

# Public Safety Leadership Teams That Matter

By Fire Chief John Butler, Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department; Dr. Connie Whittaker Dunlop; and Dr. Steve Gladis



*Fairfax County team members, from left to right. Assistant Chief Thomas Arnold, Assistant Chief Joseph Knerr, Fire Chief John Butler, and Assistant Chief Jason Jenkins.*

**F**irefighters agree that charging into a building that is engulfed in flames is not a one-person job. They depend on a team of people at the scene, like the incident commander and emergency medical technicians. They also rely upon a team of people back at headquarters, like expert instructors who trained them and savvy procurement officials who sourced their fire engine and equipment. In fact, teams of dedicated professionals make it possible for front-line firefighters to do their jobs every day.

It is no surprise then that teamwork is a core value of most fire departments. Teamwork at the department level has traditionally involved aligning and motivating a group of people with differing skills to accomplish a shared mission. More than three decades of research at Harvard suggests that successful teamwork is about so much more.

Fire Chief John Butler joined the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department (FCFRD) in 2018 to rebuild the team. The Chief heard about the research from Harvard and asked to speak with two academic practitioners engaged in the field—Dr. Steve Gladis and Dr. Connie Whittaker Dunlop—to consider applying Harvard’s research within a major fire department. After discussion, the three decided to adopt a “nested teams approach” or a team-of-teams approach that would look not only at the chief’s senior leadership team, but also at each of the assistant chief’s teams that fed into the chief’s senior team.

This article (the first in a series) describes the department, research, approach, and early results of this project.

## DEPARTMENT

The largest fire department in the Commonwealth of Virginia, FCFRD

has 1,360 uniformed men and women, 362 operational volunteers, and 183 full-time civilians. Operating 39 fire stations that are strategically positioned throughout Fairfax County, FCFRD serves a population of more than 1.15 million residents.

FCFRD is a combination career and volunteer organization that provides fire suppression services, emergency medical response services, technical rescue services, hazardous materials response services, water rescue services, life safety education, fire prevention, and arson investigation services.

Fire Chief (FC) Butler leads a team of three assistant chiefs (AC) which is referred to as the FC/AC team, and each assistant chief leads a team. AC Jason Jenkins leads the Administrative Services Bureau (ASB) team and directs the Office of the Fire Marshal, Support Services Division, Human Resources Division, Policy and Grievance Division, Professional

Standards Office, and the Volunteer Liaison Office. AC Tom Arnold leads the Office of the Fire Chief (OFC) team and oversees the Fiscal Services Division, Planning Section, Public Information Office, Information Technology Division, Data Analytics and Strategy Management Division, and Health and Wellness Section. AC Joseph Knerr leads the Operations Bureau (Ops) team, the largest bureau, and manages the EMS Division, Training Division, Special Ops Division, and three shifts across two regions of the county. Approximately 25 leaders report to three ACs who report to the FC. Together, they make up the FCFRD’s senior leadership team.

**RESEARCH**

In one study of over 120 leadership teams of varying industries around the world, Ruth Wageman of Harvard discovered a startling truth: only 21 percent of teams were high performing, 37 percent were mediocre, and 42 percent were poor performers.

Thus, in many cases, according to Richard Hackman, you’d be better off without a team.

Hackman and Wageman went on to develop the Team Diagnostic Survey™ (TDS™). Over 200 studies by social scientists have further validated this instrument, which measures six conditions required for team success—three essential conditions and three enabling conditions. **Table 1** describes the six team conditions.

Hackman and Wageman argued that these six conditions account for 80 percent of the variance in team performance. They recommended a three-phased approach for improving team performance that involves designing, launching, and coaching teams—in that order.

**APPROACH**

Chief Butler worked with Drs. Gladis and Dunlop to assess four nested FCFRD teams: the FC/AC team, the ASB team, the OFC team, and the Ops team. To kick off the initiative,

Chief Butler recorded a short video describing the purpose of the project and asked each member of the senior leadership team to complete the survey. Team members received an email with instructions and a link to the online instrument. Once completed, Drs. Gladis and Dunlop prepared 27-page reports from the TDS™ system for each of the four teams. The reports included both quantitative and qualitative measures of team effectiveness.

