



Recruiting Facilities Management Leaders

**Judgement, Risk & Decision
Quality in a Tougher World**

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FM Leader Recruitment as Risk Management

The FM industry is, and has always been, a dynamic one and one of the key shifts we've seen in the sector is that Facilities Management recruitment is no longer a sourcing challenge, it is a risk-management one.

The world FM leaders operate in has structurally hardened. Costs are higher; regulation is stricter; buildings are used less predictably; public scrutiny is sharper, and the margin for leadership error is smaller.

Despite this challenging environment, many organisations still recruit Facilities Managers as if the risk profile hasn't changed.

They focus on:

- CV coverage
- Speed of hire
- Salary benchmarking
- Cultural fit as a soft proxy for judgment

None of these prevent failure.

In the modern FM landscape, the defining question is not "Can this person do the job?" It is "Can this person make the right decisions under pressure – in this system?"

That is the lens this guide uses.

“Great facilities management is invisible when done right.”



The Environment FM Leaders Now Operate In

Facilities Management no longer functions as a quiet, behind-the-scenes support function. Today, it has a direct and visible impact on organisational performance, employee experience, and public perception. FM leaders are no longer just maintainers of buildings; they are strategic operators navigating a complex, high-stakes environments.

They are now directly exposed to multiple, intertwined pressures:

Regulatory Accountability and Personal Liability

FM leaders are increasingly held personally responsible for compliance failures. Whether it's environmental regulations, workplace safety standards, or energy reporting, missteps can have legal, financial, and reputational consequences. The role demands constant vigilance, proactive risk management, and an ability to translate complex regulations into actionable, operational strategies.

Heightened Safety, Compliance, and Reputational Risk

Every failure in facilities management, from a minor safety oversight to a significant incident, can instantly damage an organisation's reputation. Today, FM leaders must anticipate risks that range from physical hazards to regulatory scrutiny and public perception. The stakes have never been higher, and mistakes are magnified in a world of social media and instant communication.

These pressures are not cyclical. They are structural and enduring. FM leadership is no longer about "keeping the lights on"; it is about navigating an environment where stakes are permanent, visibility is constant, and accountability is personal.

Today, FM leadership failure rarely results from a lack of technical skill. Instead, it emerges from judgment erosion under pressure. This can result in a slow, almost invisible decline in decision-making quality when faced with high-stakes accountability, operational complexity, and constant scrutiny. Leaders who cannot manage these pressures risk far more than operational disruption; they risk their credibility, their teams, and the organisation itself.

Volatile Building Utilisation and Political Sensitivity

The way buildings are used has become unpredictable. Hybrid work models, fluctuating occupancy, and shifting organisational priorities mean FM decisions are highly visible and politically sensitive. Every choice, from space allocation to resource management, can spark debate or draw scrutiny from stakeholders across the organisation. Leaders must balance operational efficiency with strategic perception, often under intense pressure.

Labour-Dominated Cost Structures

Facilities operations remain heavily reliant on people. Labour costs represent a significant portion of total expenditure, creating constant tension between maintaining service levels and controlling costs. Workforce management, retention, and engagement are not optional, they are critical to sustaining operations and organisational trust.

Pitfalls in FM Recruitment

Many facilities management recruitment processes are still designed to optimize for reassurance rather than effectiveness. They prioritize what feels safe on paper—experience, familiarity, and process compliance—over what actually predicts strong leadership and decision-making under pressure.

These processes tend to reward:

Experience Length Over Decision Quality

Candidates with long CVs are often assumed to be capable leaders. But tenure alone does not guarantee sound judgment or the ability to act decisively in complex situations. Leadership in FM requires critical thinking, timely decision-making, and the courage to act under uncertainty, none of which are measured simply by years served.

Familiar Sector Language Over Ownership

Fluency in corporate jargon, industry terminology, and policy language can impress interviewers but it can mask a lack of true ownership. Candidates who “talk the talk” may articulate solutions well but struggle to take full responsibility for outcomes, leaving important problems unresolved or decisions unexecuted.

Consensus Behaviour Over Clarity

Recruitment processes often favor candidates who navigate group dynamics smoothly and avoid conflict, typically quite unintentionally. Examples of this include:

- Panel interviews favour candidates who are agreeable, diplomatic, and non-confrontational. They read the room, avoid strong positions, and keep everyone comfortable.
- Behavioural questions may often reward stories about alignment, collaboration, and compromise and not decisive action under conflict, e.g. “Tell us about a time you influenced stakeholders”.
- Scoring criteria could focus on collaborative factors such as teamwork and communication style, whilst omitting measures such as accountability under pressure, acting without consensus, and making difficult decisions.

