Superintendent Roles as CEO and Team Leader

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Abstract	Article Info
The complexity and intensity of reforms over several decades in the United States of America led to large-scale systemic reform and shifted superintendent roles from emphasis on management tasks to pivotal actions in the complex algorithm for managing and leading change initiatives. National commissions, task force reports, and nationwide research on the American superintendency informed need for changes in school-district leadership. This article provides a scholarly and objective analysis of issues surrounding five roles superintendents assume and the emergent need for district-level team leadership to address successfully diverse and complex challenges in contemporary education.	

Introduction

Since middle of the 19th century, a wide array of social, economic, political, and technological changes altered the purpose and structure of public education in the United States of America (USA). Schools not only facilitated the nation's shift from agricultural and industrial

economies but also assimilated unprecedented waves of immigrant children with different social, economic, and political views and prepared successive generations to enter the American workforce (Cibulka, 1999; Glass, 2008; Goodlad & McMannon, 1997; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). During the last half of the 20th century, rapid changes in technology stimulated the emergence of a global, information-based economy that required students to develop decidedly different sets of skills and presaged need to alter fundamentally the nature and direction of schooling (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014).

Since the early 1980s, national commission and task force reports heightened concerns about the condition of public education and called for policymakers to pass legislation needed to reform state education systems. During the past several decades, however, most reform initiatives focused on improving schools, student learning, and teaching rather than rethinking the system itself. Although scholars, practitioners, and policymakers agreed that the socio-industrial architecture of schooling was characterized by Balkanized organizational structures and picket-fence federalism inhibited systemic reform, they also understood the growing urgency for undertaking this transforming work. At this juncture, the options are to dismantle and replace the current system or fundamentally change how schooling is delivered. An examination of these circumstances suggests contemporary superintendents' work must focus on developing coherent, district-level management systems characterized by effective teamwork and expanded communication networks.

Although the scope and duration of changing an education system may appear daunting, international precedents suggest it is possible. The Finnish example provides insight into how strategic education

policymaking and commitment to long-term change may be accomplished. For over 2 decades (1970-1990), Finland linked the notion of economic growth and preparation of an educated workforce, and its Parliament invested in enrolling top students in teacher education programs, raising licensure standards, promoting teacher professionalism, cultivating teamwork, nurturing trust-based educational leadership, and networking among collaborative schools (Sahlberg, 2011). School district superintendents and office staffs supported the work of teachers and principals at all grade levels in developing a fundamentally different school-based curricula that shifted learning from showing mastery of the curriculum and content to hands-on experimentation and problem-oriented learning. Thus, students were not only expected to master content knowledge but also apply what they learned to new situations and solve real world problems (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). The knowledge and skills of new generations of Finnish students aligned with 21st century dimensions of the PISA test. As a consequence, Finnish students not only ranked at the top of PISA reports in reading, mathematics, and science since the early 2000s, but they also acquired knowledge and skills that fueled Finland's economic growth for the past several decades (Risku, Karnervio, & Björk, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011). The Finnish success story is instructive in that it suggests coherent education policies, district-level leadership, persistence, and active involvement of professional educators can accomplish systems change.

A common theme that emerged out of systemic reform in Finland is that those working is schools and districts were the engines of reform. An important dimension of superintendents' work over 2 decades involved redesigning traditional oversight and compliance roles of municipal education office staffs and forging them into teams

that supported building-level change and innovation (Risku et al., 2014; Björk et al., 2014). They accomplished this not by simply amending bureaucratic structures and job descriptions (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) but by reconfiguring them to support the work of teachers and principals.

Public Education in the United States

Changing the organizational and social architecture of school districts is a key dimension of systemic change in the USA. Although many countries like Finland provide education services under the auspices of a national ministry of education, responsibility for public schooling is reserved to individual states (Kowalski, 2013; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). In this regard, rather than a single national system of education, the USA has 50 different state systems composed of more than 14,000 local school districts (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although responsibility for public schools stresses local control (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007), there are many similarities across all public school districts with regard to governance, structure, and goals. Individual state legislatures establish a uniform system of education by enacting education laws and regulations, appropriating and allocating tax revenues to school districts, defining minimum teacher and administrator licensure standards, establishing salary scales, developing curricula and assessing student learning, and regulating services (e.g., books, buses, extracurricular programs).