Drs. Gladis and Dunlop debriefed the Chief on the TDS™ results for the FC/AC team before meeting with the Chief and his three ACs for further discussion about the results. In subsequent weeks, Drs. Gladis and Dunlop met with each AC to discuss the TDS™ results for their team before sharing a video debrief of the results with the AC’s direct reports. In the final step of the design phase, Drs. Gladis and Dunlop identified patterns across the four teams, which comprise the senior leadership team and made associated recommendations to the Chief and ACs.

**Table 1: Six Team Conditions (Hackman, Wageman, and others)**

ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS			
<b>Real Team</b>	<b>Bounded:</b> Everyone knows who is on the team, which for overly large teams is often not the case. Also, it is clear how each person on the team is critical to the team’s mission and strategy.	<b>Interdependent:</b> Team members are working and focused on the same goals and objectives. Their success depends on each other. No silos.	<b>Stable:</b> Talent turnover is minimal. Teams need to be together long enough to know and depend on each other’s strengths and perspectives.
<b>Right People</b>	<b>Diversity:</b> Team members have different perspectives and cognitive strengths, and all team members understand these valuable differences.	<b>Skills:</b> People have all the skills required to meet the team’s challenges—including experience. These skills include technical and professional skills, plus teamwork skills.	
<b>Compelling Purpose</b>	<b>Clear:</b> Team members must be able to visualize the purpose with real clarity.	<b>Challenging:</b> The team’s purpose must push team members, but not break their spirits.	<b>Consequential:</b> The team’s purpose must have an impact on the lives of others, not just the team itself.
ENABLING CONDITIONS			
<b>Sound Structure</b>	<b>Task Design:</b> The problem requires a team to solve it, and each member’s experience and skill is required to solve the problem.	<b>Team Size:</b> Often teams are too large. The research favors teams with less than 10 members—ideally 4-7.	<b>Team Norms:</b> Teams need rules of behavior—how they work with and treat each other. Norms are spelled out at the start of a team.
<b>Supportive Context</b>	<b>Rewards and Recognition:</b> Pay and recognition are focused primarily on team, not individual, results.	<b>Information and Education:</b> The team gets data and education on time and in ways they can use it.	<b>Resources:</b> The team gets the resources—space, technology, vehicles—that it needs to operate successfully.
<b>Team Coaching</b>	<b>Available:</b> Coaching is available whenever needed.	<b>Helpful:</b> The coach is specifically experienced at team coaching.	

## RESULTS

The TDS™ scores can range from 1 to 5 with one representing a poor score and 5 representing an excellent score.

- When measures are poor and scored lower than 2, they are red.
- When measures are fair and scored between 2 and 3, they are orange.
- When measures are good and scored between 3 and 4, they are yellow.
- When measures are excellent and scored between 4 and 5, they are green.

Results from the FCFRD’s senior leadership teams’ TDS™ suggest that these teams are high performing. Summary scores for all four teams are included in **Figure 1**.

The TDS™ results also suggest that the FCFRD’s senior leadership teams are effective. The research defines “team effectiveness” in three ways: task performance, quality of group process, and member satisfaction. Members of this senior leadership team are highly satisfied with an

average score of 4.52 for the FC/AC team, 4.39 for the ASB team, 4.62 for the OFC team, and 4.14 for the Ops team. These scores measure whether team members feel that their participation on the team contributes to their own growth and development.

Team members also reported that the quality of their group processes is improving over time with average scores of 3.85 for the FC/AC team, 4.27 for the ASB team, 4.77 for the OFC team, and 4.10 for the Ops team. These teams scored lower on task performance, which measures whether the team’s outputs meet or exceed stakeholder expectations, with an average score of 3.25 for the FC/AC team, 3.50 for the ASB team, 4.14 for the OFC team, and 3.40 for the Ops team. Average scores and spreads are depicted in **Figure 2**. These results may mean that team members want to improve the quantity, quality, or timeliness of their work.

Survey results also suggest that “key task processes” that, according to the research, drive overall team effectiveness are strong. The TDS™ examines

task processes for effort (working in ways that build commitment to the team), strategy (using unique ways to approach the work), and knowledge and skill (knowing and using the capabilities of people on the team). When it comes to effort, members of the FCFRD senior leadership team reported that fellow team members are putting in the appropriate level of effort for team-related tasks, with an average score of 4.75 for the FC/AC team, 4.38 for the ASB team, 4.24 for the OFC team, and 4.00 for the Ops team.

