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SPOTLIGHT

Improving Teams to Improve Results

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Improving Teams to Improve Results

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAMS

Think for a moment. How many teams are you on? How many do you lead? Now, reflect on how many of those teams you consider “effective.” As you ponder that, consider how you define an “effective team.” One of the most important keys to unlocking the potential of a district’s human capital is through improving the effectiveness of teams.

Teams are everywhere in school systems. Whether formal or informal, permanent or temporary, teams are a common way of getting the work done. District administrators often participate in and lead a large number of teams, yet a strikingly small number of these teams are considered effective. Research shows that nearly 80% of senior leadership teams are rated mediocre or poor by their own members.¹ Would you rate the teams in your district similarly?

Public school districts typically spend 80–90% of their operating expenses on people. Building more effective teams is one of the most powerful avenues

for tapping the potential of this most important asset. Teams can help to drive employees’ commitment, foster their development, reinforce their mutual reliance and friendship, and generate better ideas and results. If administrators can manage to unlock this potential, making teams worth *more* than the sum of their parts rather than *less*, it could greatly further the objective of raising student achievement in districts across the country.

Ernest Shackleton’s team, featured below, is a testament to the power of a great team. As we seek the secrets to making a team great, it’s worth analyzing the flipside as well: what can destroy a potentially great team? In

Shackleton: A team greater than the sum of its parts

In 1914 when Sir Ernest Shackleton, a British explorer, set off on a dangerous expedition to reach the South Pole, everything seemed to go wrong. First, his boat got locked in a polar ice pack, and was unable to move for 15 months. When the ship was crushed and sank in the ice, his crew was forced to row 1,200 miles to find land before hiking over 32 miles of mountainous terrain to reach safety. Despite the perils of their situation, the cohesiveness of Shackleton’s crew seemed to grow with time. They flexibly changed their goals throughout the journey:

1 Goal #1 was reaching the South Pole.

2 Goal #2 became survival.

3 Goal #3 became getting rescued.



Years later, members of the crew spoke fondly of the experience, and many joined Shackleton on a final expedition in 1920.

contrast to the Shackleton example, the 2011 Boston Red Sox was one of the teams with the greatest potential of all teams in baseball. But, as a result of a caustic team dynamic and a dysfunctional clubhouse, the season imploded and the team was left out of the playoffs. Are there characteristics of these infamous teams that we should seek to replicate or avoid? In DMC's work with district leadership teams, we see three important levers that drive the effectiveness of teams.

Three key levers to increase the effectiveness of teams

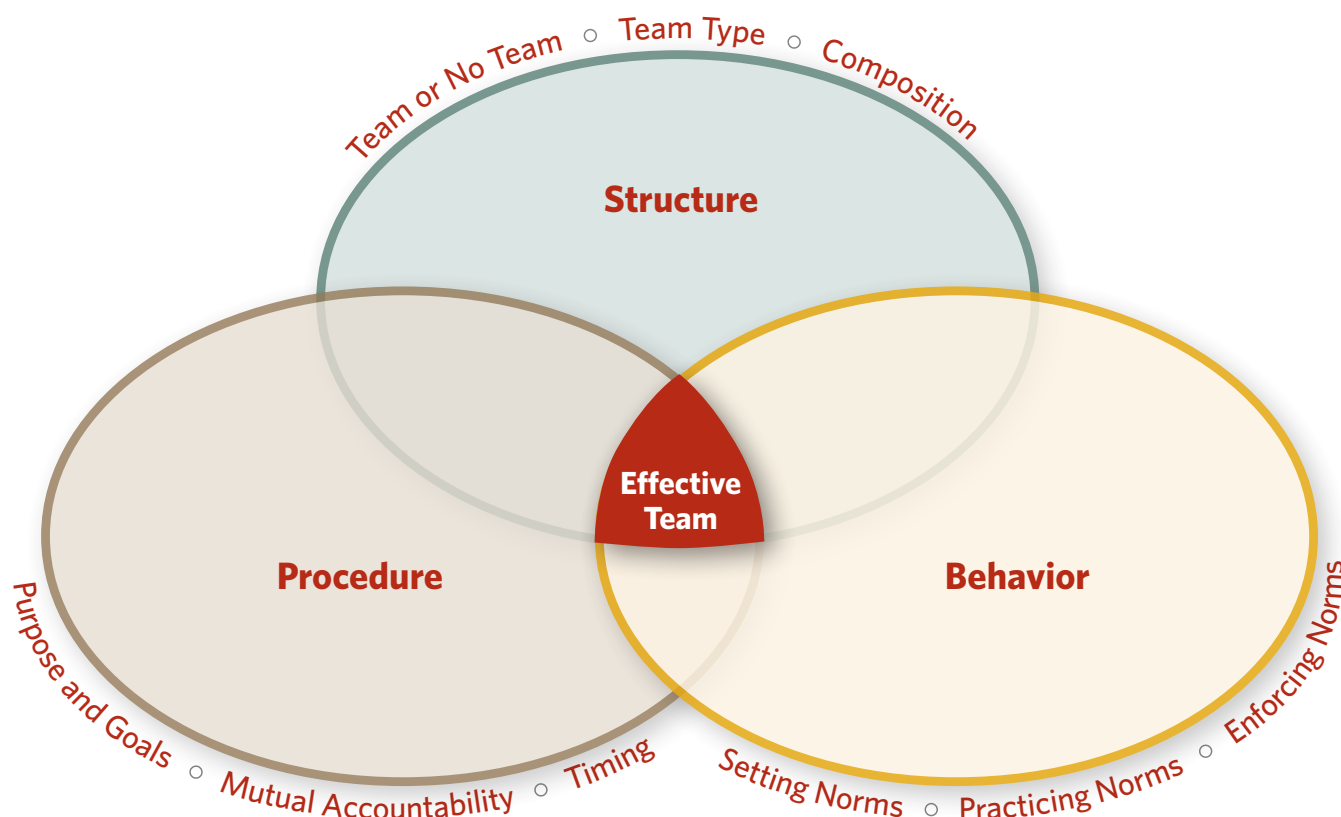
DMC categorizes the levers to building a strong team into three distinct albeit overlapping spheres:

