
Foreword

Richard F. Elmore

“This book could substantially change the way we organize and support teacher teams.”

As part of my professional practice, I routinely observe teacher teams at work, in addition to observing teachers and students at work in classrooms. As recently as eight or ten years ago, it would have been rare to find a school with designated grade-level or content teams, much less dedicated common planning time for team members to meet and work together. Now, virtually every school I visit has some kind of team structure and a regular schedule of team meetings. That’s the good news. The bad news is that only about one in ten teacher teams that I observe functions at a level that would result in any improvement of instructional practice and student learning in the classroom. I have observed all the dysfunctions of teacher teamwork described in this book, and many more. Yet I continue to be an ardent advocate of teacher teams. Why?

The answer is that there is no other way to improve instructional practice at scale in schools than to organize groups of adult learners to work on problems of instructional practice and to weave those groups into an organization-wide strategy of improvement. The evidence is clear on this point. Relational trust among teachers, and between administrators and teachers, is positively related to student performance in schools, and trust is constructed through face-to-face collaborative work. Collective efficacy, or the degree to which adults believe that working together on common tasks improves the quality of their work and its influence on student learning, is positively related to student performance in schools. The performance of

organizations in general is related to the existence of high-functioning teams, and the primary source of *organizational* learning—that adoption and implementation of practices that lead directly to improvements in performance—is the team structure. Team learning predicts performance more than individual learning in organizations. So when you step back from particular schools and look at the overall evidence, there is no doubt that high-functioning teams are the route to school improvement.¹ The problem is that most schools, in my experience, don't actually know how to make teams work for the benefit of the organization. Why?

The major culprit is the default culture of U.S. schooling. Schools have traditionally been organized as highly atomized “egg-crate” organizations, and teaching has traditionally been defined as an individual, rather than a collective, practice. We now know—and have known for at least 40 years—that changing the structure of an organization does not automatically change its culture, much less its practice or performance. Introducing teams into a school, by itself, does not transform the culture of that school from a radically atomized one into a coherent one. Yet we persist in the belief that if we just get the structure right, the practice will follow. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. How many more generations of educators will hurtle over this cliff before we recognize that this is a losing proposition?

The solution lies in deliberately changing the practice to fit the structure, rather than changing the structure on the bet that it will change the practice. As a general rule, we should never put people in a new structure without first modeling the practice that goes with that structure and without explicitly addressing the changes in actual behavior that are required to make the structure work. Changes in culture *follow* changes in practice, rather than vice versa. We are routinely dumping teachers into team structures without any preparation for the actual work it takes to make collective decisions about team practice. We glorify teamwork, as if it were an end in itself, without examining its actual impact on practice or on the learning that is required to do the work. And then we wonder why the teaching that follows the team meeting looks an awful lot like the teaching we saw before the team meeting.

What Vivian Troen and Kitty Boles have done in this book is to begin the process of drawing educators into the practice of teamwork that goes with the structure of teamwork. The narrative chapters of the book lay out a framework for the practice of teamwork that provides the rationale and general guidelines for the work. The case studies raise penetrating questions about the problems that arise as

teams develop. It is at once a hard-nosed, realistic look at how teams actually function and, in the spirit of their previous work together, an essentially optimistic book. They believe, as I do, that the future of work in schools lies in powerful face-to-face relationships among teachers. Taken seriously, as a text for collective work in schools, this book could substantially change the way we organize and support teacher teams.

There are at least three themes in this work that connect to the broader context of research on teamwork and that are worth underscoring for readers who are new to the work. First, there are huge differences between novices and experts in matters of practice. The differences, we now know, are not just in the quantity of knowledge that experts have, but in their ability to discern patterns and their fluency in diagnosing and solving problems.² By definition, no matter how “experienced” teachers are in their classrooms, they will enter teamwork almost exclusively as novices. Novices need expert guidance and support to develop their practice, and teamwork requires both behavioral and cognitive coaching in order to make the transition from novice to proficient to fluent. Putting people in teams without expert support is not only unlikely to produce the benefits of teamwork, it is likely to reinforce the negative patterns it is designed to change.

Second, team structures without an overall strategy of improvement at the school level will not result in any measurable improvement of practice. Troen and Boles speak clearly about the role that school leaders need to play in designing and supporting teamwork. Leadership is not just making structures work, it is also putting the work of those structures into a central narrative that connects structures, processes, and purposes in ways that people in the organization can understand. This narrative can be called a “strategy.” If people in the organization don’t understand how the pieces of the whole fit together to form a common storyline, then “collective work” of any kind will be directionless.

Finally, Troen and Boles make a point of stressing that effective teamwork requires teacher team members to be responsible, or accountable, to each other for their work. In my experience, this is the toughest problem American educators face in school improvement. Teachers who have been socialized to the default culture are reluctant to give up control of their individual practice in the interest of collective improvement. Without this movement from individual to collective responsibility, school improvement typically stalls and stagnates. The structure of teamwork provides the occasion for the

development of collective responsibility; the practice of teamwork provides collective responsibility itself.

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