



Interim Insights: A conversation with Lesley McLeod

I've had a long – but not the most logical – career. On paper, I suspect it looks a bit odd but, and I hope this gives people some hope, you shouldn't despair if you don't get things right straight out of the gate.

When I graduated, I got a job as a management trainee with a bank. I loved working with the public but banking wasn't for me, so I went back to university to do an MBA. I supported myself selling popcorn at the cinema during the week and working at a DIY store at the weekends proving, if nothing else, that sometimes you need to take what you can get in order to pay the bills: Nothing is wasted – you can learn from it all.

It was a good time for me – I was the class medallist and headed off immediately afterwards to try my hand at a PhD. But, I didn't finish it: instead I ended up working in the media and marketing team for one of the companies I was meant to have been researching.

My lovely boss had been the political editor of the Scotsman newspaper and one of our PR advisers had been at the Home Office. Between them they persuaded - maybe bullied a little - a small town girl from the Highlands to have a go at London. I was sure I'd hate it and came thinking I'd just tick the box and go home. Instead, I loved every minute.

I worked in the press teams at the Home Office, HMTreasury, transport and ended up as deputy director of communication and strategy at DCMS. From there I was headhunted to set up the corporate media team at TfL. I took on the director of comms role there as an interim but didn't want the job permanently. Instead, I accepted another fixed term role for a health authority then worked - again on a fixed term contract - on 2 public enquiries in Northern Ireland. I was also lecturing part-time on PR, advertising and journalism but, while I loved the students, I wasn't so sure I was a fit for teaching so, when a former boss asked if I'd consider going with her to the then British Bankers' Association, I jumped at the chance. I was there during the financial crisis and, although I know it was dreadful for many people, I had the time of my life: high stakes crises all over the place; a brilliant team; great policy colleagues; and lovely members. I then went to Energy UK - so you can see I like a challenge.

It was then I took a bit of a detour. My Mum was failing so, as is the history of unmarried women the world over, I went home and found myself the CEO of a membership body for professionals in the construction sector. It taught me a lot, not least about balancing the books and governance. But once Mum died the heart went out of it and, since then, I've been taking on interim roles. I'm not against another permanent role but it would have to be challenging and that's just what you tend to get with interim roles.

▶ **When you step into an interim leadership role, what are the first signals you look for to understand whether the corporate affairs function is aligned – or misaligned – with the organisation’s strategic priorities?**

Actually, I think the process starts before you get the job. You can get some sense of what you are up against when you read the JD alongside the outward facing words on the corporate website. You have to look out for places where the words don't line up but also for telltale signs like 'change', 'restructuring', 'challenge' – even 'rapid growth' or 'ambition'. I'd not say any of that is bad but it gives a sense of places in flux and that is always something to flesh out if they want to meet you. It could be fun – it might be toxic ...

▶ **Interim roles often mean entering during moments of change or crisis. How do you quickly assess the reputational risk landscape?**

I've been around the block a bit and, like my first, brilliant boss at the Home Office, you get a feel for a story. It's a bit like music - you can hear when it's off-key. I tend to start with the news - what's going on in the sector; how are the shares performing; what does the competition look like; are there monsters hiding under the bed. There may also be clues - high staff turnover; a general lethargy and lack of positive story- building; people sidling up to you before you've even got your coat off or found your way to the loos all too ready to warn you about other people (don't listen! Make up your own mind). There will always be jobs where risk is part of the deal so a bit of upheaval is not a deal breaker, but talking to the leadership team will give you a sense of whether there is a plan for the future and a roadmap for getting there. Just remember to look at the role in the round – where does it sit in the business and where does the business sit in the overall external environment.

▶ **You're frequently the 'new face' in the room, sometimes managing established teams. What's your approach to earning trust rapidly with both senior executives and key external stakeholders?**

It's not always easy to be new and let's not pretend you are always immediately welcome. People will have checked you out and will already have some ideas about what you are like – particularly if they are worried you are there to make people redundant. I've found it helps to listen. Actively, listen. And don't pretend to be God's gift: don't name drop; don't throw your weight around; don't belittle the in-house team who are probably feeling nervous or bruised. There is always time for kindness and fun - I find happy teams are faster and fitter. But if you have something unpleasant to do - like shaking up a team and letting people go - it's best not to shilly-shally. Be honest. Be as open as you can. And get on with it. Once it's done, it's done and then everyone can move on. Don't cling to the senior team – talk to everyone. Ask questions - and don't be afraid to look like an idiot. Echo back what you learn to make sure you have a handle on the business and the task in hand. Remember you are there for your expertise – not because you know your way round any particular organisation or sector. Look for small wins where you can deliver quickly and praise in public. Develop a thick skin because you may face scepticism or downright hostility and it doesn't help to rise to the bait. And smile!

▶ **Contractors are expected to deliver value immediately. What framework practises or approaches enable you to make high-impact decisions within your first month?**

It's about old-fashioned need finding. I have a background in communication strategy and planning so I always start with a diary as it gives you some pegs to hang things on. Establish the organisational priorities – there may be fixed markers you have to hit - like company results or major launches. There may be external events that will drive the narrative – a budget; a major policy announcement; a change in regulations. And then setting out a realistic timeline to getting things done. And never forget you are not just dealing with a business - there are living people involved and they will have dreams and aspirations of their own – and it helps to know what those are so you can help frame individual wins that work with the organisation. Personally, one of my strengths is helping organisations understand how the outside world sees them and I've found being the inside-outsider is something people really value.

▶ **What legacy do you aim to leave when stepping out of an interim role, and how do you measure the value of that longer-term legacy?**

At a base level you need to do no harm. But it's obviously more than that. You want to leave behind clearly established goals for the team with which you have been dealing and a sound framework for how those aims can be achieved. If you have time, it is good to look closely at staff training and development and to start succession planning or considerate redeployment or exit if necessary. The value comes from a more cohesive team and approach to tasks that support operation objectives. If you leave behind a stronger team knowing where they fit into the overall picture then you probably have done what is needed. You'll know in time: the people you met will thrive; and processes you established will last.

▶ **What advice would you give to someone navigating the job market during a challenging geo-political time?**

It's not easy when things the job market is difficult but don't give up. Keep busy. Keep informed. Keep your skills current. Be prepared to turn your hand to anything within reason. But know your worth. And, as I said before, keep smiling.



How we can help

Whether you are seeking your next professional challenge or building a team to achieve lasting impact, Ellwood Atfield supports communications, policy, and advocacy professionals at every stage of their career. We welcome the opportunity to speak to you.

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