While consensus-seeking can be valuable, FM leaders need clarity of purpose and the courage to make tough calls, even when it means challenging the status quo or facing pushback. Overvaluing harmony can produce leaders who are skilled at managing meetings but not outcomes.

Process Compliance Over Consequence Awareness

Following procedures is important, but compliance alone does not equal leadership. FM leaders must understand the real-world consequences of their decisions; how maintenance choices affect safety, operational continuity, and organisational reputation. Rewarding procedural fidelity over consequence awareness can produce leaders who “do things right” but fail to do the right things.



The Mismatch Between Interview Performance and Leadership Reality

The previous pitfalls can create a dangerous structural mismatch between what recruitment processes select for and what the FM leadership role actually requires. Interviews often reward composure, diplomacy, and the ability to speak fluently about complexity. But the operational reality of facilities management demands something different: the ability to reduce ambiguity, make clear decisions, and accept accountability under pressure. Under real operational pressure, this mismatch begins to show through behaviour.

Deferring Decisions to Committees

Rather than making a clear call, decisions are escalated, referred, or distributed across groups. Committees provide psychological safety. Shared ownership reduces personal risk, but they also slow response time and dilute clarity. In fast-moving operational environments, delay itself becomes a risk.

Spreading Accountability Thinly

Responsibility becomes collective rather than owned. Language shifts from “I decided” to “we aligned” or “it was agreed.” When accountability is diffused, no one fully owns outcomes, and corrective action weakens. Problems persist longer because no single leader feels fully responsible for resolving them.

Hiding Behind Process

Process becomes a shield rather than a tool. Leaders point to procedures, policies, or governance steps to justify inaction or delay. While compliance is important, over-reliance on process can prevent timely intervention, especially when situations require judgment beyond what procedures anticipate.

Delaying Uncomfortable Conversations

Difficult issues such as performance gaps, safety concerns, budget realities, or strategic trade-offs are postponed to preserve harmony. Short-term comfort replaces long-term clarity. However, unresolved problems rarely stabilise; they compound silently until they become harder and more disruptive to rectify.

The immediate effects of these behaviours are often subtle as operations may continue, issues may remain partially contained, and visible disruption may be limited. This creates a false sense of stability, yet over time these unresolved decisions begin to accumulate, which compounds risk. Small compromises grow into structural weaknesses and when consequences finally surface, they tend to be expensive, visible, and in many cases irreversible.



What Defines Strong Facilities Management Leadership

Effective facilities management leadership is not defined by technical knowledge alone, but by the quality of judgment, ownership, and control exercised under real operating conditions. The role sits at the intersection of safety, cost, compliance, and organisational performance, where decisions carry tangible and sometimes irreversible consequences. In this environment, capability is revealed less by what is said and more by how leaders think, prioritise, and act when faced with pressure and competing demands.



Judgement Under Pressure

Makes sound decisions when information is incomplete, time is limited, and consequences are real.



Clear Ownership

Takes responsibility for outcomes rather than diffusing accountability across teams, processes, or committees.



Decisiveness with restraint

Acts when necessary, but without impulsiveness or hiding behind procedure to avoid responsibility.



Governance awareness

Understands regulatory, safety, and reputational exposure and operates within those realities at all times.



Noise Resistance

Maintains direction despite politics, optics, or competing stakeholder pressures.



Operational foresight

Anticipates failures, capacity strain, and risk before they become visible or disruptive.



Commercial Acumen

Understands contracts, how suppliers operate, and how to extract highest levels of service value.



Risk calibration

Distinguishes between acceptable operational risk and dangerous exposure, and adjusts action accordingly.



Priority Clarity

Separates what is urgent, what is important, and what is unnecessary and allocates effort appropriately.



Execution Discipline

Converts decisions into sustained, reliable action rather than discussion or intent.



Stakeholder Boundary Control

Engages stakeholders constructively without surrendering



Regulatory Accountability and Personal Liability

Takes responsibility for compliance failures and ownership in rectifying them.

