

# Chapter 1C

## Build the Delivery Unit



### System Leader Summary

Distractions abound when you lead a system—so much so that it can be difficult to focus on the discipline of delivery. For this reason, we recommend that you establish a **Delivery Unit**: a person or team responsible for driving the achievement of your aspiration, no matter what. Led by your delivery leader, the Delivery Unit is the one group in your system that you can count on to be immune to distractions, even when you yourself have to respond to them. This chapter describes the role of the Delivery Unit and how you should organize it and build its capacity.

Your Delivery Unit's relevance will depend on your support. Carve out a small but significant set of resources for the Unit, staff it with talented people, back them publicly, and give them a singular charge: to master the tools and practices in this book and embed them in your system's ongoing work. If you've found the right people, they will do the rest; in fact, as they build trust with you, they will learn to guide and manage you through the rest of this book.

## ◎ WHY BUILD A DELIVERY UNIT?

In Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the many dangers that the hero, Odysseus, faced on his journey home were Sirens, a brood of dangerous creatures whose sweet song would lure sailors to veer off course and run aground on the rocky island they inhabited. Odysseus wanted to avoid this, but he still wanted to hear the sirens' song. So he instructed his crew to plug their ears with wax and to tie him, ears unplugged, to the mast of their ship. It worked: when the ship came in range, Odysseus heard and was enchanted by the Sirens' song—but much as he might try to convince his crew to untie him and direct the ship toward the island, they rowed on, wax in their ears, safely toward their destination.

A system leader who undertakes a delivery effort is rather like Odysseus. He or she wants to hear the sirens' call; in fact, a system leader must be willing to spend his or her own personal time and attention engaging with the inevitable distractions and crises that arise in the course of their work. But even as that happens, a system leader must have a crew that can be counted on to be immune to the sirens, rowing toward the system's aspiration and focusing on student results no matter what kinds of distractions arise. That crew is the Delivery Unit.

The idea of a Delivery Unit preceded the idea of delivery itself. It was for the purpose of running a new "Prime Minister's Delivery Unit" that Michael first went to serve at No. 10 Downing Street; it fell to that Unit, once established, to actually invent the practices and disciplines of delivery.

And invent they did: the various chapters of this book all derive from that original work and the work of the people who have replicated it elsewhere. That original Delivery Unit was a vanguard: taking the best of management practices from multiple sectors, they created something new and well suited to achieving results in education systems.

Today, over a decade later, it's worth asking the question: now that we know so much more about delivery, is a dedicated Unit still necessary? Aren't the commonsense principles of delivery supposed to be *everyone's* job, and not just that of a separate Unit? In fact, doesn't that separateness create the risk of a "delivery silo" to add to those that already exist in education systems?

Though we know that delivery can take hold with or without one, we continue to believe that a dedicated Unit is the best investment a system can make to maximize the likelihood of delivering results. There are a few reasons for this:

- Though we know much more about delivery, it's a discipline that's constantly being renewed and reinvented. Delivery Units provide a focal point for continuing to reflect on and improve delivery tools and practices.
- Like most aspects of good management, delivery is also a neglected discipline. It's certainly true that delivery—the focus on results for students—*should be* everyone's job. But we have seen too many leaders make the naïve assumption that talented people, qualified people, and/or experienced people automatically know what it takes to drive results. The truth is that the disciplines of delivery are counterintuitive; they don't come naturally to even the highest performers. A Delivery Unit will build the capacity of every leader to adopt these disciplines.

- The crises of the moment will inevitably distract even the most focused system leaders and managers from the work of achieving results for students. Without a Delivery Unit, there will be no advocate for delivery, which will put the focus on outcomes at risk. Sometimes, the sirens' song is simply too powerful to resist.

A Delivery Unit provides consistency, a calm and steady presence whose role it is to continue to ask the four key questions of delivery:

1. What are you trying to do?
2. How are you planning to do it?
3. At any given moment, how will you know that you are on track to succeed?
4. If not, what are you going to do about it?