Members of these teams also reported that they approach the team’s work in strategic and innovative ways, with average scores of 4.50 for the FC/AC team, 4.29 for the ASB team, 4.48 for the OFC team, and 3.77 for the Ops team. Average scores for knowledge and skill were lower at 3.83 for the FC/AC team, 3.79 for the ASB team, 4.24 for the OFC team, and 3.27 for the Ops team. Average scores and spreads for key task processes are found in **Figure 3**. These results imply

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**Figure 1.** TDS™ summary scores for FCFRD senior leadership teams.

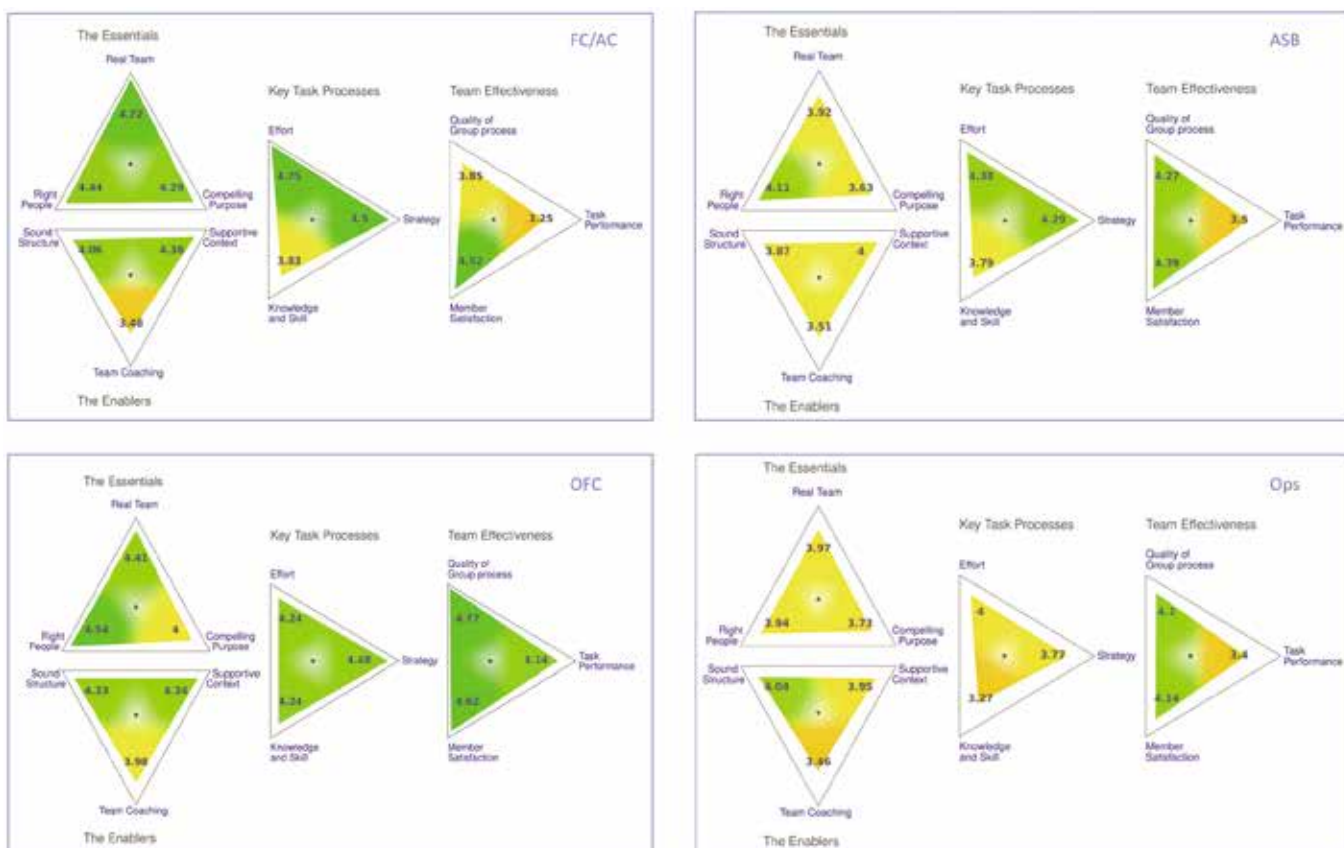


Figure 2. TDS™ team effectiveness scores for FCFRD senior leadership teams.