Legislatures typically defer responsibility for education to an elected or appointed state board of education, which hires a commissioner or secretary to administer its programs and provide oversight of local school-district operations. Historically, local districts have been by viewed as the "basic unit of government in public education's organizational structure" (Kowalski, 2013, p. 74) and

although their legal authority may differ by state, school districts are viewed as extensions of state governments. Although the *Constitution of the United States* reserves the right to provide education to states, the *general welfare clause* gives Congress the authority to ensure *the common good* of its citizens. Consequently, the federal government may pass narrowly targeted education acts to ensure that public education benefits the nation as a whole.

School district superintendents typically are hired on multiple-year contracts (e.g., 42% have 3-year contracts) and over the span of 16 years serve in three districts (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). As chief executive officers (CEOs), their primary responsibility is to manage the day-to-day affairs of the district and rely on their central office staffs to accomplish work (Björk, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005). The size of school districts varies according to the number of students enrolled, which in turn often determines the number of central office staff engaged in middle-management activities. Although superintendents of small districts may handle several areas of responsibility, CEOs of large county or urban districts delegate responsibilities to their middle management staffs.

Historical antecedents contributed to school districts being centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratic. Following publication of A *Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), however, a wide array of reform mandates, regulatory requirements, and accountability measures were promulgated. As a result, the locus of education policymaking shifted to the state level and school district bureaucracies grew in size and complexity in an effort to provide adequate oversight and accountability at the local level. When reformers encountered structures that they were instrumental in

creating, they often criticized them as being unduly hierarchical and rigid (Kowalski, 2013). After several decades of work focused on decentralizing decision-making authority and increasing the voice of a wider range of stakeholders, analysts concurred that neither centralization nor decentralization proved successful in initiating and sustaining reforms (Adler & Borys, 1996; Datnow, 2002). A longtime scholar of education change, Fullan (2003), argues persuasively that greater balance between centralization and decentralization need to be achieved to support systemic reform. However, accomplishing the redesign of hierarchical and rule-bound structures to emphasize "flexibility, participation and quality" (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 52) requires considerable time and attention. When a proper balance between centralization and decentralization is achieved, increases in both efficiency and effectiveness become more probable. The key to achieving equilibrium resides in district-level leaders. Specifically, these individuals need to develop groups, teams, and networks that provide support to work across district middle-management structures—and they must do this while retaining responsibility for policy compliance and accountability (Kowalski, 2003; Kwalwasser, 2012).

District Office and Middle Management

At this juncture, the challenge facing school district superintendents is not whether to choose centralization or decentralization but rather to find an effective balance between the two (Fullan, 2003). Concurring with that assessment, Kowalski (2013) asserts "there is no single recipe for determining the appropriate mix of centralization and decentralization. Instead, conditions must be diagnosed and addressed on a district-by-district and school-by-school basis" (p. 100). Avoiding becoming the victim of a one-best system

mentality, superintendents should understand multi-directional pressures that eventually determine the outcome of their organizational redesign efforts.

Mintzberg's (1980/2016) discussion of organizational design suggests general principles for guiding district-level restructuring efforts. For example, at the strategic apex of the organization, superintendents tend to emphasize centralization as a way to accomplish their mission through rules, regulations, and policies. Conversely, district-office middle managers, committed to their own administrative domains tend to resist top-down control as a way to protect and enhance their units' parochial interests. This tendency can pull the organization toward balkanization. Although technocrats feel comfortable with predictability offered by centralized structures, other middle management staffs are most at ease when authority is dispersed and routine work is accomplished through on-going mutual adjustment achieved through committees, task forces, teamwork, liaison devices, networks and other forms of collaboration.