structural, procedural, and behavioral (Exhibit 1). Structural levers are about forming teams—when we need a team (and when we don't) as well as what the structure of the team should be. Procedural levers are about how we establish and execute processes for the team. Behavioral levers are about maximizing the ongoing functioning of the team by establishing a set of commonly understood norms.

Managing each of these spheres can lead to organizational benefits, such as improved culture and development opportunities for staff, and most importantly, improved performance, such as increased student achievement, cost savings, or improved service quality. ➤

EXHIBIT 1

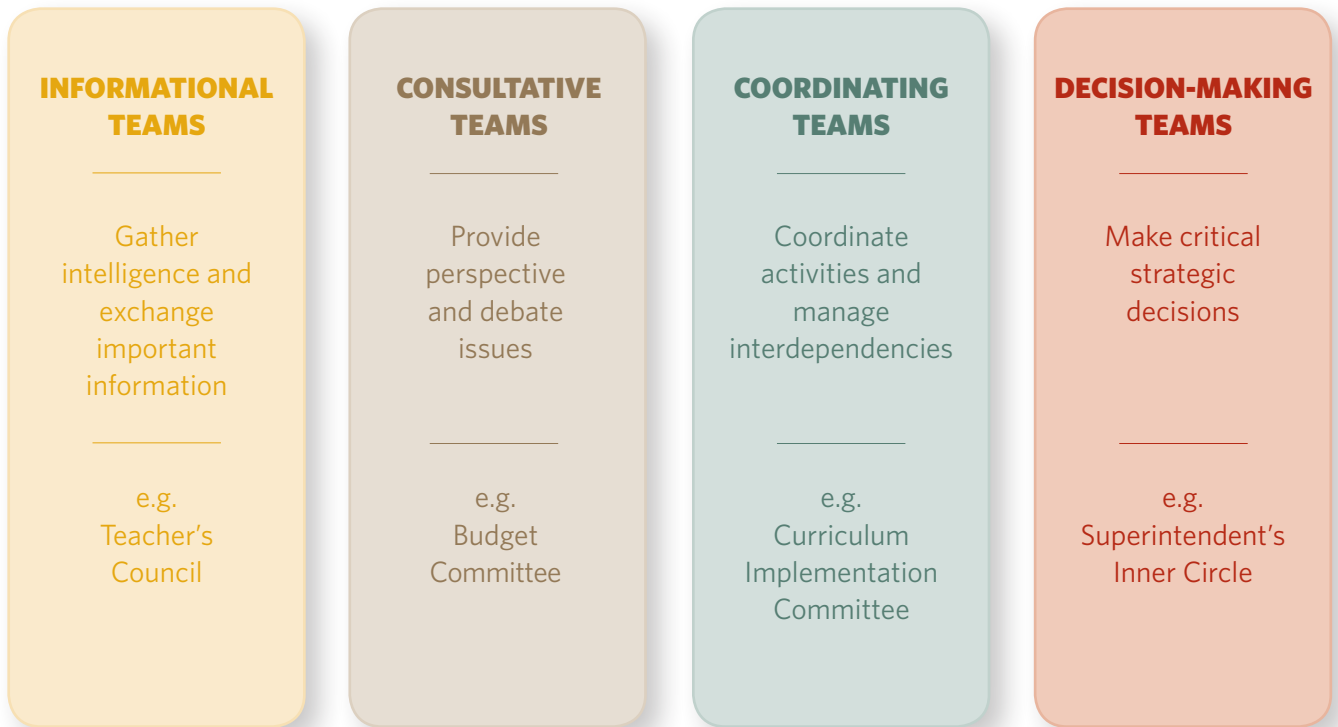
Three Key Levers for Building Strong Teams