To these four questions, a Delivery Unit will add a fifth: How can we help? When it functions well, a Delivery Unit gives coherence to a system's delivery effort, supplying influence without authority to complement the system's formal line management structure.

“Someone needs to manage to the aspiration. Otherwise, the aspiration is something that a board votes on every 12 months and gets neglected. Delivery ensures that someone is watching out for the outcomes we all want. And unless it's someone's job, it's no one's job.”

—Matt Deninger,  
Delivery Leader,  
Massachusetts Department  
of Elementary and  
Secondary Education

## ◎ CORE PRINCIPLES

The steps for building a Delivery Unit are fairly straightforward: you need to establish one, and then you need to build its capacity and culture.

### Establish the Unit

A Delivery Unit is the person or team responsible for driving the achievement of system aspirations, no matter what. The theory of action is simple: if a system leader creates and backs a small, flexible, and highly capable team that can focus on results, then that team will help the leader exercise meaningful influence over the activities of that system to drive toward those results.

It sounds simple, but it's kind of revolutionary. You don't need to overhaul everything all at once. You don't need to reorganize your entire system as a first step. Start at the top, start focused, and start small, and you can have the impact you want on the larger whole. Bigger changes may come later, but your Delivery Unit will help you commit to those changes with confidence that they're the right ones to make.

A Delivery Unit plays five roles:

1. **Plans and planning:** Delivery Units ensure that a system has priority goals and that each goal has a plan for how it will be achieved. They work with a system's goal leaders to facilitate or drive this planning as necessary.

2. **Monitoring and reporting:** When plans are in place, Delivery Units set up the right routines to consistently monitor progress against each goal.
3. **Evaluation and follow-up:** Between these routines, Delivery Unit members work with goal leaders and their teams to arrive at a shared view of progress, to tease out the implications for the work, and to align system resources to keep things on track.
4. **Capacity-building:** Delivery requires a shift in mindsets and capabilities from the top to the bottom of a system. This shift begins within the Delivery Unit itself, but the Unit must take advantage of every opportunity to “teach” delivery to system staff—including formal training, everyday interactions, and job-embedded coaching.
5. **Communication and relationship management:** Because their job is to exercise influence without authority, Delivery Units must be experts at managing relationships throughout the system—with goal leaders, with other system staff, and with the system leader.

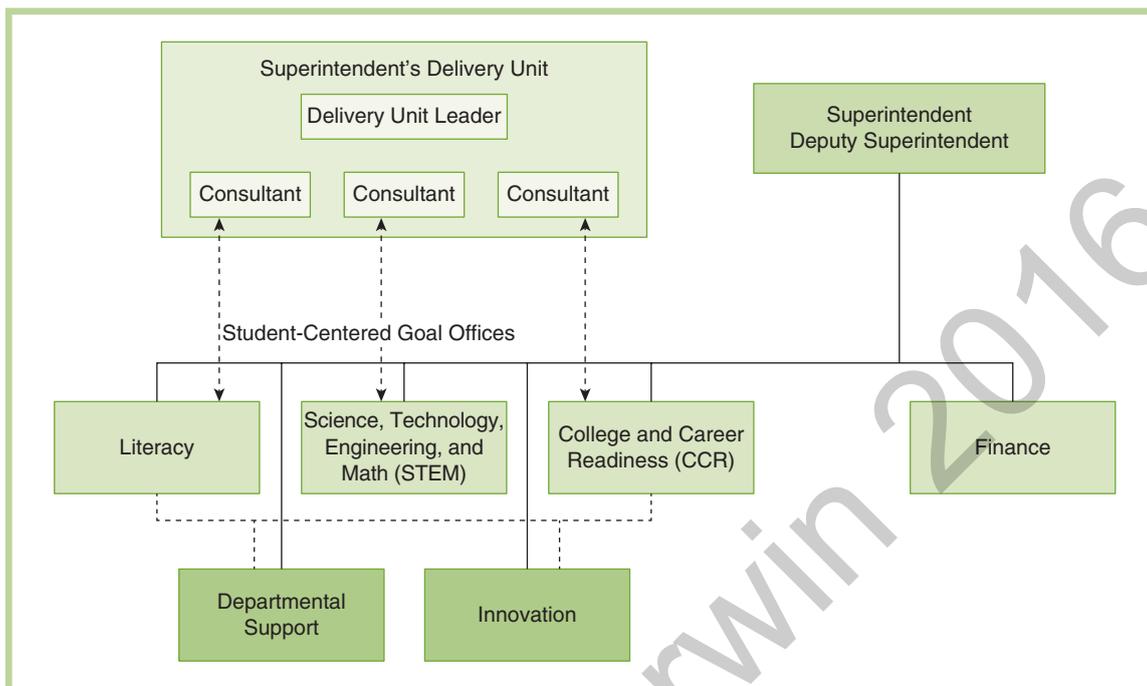
To play these roles, the ideal Delivery Unit will be a dedicated, independent team established according to three principles. First, the delivery leader who leads the Unit should report directly to the system leader. This person must have the trust of both the leader and the leadership team—in particular, the system leader must be ready to back up the delivery leader when things get difficult. This relationship can be set up through a variety of existing arrangements and organizational structures. Some Delivery Units live inside a larger but related function—such as data, research, evaluation, and/or planning. Others are Chief Academic Officers or sit in that office. And others are Delivery Unit leaders by another name—Chief Performance Officer, Chief Accountability Officer, and so on.