Interview Questions to Assess Real FM Leadership

These questions are designed to move beyond rehearsed competence and reveal how a facilities management leader actually thinks and operates under real conditions. Technical knowledge and experience are necessary, but they are not sufficient predictors of leadership effectiveness. What distinguishes strong FM leaders is the quality of their judgment, ownership, risk awareness, and behaviour when facing ambiguity, pressure, and consequence. The questions below are paired with indicators of strong and weak responses to help interviewers focus not on polish or confidence, but on evidence of clear decision-making, accountability, and operational control.

Strong Reponse:
Clear decision, explains trade-offs, accepts uncertainty, owns outcome.

Tell me about the hardest operational decision you made with incomplete information. What did you decide and why?

Weak Reponse:
Vague, process-heavy, avoids stating the decision, focuses on discussion not action.

Strong Reponse:
Uses "I", accepts responsibility, explains corrective action and learning.

Describe a situation where something under your control went wrong. What did you do personally?

Weak Reponse:
Uses "we", shifts blame, focuses on context not accountability.

Strong Reponse:
Recognises timing mattered, acts at the right moment, explains consequences of waiting.

Give an example of when delay itself would have created risk. How did you act?

Weak Reponse:
Waited for more information, escalated unnecessarily, avoided commitment.

Strong Reponse:
Addressed issue early despite discomfort, clear and direct, prevented escalation.

Tell me about a difficult conversation you initiated early that others preferred to avoid.

Weak Reponse:
Postponed or softened message, prioritised comfort, allowed problem to grow.

Strong Reponse:
Demonstrates awareness of legal, safety, and reputational implications; explains protective action.

Describe a time regulatory, safety, or compliance risk changed your decision.

Weak Reponse:
Refers only to procedure, shows little understanding of real-world implications.

Strong Reponse:
Explains boundaries, shows balanced reasoning, conscious acceptance or avoidance.

Tell me about a time you accepted operational risk, and why it was justified.

Weak Reponse:
Either overly cautious or impulsive, lacks structured reasoning.

Strong Reponse:
Noticed subtle decline early, intervened promptly, sustained correction.

Describe when standards or compliance were slowly declining. How did you recognise and correct it?

Weak Reponse:
Only reacted after obvious failure, treats slow decline as normal.

Strong Reponse:
Identifies faint warning patterns, explains interpretation and early response.

What is the earliest warning sign of a serious issue you have detected? What did you do?

Weak Reponse:
Notices only clear signs, relies on incidents to trigger action.

Strong Reponse:
Makes clear balancing choice, explains sacrifice and outcome.

Describe a difficult trade-off between cost, safety, and service. How did you decide?

Weak Reponse:
Avoids choosing, describes compromise without clarity.

Strong Reponse:
Applies sound reasoning when rules insufficient, explains justification.

Tell me about a time process pointed one way but your judgment pointed another. What did you do?

Weak Reponse:
Uses rules as shield or ignores them without rationale.

Strong Reponse:
Considers input but maintains direction, prioritises operational reality.

Tell me about a time stakeholders tried to push you toward the wrong decision. How did you handle it?

Weak Reponse:
Concedes to influence, frames outcome as group comfort.

Strong Reponse:
Maintains follow-through, monitors progress, corrects drift.

Describe a decision that required sustained follow-through. How did you prevent drift or loss of momentum?

Weak Reponse:
Strong start but fades, lacks sustained control.

Strong Reponse:
Connects technical, financial, and human factors into a coherent whole.

Give an example where technical, financial, and people factors interacted. How did you manage the whole system?

Weak Reponse:
Describes isolated actions, misses interdependencies.

Strong Reponse:
Focuses on outcomes, intervenes firmly, uses leverage effectively.

Tell me about a contractor who was compliant but not delivering outcomes. What did you do?

Weak Reponse:
Accepts reports and activity, avoids confronting poor performance.

Strong Reponse:
Stabilises quickly, sets clear priorities, restores control.

Tell me about a serious operational failure you led through. What were your first three actions?

Weak Reponse:
Focuses on blame or analysis before stabilisation.

Strong Reponse:
Calm, clear, consistent under challenge, maintains accountability.

Describe a time your decision was heavily challenged or escalated. How did you maintain clarity?

Weak Reponse:
Defensive, vague, or evasive.

Strong Reponse:
Distinguishes critical from non-essential, concentrates effort.

When everything is urgent, how do you decide what truly matters? Give a real example.

