

Recruiting Facilities Management Leaders

How to assess judgement, ownership and risk awareness when hiring FM leaders who must make sound decisions under operational pressure.



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01

Introduction

Facilities Management has always been a dynamic profession, but one shift now matters more than any other. Recruiting an FM leader is no longer mainly a sourcing challenge. It is a **risk-management** decision.

The environment FM leaders work 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, many organisations still recruit facilities leaders as if the risk profile had not changed. They concentrate on CV coverage, speed of hire, salary benchmarking and cultural fit used as a soft proxy for judgement. None of these, on its own, prevents failure.

In today's 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 throughout.

**FM
recruitment is
now **risk
management.****



02

The Environment FM Leaders Now Operate In

Facilities Management is no longer a quiet, behind-the-scenes support function. It has a direct and visible effect on organisational performance, employee experience and public perception. FM leaders are not simply maintainers of buildings. They are operators navigating a complex, high-stakes environment.

They are now exposed to several pressures at once, and those pressures interact.

Regulatory Accountability and Personal Liability

FM leaders are increasingly held personally responsible for compliance failures. Whether the issue is environmental regulation, workplace safety standards or energy reporting, a misstep can carry legal, financial and reputational consequences.

The role demands constant vigilance, proactive risk management and the ability to translate complex regulation into practical operating decisions.

Heightened Safety, Compliance and Reputational Risk

Any failure in facilities management, from a minor safety oversight to a serious incident, can damage an organisation's reputation almost immediately. FM leaders must anticipate risks that range from physical hazards to regulatory scrutiny and public perception.

The stakes are high, and mistakes are amplified when news travels instantly and online commentary follows within hours.

Volatile Building Utilisation and Political Sensitivity

The way buildings are used has become unpredictable. Hybrid working, fluctuating occupancy and shifting organisational priorities make FM decisions highly visible and politically sensitive.

Choices about space allocation or resourcing can spark debate and draw scrutiny from stakeholders across the organisation. Leaders must balance operational efficiency with how decisions are perceived, often under considerable pressure.

Labour-Dominated Cost Structures

Facilities operations remain heavily dependent on people. Labour accounts for a significant share of total spend, which creates a constant tension between maintaining service levels and controlling cost.

Workforce management, retention and engagement are not optional extras. They are critical to sustaining operations and to the trust the wider organisation places in the FM function.

Structural, Not Cyclical

These pressures are not a passing phase. They are structural and enduring. FM leadership is no longer about “keeping the lights on”. It is about operating where the stakes are permanent, visibility is constant and accountability is personal.

As a result, FM leadership failure rarely stems from a lack of technical skill. It emerges from **judgement erosion under pressure**: a slow, almost invisible decline in decision quality when a leader faces high-stakes accountability, operational complexity and continuous scrutiny.

Leaders who cannot manage these pressures risk more than operational disruption. They put their credibility, their teams and the organisation itself at risk.

“ *Great facilities management is invisible when it is done right.*

03

Pitfalls in FM Recruitment

Many facilities management recruitment processes are still designed to deliver reassurance rather than effectiveness. They favour what feels safe on paper, such as experience, familiarity and process compliance, over what actually predicts strong leadership and sound decisions under pressure.

In practice, these processes tend to reward four things.

Experience Length Over Decision Quality

Candidates with long CVs are often assumed to be capable leaders. Tenure alone does not guarantee sound judgement or the ability to act decisively in complex situations.

FM leadership requires critical thinking, timely decisions and the courage to act under uncertainty. None of these is measured by years served.

Familiar Sector Language Over Ownership

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

Consensus Behaviour Over Clarity

Recruitment processes often favour candidates who navigate group dynamics smoothly and avoid conflict. This is usually unintentional, and it shows up in familiar ways:

- **Panel interviews** favour candidates who are agreeable, diplomatic and non-confrontational. They read the room, avoid strong positions and keep everyone comfortable.

- **Behavioural questions** often reward stories about alignment, collaboration and compromise rather than decisive action in the face of conflict. “Tell us about a time you influenced stakeholders” is a typical example.
- **Scoring criteria** may focus on collaborative factors such as teamwork and communication style, while leaving out accountability under pressure, acting without consensus and making difficult decisions.

Consensus-seeking has value. But FM leaders need clarity of purpose and the courage to make tough calls, even when that 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 procedure matters, but compliance alone is not 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.



**Hire for
judgement,
not CV
coverage.**

04

The Mismatch Between Interview Performance and Leadership Reality

These pitfalls create a dangerous structural gap between what recruitment processes select for and what the FM leadership role actually requires. Interviews tend to reward composure, diplomacy and the ability to talk fluently about complexity.