Second, the Delivery Unit should sit outside the line management hierarchy of the system, neither managing nor being managed by the goal leaders and teams they work with. This allows them to provide an objective perspective on the system’s progress toward its aspirations.

Finally, the Unit should include some of the most talented and capable people in the system—problem solvers, relationship managers, data analysts, and expert coaches. They are not necessarily the most senior people in a system, but these Delivery Unit Consultants should know how to work with and earn the respect of people at all levels.

Once you’ve established a Unit, how should you organize their work? For most Delivery Units, relationships with goal leaders and their teams are the most critical ones to build. This is why Delivery Units usually organize their staffing so that each team member is an “account manager” for one or more goal leaders. In Figure 1C.1 is a typical structure for a K–12 system.

Ownership for the system’s 10 goals was divided according to three student-centered content areas: Literacy; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM); and College and Career Readiness (CCR). Responsibility for these goals rested with the chiefs for each of those content areas, who reported directly to the superintendent. Each content team was directly supported by a Delivery Unit Consultant, who worked closely with the team to prepare for stocktakes and monthly meetings, perform the necessary analyses, and solve

**Figure 1C.1** Delivery Unit Relationships With Goal Leaders in a K–12 System

problems when goals were off-track. The benefit to this structure is that the Delivery Unit Consultants become very familiar with the content area they support and can form a strong relationship with the goal leaders to provide a good balance of challenge and support.

In some systems, the most important “goal leader” is actually a local leader. This is particularly true in higher education systems, where campus presidents and chancellors hold disproportionate sway. Recognizing this, the University of Missouri System’s delivery leader assembled her Delivery Unit with leaders from each of its four campuses. This structure

Please visit EDI’s website at [www.deliveryinstitute.org/1C](http://www.deliveryinstitute.org/1C) for more information on establishing a Delivery Unit.

### The Experience of Goal Leadership

Being a goal leader means taking the journey of delivery alongside the Delivery Unit. It’s a tough experience, but it can be a rewarding one. Dale Sims, Vice Chancellor for Business and Finance at the Tennessee Board of Regents and a goal leader for that system, explains:

“The process of goal setting and implementation of a specific plan to deliver on those goals has helped me to prioritize and assess the work related to my strategy. By virtue of the fact that through the system of routines, I am constantly reviewing progress on the pieces involved in implementing my strategy with team members as well as with the Chancellor, other board staff, and the Board, we can make almost real-time adjustments to the work. This has resulted in avoiding investment of time and resources in something that won’t get us to our goal.”

ensured a direct line of communication to the people who would feel the most responsibility for driving progress toward the system's goals.