Source: DMC

EXHIBIT 2

What Type of Team Do You Need?



Source: Adapted from Wageman et al., *Senior Leadership Teams*, 2008

1

Structural levers help form the team

Creating an effective team must start with a focus on its structure.

Is a team approach the best choice?

The first question to consider is whether a team is necessary at all. Often, we form teams assuming that the benefits of collaboration will be easy to achieve; however, bringing a group together to tackle a problem is not always a simple or smooth path. Determining the situations that really require a team can help avoid a

lot of frustration. Teams are necessary only to tackle complex situations that require diverse perspectives or buy-in from multiple parties.

Some situations may actually benefit from individual work and single-individual leadership rather than collaborative teaming. This is especially the case when the task at hand is clear and the roles to execute it are well-defined.² As team gurus Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith have written, individual effort and leadership are “a familiar and essential part of all well-managed organizations. Throughout history, most organizational departments and business units have been led primarily in this mode.”³

What type of team is warranted?

If, however, the problem does merit a team approach, the next question becomes what type of team to structure?

Teams can serve in a variety of functions—from pure decision-making to information exchange. Exhibit 2 shows four types of teams identified by Harvard's Ruth Wageman in her research on senior leadership teams.⁴

- **Informational Teams** are used mostly to gather and exchange information. They tend to operate more effectively with a large number of members than other types of teams.
- **Consultative Teams** also exchange information, but mostly debate issues and provide perspective to one or more key decision-makers.
- **Coordinating Teams** manage interdependencies and coordinate activities, and are most often used for implementation. Generally these teams also serve an informational and consultative role as well.
- **Decision-Making Teams** focus foremost on making a small number of critical strategic decisions. While information exchange, consultation, and coordination are important functions of this type of team, efforts are focused on making decisions. In order to operate effectively, decision-making teams generally require the smallest number of members.

As you look through these definitions, where would you place the teams that you work with? Are some of your teams working with one purpose when they should really have another? A common example of a mismatched team type and purpose is when a group of senior leaders comes together for information-sharing, but ends up making critical strategic decisions that go beyond the team's mandate.

How large should the team be? Who should be on the team?

The final structural consideration in forming a team is the composition of members. The size of the team and the mix of members are the key critical decisions.

Size is a critical factor to consider. Large teams often lose efficiency due to social loafing, formation of cliques, or lack of shared understanding. However, teams that are too small bring less information and fewer perspectives to the table, reducing the potential benefits of collaboration that a team offers. Research is inconclusive on the optimal size for a team. According to Evan Wittenberg of the Wharton Graduate Leadership Program, who has surveyed the findings on team

size, "The research is not conclusive, [but the optimal size] does tend to fall into the 5 to 12 range, though some say 5 to 9 is best, and the number 6 has come up a few times."⁵ Ultimately, the right size depends on what type of team you need and the success of your procedural and behavioral setup. Often in school districts, we create big teams and rush to be inclusive—in reality, we should choose the members carefully based on the type of team we need and the critical roles we envision members playing.

The **mix of members** on the team is another key determinant of team success. There are many ways to choose the members of a team. Selection can be based on formal organizational role, career development, technical skills, or working style and "team maker" skills that members bring to the team.

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- The organizational role is often a predominant consideration because we feel that we must have representation from every office in the organization. But, selection should really be guided by an individual's relevance to the goal to be attained rather than by his or her title in the organization. This clarity, in turn, guarantees individual accountability and increases the likelihood of having each team member take ownership over the work.