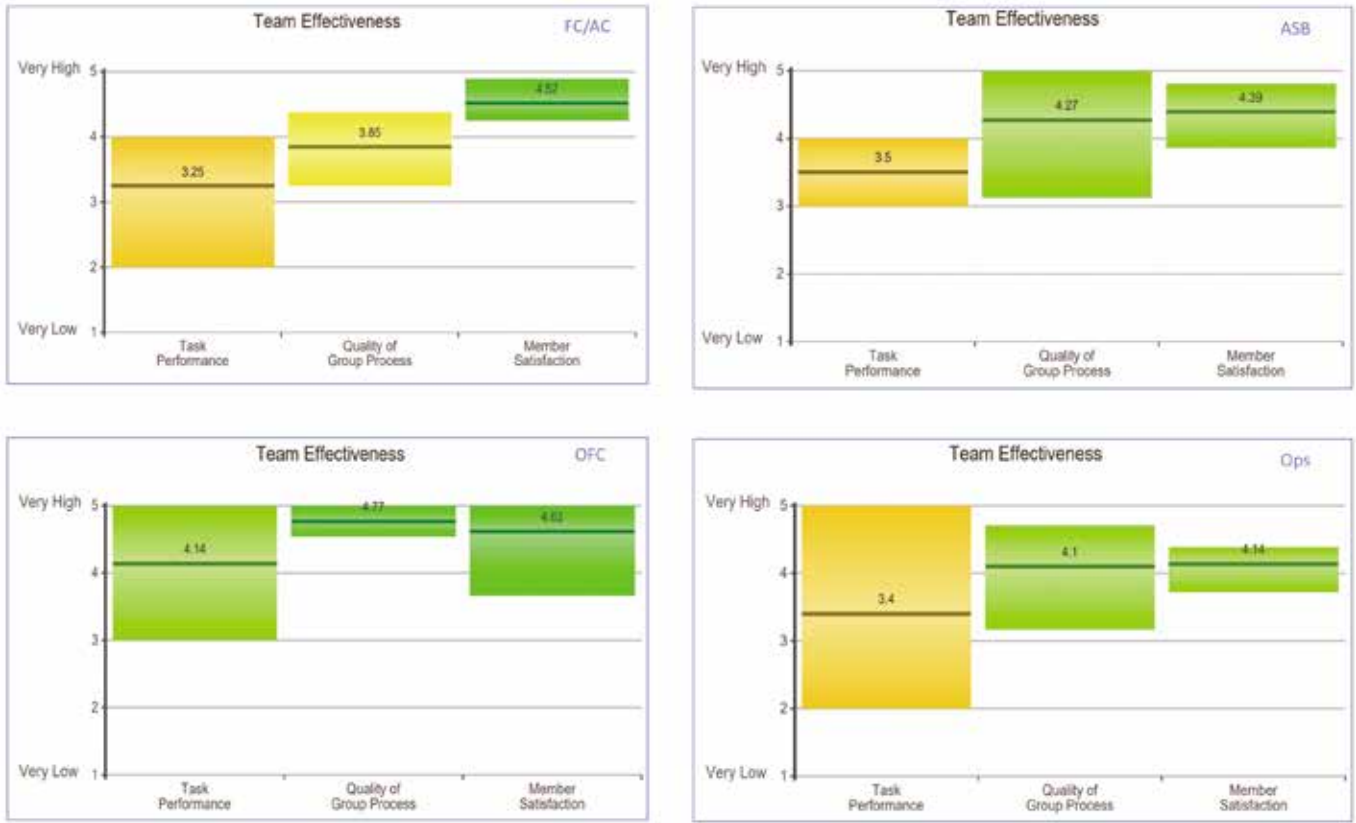


Figure 3. TDS™ key task processes scores for FCFRD senior leadership teams.