## Build the Unit's Capacity and Culture

Once you've carved out a space for your Unit, set it up, and recruited a few stars, you'll have the raw materials you need. Delivery is such a new discipline, however, that nearly every team member will inevitably be learning on the job. The key is to set the Unit up so that they can learn faster than anyone else.

This means that the Unit must embody a culture of delivery so thoroughly that its work is infectious. After the PMDU's first year of operation, Michael tried to sum up this emerging culture in five words:

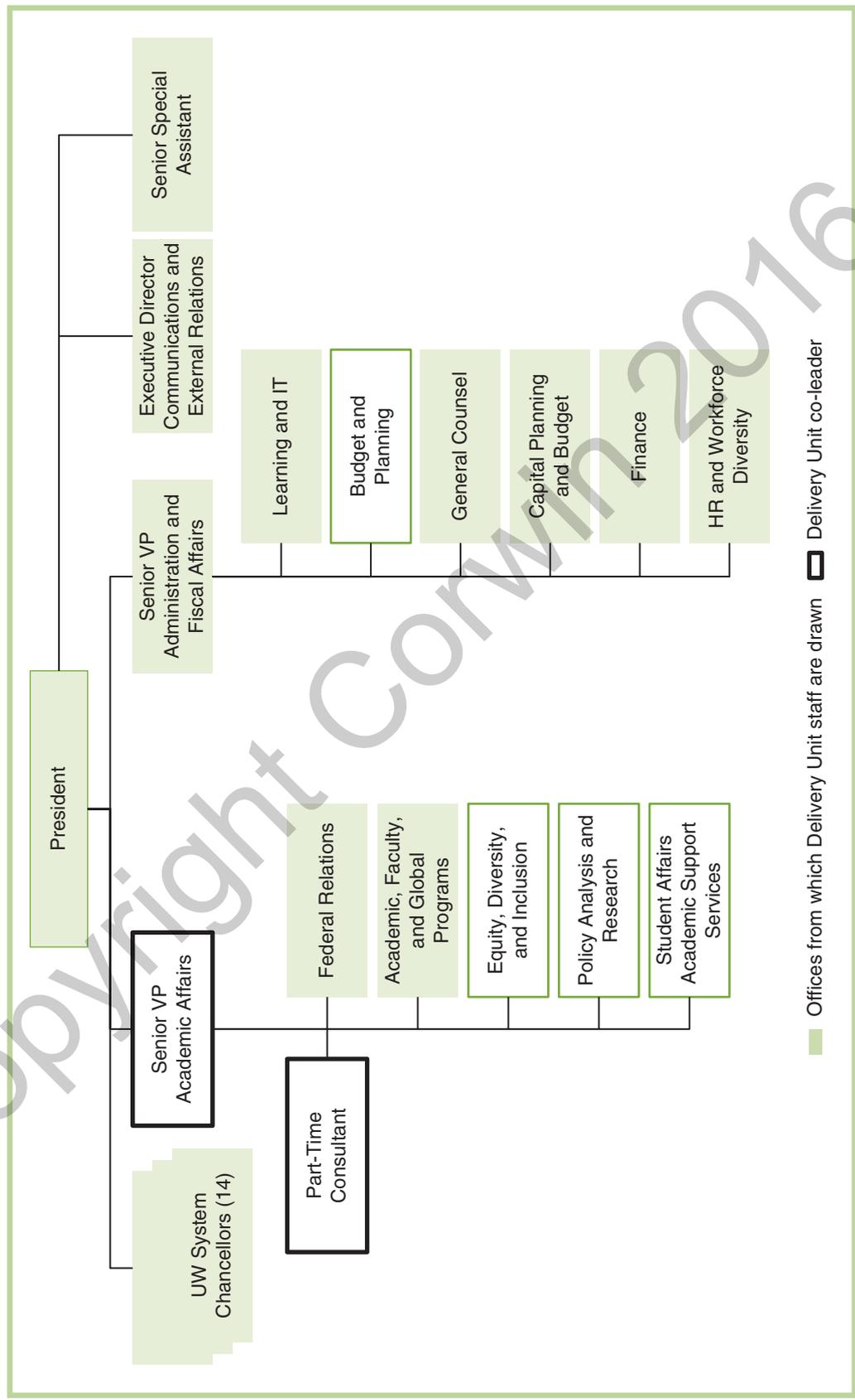
1. **Ambition:** The Delivery Unit should constantly challenge performance and ask difficult questions, holding everyone—including themselves—to a high standard.
2. **Focus:** Delivery requires that we identify the things that are most likely to help us achieve our goals and prioritize them relentlessly. The Delivery Unit must lead this charge.
3. **Clarity:** The Delivery Unit should be able to cut through complex situations and get to the heart of every matter it addresses with a combination of rigorous problem solving, fact-based analysis, and effective communication.
4. **Urgency:** Most systems are biased toward inaction. The Delivery Unit must have the opposite bias, keeping awareness of the timetable for achieving results on the front of everyone's minds.
5. **Irreversibility:** Success is insufficient if it is ephemeral; the Delivery Unit must obsess with how they get the changes they make to *stick*.