The operational reality of facilities management demands something different: the ability to reduce ambiguity, make clear decisions and accept accountability under pressure. When real pressure arrives, the mismatch shows up in behaviour.

Deferring Decisions to Committees

Instead of making a clear call, the leader escalates, refers or spreads decisions across groups. Committees offer psychological safety, and shared ownership reduces personal risk. They also slow response times and dilute clarity. In fast-moving operational settings, delay is itself a risk.

Spreading Accountability Thinly

Responsibility becomes collective rather than owned. The language shifts from “I decided” to “we aligned” or “it was agreed”. When accountability is diffused, nobody fully owns the outcome, corrective action weakens and problems persist because no single leader feels 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. Compliance matters, but over-reliance on process prevents timely intervention, especially when a situation calls for judgement that procedures did not 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. Unresolved problems rarely stabilise. They compound quietly until they become harder and more disruptive to fix.

Why the Damage Is Easy to Miss

The immediate effects of these behaviours are often subtle. Operations continue, issues stay partly contained and visible disruption is limited. This creates a false sense of stability.

Over time, unresolved decisions accumulate and risk compounds. Small compromises become structural weaknesses. When the consequences finally surface, they tend to be expensive, visible and, in many cases, irreversible.

LISTEN FOR THE PRONOUN

In interview, notice whether a candidate says “I decided” or “we aligned”. Collaboration is healthy, but a leader who never owns a decision in their own stories is unlikely to own one in your building.

05

What Defines Strong Facilities Management Leadership

Effective FM leadership is not defined by technical knowledge alone. It is defined by the quality of judgement, ownership and control exercised under real operating conditions.

The role sits where safety, cost, compliance and organisational performance meet, and decisions carry tangible and sometimes irreversible consequences. Capability is revealed less by what leaders say and more by how they think, prioritise and act when faced with pressure and competing demands.

We look for twelve qualities.

- **Judgement under pressure:** makes sound decisions when information is incomplete, time is limited and the consequences are real.
- **Clear ownership:** takes responsibility for outcomes rather than diffusing accountability across teams, processes or committees.
- **Decisiveness with restraint:** acts when necessary, without impulsiveness and without hiding behind procedure to avoid responsibility.
- **Governance awareness:** understands regulatory, safety and reputational exposure, and operates within those realities at all times.
- **Noise resistance:** holds direction despite politics, optics or competing stakeholder pressure.
- **Operational foresight:** anticipates failures, capacity strain and risk before they become visible or disruptive.
- **Commercial acumen:** understands contracts and how suppliers operate, and knows how to secure the best service value from them.
- **Risk calibration:** distinguishes acceptable operational risk from dangerous exposure, and adjusts action accordingly.
- **Priority clarity:** separates what is urgent, what is important and what is unnecessary, and allocates effort to match.
- **Execution discipline:** turns decisions into sustained, reliable action rather than discussion or intent.
- **Stakeholder boundary control:** engages stakeholders constructively without surrendering the authority to decide.

- **Regulatory accountability and personal liability:** accepts responsibility for compliance failures and takes ownership of putting them right.

06

Interview Questions to Assess Real FM Leadership

These eighteen questions are designed to move beyond rehearsed competence and reveal how an FM 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 judgement, ownership, risk awareness and behaviour when facing ambiguity, pressure and consequence. Each question is paired with indicators of strong and weak responses, so interviewers can focus on evidence of clear decisions, accountability and operational control rather than polish or confidence.

Decisions and Ownership

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

Strong response: a clear decision, with the trade-offs explained, uncertainty accepted and the outcome owned. **Weak response:** vague and process-heavy, avoids stating the decision, focuses on discussion rather than action.

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

Strong response: uses “I”, accepts responsibility, explains the corrective action and what was learned. **Weak response:** uses “we”, shifts blame, focuses on context rather than accountability.

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

Strong response: recognises that timing mattered, acted at the right moment and explains the consequences of waiting. **Weak response:** waited for more information, escalated unnecessarily, avoided commitment.

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

Strong response: addressed the issue early despite the discomfort, was clear and direct, and prevented escalation. **Weak response:** postponed or softened the message, prioritised comfort, allowed the problem to grow.

Risk, Compliance and Early Warning

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

Strong response: shows awareness of the legal, safety and reputational implications, and explains the protective action taken. **Weak response:** refers only to procedure, shows little understanding of real-world implications.

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

Strong response: explains the boundaries, shows balanced reasoning and a conscious decision to accept or avoid the risk. **Weak response:** either overly cautious or impulsive, lacks structured reasoning.

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

Strong response: noticed the subtle decline early, intervened promptly and sustained the correction. **Weak response:** only reacted after an obvious failure, treated slow decline as normal.