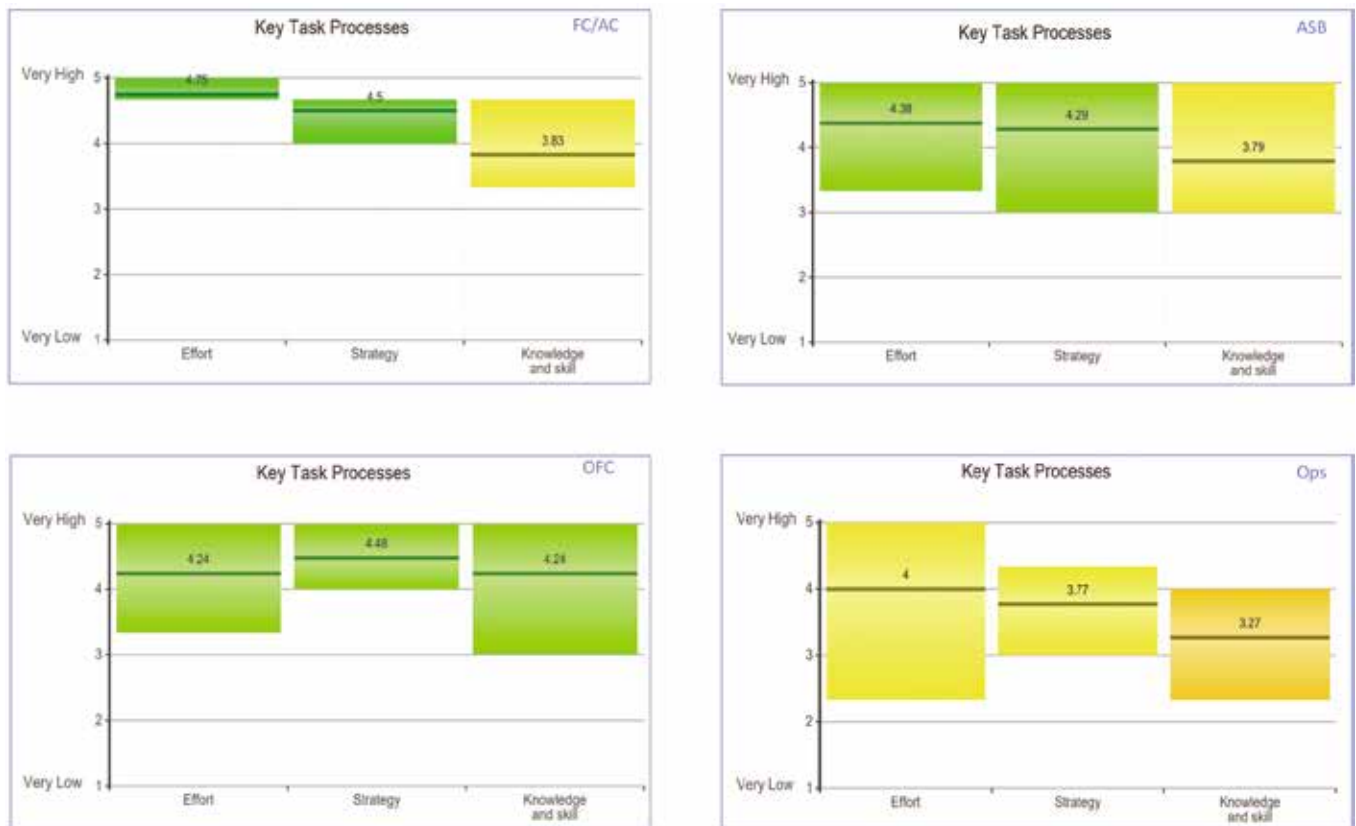


Figure 4. TDST™ right people scores for FCFRD senior leadership teams.