Building this culture is partly about what you tell the team, but it's also about what the team does together to reinforce these values. Ultimately, you will build the team's culture by doing the work laid out in the rest of this book and by offering capacity-building supports along the way. For more tools and resources on capacity building, please see Chapter 5A.

### Delivery Units in a Resource-Constrained Environment

Dedicated does *not* necessarily mean full-time. Several systems, particularly in higher education, have achieved promising results by drawing their delivery teams from the part-time contributions of existing staff. In these systems, the delivery team is a cross-functional group who takes advantage of the talent and credibility of people throughout the different units of the system office, as this example in Figure 1C.2 from the University of Wisconsin System shows.

**Figure 1 C.2** The University of Wisconsin system distributed delivery responsibilities among multiple offices.



■ Offices from which Delivery Unit staff are drawn □ Delivery Unit co-leader

### The Massachusetts Delivery Unit

“Implementing delivery principles at ESE over the past few years has shifted the conversation to clarify not only what we are trying to accomplish but also how we are going to accomplish it, ensuring that we focus on improving student outcomes. At the heart of this approach has been the Delivery Unit: a dedicated team of three people that drives the department forward and constantly brings the conversation back to academic indicators and student outcomes.”

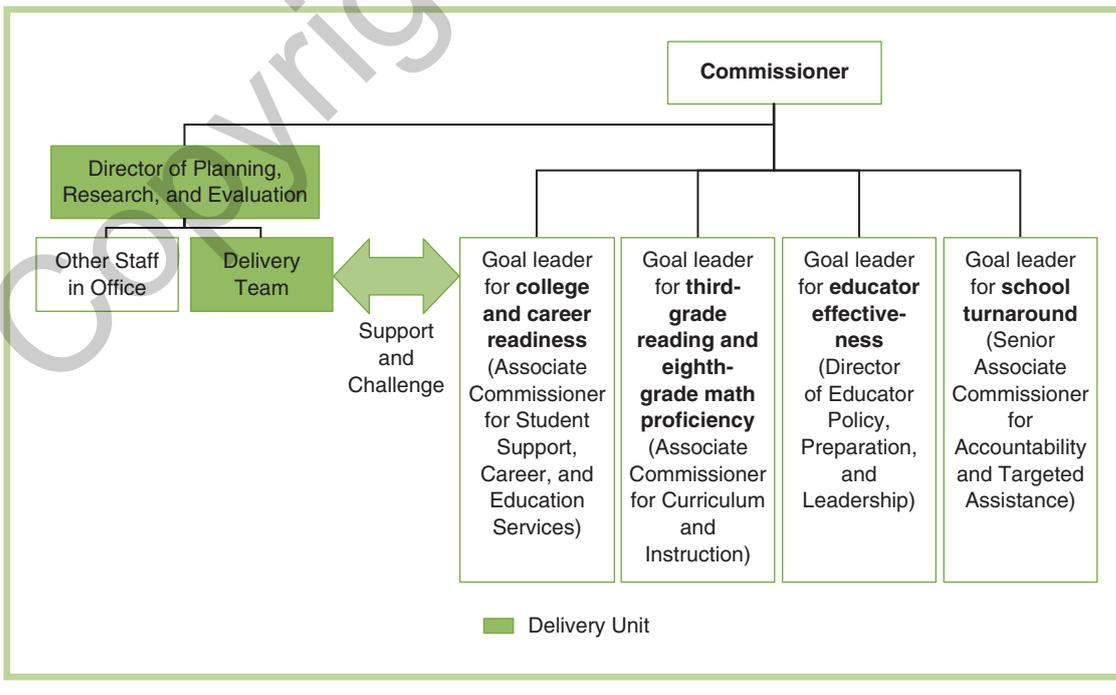
—Mitchell Chester,  
Commissioner of  
Education, Massachusetts