While our overarching tenet is to tailor the team composition to the nature of the objective, DMC does believe it is important to include principals and/or teachers on teams whenever it makes sense in order that the classroom view be represented. In Hamilton County, Tennessee, for example, the inclusion of >

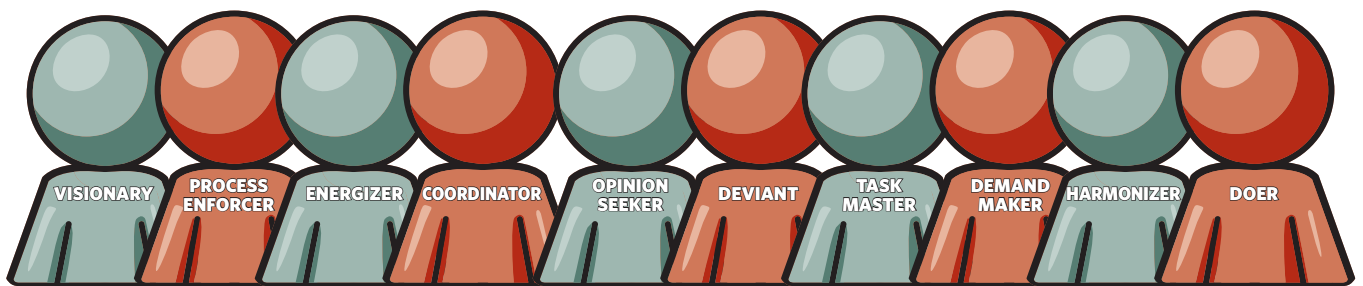
Whom we choose *not* to select [for a team] may be as important as whom we do select. Choosing not to select the bully in the office may save the team from future frustration.

teachers and principals on the implementation team for a new teacher evaluation system was critical to forging a sense of common purpose and successfully unveiling a major initiative (see “Changing the Culture of Teaching: Hamilton County’s Project COACH Teacher Evaluation System” on page 22).

- Career development should also enter the equation for team composition. Membership on a team can be a good way to entrust employees with an important assignment, test them in a leadership role, or expand their job responsibilities. Making the connection between team membership and career development will also motivate individual members, which ultimately leads to a higher-functioning team.

EXHIBIT 3

Have you selected the right “team maker” skills?



“Visionary” helps set the vision and goals of the team

“Process Enforcer” helps the group stay focused, avoid distractions, and stick to agreed-upon norms

“Energizer” moves the group rapidly towards its objectives; finds ways to bring energy to the team

“Coordinator” identifies relationships between ideas; creates cohesion

“Opinion seeker” encourages involvement from all team members; ensures talk time is spread evenly

“Deviant” challenges the status quo and says what no one else is willing to articulate (“hold on, why are we doing this? what if we looked at it a totally different way?”)

“Task Master” keeps an eye on the clock; pushes the team to reach its objectives

“Demand maker” holds people accountable for agreed-upon goals and action items

“Harmonizer” resolves differences between individuals. Seeks to reduce tension through compromise, bridge-building, or humor

“Doer” the person (or people) who does the work between meetings

Source: DMC

- We also rarely choose based on technical skills. Sometimes we choose for functional expertise (“we need an expert”), but we rarely choose members for their technical skills—project management, analysis, communications skills—which can be crucial for team success.
- Choosing team members based on working style or “team maker” skills (Exhibit 3) seems to be one of the least used methods in districts, even though we know that the “team dynamic” ultimately determines the level of functioning of our teams. Whom we choose *not* to select may be as important as whom we do select. Choosing not to select the bully in the office may save your team from future frustration.

Creating a team: achieving that special blend

Team leaders should consider which of these skills they really need and which ones they have selected for in the past.

Leaders are often looking for the secret ingredient that makes a mediocre team good, or a good team great. Selecting for “team maker” skills shown in Exhibit 3—those skills held by team members that help unlock great team performance—is a critical task that contributes to getting team structure right. For example, many great teams have a “task master” that keeps a team on track, a “connector” who creates cohesion by identifying relationships between ideas, or a “demand maker” who holds people accountable for agreed-upon goals.

In our consulting engagements with districts, we often hear from superintendents about their most pressing “midnight concerns.” Almost invariably, these concerns revolve around the effectiveness of senior leadership teams. We often hear that leadership teams are too large, that certain individuals hamper the formation of a team dynamic, or that team members defer too often to the team leader. An effective reselection of team members can help these problems dissipate, while at the same time increasing the results that a leadership team—or any team—is able to achieve.