Weak Reponse:
Reactive, scattered, treats everything equally.

Strong Reponse:
Holds firm on safety/compliance despite pressure; explains why.

Tell me about a time you held firm on safety or compliance despite pressure to compromise.

Weak Reponse:
Allows compromise for convenience, cost, or stakeholder comfort.

The Hidden Risk of Speed in Recruiting Leaders

Organisational pressure frequently creates a demand to “move quickly.” Vacancies feel urgent, operational strain rises, and leadership seeks rapid relief. In this environment, speed can appear synonymous with efficiency. But in facilities management recruitment, speed without sound judgment does not reduce risk, it accelerates it.

Fast hiring decisions often provide short-term reassurance while quietly embedding long-term exposure.

They can mask weak role definition

When recruitment moves too quickly, organisations often hire into roles that are poorly defined. Expectations remain unclear, authority boundaries unresolved, and success measures vague. The result is not clarity but confusion and a leader entering a role without a stable operating frame.

They avoid uncomfortable structural truths

Rapid hiring can bypass deeper questions about decision rights, accountability, and organisational design. Instead of resolving whether the role truly has the authority required to manage risk and operations, the organisation fills the position and hopes clarity will emerge later. It rarely does.

They create false confidence

A quick appointment can produce a temporary sense of progress and stability. Stakeholders feel the problem has been “handled”, but confidence based on speed rather than capability is fragile. Reality eventually tests whether the hire can operate under pressure, not whether they interviewed well.

They increase downstream regret

The true cost of a rushed hire rarely appears immediately. It emerges later through misjudged decisions, weak control, slow response to risk, or erosion of standards. By the time these effects become visible, replacement is harder, more disruptive, and far more expensive.



FM Leader Recruitment Timeline

A structured recruitment process reduces risk, improves decision quality, and ensures the appointment of a facilities manager capable of operating under real organisational pressures. The following timeline outlines a practical, milestone-based approach to selecting a facilities manager with the judgment and operational control the role demands.



The Cost of Getting it Wrong

When facilities management leadership recruitment fails, the impact rarely remains confined to a single operational area. Weak or misaligned leadership creates ripple effects that can compromise the safety, efficiency, and reputation of the entire organisation.

The consequences often manifest as:

- Safety incidents: From minor operational errors to major accidents, reflecting gaps in oversight and accountability.
- Regulatory intervention: Fines, inspections, or enforcement actions triggered by non-compliance or operational lapses.
- Contract erosion: Loss of trust and performance with suppliers, service providers, or external partners.
- Workforce disengagement: Teams lose confidence in leadership, morale declines, and productivity suffers.
- Board scrutiny: Senior leadership and governance bodies become involved when failures threaten the organisation's reputation or legal standing.

By the time these issues are visible, the critical hiring decision that enabled them has already been made. Once a misfit is in place, remedial action becomes expensive, disruptive, and often only partially effective.

This highlights a crucial truth: the role of recruitment is not merely to fill a vacancy. Its purpose is to prevent avoidable failure, ensuring that every hire has the judgment, resilience, and operational competence to protect the organisation and drive reliable outcomes



Redefining Recruitment for High-Stakes FM Leadership

At Maxwell Stephens Recruitment, our approach is not built around volume, speed, or superficial reassurance. We do not measure success by the number of candidates presented, the pace of an appointment, or the breadth of CV coverage. Sending large volumes of applicants may create activity, but it does not improve outcomes. Likewise, rapid hiring can ease short-term pressure while quietly increasing long-term risk. Comfort and familiarity during a recruitment process may feel reassuring, but they are not reliable indicators of real operational capability.

Our purpose is to reduce decision risk in roles that organisations cannot afford to misjudge. Achieving this requires a fundamentally different way of working. We begin by rigorously examining the brief itself; clarifying the role's true responsibilities, decision authority, and exposure, before engaging candidates. Where structural gaps exist, we slow the process rather than allow urgency to override sound foundations, and we will not proceed with assignments where accountability or scope remains unclear. Throughout assessment, our focus is on how individuals think and decide in real operating conditions, prioritising judgment, risk awareness, and practical reasoning over presentation or rehearsed responses.

The result is a deliberate and selective methodology. We place fewer leaders, but those we do appoint are better aligned to the demands of the role. Our aim is not simply to fill positions, but to ensure that every appointment strengthens the organisation, reduces exposure, and supports sustained operational performance.

