

## The Short Guide to Preparing for a Headship Interview

By Dr. Deborah Welch

*How can you best prepare for a headship interview? Whether you are a new head or a veteran, it can be daunting to anticipate what sort of questions you'll be asked. These two actions steps can help guide your preparations.*



Whether you are an aspiring head of school or an experienced veteran, it can feel daunting to prepare for the “content” aspect of an interview. There are hundreds of potential questions about the leadership of a school, but it’s next to impossible to predict which ones might be selected for your conversation.

How can you best prepare for an interview for a head of school position? What types of questions do recruiters, trustees, and school search committees ask? Where do interviewers get their questions? How might your responses be evaluated?

By using the two action steps outlined below to guide your preparation, you can ensure that you are not only fully ready for the interview but you can learn to also clarify whether the school and the position are a match for you.

### **1. What are the school’s projected needs?**

The position description, typically developed by the recruitment firm, is a thoughtful document that offers application details and describes the school’s history, governance structure, academics, facilities, and student life. The mission and other guiding

statements are also highlighted to provide you with insights into the school's culture and ethos.

While position descriptions may be formatted differently, there are usually sections for "*Opportunities and Challenges*" and "*Desired Qualities and Qualifications*." These areas are crucial for your preparation because interviewers use them to develop questions. They represent the summation of multiple stakeholder interviews with trustees, leadership teams, parents, students, and staff. You need to be clear in your understanding of these projected needs because they describe the profile of the school's next leader. If the position description emphasizes building projects, enrollment increases, and financial sustainability, you can predict that questions will be asked about your experience on the "business side" of managing a school. If shaping a cohesive academic vision and developing mission aligned faculty are emphasized, you know the school has prioritized a pedagogical leader to take the school forward.

**Action Step:**

Review the position description and the school website carefully. If possible, find the school's strategic plan and recent accreditation report. What can you learn about the school's identity and culture? What ideas are important to note from the school's guiding statements? What are the projected leadership needs of the school for the next five years?

In a table of three columns, complete the first column by making a list of the school's future needs and opportunities that are mentioned in the various documents.

**2. What are your leadership accomplishments that match the school's projected needs?**

Interviewers frequently focus on leadership experience by asking candidates to provide examples of what they have accomplished. Such queries, known as behavior questions, are preferable to asking what you might do or inquiring about your philosophical stance on an issue. A behavioral question is typically prefaced by language such as:

Have you ever...

Can you tell us about a time...

Might you provide an example of...

Describe a situation when....

The best responses to such questions are evidence based. If you are specific about the outcomes you have achieved and support your accomplishments with anecdotes and data, the interviewers will gain insights into your future performance. They may ask follow-up questions about your level of involvement or encourage you to reflect on why you acted in a certain manner. They understand that not every initiative or activity is a success. Your critical reflections about what you learned let them know that you are continuously improving as a leader, a quality to be commended. Don't be modest about

what you have achieved and don't be unwilling to acknowledge when it was a team effort. (School leaders need to know when to delegate.)

**Action Step:**

Using the behavioral question format, project in the second column potential questions for each opportunity and challenge in the school's position description. Also note any characteristics in the desired qualities that further support the list.

Next, in the third column, cite examples that demonstrate your experience in those areas. The more you can talk about what you have done and document it with relevant examples and evidence, the better. You might jot bullets, data from a survey, or talking points for a story. You might have an artifact such as a graph or photo to share. A hypothetical example is provided below:

<p><b>School's Opportunities and Challenges</b> <i>What has the school prioritized they will need in the future?</i></p>	<p><b>Potential Questions</b> <i>What might be questions that align with the school's opportunities and challenges?</i></p>	<p><b>My Examples and Evidence</b> <i>What examples can I provide from my leadership practice?</i></p>
<p>Sustaining academic excellence</p>	<p>How do you know that your school has a strong academic program? What evidence do you accept?</p>	<p>-Qualitative and quantitative measures aligned with mission and vision. Use Annual Report for reference. -Accreditation or IBO authorization commendations.</p>
<p>Partnership with parents</p>	<p>Talk about approaches you have used for authentic listening to all stakeholders and soliciting feedback.</p>	<p>-Provide survey data for parents re: responsiveness of HOS -Tell story of upset parent who is now PTO president. -Have typical agenda from parent forums. Talk about how generated and follow-up.</p>
<p>Diversity and inclusion</p>	<p>What actions have you taken to reduce bias and promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in your school? What have you</p>	<p>-Task Force, Coordinator to deliver on the mission. -Objectives of Task Force and results.</p>

	learned to be most effective and why?	-Personal growth as well as professional learning. -Learnings include research for meaningful measurement.
Financial management	What are some of the financial challenges your school has faced? How have you managed them?	-Sit on board treasury committee. -Manage division budget. -Role in reducing budget 10% -top learning in AISH finance course.

The time you spend completing the table will be productive research for the interview as well as personally meaningful. It will enable you to clarify what attracts you to the school and support your stance that you are the right person for the position.

You may, in some cases, realize that the position is not right for you. If fundraising and donor management are emphasized and you do not have experience or desire to do advancement work, it is better to realize early that this is not your school. The school may be in a beautiful cosmopolitan setting but you are not going to be spending much time relaxing in cafés. If the position is not a good fit for your skills and interests, your surroundings will bring you little comfort.

This kind of preparation will organize your thoughts and lay the groundwork for strategic responses to behavioral questions for a head of school position. It will actually be fun to reflect afterwards about how many questions you anticipated! While there are still tips and strategies for the “presentation” side of the interview, to be discussed in a future article, if you have the “content” under control, you will exude confidence and clarity during the interview.

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