EXAMPLE: Ector County ISD

One of DMC’s member superintendents found that by introducing just one new team member onto his

senior leadership team, he was able to completely change the effectiveness of the group. In Ector County ISD (TX), Superintendent Hector Mendez was grappling with how to increase the performance of his senior leadership team. He knew that his team was capable of exceptional performance—they had banded together in his first 30 days as superintendent to successfully open district schools and address a variety of neglected issues left by his predecessor’s departure. However, he felt that they had grown stagnant over time and were failing to muster the same sense of urgency and high level of performance.

In order to get things moving again, Mendez resolved to bring a new leader into the group; he hired a young administrator, Heliodoro “H.T.” Sanchez, who had demonstrated success in another Texas district. Sanchez quickly assumed two key roles on the leadership team: (1) he was willing to question the way the team operated, and (2) he was willing to manage the tasks of the team and hold his colleagues accountable to commitments they had made as a group. Through the use of simple tools and the injection of a new burst of energy, Sanchez and Mendez were able to inspire the leadership team to recapture its full potential (for further detail, see “Ector County Independent School District: Building a Great Leadership Team to Supercharge Strategic Plan Implementation” by Hector Mendez in *The District Management Journal*, v.8).

2

Procedural levers help get the team off the ground

Once the team is structured, procedural levers can be used to set the team on the right path with effective processes.

Create a team charter & a team meeting follow-up tool

A team charter is a relatively simple tool that can create clarity for team members by establishing the purpose and objectives, the schedule of meetings, roles and responsibilities, specific goals, and timelines and deliverables. Involving the team in the creation of the charter can generate additional understanding and buy-in. A team >

charter is typically a one- or two-page document, written at the team's inception, that serves as a guide throughout the life of the team. It should be a living document, one that is continually revised and used to track the achievement of the team's objectives and process milestones.

Equally important is a team meeting follow-up tool to track the decisions made and to summarize who is to do what. At the end of the meeting, it is helpful to read aloud a summary of the decisions that were agreed to during the meeting. At the beginning of the next meeting, reading aloud the summary from the prior meeting of who was to do what can be very effective in maintaining accountability and ensuring progress is made from meeting to meeting.

EXAMPLE: *The Boston Public Schools Management Institute*

In our work with the Boston Public Schools (BPS), DMC helped over 100 central office managers to establish SMART, outcomes-oriented “Performance Challenges” as part of a twelve-week leadership development program. By making the achievement of an individual's goal the central purpose of the program, and then providing multiple forms of support to achieve that goal—including coaching, peer group brainstorming, targeted professional development, and public reporting—participants knew unambiguously where to focus their attention, and were able to achieve results (for further detail on the BPS Management Institute, please see “Boston Public Schools: Growing Leadership, Improving Quality, and Reducing Costs” in *The District Management Journal*, v.5).⁷

Often in school districts, we create big teams and rush to be inclusive—in reality, we should choose the members carefully based on the type of team we need and the critical roles we envision members playing.

Establish results-oriented goals for the team

Establishing goals is one of the most effective ways to prepare any team for success, for it helps to create focus, energy, effort, and persistence.⁶ It has become commonplace in goal-setting processes to talk about the importance of setting “SMART” goals—goals that are specific, measurable, aggressive yet attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Most importantly, goals should target specific *outcomes*—improvements in student achievement, cost, or service quality. If we fail to identify outcomes, we risk spending a lot of time and effort in the pursuit of the wrong thing. Many teams have fallen victim to the pursuit of activities (e.g. making recommendations; writing a report; gathering input) without connecting those important activities to the achievement of change.

Create time for the team

One often neglected procedural lever is the use of time, an important performance dimension. To make progress, teams need time together—often significant amounts of time. Often, we fail to structure enough time together to realistically accomplish the objectives we have established. Not only can this lead to disappointment and frustration, but it can detract from the legitimacy of the team itself. There are two different reasons we struggle to get time together. The first is that time is not established on the calendar early enough—schedules get chaotic, and the bigger the team, the harder it is to get everyone in the same room at the same time. The second is that time on the calendar is eroded by conflicting priorities, urgent situations, or simply by people showing up late. It is essential that our most important teams find time together and then hold that time sacred. Regardless of the type of team (informational, consultative, coordinating, decision-making), if the group is not able to communicate together, they are unlikely to find common ground to move the organization forward.