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

Strong response: identifies faint warning patterns and explains how they were interpreted and acted on early. **Weak response:** notices only clear signs, relies on incidents to trigger action.

Trade-offs and Judgement

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

Strong response: makes a clear balancing choice and explains what was sacrificed and what resulted. **Weak response:** avoids choosing, describes a compromise without clarity.

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

Strong response: applies sound reasoning where the rules were insufficient and explains the justification. **Weak response:** uses rules as a shield, or ignores them without rationale.

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

Strong response: distinguishes the critical from the non-essential and concentrates effort accordingly. **Weak response:** reactive and scattered, treats everything equally.

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

Strong response: connects technical, financial and human factors into a coherent whole. **Weak response:** describes isolated actions, misses the interdependencies.

Stakeholders, Suppliers and Challenge

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

Strong response: considers input but maintains direction, prioritises operational reality. **Weak response:** concedes to influence, frames the outcome as group comfort.

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

Strong response: focuses on outcomes, intervenes firmly and uses contractual leverage effectively.

Weak response: accepts reports and activity, avoids confronting poor performance.

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

Strong response: calm, clear and consistent under challenge, maintains accountability. **Weak response:** defensive, vague or evasive.

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

Strong response: held firm on safety or compliance and can explain why. **Weak response:** allowed compromise for convenience, cost or stakeholder comfort.

Crisis and Follow-Through

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

Strong response: stabilises quickly, sets clear priorities and restores control. **Weak response:** focuses on blame or analysis before stabilisation.

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

Strong response: maintains follow-through, monitors progress and corrects drift. **Weak response:** strong start that fades, lacks sustained control.

SCORE EVIDENCE, NOT POLISH

Agree the strong and weak indicators before the first interview and score every candidate against them. It keeps the panel focused on what the candidate actually did, rather than how well they told the story.

**Delay is itself
a *risk*.**



07

The Hidden Risk of Speed in Recruiting Leaders

Organisational pressure often creates a demand to move quickly. Vacancies feel urgent, operational strain rises and senior leaders want rapid relief. In that climate, speed can look like efficiency.

In FM leadership recruitment, speed without sound judgement does not reduce risk. It accelerates it. Fast hiring decisions often provide short-term reassurance while quietly embedding long-term exposure, in four ways.

They Mask Weak Role Definition

When recruitment moves too quickly, organisations often hire into roles that are poorly defined. Expectations stay unclear, authority boundaries unresolved and success measures vague. The result is confusion, not clarity, 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 settling whether the role has the authority it needs to manage risk and operations, the organisation fills the post and hopes clarity will follow. It rarely does.

They Create False Confidence

A quick appointment can produce a temporary sense of progress. Stakeholders feel the problem has been handled, but confidence built 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 straight away. It emerges later through misjudged decisions, weak control, slow responses to risk or eroding standards. By the time these effects are visible, replacement is harder, more disruptive and far more expensive.

“

A fast hire into an unclear role is not progress. It is deferred risk.



**Tenure is not
the same as
decision
quality.**

08

The FM Leader Recruitment Timeline

A structured recruitment process reduces risk, improves decision quality and gives you a leader capable of operating under real organisational pressure. The timeline below sets out a practical, milestone-based approach across eight stages and twenty milestones.

Stage 1: Role Definition and Approval

- **Milestone 1:** confirm the strategic need for the role, including reporting line, scope and budget.
- **Milestone 2:** finalise the role profile, with clear authority, accountability, key success measures and risk exposure.
- **Milestone 3:** obtain senior leadership approval for the job description and recruitment plan.

Stage 2: Advertising and Sourcing

- **Milestone 4:** publish the vacancy internally and externally, through LinkedIn, professional networks and FM associations.
- **Milestone 5:** engage a specialist search partner if required.
- **Milestone 6:** identify and approach high-potential passive candidates.

Stage 3: Application Screening

- **Milestone 7:** review CVs and applications against defined high-signal criteria: judgement, ownership, operational experience and risk management.
- **Milestone 8:** shortlist candidates for initial interview, typically five to seven.

Stage 4: Initial Interviews

- **Milestone 9:** conduct structured behavioural interviews.
- **Milestone 10:** score candidates using the strong and weak response indicators.

Stage 5: Practical Assessment and Scenario Testing

- **Milestone 11:** set realistic operational scenarios or case studies.
- **Milestone 12:** evaluate problem-solving, clarity and systemic thinking.

Stage 6: Panel and Senior Stakeholder Interviews

- **Milestone 13:** conduct panel interviews.
- **Milestone 14:** make sure candidates meet every stakeholder involved in the decision, so the process is not delayed unnecessarily later.