In sum, professional bureaucracies allow for the standardization of behavior through coordination rather than centralized control mechanisms. In retrospect, however, efforts at decentralization have presented significant challenges for practitioners who were academically trained and socialized by experiences in highly centralized education systems. Long-standing beliefs about how to work (e.g., efficiency, authority, control, risk, trust) may require time and effort focused on transforming the culture of education (Kowalski, 2006). When reconfiguring district offices, superintendents may benefit from analyzing normative tensions that exist between the forces of centralization and decentralization, the roles of executives and middle managers, and the unique dynamics of professional

bureaucracies. Understanding these issues remains critical to school district restructuring efforts.

Superintendent Role Characteristics

Mounting pressure on districts to improve student academic performance contributed to tensions between advocates for top-down and bottom-up change strategies. Neither end of this structural continuum, however, describes how real work is done. For example, Finland's neorealist perspective that centralization and decentralization are indispensable dimensions of education organizations contributed to transforming the function of middle management from oversight to support and the locus of change from districts to schools. Superintendents in the USA are faced with similar challenges that may require exercising five role conceptualizations. Brunner, Grogan and Björk's (2002) discussion of their roles is based on analyses of historical discourse and data reported in the last two 10-year studies (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011) authorized by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). While some roles can be traced back to the founding of the position in the 1850s and others materialized more recently, none of the roles has become irrelevant to modern practice (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). For example, the first four roles described by Callahan (1966) include *teacher-scholar* (1850 to early 1900s), *organizational manager* (early 1900s to 1930), *democratic leader* (1930 to mid-1950s), and *applied social scientist* (mid-1950s to mid-1970s). A fifth role, *communicator* (mid-1970s to present) is described by Kowalski (2005) as the warp and weft of the whole cloth of district-leadership practice. Although each role characterization is described individually, superintendents often enact two or more of them simultaneously (Björk et al., 2014).

Teacher-Scholar Role

Initially, superintendents served as master teachers; however, by the turn of the 20th century their work expanded to implementation of a mandated state curricula and supervision of teachers (Callahan, 1962). The state and district capacity to deliver a set of specified courses with uniform content was altered by rising industrialization, demographic shifts, urbanization, and influx of immigrants. In this environment, school districts served as a way to prepare children to enter the workforce as well as to assimilate them into the American culture. As school districts increased in size and complexity, the superintendent's role as teacher-scholar fluctuated in importance. However, after the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk,* heightened concern for the economic wellbeing of the nation linked student academic performance to a corporate bottom-line requirement. At this juncture in history, instructional improvement became an enduring aspect of superintendent work, although they enacted their teacher-scholar role differently than other educators. As instructional leaders, superintendents provided visionary leadership, articulated high expectations for teachers and students, engaged in long-term planning and budgeting, evaluated staff members' performance, and monitored student academic achievement through a lens of district-wide improvements (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

Organizational-Manager Role

During the late 1800s, urban school-district boards expressed misgivings about superintendents' knowledge and skills to manage large, complex education enterprises. According to Cuban (1976), "the lines of argument crystallized over whether the functions of a big-city superintendent should be separated into two distinct jobs, i.e., business manager and superintendent of instruction" (p. 17). Scholars suggest

that these debates were influenced by pervasive corporate concepts of scientific management and business efficiency (Kowalski, 1999). Prominent education scholars including Franklin Bobbitt, Ellwood Cubberly, and George Sprayer supported adoption of business principles by superintendents and other education leaders (Cronin, 1973). Other scholars, led by George Counts, opposed adoption of industrial management practices because they were considered incongruous with schools and because corporate board authority and executive control contradicted democratic core values of public education (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Van Til, 1971). Despite these arguments, school boards adopted corporate governance models and expected superintendents to handle day-to-day management responsibilities (e.g., budgeting and personnel oversight, facility management, public relations). Although superintendents' management role remained a core aspect of their work (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Kowalski & Glass, 2002), the most recent AASA decennial report indicated that it had been eclipsed by their role as instructional leader (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Democratic-Political Leader Role

