Eight lessons from my first year as DoS

Fabiana Svorza
reflects on her new position.

I remember feeling overwhelmed by many different emotions.

I was sitting in head office, thinking I had been called to speak about a potential transfer across schools in my city. Instead, I was being offered the director of studies (DoS) position at my current school. I spent the following week humming and harring about what the right course of action would be: should I take the job and accept teaching less hours, potentially losing my favourite classes and opening up to what looked like a world of unknowns, worries and stresses? Or should I stick with what I knew and stay in my comfort zone? Admittedly, I was confused and had no idea what to do.

Conversations with friends (actual ones, not the Rooney book), family, other DoSes and a touching poem ('Come to the edge' by Christopher Logue, read it if you can) gave me the courage I needed to say yes and embark on the crazy adventure of being a DoS.

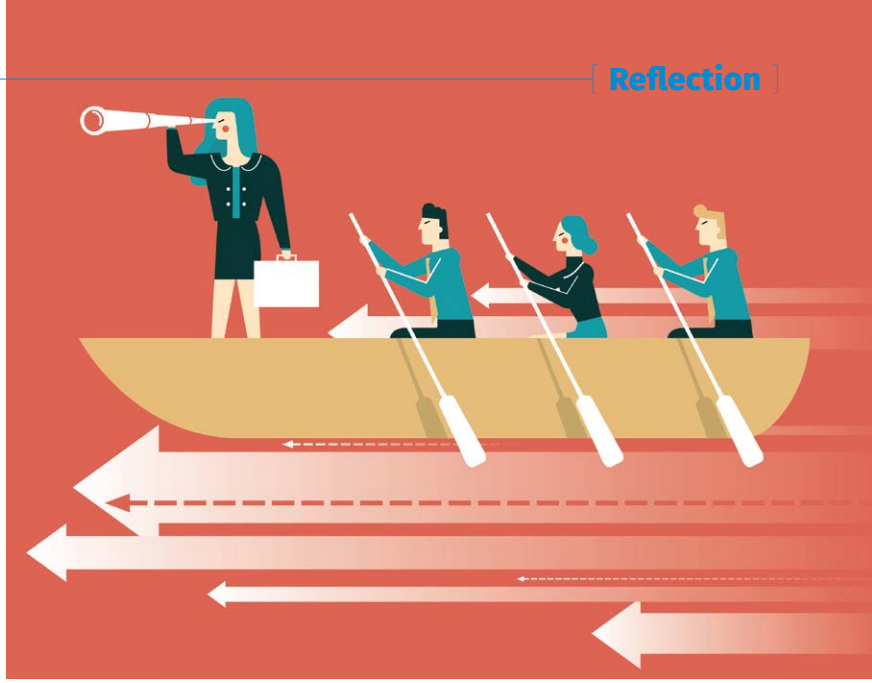
I don't think any amount of training could have prepared me for the year, as a DoS's work is something you can only truly learn on the job; every day is different and filled with opportunities to learn, to fail, to regroup and try again. On good days, I felt on top of the world. On not-so-good-days (which were few and far between) I found myself thinking about the summer holidays and impatiently counting down the days. Somehow, amid the highs and lows, I blinked and there I was, locking the school up for the summer. So, with more time on my hands, it feels only natural to reflect on the year just gone and share eight lessons I've learnt during the course of it.

1 Nip it in the bud

Before starting working as a DoS, I used to be worried about confrontation of any kind. Conflict was very intimidating for me, as well as thinking about managing conflict, disappointment, unprofessional behaviour and/or any problems that required an authoritative figure to step in and facilitate.

I had to learn pretty quickly to get over this fear, because leaving things to fester would only make the environment worse, even toxic in extreme cases, which could lead to staff coming to work unhappy and the school being 'infected' by negativity.

If (or rather, when) there is a problem of any sort, act fast. Do so in a calm manner, and lead with facts, not emotions. Make sure you hear both sides



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(or as many as there are!) and try not to take anything personally – this was, and still is at times, the hardest part for me. Nonetheless, when I got better at this, I found that difficult conversations with students, parents and teachers were not keeping me awake at night anymore; I also noticed that difficult parents started respecting me more, because they could see that I was being transparent and addressing important issues, all with the final intention of helping their children didactically, as opposed to waiting and delaying difficult conversations just to have a situation messily backfire later on in the year.

Having this type of attitude helped me majorly, both with retaining excellent staff (English language schools in Italy have an insanely high turnover rate) and with creating meaningful working relationships with students and their parents. When you get in the habit of nipping things in the bud, staff and students respect you more, and this really helps in the long run.

2 Observe and learn

Observations are crucial for teachers, allowing them to continuously improve their practice. Of course, they're never teachers' favourite thing to do, but I've personally always found them insightful and enriching for my teaching.

Now that I get to be on the other side, I understand that they're an incredibly useful didactic tool for a DoS, too. I've learnt so much from observing my teachers this year, and made sure that every example of good practice I witnessed was being tried in the classroom by myself, and shared with the rest of the team through peer-learning sessions, around once a month.

Additionally, observations help you diagnose areas of strength and weakness in your team, and allow you to think strategically about which teachers to assign to each classroom or student, as well as designing tailored training sessions for the needs of your teaching team.

3 A pain shared is a pain halved

Being a DoS can at times feel a little lonely, in my opinion. This is a role for which you must wear a lot of different hats and they all have to fit somewhat nicely; it can be an isolating experience because you are the only person to know the ins and outs of your job, and the challenges it brings with it. Teachers have each other, as well as senior staff, to share experiences with and ask for and receive support, but there is only one DoS, so I found that speaking to other directors in my company really helped.

