

# There is No 'T' in school improvement: The missing team perspective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The concept of teams tend to be marginalized in the scholarly discussion of school improvement. The present paper argues that teams play a crucial role in promoting an holistic integration of school operation necessary to support school change. Specifically, the paper outlines the dynamic of effective teams at times of school improvement.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The article presents the concept of teams, elaborates on their central function as a 'coupling mechanism', and describes the reciprocal relations between teams and school change.

**Findings** – The article emphasizes the reciprocal effects of teams and change, suggesting that teams can serve as key change agents in school restructuring processes, specifically when balancing between 'coping' and 'pushing' forces. Based on the model, effective team leadership and effective school leadership at times of school change are introduced. Practical implications are discussed for school leaders.

**Originality/value** – The integration of the concept of teams into the school improvement discourse might assist school leaders to develop processes and procedures that will enable both school teams and schools to react more effectively in times of change and restructuring.

Published in International Journal of Educational Management, 2017, 31(7),922-929.

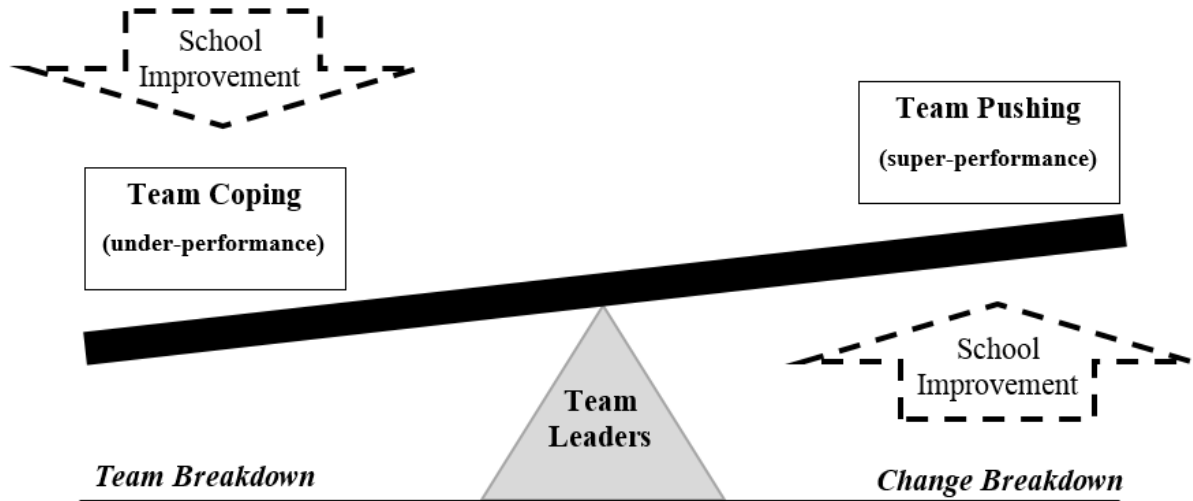
DOI: [10.1108/IJEM-04-2016-0069](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-04-2016-0069)

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The common assumption today is that schools must change and adapt rapidly in order to be successful in today's dynamic social and political environment (Spillane and Coldren, 2015; Tang *et al.*, 2014). Literature on improving the educational system often emphasizes the role, or potential role, of principals and teachers as agents of change. However, few studies have focused on the role of school teams in promoting school change in general, and as change agents in particular (see notable exceptions- Leithwood, 1996). For instance, canonical works on school improvement and restructuring (e.g., Bryk *et al.*, 2010; Harris and Muijs, 2004; Hopkins, 2003) mention the word 'team' less than three dozen times (ranging between 3-34 occurrences) in texts totaling about 90,000 words. To exemplify the severity of this oversight, let us consider the example of a clockmaker attempting to fix a clock but only examining the movement of the clock's hands and the integrity of the different cog-wheels, without testing the specific mechanisms that integrate and tie together the various parts to make the clock function as a whole.