An integral part of superintendents' work is influencing state-level macro political decision-making processes and orchestrating micropolitics of district-level implementation. The nature and scope of these efforts include galvanizing public support for education, lobbying state legislatures for adequate budget appropriations, negotiating local tax rate increases and bond issues, interacting with school boards, responding to interest group demands, serving as the spokesperson on controversial public policy issues, and engaging staffs in change initiatives (Björk et al., 2014; Björk & Lindle, 2001). Superintendents acknowledge the rise in interest group politics and

how their political influence manifests itself in different ways depending on district size (Kowalski et al., 2011). The most overt political action is experienced by superintendents leading large districts. Conversely, superintendents serving in small or rural districts tend to work around and thru local relationships that are "close knit" and "life-long" and "have a prevalence of emotional responses to considerations for change in those communities" (Lambkin, 2006, p. 19). These circumstances suggest that influence on decision-making processes in smaller districts often require a more personal political strategy. Although enacting their political role typically differs according district size, a majority of superintendents viewed community involvement and listening to public opinion as key to the vitality of a democratic society (Glass et al, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Kirst & Wirt, 2009). Although a majority of superintendents view their relations with school board members (i.e., micro-politics) as being positive, they also regard it as one of the most significant challenges they face (Kowalski et al., 2011). These findings suggest that it is not a question as to whether superintendents have a political role but rather how they enact it (Björk & Gurley, 2005). Having political acuity to work with and thru a wide array of stakeholders in enacting systemic reform at the local level is important for superintendents as well as for the wellbeing of society (Kowalski et al., 2011; Levin, 1999).

Social-Scientist Role

Recognizing changes in the social, economic, and political life of the nation and understanding how these shifts influenced public education contributed to the fourth conceptualization, superintendent as an applied social scientist. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation (1961) articulated its importance by noting that superintendents who had "a greater sensitivity to large social problems through an

interdisciplinary approach involving most of the social sciences" (p. 13) were well positioned to make strategic changes in their community's public schools. Although Callahan (1966) affirmed that perspective, observing that social-science research findings had profound implications for public education, he cautioned against its rigid, technocratic application to problem solving. He additionally argued that superintendents should understand the larger context in which changes are occurring to facilitate their making contributions to a more just and democratic society. During the 1950s, the theory movement and its emphasis on empirical data coincided with the rise of an information society. The convergence of these two events fueled widespread criticism of public schools, particularly those serving the nation's economic underclass and students of color. Behavioral scientists also applied systems thinking to describe relationships among external events occurring in society (e.g., socioeconomic, political, legal) to internal corrective actions (Getzels, 1977) and provided an initial framework for launching systemic reforms.

Beginning in the late 1970s, school districts were forced by education reformers to collect an ever-widening array of and increasingly finer grained data. This information was demographic and performance based; it pertained to students, teachers, and aggregate school performance; the assumption was that superintendents would use these data to make informed decisions that would contribute to improving schools, meeting the needs of all children (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Starratt, 1991), and eradicating social injustices (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005).

Communicator Role

During the formative era of public education, superintendents emulated norms and practices prevalent in industry and tended to

issue commands like corporate CEOs down the school district's chain of command. Thayer (1961) characterized their communication style as being "top-down and impersonal, intended narrowing for informing, instructing (or directing), evaluating and influencing" (p. 4). Several decades later, social, economic and political changes occurring in the USA not only increased citizens' voice but also irrevocably altered executive communication patterns. In addition, scholars found that the top-down model of communication had deleterious effect on employee perceptions of administrators as well as on their morale, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization--conditions that negatively impacted organizational effectiveness (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011).

After publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the call for systemic reform expanded community and parental engagement as well as increased the level of collaboration among administrative staffs, teachers, and students (Björk, 2001). In this emerging environment, Schlechty (1997) argued that "the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn" (p. 134). Consequently, to function effectively, superintendents were cautioned to minimize hierarchical forms of authority and adopt relational models of leading and "open, two-way and symmetrical" (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 4) communication patterns. At an operational level, there is a reciprocal relationship between organizational culture and patterns of communication: "Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management" and "do not exist separately from people communicating with one another" (Conrad, 1994, p. 27). In other words, organizational communication and culture are iterative because "communication gives rise to culture,

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which gives rise to communication, which perpetuates culture" (Axley, 1996, p. 153).