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Build connections with DoSes around you, and don't be afraid to ask for help or advice if needed: whenever I have done so, I've only ever been helped in the best ways possible. I have also been extremely lucky to get into the job with an incredible assistant director – ADoS – who knew the school, the permanent staff and the students very well, and she has been an invaluable help throughout my first year.

4 Be a coxswain

After spending some time studying at the University of Oxford last summer, and inevitably getting to know and understand rowing culture which is so deeply entrenched in the students' lives there, I started picturing the school as a rowing boat.

In rowing, the coxswain is responsible for the overall direction of the boat, as well as the motivation of the team and its safety. They must remain calm under pressure and they're in charge of any crucial decision which can make (or break) the race. They always face the team of rowers and communicate each instruction directly and precisely. With a good coxswain, there is no room for doubt; the team's expectations are managed and everyone knows exactly what to do at all times.

Being a DoS is a lot like being a coxswain (minus the shouting, which I'd definitely avoid): you are responsible for the direction your school takes, and for motivating your teachers every step of the way. Instructions, rules and expectations have to be delivered clearly, there can be no murky communication and your team should be able to see you as the main point of reference should any doubts arise – which they will. And that's totally OK, because the team will always be able to rely on clear, helpful (re)directions from yourself.

I had an amazing year with the teachers at school, and, because of my previous experience, the organisation of potentially delicate stages of the year (such as running final exam sessions or complex cover days) went unexpectedly

smoothly. Discussing this with my ADoS, we reflected and realised that the thing that made all the difference during the year was clear, precise communication, expectations managed from the very beginning and, because of the above, trust from the team that we were leading in the best possible way.

5 Let it go

Sadly I am not referring to the Disney song, although its premise is correct: you should let any ounce of perfectionism go, because it is only going to hold you down and turn your well-functioning brain into your worst enemy.

This is something that I'm still working on, and I think I'll have to work on for a long time; being a perfectionist means everything you do has to be the best possible version, or else it's not acceptable. I'm sorry to admit, this is not going to get you very far. One of the harshest lessons learnt this year was that I cannot control the details of absolutely everything that happens at all times. Unfortunately, this is just a fact.

In November, two teachers in the team quit giving two weeks' notice, and it scuppered the plans I had. It didn't matter that I had an incredibly carefully planned timetable, a trimestral overview of teachers' working hours and cover plans; if I didn't have teachers to start with, all my perfectly laid out plans were useless. Luckily we found two excellent substitutes who took over the classes effortlessly, but that meant I had to go back to my plans and change them, even in ways that I wouldn't have wanted to, absolutely far from perfection, but that worked for the current 'state of emergency' and saw us through to the end of the trimester unscathed.

The truth is, you can't control what happens to you (or your school, or your teachers), but you can control how you respond to it. Being able to accept this took me a long time. I cannot have a direct hand on sickness, on teachers leaving or on traffic being so bad it makes students taking a final exam late (I work in Rome, after all!). But if there is a problem, there will very likely be a solution, you just have to be creative and flexible enough to work around it and find it. The cold never bothered you anyway, right? Water off a duck's back.

6 Beyond the classroom

Most of our students come to our lessons straight after school, and they sometimes have to wait around before the (metaphorical) bell rings and we let them in the classrooms. One of my goals was to bond with the students in the school and didactically get to know them better in order to help them reach their language goals, but I couldn't be in all classes simultaneously.

What I found helpful was to turn the school into a learning ecosystem, where every corner has something to teach, whether it's an English quote students spend some time getting to grips with, a 'word of the week' board where students can challenge themselves creating sentences using that word, or season-themed name-creating challenges ('name the ghost' was such a success that the idea was shamelessly recycled into a 'name the reindeer' challenge at Christmas). Everything helps to create a solid learning environment where students literally step into and feel engrossed in the minute they cross the school gates.

This also created an atmosphere of collaboration and peer-learning among students of different ages and levels, and allowed me to develop relationships with the students by checking in before the classes started, helping out on different language challenges.

7 It takes a village

As a teacher, you have a pastoral duty of care towards the students; not only are you teaching them English, but you're also educating them and passing on invaluable life lessons that go beyond the classroom.

Being a DoS means becoming an educator for every single student in the school, not just the ones in your classes, and not just for children, either. I found myself having plenty of conversations with adult students about their progress, their mindset and their general linguistic journey; we never stop being the community, the 'village' that people need to keep on growing at all stages of their lives.

8 When in doubt . . .

Towards the end of the academic year, one of my newer teachers asked me what the 'career ladder' looks like for someone in the world of ELT. This gave me the chance to make sense of what the final (and most important) lesson learnt this year was, and only in answering the teacher's question did I realise it had been staring right at me all year long.

In my mind, the ELT ladder develops horizontally, not vertically. The roles that one may move on to (ADoS, DoS, senior teacher, examiner, materials writer) are all heavily entrenched in, and lean on, our experience as teachers, that teaching experience expands the breadth of our abilities in those later roles. So, the more you teach (or you've taught), the better you understand students, their needs, what our profession is really all about, and why we do what we do. Whenever I felt lost in the never-ending to-do lists, unsure about a decision or trying to untangle a particularly difficult situation, I found that getting in the classroom and teaching was the answer to everything. Experiencing the adventure of learning first hand fuelled me back up, and, with that in mind, I was able to tackle absolutely everything that came my way. It can be incredibly easy to forget, amid the stress, the emails, the requests, the meetings and the WhatsApps, why we started doing this in the first place.

Whether it's managing a school academically, supporting a team of new teachers, examining students or writing textbooks, we are teachers first and foremost.

So when in doubt, teach.

Reference

Logue, C. (1969). 'Come to the Edge'. *New Numbers*. Jonathan Cape.

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