Most schools' internal structure can still be described as "loosely coupled" (Weick, 1976). Deduction from simple observation accounts for the "looseness" as most of the time, teachers work in isolation from their peers and administrators behind closed doors. Yet, despite the inherent fragmentation of both school faculty and content (Sizer, 1992), we suggest that many faculty members are "coupled" as they interact within teams structured around tasks. Cohen and Bailey (1997) define a team as "a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems (for example, business unit or the corporation), and who manage their relationships across organizational boundaries" (p. 241). Since school improvement and responsiveness to continual changes may depend on the collective learning of staff members, supportive conditions, and shared practice (Schechter and Mowafaq, 2013), teamwork is likely to provide a "coupling mechanism" through which professional collaboration and adaptation to change will be reached (Scribner *et al.*, 2007). In the following sections, we introduce the concept of team-based work as central in schools and the essential need of team leaders to consider school teams as key change agents in improvement initiatives both influenced by change - '*team coping*'- and as mobilizing it - '*team pushing*'. Furthermore, we argue that team leaders and principals play an important role in promoting school teams as effective change agents as they balance the 'seesaw'

teams face at times of restructuring by maneuvering between internal and external team focuses (see Figure I). Finally, some practical managerial suggestions are given to promote school change.



**Figure 1.** The role of school teams in school improvement initiatives.

### Why are teams so central in schools?

Teams are first and foremost functional sub-units designed to promote organizational work that is complex in terms of quantity (i.e., high value) or quality (i.e., interconnected responsibilities) (Cameron and Green, 2015). Often, teams are necessary to address complex problems and deal with subject matter that cannot be adequately addressed through an individual alone (Jimerson and Wayman, 2012). Thus, teams are an important component of school success (Fleming, 2013; Walker, 1994).

The use of work teams in schools might be a discretionary decision made by school staff, but sometimes they are also mandated by formal regulations. Often teams are part of the school's organizational structure and hierarchy with the principal at the top of the hierarchy. Teams in schools serve diverse purposes:

- *Senior or School Management Team (SMT)* typically consists of senior personnel such as the principal, deputy principals, and other key school officials, and is responsible for shaping the direction of school policy and contributing to school functioning. The SMT is responsible for overall school performance. Its function involves translating school goals into specific

objectives for sub-teams and individuals teachers (Abbott and Bush, 2013; Benoliel, 2017). The SMT's duties may also involve the development of coordinated interventions to address student learning and/or behavioral problems.

- *Disciplinary team* (e.g., a math team, an English team) is assigned the joint goals of improving student achievements in a specific subject matter and developing appropriate methods and programs.
- *Grade-level team*, (e.g., seventh-grade teachers or of eighth-grade teachers) is generally expected to plan and coordinate the work of various disciplinary teachers in a particular grade-level. Each team member teaches a different subject and masters its unique resources, methods, and goals.
- *The treatment team* generally consists of a psychologist, educational counselor, and other para-therapeutic professionals. These professional members have to cooperate to provide care for students.

### **Teamwork: A relational and a structural coupling function**

When teaching is organized in a loosely coupled structure, which is more "resilient" to change in comparison to strongly coupled units, teams become essential to ensure a holistic integration of school operation. The interrelationships in teams assist in developing goals, curricula, instructional strategies, and budgets, since they create a network with a capacity for developing a "collective mind" fundamental to efficient change adjustments and school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Weick and Roberts, 1993).

#### *A relational coupling*

As part of a network, each school team provides a strong interpersonal social and emotional support system to teachers as they work in collaboration to solve problems and meet the diverse needs and backgrounds of the students (Bush and Glover, 2012). Frequent interactions, intimacy and sharing, and reciprocity in exchanges allow for mutually confiding, trust-based interactions (Sanders, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Varey, 1996). Such a "relational coupling" facilitates a professional growth process in which teachers learn together and share their knowledge and expertise (Somech and