Ensure accountability

Teams often struggle with accountability. When a team is successful, team members enjoy sharing credit for the achievement. However, if a team fails to deliver

the results it promised, do the team members point fingers across the table, or worse, do they scatter like rats? Mutual accountability is often elusive, but certain processes help establish the shared accountability necessary for individuals to participate to their fullest. First, regular periodic reviews of goals are critical. When a milestone is at risk or not achieved, the team should identify solutions or workarounds proactively. A break in mutual accountability will occur if the full team is not kept apprised of progress as well as risks to overall work completion. Second, regular follow-up about tasks assigned to individuals as well as about key pending decisions is another essential process to ensure accountability. To set expectations appropriately, these types of discussions should be embedded in the regular meeting structure.

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customized to a particular group: “we use a specific brainstorming process.”

Leaders will naturally differ in their appetite for structured norms. We have worked with many district leaders who scoff at the establishment of norms—a “not for me” kind of approach. However, we have often observed that these leaders who nominally eschew norms have actually established the most effective norms of operation with their teams. To reconcile this paradox, it is important to note that the absence of formal norms is a norm in and of itself! For example, some teams always start meetings on time while others never do. There is no denying that the implicit norm of the latter group is that “starting on time is not important.”

Determining which norms matter is likely to be context-driven. Nevertheless, the norms should be proactively set and managed over time. Because team members tend to follow the dynamic established by the leader of the group, the leader’s adherence to the agreed-upon norms is crucial. This sounds straight forward—as leaders we generally have a set of norms that we value and believe are important—but sometimes we forget or fail to allow the time to practice them on a day-to-day basis.

Cultivate your teams and unleash potential

We have a lot of teams, and our calendars are very busy. Getting all of these teams to become high-performing is an enormous challenge. ▸

3 Behavioral levers keep the team on track

Regardless of how precisely the team is structured and how attentively its procedures are honored, its success in the final analysis owes to the ongoing behavior of its members. Pulling behavioral levers enables a team to establish, practice, and enforce norms for operation.

Team-wrecking behavior is not allowed

We have all encountered classic “team-wrecking” behaviors: coming late or missing the meeting altogether, bringing a negative attitude that dampens the team spirit, checking email, falling asleep, just generally not contributing to the conversation, and the list goes on ... It is important for the leader to create a context that staves off such disruptive behavior and allows the team to flourish. The most direct and tangible way for a leader to shape the context is to establish, practice, and enforce norms. Norms can be as simple as “we start on time” or they can become more nuanced and

Establishing a context in which effective teams can flourish actually shapes behaviors and can build motivation, energy, and effectiveness.

The prevailing wisdom is that morale and motivation in our school systems are low, and that there is little we can do to change the intrinsic satisfaction and behaviors of our staff. DMC takes an alternative view—we believe that establishing a context in which effective teams can flourish actually shapes behaviors and can build motivation, energy, and effectiveness.

By intentionally focusing on creating a context that encourages high-performance among teams, we can turn mediocre teams into high performing ones. Pulling the structural, procedural, and behavioral levers can help us target key pressure points for team effectiveness and help unlock the potential of the district's most important asset—its people.

¹ Ruth Wageman, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, and J. Richard Hackman, *Senior Leadership Teams* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School, 2008).

² Douglas Smith, Presentation to DMC Superintendents' Strategy Summit, New York City, New York, January 19, 2012.

³ Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Discipline of Teams* (New York: John Wiley, 2001), p. 6.

⁴ Wageman et al.

⁵ Evan Wittenberg, Wharton Graduate Leadership Program.

⁶ Douglas K. Smith, *Make Success Measurable* (New York: John Wiley, 1999).

⁷ Based on work and ideas of Douglas Smith, Charlie Baum, and DMC.

Meet a DMC Practice Leader: GARRETT SMITH



GARRETT SMITH is a managing director at The District Management Council, and is a leader of the Human Capital Practice Area. Recently, he has been serving several school districts in developing and implementing a multi-dimensional teacher evaluation system. He also helped to design and manage DMC's District Management Institute for a large urban district; this program for central office leaders focused on the achievement of outcome-oriented performance goals with the support of professional development, executive coaching, and district peer input.

Garrett holds an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School, a Master's in Public Administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and a B.A. in Math and Economics from Williams College. He was a consultant at Bain & Company, a leading international management consulting firm; he also worked as a consultant to the Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development at the U.S. Department of Education, and as a consultant to Baltimore City Public Schools.

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