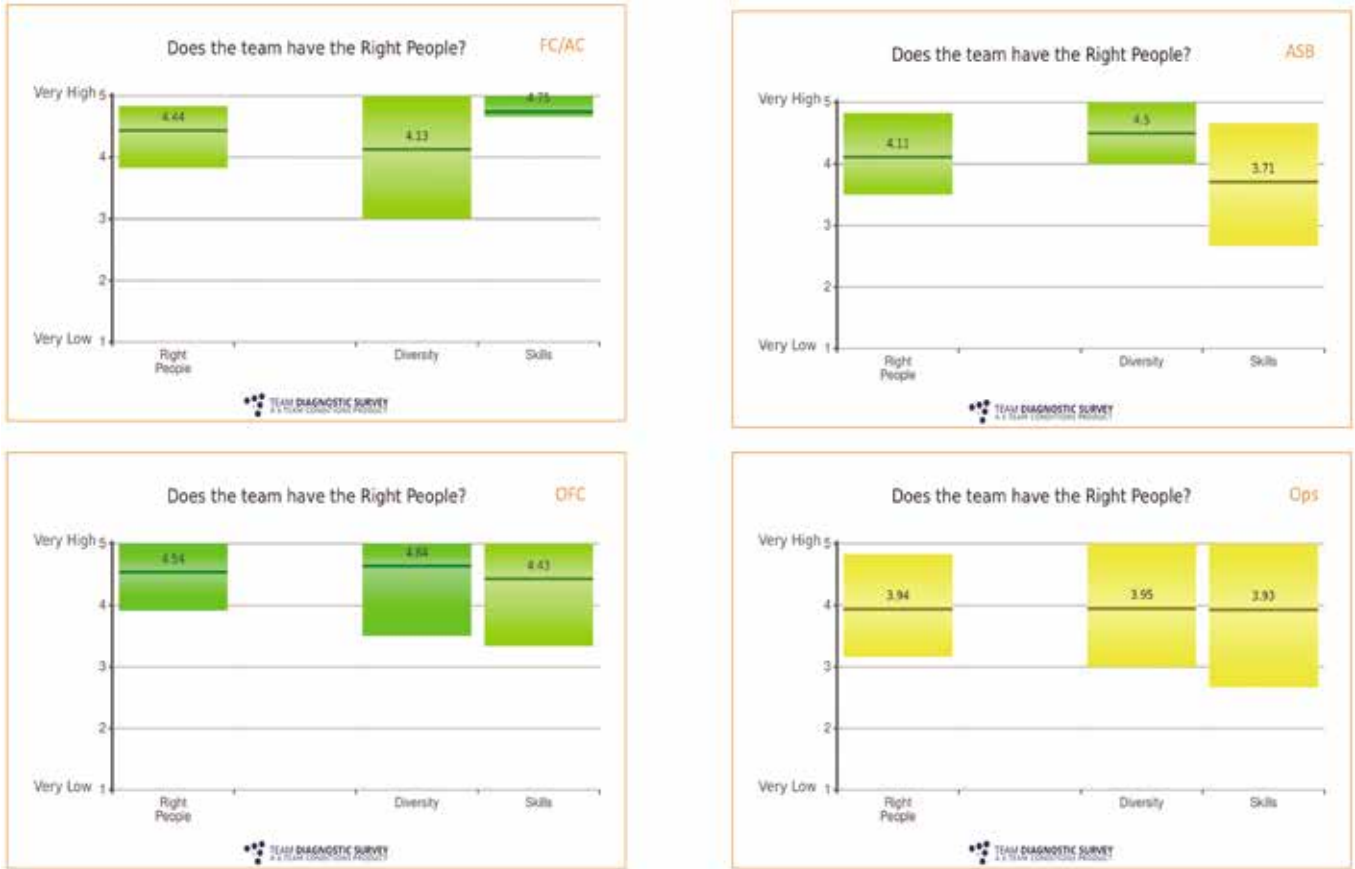
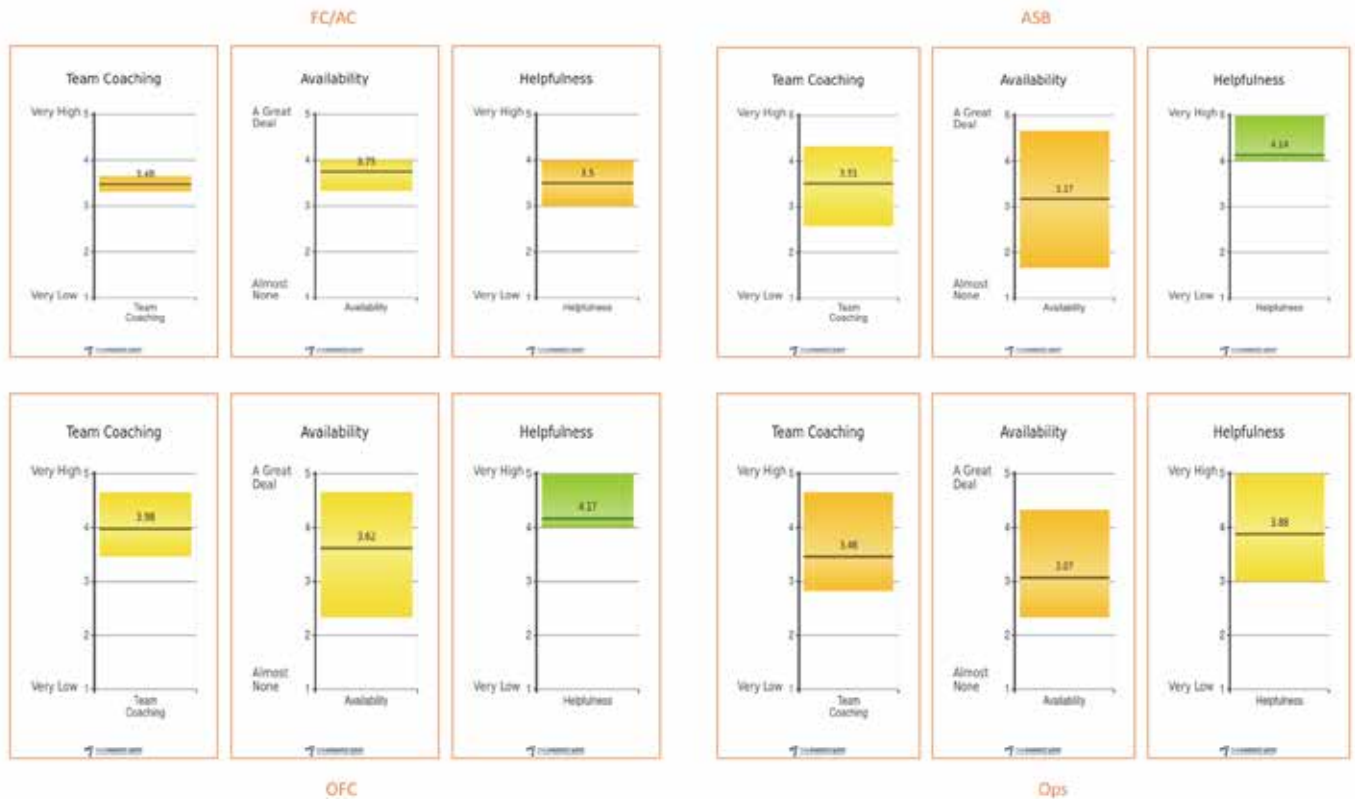