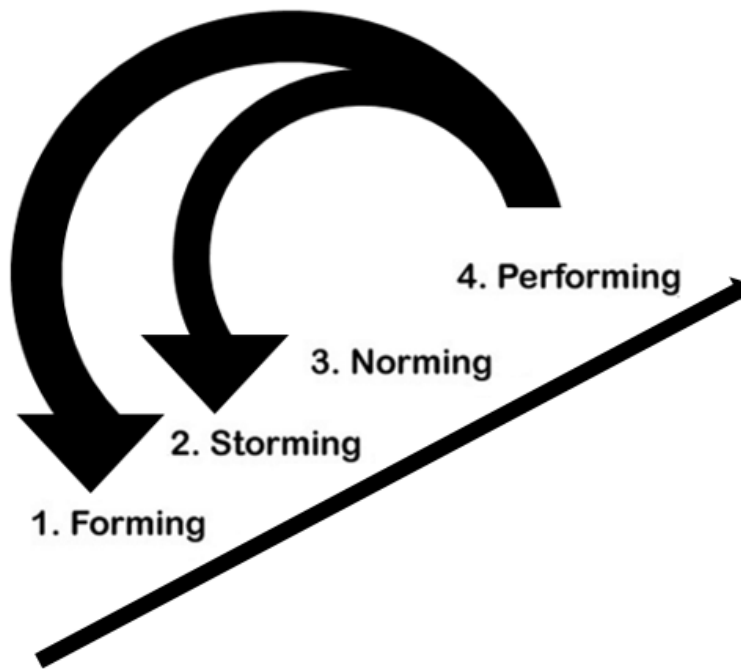
Drach-zahavy, 2007). This enhances teachers' pedagogical enrichment which contributes to the quality of the teachers' work environment (Eden, 2001).

#### *A structural coupling*

Teamwork as an organizational structure enabling intra- and inter-team links can provide a strong structural coupling that directly affects adaptive change. First, structural coupling through school teams plays a significant role in identifying students' needs by giving principals and administrators access to critical information regarding problems occurring in the classroom (Schildkamp *et al.*, 2015). Second, when the social network in the school is highly interconnected with many strong ties, promoting shared understandings at the team level and ultimately at the school level resulting in a focus on common interests, change is more likely to be successfully accepted, understood, and implemented (Schechter, 2015).

#### **The coping side: How do school change initiatives influence teams?**

School improvement initiatives, particularly those aimed at generating fundamental changes in school regularities (i.e., second-order change) influence teams by affecting the team's natural life-cycle development, leading to team under-performance. To understand the effect of external change on school teams we will use the Tuckman's (1965) model of team development. The Tuckman model, one of the most popular models in team literature, offers a linear conceptualization of progress in team dynamic. The model suggests that a team moves from the initial stage to more progressive stages until it becomes a fully developed team. *Forming*, the first stage in team development, refers to the team's attempt to establish its primary goal, structure, roles, procedures, relationships, and boundaries. *Storming*, the second stage, is characterized by the emergence of unsolved conflicts around key questions requiring solutions. *Norming*, the third stage, refers to the team dynamic gaining a normative status instead of the previous ad-hoc status. *Performing*, the last stage, is the stage at which the team focuses primarily on its task while addressing routine individual and team needs. Organizational change is said to often reverse the team's progression in this linear sequence (Cameron and Green, 2015) (see Figure II).



**Figure II.** Reversed teams' development during school improvement initiatives.

Therefore, it is common that teams revert to the *Storming* stage as new unsolved conflicts emerge. Similarly, teams that have already reached the performing stage might even find themselves returning to the initial stage of *Forming*, attempting to reestablish their objectives, procedures, and boundaries. Therefore, during school restructuring, a teams' agentic ability to exercise control is often harmed. In this a context, team leaders may need to emphasize and cultivate an internal team learning climate to help teams to regain their agentic abilities. Researchers outline several factors that team leaders can use to enhance internal team processes (Barnett and McCormick, 2012; Berry, 1997; Cameron and Green, 2015; Leithwood et al., 1997; Møller and Eggen, 2005):

- (1) *Structural enhancers*: Providing strong team structure and procedure (i.e., clarity of team mission, planning, and goal setting), collaborative processes, delegating authority, and empowering the team, and allocation of suitable time for team meetings.
- (2) *Cognitive enhancers*: Open communication that encourages expression of different viewpoints, debate, and doubts.

