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INSIGHT

From FM Manager to Director Guide



Introduction

Many strong facilities managers hit the same wall. They are good at the job. Their sites run well, their clients or occupants trust them and their teams respect them. And yet the director roles go to someone else, or they are offered a bigger site and a bigger title but the same job.

The reason is usually uncomfortable and fixable. Director roles are not rewards for being an excellent manager. They are different jobs, judged on different things: commercial outcomes, strategic judgement, influence at executive level and the strength of the leadership team beneath you. Being brilliant at what you do now is the entry ticket, not the qualification.

This guide is for FM and estates professionals who want to move from manager to director, head of function or equivalent. It is deliberately direct. It sets out what changes, what to stop doing, which skills to build and how to prove them, and how to make the move itself, whether internally or by changing employer.

You will not find a single formula, because every organisation defines director differently. But you will find tests you can apply to your own career right now, and a clear sense of what hiring panels are really looking for.

What actually changes at director level

Titles vary wildly across FM. A director in one organisation might run a small team on a single campus. In another, it is a seat at the executive table with responsibility for a national portfolio and a large budget. Look past the label and focus on what the work consists of.

At manager level you are paid to make the operation work. At director level you are paid to decide what the operation should be, and to make sure it is worth what it costs.

It helps to look at job descriptions for director roles in your sector and underline every verb. You will find words such as shape, influence, represent, advise and challenge, alongside fewer instances of manage, coordinate and ensure. That shift in verbs is the shift in the job, and it is worth reading three or four of them side by side.

- Time horizon: from this month's performance to the next three to five years.
- Audience: from occupants and suppliers to executives, boards and investors.
- Measure of success: from service delivered to business outcomes enabled.
- Main tool: from your own expertise to the capability of the people and systems you build.

Ask yourself honestly: how much of your week is spent on things only you can do, and how much is spent on things you could teach someone else to do? Directors spend most of their time on the first category, and it is a different list from the one managers have.

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Strong shortlists are short



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Stop being the best operator in the room

The hardest habit to break is the one that got you promoted. You are the person who knows how to fix the problem fastest, and when something goes wrong, your instinct is to step in. At director level that instinct is a handicap.

Every time you solve something your team could have solved, you take a development opportunity from them and an hour from your own strategic work. Panels notice this. They ask candidates for examples of delegation, and the ones who answer with heroic firefighting stories are quietly marked down.

Delegation is not abdication, though. The skill is matching the level of support to the person and the risk: close oversight for someone new on something high-stakes, light touch for someone proven. Make your expectations explicit, agree when you want to hear about problems, and then actually keep out of the way. Reliable delegation is a visible, learnable skill, and panels can hear it in how you describe your team.

- Give decisions to the lowest level that can make them well, and let people get some wrong.
- Coach rather than rescue: ask what they would do before you say what you would do.
- Set outcomes and boundaries, then step back from the method.
- Track what you are still doing that belongs to someone else, and hand it on deliberately.

A practical test: take a proper holiday and do not check email. If the operation falls apart, you have not built a team, you have built a dependency. If it runs well, you have just created your best interview evidence.

Learn the language of money

Commercial fluency is the single biggest gap between manager and director candidates. Many managers run a budget well but cannot explain it in the way a finance director thinks about it. Directors are expected to speak fluently about operating cost, capital expenditure, whole-life cost, return on investment and risk.

You do not need to become an accountant. You do need to be able to build a business case that a sceptical finance colleague would sign.

One of the best ways to practise is to take a decision you made recently and rewrite it as a one-page paper for an executive. State the problem, the options, the cost of each, the risk and your recommendation. If you find it hard to put numbers on the options, you have found the exact capability you need to build. Then ask a finance colleague to mark it.

- Understand the difference between operating and capital spend, and how your organisation treats each.
- Learn to present options with costs, benefits, risks and a clear recommendation.
- Know your contracts: what you are paying for, what is variable and what the exit terms are.
- Talk about cost per outcome, not just cost per square metre.
- Be able to explain how a decision affects the organisation's financial position, not only your own budget.

Spend time with your finance partner. Ask them what they look for in a business case and what makes them lose confidence in a proposal. It is the cheapest and fastest education available.