Because changing school cultures was perceived to be key to launching and sustaining systemic change, effective superintendent communication patterns shifted from classical, top-down directive to reciprocal patterns that aligned with new ways of doing work (Heckman, 1993; Kowalski, 2000; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007). Superintendents reported that being an effective communicator became increasingly important near the close of the 20th century (Glass et al., 2000) and was *substantially* (85%) or *moderately* (14%) critical to their job performance (Kowalski et al., 2011) a decade later.

Redesigned Social Architecture of School Districts

Throughout the 20th century, school boards and superintendents emulated corporate governance and administrative structures built on the tenets of classical organizational theory that stressed efficiency, hierarchical-bureaucratic structures, and top-down communication (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014; Scott & Davis, 2007; Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2016). Such notions of efficiency however tended to stymie changes in organizational structure when circumstances changed, foster perceptions of conflict as being only negative, engendered treatment of non-administrators as subordinates, and nurtured conventional cultures designed to insulate organization from external influences (e.g., political pressures, government regulations). Because these classical tenets perpetuated traditional structures and normative culture of public schools with regard to administrator behaviors and communication patterns, rigidity within public schools thwarted attempts to realign learning and teaching with changing demographic contexts and economic demands.

Complementary Communication

The notion of *complementary communication* is a central tenet of classical theory and prescribes one-way, top-down, directive, and coercive information exchanges. This form of communication intentionally focuses on (a) maximizing power of administrators over subordinates (Burgoon & Hale, 1984), (b) thwarting mutual influence, and (c) preventing multi-level and multi-directional exchanges (McGregor, 1967). Complementary communication patterns negatively impact an administrator's relationships with employees, which is viewed positively through the lens of classical technical efficiency (i.e., relationships with employees are counterproductive).

Constructive Communication

As the USA moved from an industrial to a technical and information-based economy, scholars challenged the validity of fundamental assumptions within classical organizational theory. For example, as educational reformers sought to transform the nature and direction of schooling, they advised school and district administrators to replace rigid, authoritarian administration with democratic administration (Etzioni, 1993; Ogawa, Crowson, & Goldring, 1999) and to replace change-resistant cultures with learning cultures (Barth, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Schein, 1992). They viewed both democratic administration and learning cultures as being essential canons of effective teamwork and systemic change.

Challenging Teamwork

Because of the scope and complexity of the challenges facing schools and districts today, teams composed of members with diverse expertise have become pervasive. A *team* is defined as a group of "three or more people who perceive themselves as a unit, who are mutually interdependent, and who interact about some common goal"

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(Wilson, 2004, p. 371). Effective teams are characterized by their possessing (a) complementary knowledge and skills required to complete assigned tasks, (b) member interdependence, (c) shared authority, (d) shared responsibility, (e) self-management, (f) accountability for collective performance, (g) common goals, (h) shared rewards, and (i) synergy (Edmonson, 2012).

Most teams visible in public education are school-based units focused primarily on improving curriculum and instruction or district-level units focused primarily on policies and governance. Some teams are permanent (e.g., school-level interdisciplinary team or site-based governance team), while others are temporary (e.g., district-level ad hoc team promoting passage of a bond referendum).

Superintendent as Team Leader

Scholars note that although teams have existed for decades, their structure, process, and levels of effectiveness remain relatively inconstant (Lencioni, 2002). Their unstable nature may be understood partly because teaming unavoidably unmasks conflicting dispositions about the role and authority of education administrators. A quintessential example of this tension is evident in conflicts between notions of professionalism and democracy. As professionals, superintendents are expected to rely on expert knowledge to make decisions that are in the best interest of the broad community. As CEOs of public school districts, however, superintendents are expected to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders in decision-making processes--a condition that often makes them subservient to the will of the people and at times may compromise their professional judgment (Wirt & Kirst, 2001).