- (3) *Affective enhancers*: Presenting a clear and a persuasive shared vision, respectful acknowledgment of members' unique knowledge, and emphasis on team morale and cohesiveness.

### **The pushing side: How do effective teams promote school improvement?**

In essence, an effective team acts as an agent for change when it distributes the change to other teams and the rest of school staff. For improvement initiatives to take root in a school, a broad and successful transformation must occur in the dynamic of the school. Thus, school teams must extend their attention and outcomes outside the teams' boundaries. Kurt Lewin's (1947) psychological model of three stages can be handy in considering how such effective interactions can unfold. First, according to the model, an *unfreeze* stage must occur to set the groundwork (i.e., questioning the current situation, understanding the reasons for change). Second, the *change* itself is introduced (e.g., a new program is presented, its implementation begun). Third, the *refreeze* stage that crystalizes the change should occur (e.g., creating routines that establish the change, and maintaining the change via socialization and supervision).

In order for a school team to become an effective change agent and to play an active part in the different stages of the broader organizational transformation (e.g. unfreeze, change, and refreeze), the team must maintain a fairly loose boundary around itself so as to foster multiple and ongoing exchanges with the environment in which it resides. In this process both team leader and team members play important roles. They engage in boundary spanning activities; that is, activities aimed at building and maintaining key relationships with external parties in pursuit of outside feedback, support, and resources (Benoliel, 2017). Research indicates that to improve school effectiveness, school reform should encourage interdependence of the teaching task and communication flows across team boundaries (Yang, 2009). Acting as a change agent, as a 'hub', through boundary spanning activities, team members and leaders promote the creation of an interdependent structure (Benoliel and Somech, 2016; Davison and Hollenbeck, 2012; Larson, 1992). The key practices involved in the process are:

- (1) Teacher members and team leaders build on prior personal relationships to reduce uncertainty about the change in the broader school community, to redefine the expectations of others and thereby enhance the cooperation necessary for the “unfreeze” change stage.

- (2) Team members and team leaders establish conditions for alternative patterns of relationships with other teachers and teams necessary for the “change” stage. This is done through an emphasis on mutual advantages, on reciprocity norms and relationships of interdependence.
- (3) Team members and team leaders generate operational integration of the change in regular school procedures by setting up formal arrangements and inducing others to participate in the change in order to preserve their positive reputation. This development is central for the success of the "refreezing" stage in the organization.

### **Conclusions and implications**

In sum, we propose that school teams, as a coupling mechanism, can serve as key change agents in school restructuring processes, specifically when balancing between 'coping' and 'pushing' forces. Yet, no discussion will be complete without addressing the role of school principals in promoting teachers, educators, and school teams as effective change agents (Hallinger and Lu, 2014). School principals hold major responsibility for creating, promoting, and improving intra-and inter-team processes and outcomes (Benoliel, 2017). Particularly during school restructuring, a hierarchical managerial approach does not fully exploit the inherent potential of teams as a "coupling" mechanism. Accordingly, an alternative managerial approach based on networking and boundary spanning activities is more advisable for school principals. We offer several guidelines for school principals to assist teachers and teams to cope with change and fulfill their potential of becoming effective change agents (Fleming, 2013; Spillane, 2005; Walker, 1994):

- (1) Commitment to continuous development of school teams,
- (2) Commitment to continuous development of team leaders and team members alike,
- (3) Making sure adequate time is allocated for team meetings, valuing and praising exemplary teamwork,
- (4) Assisting team members with team boundary management for resources acquisition and exchange,
- (5) Promoting both intra-and inter-team relationships and collaboration,
- (6) Adopting and encouraging a network managerial approach at all levels, central in the school operation routine.



We view principals as the Chief Executive Integrators responsible for managing the overall process effectively, parallel to a clockmaker that assures that the mechanisms work together harmoniously and systemically, hoping his or her ideas can promote teams as effective change agents for bettering teaching and learning.

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