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Know your worth, know your market



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Think in outcomes, not assets

Managers tend to think in assets and services: the plant, the contracts, the cleaning, the helpdesk. Directors think in outcomes: a workplace that helps people do their best work, a risk profile the board can live with, a cost base that supports growth.

The shift sounds abstract, but it shows up in practical ways. When you propose a project, do you describe the equipment, or the problem it solves for the business?

Another useful exercise is to interview two or three people in other functions about what they need from facilities and what frustrates them. You will usually learn that their priorities, such as hiring, customer experience or cost control, are ones FM could help with if it were framed differently. That is the raw material of a strategy, and of a conversation with an executive.

- Connect every major initiative to something the organisation already cares about, such as safety, productivity, sustainability or reputation.
- Learn the organisation's strategy and find where FM influences it.
- Look outwards: understand your sector, your regulators and how peers run their estates.
- Spend time with the operational reality of the business, not just the buildings.

Try writing the strategy for your current function on one page. If you cannot, or if it reads as a list of activities, that is your development area. A director-level strategy says what you will do, what you will stop, and how it serves the organisation's goals.

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Know the brief before the shortlist



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Influence upwards and sideways

Directors rarely have the authority to command; they have the credibility to persuade. That means building relationships with executives, peers in HR, IT, finance and operations, and key suppliers, long before you need them.

Many FM managers are excellent at managing down and across their own team but avoid the senior room. Do not wait for an invitation. Look for reasons to be useful to senior people.

Practise the habit of preparing for senior meetings by asking what the person across the table wants to hear in two minutes, and what decision you want from them. Many managers walk into executive rooms with too much detail and no ask. A short summary, a clear recommendation and a willingness to take questions will serve you better than a polished presentation.

- Offer a short, plain-English update to leaders on risks and opportunities, not just activity.
- Bring solutions with problems; executives remember people who reduce their load.
- Learn each stakeholder's priorities and speak in their terms.
- Seek opportunities to present at leadership meetings, even for ten minutes.
- Find a senior sponsor or mentor, ideally outside your own reporting line.

Remember that influence includes saying no. A director who can explain, calmly and with evidence, why a request is unwise earns far more respect than one who agrees to everything.

Build a bench and prove you can develop people

Directors are judged partly on who comes through behind them. A panel will want to know whether you have developed people who have been promoted, whether you can build a team with complementary strengths and whether you can manage people who are more specialist than you.

If your team has no obvious successor for your own role, that is a barrier to your promotion. Organisations are reluctant to move someone upward if it leaves a gap they cannot fill.

If you can, ask your current director what they would want in a successor, and what they see as your next stretch. People are often generous with this when asked directly, and the answer may reveal a perception gap you can fix. It also signals ambition in a constructive way, which is better than silent frustration.

- Identify one or two people who could do your job in time, and give them real exposure.
- Delegate stretch assignments, not just tasks.
- Be known for developing people: let it show in who chooses to work for you.
- Learn to hire well, including people with skills you lack.

Keep examples. When you are asked how you develop talent, specific stories about named roles and outcomes, with names removed, are far stronger than general statements about valuing your people.

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Right person, right moment



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Close the gaps: scale, exposure and credentials

Most step-up candidates have a gap or two. Common ones include limited experience of large budgets or multi-site scale, little exposure to executive committees, no experience managing through a significant incident or project, or gaps in formal learning.

Identify yours honestly, perhaps with the help of a trusted colleague or mentor, and then plan to close them rather than hoping nobody asks.

Be wary of building a case on soft claims. Directors are judged by results, so say what changed, by how much, over what period, and what your part was. Where figures are sensitive or unavailable, describe the direction and the mechanism honestly. A credible modest result will beat an inflated one, because senior panels are experienced at spotting the difference.

- Seek responsibility for a bigger, more complex or higher-profile piece of work, even as an add-on to your day job.
- Volunteer for cross-functional projects, such as a move, a tender or a major change programme.
- Consider professional membership and development through the Institute of Workplace and Facilities Management or relevant engineering and safety bodies, if it fits your path.
- Consider management or leadership education if your background is technical.
- Take a secondment or interim assignment if your employer offers one.

Qualifications alone rarely win director roles. Treat them as a way to build knowledge and credibility, not as a substitute for evidence of impact.

