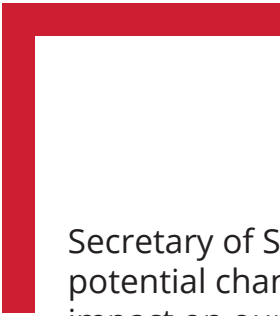
I've learnt that people often make decisions based on their emotions rather than on logic. People that work in education are on the whole all hugely caring. That sometimes influences their pragmatic and longer term decisions and some staff can find that hard. On the other hand, as a CEO you have to deal with politicians, some of whom could make decisions which may not always be based on fact, but on what will garner the most political support.

As CEO I have to try to find the middle ground, and try to make the best and most beneficial decisions on behalf of our pupils and our trust. I am to some extent the trust filter.

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

I think being the CEO can be a lonely role, and since the pandemic started it has become more isolated because I spend more time working from home now. Because I'm spending less time in the office, and I'm not able to go into the schools as much as I did before, I have less human contact and fewer interactions on a day-to-day basis. However, I am gradually starting to be able to go into the schools more often again now, and keep in close contact with the central team when I'm not in the office via the phone or video calls.

Dealing with continuous political change and the rapid turnover of education secretaries has been another challenge. As a school leader I am on my eleventh



Secretary of State, fifth HCMI, and third RSC. The challenge is to try and anticipate the potential changes that are coming, so that their implementation doesn't negatively impact on our ability as a trust to deliver good outcomes for our pupils.

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

My greatest source of support for me is my wife. I'm in the very fortunate position that I'm also married to the CEO of an academy trust, and even though we have very different trusts that operate in different ways, we have mutual empathy and understanding of the demands of the role.

I also receive a great deal of support from my Chair, my executive team, and other staff within the trust.

In terms of professional organisations, I gain a lot from being a member of Forum Strategy, CST and ASCL.

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

Build up your network. I think networks are essential, and it's important to have people you can ring up with any questions you may have, or to talk through certain issues. This includes a mentor/ coach who can help you chat through those tricky decisions we all face.

Remember that you're not a headteacher anymore, so put together a great team of people around you. As a headteacher you can, more or less, physically touch all of your decisions, but as a CEO you can't, so you have to have a great team of people around you who you can trust and rely on. Finally, your job is now a longer-term job, shaping the organisation during your period of custodianship, to leave it a bit better than you inherited it.