Stage 7: References and Background Checks

- **Milestone 15:** take up references.
- **Milestone 16:** validate certifications, compliance records and operational experience.

Stage 8: Final Decision and Offer

- **Milestone 17:** consolidate interview and assessment scores, references and internal input.
- **Milestone 18:** the leadership panel makes the final selection.
- **Milestone 19:** extend the offer, negotiate terms and confirm a start date.
- **Milestone 20:** prepare an onboarding plan aligned to operational priorities and the accountability structure.

SLOW DOWN AT STAGE 1

Most rushed hires fail because the role was never properly defined. Time spent settling authority, accountability and risk exposure before advertising is the cheapest risk control in the whole process.

**Speed
without
judgement
accelerates
risk.**



09

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

When FM leadership recruitment fails, the impact rarely stays within one operational area. Weak or misaligned leadership creates ripple effects that can compromise the safety, efficiency and reputation of the whole organisation.

The consequences typically appear as:

- **Safety incidents:** from minor operational errors to major accidents, reflecting gaps in oversight and accountability.
- **Regulatory intervention:** fines, inspections or enforcement action triggered by non-compliance or operational lapses.
- **Contract erosion:** loss of trust and performance with suppliers, service providers and 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 hiring decision that enabled them has already been made. Once the wrong leader is in place, remedial action is expensive, disruptive and often only partly effective.

This points to a simple truth. The role of recruitment is not merely to fill a vacancy. Its purpose is to **prevent avoidable failure**, by making sure every hire has the judgement, resilience and operational competence to protect the organisation and deliver reliable outcomes.



**Strong
leaders say “I
decided”.**

10

Redefining Recruitment for High-Stakes FM Leadership

At Maxwell Stephens, 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 creates activity, but it does not improve outcomes.

Rapid hiring can ease short-term pressure while quietly increasing long-term risk. Comfort and familiarity during a process may feel reassuring, but they are not reliable indicators of real operational capability.

Our purpose is to reduce decision risk in roles organisations cannot afford to misjudge. We begin by examining the brief itself, clarifying the role's true responsibilities, decision authority and exposure before we engage candidates. Where structural gaps exist, we slow the process rather than let urgency override sound foundations, and we will not proceed with an assignment where accountability or scope remains unclear.

Throughout assessment, we focus on how people think and decide in real operating conditions, prioritising judgement, risk awareness and practical reasoning over presentation or rehearsed answers.

The result is a deliberate and selective method. We place fewer leaders, but those we appoint are better aligned to the demands of the role. Our aim is not simply to fill positions, but to make sure every appointment strengthens the organisation, reduces exposure and supports sustained operational performance. To discuss a leadership appointment, call 0207 118 4848 or email info@maxwellstephens.com.

**Recruitment
exists to
prevent
avoidable
failure.**



THE EVIDENCE

What the Data Says

What the data shows about leadership pressure, interview quality and the risk of getting a hire wrong.

0.42

Structured interviews have the highest mean validity of common selection methods (.42) in the Sackett et al. meta-analytic update.

[Source: Sackett et al., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2023](#)

0.19

Unstructured interviews predict job performance far less well: a mean operational validity of .19, versus .42 for structured interviews.

[Source: Sackett et al., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2023](#)

41%

41% of UK organisations that selected candidates in the past year said new recruits always, mostly or sometimes resigned within their first 12 weeks.

[Source: CIPD, Resourcing and talent planning report 2024](#)

84%

84% of FM leaders worldwide identify escalating operating costs and budget constraints as their top concern.

[Source: JLL, Global State of Facilities Management Report 2025](#)

95%

95% of candidates placed by Maxwell Stephens remain in role one year after appointment.

[Source: Maxwell Stephens, 2026](#)

Sources were checked in September 2026. Select a source to open the original research. Maxwell Stephens figures are drawn from our own published vacancies and placement records.

CASE STUDY

See It in Practice

UCL Director of Campus Infrastructure and Operations Recruitment

University College London asked Maxwell Stephens to recruit a Director of Campus Infrastructure and Operations for an estate of more than 200 buildings valued at over £2 billion. The role combined large-scale estate leadership with safety, sustainability, cultural change and senior stakeholder engagement across academic departments with competing claims on the same buildings. We assessed candidates on their ability to turn strategy into operational performance, looking for leaders who could explain how a plan survived a live building and a term-time constraint. The appointed Director brought a track record in safety culture, large portfolio operations and long-term estate planning.

It shows the principle at the heart of this guide: at senior level, technical expertise is the entry requirement, and the appointment turns on judgement, accountability and the ability to deliver under real operating pressure.

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- [What Does Strong FM Leadership Look Like?](#)
- [What Makes a Great Facilities Director?](#)
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- [The Modern FM Director](#)
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