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Gather evidence, then tell the story

Hiring panels for director roles are not impressed by task lists. They want to hear what changed because you were there. Start collecting evidence now, in a form you can use on a CV and in interview.

For each major piece of work, write down the situation, what you personally decided or did, what happened and what you learned. Be specific about your role, and honest about what others contributed.

It is also worth working with a specialist recruiter early, even before you are actively applying. A good one can tell you how the market reads your profile, which gaps matter in your sector and what a realistic next step looks like. Choose someone who tells you the truth, including when you are not yet ready, rather than someone who simply sends you roles.

- Quantify where you can, using your own real figures, and never exaggerate or estimate loosely.
- Show decisions under uncertainty, not just smooth delivery.
- Include a failure or setback and what you changed afterwards; it signals maturity.
- Show commercial outcomes: a contract renegotiated, a cost avoided, a risk reduced.
- Show leadership of people through change, not just management of tasks.

Rewrite your CV for the role you want, not the one you have. Lead with scope, outcomes and leadership, and cut the detailed duty lists that belong at manager level.

Making the move: internally or externally

You have two routes. Internally, you may be promoted, or may need to create the role by showing a gap. Externally, you move employer to take the title. Both are valid, and the right choice depends on your organisation and how it sees you.

A common problem is the internal ceiling: your employer sees you as an excellent manager and struggles to imagine you in the bigger seat. If you have made a clear case, with evidence, and nothing moves, it may be time to look outwards.

Give yourself permission to ask for help, particularly in the first year. A mentor, a peer network or an executive coach can speed up the learning curve and give you a place to test ideas. The best directors do not pretend to know everything. They know where to find out, and they are visibly willing to learn.

- Have an honest conversation with your line manager about what the next role requires and what you need to show.
- Ask for specific feedback, and a time frame for review.
- If looking externally, target roles that stretch you by one level, not two.
- Be realistic about the trade-offs: a bigger title may mean a smaller team or a different sector.
- Prepare for senior interviews with strategy, finance and stakeholder scenarios.

Be careful about leaving only for the title. Check the scope, the reporting line, the support you will have and whether the organisation truly values FM. A director title without influence is a manager role with better stationery.

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Say what you can deliver, then deliver it



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Landing well, and knowing if you are not ready

Once you are in the role, the first months decide whether you thrive. Listen before you change. Meet your executive peers, your key suppliers and your team. Learn the politics and the money before you set direction.

It is also worth being candid about readiness. Not everyone needs to be a director, and some excellent managers are happier and more valuable in senior operational roles. The step is a change of work, not just of status.

One last thing: whichever path you choose, keep a regular rhythm of reflection. Once a quarter, ask what you have learned, what you would do differently and what you want to be known for. Careers are built from a series of deliberate choices, and the people who make them consciously usually arrive at the destination they actually want.

- Agree early what success looks like at six and twelve months with your own manager.
- Resist the urge to fix everything yourself in the first weeks.
- Build quick wins that matter to executives, not only to your team.
- Watch for old habits: if you are back in the detail, step out.

If you read this guide and feel pulled towards the operational side, that is a valid conclusion. A well-paid, respected head of operations or senior site role can be a better career than a director role that drains you.

Step-up readiness checklist

- [ ] Write down what share of your week only you can do, and delegate the rest.
- [ ] Take a proper holiday to prove your team runs without you.
- [ ] Learn how your organisation treats operating and capital spend.
- [ ] Build one business case that your finance partner would sign.
- [ ] Write a one-page strategy for your function connected to organisational goals.
- [ ] Identify a senior sponsor or mentor outside your reporting line.
- [ ] Name one or two potential successors and give them stretch work.
- [ ] List your honest gaps in scale, exposure and credentials, and plan to close them.
- [ ] Write up five pieces of work as situation, action, result and learning.
- [ ] Rewrite your CV for the director role you want, leading with scope and outcomes.

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Clarity now saves months later



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Next steps

The step from manager to director is earned by changing how you work well before the title arrives. The people who make it do not wait to be noticed. They delegate, learn the commercial language, build their successors and collect evidence, and then they choose their moment.

Your next step: pick the one gap in this guide that made you wince, and set yourself a ninety-day action to start closing it. When you are ready to talk about the market for senior roles, Maxwell Stephens is a specialist Facilities Management recruitment consultancy.

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