Recognizing social, economic and political shifts occurring in the nation, communication scholars advised administrators to exhibit the

principles of democratic leadership and move from complementary communication to relational communication patterns (Littlejohn, 1992). The latter paradigm has two important characteristics. First, superintendents need to engage in interpersonal, two-way conversations in which those involved influence one another's behavior over and above their organizational role, rank, and status (Cappella, 1987). And second, superintendents engage in symmetrical exchanges intended to benefit all involved parties (Grunig, 1989). Being an effective communicator is currently viewed as a major role conceptualization for today's superintendents. In this regard, relational communication is the norm due to the intricate connection between communicative behaviors and relationships. Grunig and Huang (2000) argue persuasively that positive relationships are erected on four communication-driven pillars of mutuality: power sharing, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. In this regard, relationships are "bestowed, sustained, and transformed through communicative behavior" (Millar & Rogers, 1976, p. 87).

Because teams are vulnerable to several persistent problems, their effectiveness rarely occurs naturally, particularly when the quality and acceptance of outcomes are imperative. Following are examples of situations when superintendent leadership interventions and clear communication may alleviate potentially serious problems.

- *Allowing member self-interests to influence process or outcomes*. Individual team member predilections are often at odds with each other, especially in districts serving highly diverse communities. In these instances, team members often allow their social preferences and political choices to eclipse evidence, dismiss contradictory viewpoints, and sensible conclusions (Patton & Downs, 2003; Reitz, 1987).

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- *Tolerating excessive inefficiency.* Team decisions typically require more time and resources than do individual decisions (Clark, Clark, & Irvin, 1997). Without sound superintendent leadership, however, the amount of time expended may reach unacceptable levels and be counterproductive (Edmonson, 2012).

- *Allowing negative social and political obstructions*. Teams are vulnerable to goal displacement, a social condition in which cohesion among group members becomes a higher priority than decision quality, a condition is commonly referred to as *groupthink.* In addition, teams also may be vulnerable to manipulation, a political condition resulting from unequal distribution of power and knowledge among its members (Janis, 1982). In these circumstances, social and political problems usually steer teams in the direction of making mediocre or ineffective decisions.

- *Ignoring or tolerating dysfunctional conflict*. Group development theory posits that organizational conflict is both inevitable and essential to long-term effectiveness (Mohr & Dichter, 2001). On the one hand, if conflict is ignored or tolerated, dysfunctional conflict may negatively affect the quality of team decisions. On the hand, properly managed conflict may become a catalyst for desirable change (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008).

Despite possible disadvantages of teamwork, the concept is highly defensible professionally, politically, and philosophically. Professionally, team members usually acquire information, knowledge, and skills that improve their practice and motivate them to be creative and responsible (Owens & Valesky, 2015). Compared to individual decision making, the quantity and quality of evidence collected and analyzed are more substantial. Politically, compared to autocratic decisions, team decisions and recommendations are more

likely to be accepted and promulgated (Hirokawa, 1990; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2004). Philosophically, teams are more compatible with democratic principles and shared leadership (Sergiovanni, 2006).

In the face of continuous change, school district effectiveness depends largely on organizational learning and developing highly effective central-office and school-level teams, which are the engines that drive systemic reform processes (Edmonson, 2012). Distributive leadership focused on principles of deliberative democracy, however, requires more than mere conviction and good intent. To facilitate successful teams, superintendents must be committed to and adept at symmetrical and ongoing information exchanges with multiple and diverse public constituencies and internal groups. To bring about effective teams, superintendents need to allow their spending "a tremendous amount of time and effort exploring, shaping and agreeing on a purpose that belongs to them both collectively and individually" (Katzenback & Smith, 2004, p. 7). In other words, highly effective superintendents are acutely aware that a group never "becomes a team until it can hold itself accountable as a team" (p. 13).

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