In 2010, Commissioner Mitchell Chester established a Delivery Unit for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE). He appointed Carrie Conaway, the head of the Office of Planning and Research, to head the Unit. Carrie was a strong choice for delivery leader for several reasons: her talent, her trusted relationship with the Commissioner, and her relationship with the senior staff. Her office was also outside the line management hierarchy for most of the people who were managing ESE’s goals (see Figure 1C.3). Carrie did have a day job, however—leading the planning and research work—so she appointed a deputy and dedicated two analysts to work with that deputy to drive the delivery effort full time.

Each Delivery Unit member was assigned responsibility for a particular goal leader and team, for whom they provided support and challenge toward meeting the goal.

One year later, in a capacity review for ESE, the results showed that the Delivery Unit had made great progress in establishing the disciplines of delivery throughout the agency. Stakeholders throughout the agency, from mid-level leaders to the Commissioner, voiced their respect and praise for the Unit’s work.

**Figure 1C.3** Simplified Organization Chart for Massachusetts Delivery Unit and Goal Leaders



## ◎ LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

### Be Clear About Roles

The Delivery Unit is still a new concept. As such, the potential for misunderstanding is great, and you will need absolute clarity on the role that the Unit plays. A group of talented people is a magnet for every possible “special project” that your system’s leader and staff can dream up: we have seen delivery leaders mistaken for “czars” that run particular high-profile initiatives, dismissed as “mere” project managers, and pulled into the very firefighting activities that they are supposed to avoid.

For this reason, remember and emphasize what a Delivery Unit does *not* do. Though the work is related, a Delivery Unit is not a project management office. Three things distinguish Delivery Consultants from project managers: (1) their focus on outcomes rather than inputs, (2) their role in synthesizing and interpreting rather than just aggregating information about performance, and (3) their sense of ownership of the delivery effort at a leadership level.

A Delivery Unit is also not a goal leader. Goal leaders are ultimately accountable for achieving the system’s aspirations and for managing a system’s strategies to that end. They have direct ownership over the work: they are curriculum developers, conveners of faculty committees, managers of contracts with vendors, and so on.

By contrast, Delivery Units do not manage the day-to-day work; instead, they work with and through goal leaders and other system staff to ensure that things stay on track. They do this by striking the right balance between supporting the work (and the people who do it) and challenging it to be better. It is their distance from the day-to-day that gives them the perspective and objectivity necessary to do this.

To protect this role, Delivery Units must clearly delineate and overcommunicate it to others. This communication starts with the system leader and the Delivery Unit itself; over time, goal leaders must reinforce this message to their teams as well.