Figure 5. TDST™ team coaching scores for FCFRD senior leadership teams.



that FCFRD teams may not be aware of or are not maximizing their members' knowledge and skills.

The senior leadership team's key task processes stem from the six conditions—three essential conditions plus three enabling conditions. Survey participants rated the essential team conditions as excellent or good. One essential condition stood out as a strength: the right people. Responders rated this condition as 4.44 for the FC/AC team, 4.11 for the ASB team, 4.54 for the OFC team, and 3.94 for the Ops team. Average, maximum, and minimum scores for this condition are found in **Figure 4**. These results imply that FCFRD senior leadership team members have the right skills, including teamwork skills, to perform their tasks effectively and that team members bring a diverse mix of perspectives to the work.

Senior leadership team members rated three enabling team conditions as excellent or good. However, one condition—team coaching—stood out as an area of opportunity for all four senior leadership teams. Survey responders rated team coaching as 3.48 for the FC/AC team, 3.51 for the ASB team, 3.98 for the OFC team, and 3.46 for the Ops team. Average, maximum, and minimum scores for this condition are found in **Figure 5**. These results suggest that team coaching inside the FCFRD senior leadership team is less available than it could be.

## CONCLUSION

Chief Butler came to Fairfax County's Fire and Rescue Department to rebuild the team. Having completed the first phase of this project, he is well on his way. Now the Chief is turning his eye toward the second phase, which includes relaunching the team.

In a team relaunch, Drs. Gladis and Dunlop will guide team members to create a team strategy, which is different from, but in alignment with, the organization's strategy. A team strategy includes a team mission, vision, values, norms, goals, and objectives. Once the team strategy is complete, Drs. Gladis and Dunlop will coach the team to make progress on its strategy and solve problems in real-time.

Stay tuned. 📌



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