### Don’t Assume Credibility; Earn It

Many of the principles we’ve covered are designed to increase the Delivery Unit’s credibility—in particular, a Unit that reports directly to the system leader and is not in the line management hierarchy will enjoy some independence and will be more likely to be taken seriously. However, this kind of “structural” credibility only lasts so long. As Michael used to tell his staff at the PMDU, the Prime Minister’s name would help you get your foot in the door with goal leaders; after that, you were on your own. And it’s easier than you think to mess things up.

A Delivery Unit can threaten others in a system. In addition to the fact that *any* change is disruptive, the very existence of a Delivery Unit can give the impression that others aren’t capable of doing their work on their own.

“If you overplay your hand, you sound arrogant; if you make unreasonable demands, you weaken yourself for the next time; if you claim to speak for the Prime Minister on an issue but don’t really, you risk ridicule; and if you are rude, aggressive or ill informed, you bring the Prime Minister himself into disrepute. Worse still, if you persistently do any or all of these things, in the rumor mill that is government the world over, the word soon gets back to the man himself. And if he loses confidence in you or your Unit, the game is up.”

—Sir Michael Barber<sup>1</sup>

Nothing could be further from the truth; in fact, the point of a Unit is to free everyone else to focus on the substantive work that they do best. Nonetheless, the potential for misunderstanding is real.

Ultimately, Delivery Units maintain their credibility and relevance by the quality of their relationships and their success at helping others buy in to this approach. The tools and processes in this book are necessary for the work to be effective, but they are not enough on their own. Early on in a delivery effort, Delivery Units must demonstrate that, while they will not always agree completely with the goal leaders that they work with, they will always be respectful and helpful. As one delivery leader once said to us, “I define success as people wanting to work with us because they know we are going to make them look good.”

Delivery Units must therefore adopt a posture of humility toward the leaders they work with and strive to earn their trust. Invoking the system leader’s name—or any kind of formal authority—should be a last resort.

## ◎ KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SYSTEM LEADERS AND STAFF

If you’re a **system leader**, we encourage you to find the resources to build a Delivery Unit. The most important role you will play is in your endorsement of this Unit’s work as your primary means for focusing your system on achieving your aspirations. This means guiding your leadership team to work with the Unit, publicly communicating about the importance of its work, and backing them up when they receive the inevitable pushback. It takes a certain degree of confidence and humility to allow a Delivery Unit to “manage” you in the way that they are supposed to; by showing that you trust them to do this, you will set an example for your leadership team and staff.

The tools and practices outlined in this book will help **system staff** focus your work on achieving results, whether or not there is a Delivery Unit helping you do this. Ultimately, your adoption of this different way of working will determine whether delivery is a passing fad or a catalyst for lasting change. As you read this book, consider how it can inform your individual work, regardless of whether there is a larger delivery effort under way. It may be possible, for example, to dedicate a portion of your team’s time to focusing on delivery. If your system does have a Delivery Unit, consider how they can be an asset in helping you achieve results for students—and be willing to give them feedback about how they can best work with you.

Finally, **delivery leaders** must pay special attention to building a positive “brand” for the Delivery Unit as soon as possible. The system leader has placed his or her trust in you and has allocated precious resources to your Unit; your job is to demonstrate to everyone that your existence is worth the cost. For more on building the Delivery Unit brand, see Chapter 5C: Unleash the “Alchemy of Relationships.”

## ◎ CONCLUSION

Whatever it's called and however it's arranged, dedicated capacity to focus on delivery is a critical condition for success. The up-front investment, and the disruption caused by the early work, will be a source of tension. But this is a natural consequence of the shift that delivery brings; what feels like added work is in fact the addition of the *right* work, which must then be offset by a willingness to drop those things that aren't as important. Courage is required throughout a delivery effort, but the early stages, in which a Delivery Unit begins its work, are some of the most critical.

## ◎ NOTE

1. Barber, M. (2008). *Instruction to deliver: Fighting to transform Britain's public services* (Rev. ed.). London, UK: Methuen.

Copyright Corwin 2016