The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

A Leadership Fable

Patrick Lencioni
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2002).

Teamwork ultimately comes down to practicing a small set of principles over a long period of time. Success is not a matter of mastering subtle, sophisticated theory, but rather embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence. [p. 220]

In this review

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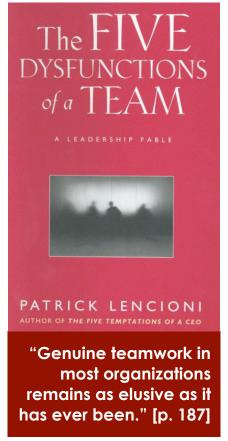
This observation from the book **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team** absolutely rings true. Still, near the top of every failure in an organization is the failure that comes from poor team performance. When a team functions well, it is a marvel to behold, and it lifts the entire organization. When a team fails to function well, the ripple effects hurt the entire organization. Building successful teams is an organizational survival skill. Serving on a team successfully, and helping make the entire team a success, is the job skill that may be the most important one of all.

The FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS of a TEAM

A LEADERSHIP FABLE

PATRICK LENCIONI

AUTHOR OF *THE FIVE TEMPTATIONS OF A CEO*

"Genuine teamwork in most organizations remains as elusive as it has ever been." [p. 187]

(Note: because the book is a "fable," followed by a content description of the principles, this selection of quotes comes from the "content description" portion of the book).

As difficult as it is to build a cohesive team, it is not complicated. In fact, keeping it simple is critical, whether you run the executive staff at a multi-national company, a small department within a larger organization, or even if you are merely a member of a team that needs improvement. (p. 185).

Two critical truths have become clear: First, genuine teamwork in most organizations remains as elusive as it has ever been. Second, organizations fail to achieve teamwork because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls, which I call the five dysfunctions of a team. They form an interrelated model, making susceptibility to even one of them potentially lethal for the success of a team. (p. 187).

In the context of building a team, trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another. This description stands in contrast to a more standard definition of trust, one that centers around the ability to predict a person's behavior based on past experience. (p. 195).

It is only when team members are truly comfortable being exposed to one another that they begin to act without concern for protecting themselves. (p. 196).

Most successful people learn to be competitive with their peers, and protective of their reputations. It is a challenge for them to turn those instincts off for the good of a team, but that is exactly what is required.
Teams that lack trust waste inordinate amounts of time and energy managing their behaviors and interactions within the group. They tend to dread team meetings, and are reluctant to take risks in asking for or offering assistance to others. As a result, morale on distrusting teams is usually quite low, and unwanted turnover is high. (p. 196)

Building trust requires shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members. (p. 197).

Connection to dysfunction 2: by building trust, a team makes conflict possible because team members do not hesitate to engage in passionate and sometimes emotional debate, knowing that they will not be punished for saying something that might otherwise be interpreted as destructive or critical. (p. 202).

All great relationships, the ones that last over time, require productive conflict in order to grow.   This is true in marriage, parenthood, friendship, and certainly business. (p. 202).

It is important to distinguish productive ideological conflict from destructive fighting and interpersonal politics. Ideological conflict is limited to concepts and ideas, and avoids personality-focused, mean-spirited attacks.
Teams that engage in productive conflict know that the only purpose is to produce the best possible solution in the shortest period of time. They discuss and resolve issues more quickly and completely than others, and they emerge from heated debates with no residual feelings or collateral damage, but with an eagerness and readiness to take on the next important issue. (pp. 202 & 203.).

When team members do not openly debate and disagree about important ideas, they often turn to back-channel personal attacks, which are far nastier and more harmful than any heated argument over issues.

Healthy conflict is actually a time saver. (p. 203)

Connection to dysfunction 3: by engaging in productive conflict and tapping into team members' perspectives and opinions, a team can confidently commit and buy into a decision knowing that they have benefited from everyone's ideas. (p. 207).

In the context of a team, commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in. Great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from every member of the team, even those who voted against the decision.
Great teams understand the danger of seeking consensus, and find ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible. They understand that reasonable human beings do not need to get their way in order to support a decision, but only need to know that their opinions have been heard and considered. (p. 207).

Connection to dysfunction 4: In order for teammates to call each other on their behaviors and actions, they must have a clear sense of what is expected. Even the most ardent believers in accountability usually balk at having to hold someone accountable for something that was never bought in to or made clear in the first place. (p. 212).

Members of great teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, thus demonstrating that they respect each other and have high expectations for one another's performance. As politically incorrect as it sounds, the most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team is peer pressure… More than any policy or system, there is nothing like the fear of letting down respected teammates that motivate people to improve their performance. (p. 213).

Connection to dysfunction 5: If teammates are not being held accountable for their contributions, they will be more likely to turn their attention to their own needs, and the advancement of themselves or their departments. An absence of accountability is an invitation to team members to shift their attention to areas other than collective results. (p. 216).

The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group. (Note: results are not limited to financial measures like profit, revenue, or shareholder returns). (p. 216).

Political groups, academic departments, and prestigious companies are also susceptible to this dysfunction (inattention to results), as they often see success in merely being associated with their *special* organizations. (p. 217).

A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals. (p. 217-218).

A team ensures that its attention is focused on results by making results clear, and rewarding only those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results. (p. 218).

Teamwork ultimately comes down to practicing a small set of principles over a long period of time. Success is not a matter of mastering subtle, sophisticated theory, but rather embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence. Ironically, teams succeed because they are exceedingly human. By acknowledging the imperfections of their humanity, members of functional teams overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and a focus on results so elusive. (p. 220).

A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals. (p. 217-218).

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Presentation Outline

1. **Dysfunction one: An absence of trust among team members.**
   – (resulting problem: invulnerability)

2. **Dysfunction two: Fear of conflict.**
   -- (resulting problem: artificial harmony)

3. **Dysfunction three: Lack of commitment.**
   -- (resulting problem: ambiguity)

4. **Dysfunction four: An avoidance of accountability.**
   -- (resulting problem: low standards)

5. **Dysfunction five: Inattention to results.**
   -- (resulting problem: status and ego)

• Another way to look at this model –
  imagine how members of truly cohesive teams behave:

  1. They trust one another.

  2. They engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.

  3. They commit to decisions and plans of action.

  4. They hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.

  5. They focus on the achievement of collective results.

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1. **Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 1**

   • Personal histories exercise

   • Team effectiveness exercise -- team members identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team, as well as one area that they must either improve upon or eliminate for the good of the team

   • Personality and behavioral preference tools (e.g., MBTI)

   • 360-degree feedback -- (the author recommends that this be divorced from compensation and formal performance evaluation)

   • Experiential team exercises – ropes courses, and other experiential team exercises (note: the author observes that these seem to have lost some of their luster in recent years)

   • **The role of the leader:** demonstrate vulnerability first; genuine, not staged.

To succeed as a team requires practicing a small set of principles over a long period of time.

Teams only work when the five dysfunctions described in this book are acknowledged, identified, and overcome.

Presentation Outline, continued

2. **Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 2**

   • Acknowledge that conflict is productive.

   • *Mining* – extract disagreements, call out sensitive issues…

   • Real-time permission – openly state, in the heat of the moment, that *this* conflict is productive;
   "it is ok, even good, for us to have this conflict…"

   • **The role of the leader:** practice restraint; allow conflict, and resolution, to occur naturally.
   (Do not let the {natural} desire to protect members from harm to prematurely interrupt disagreements).

3. **Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 3**

   • Recognize the dangers inherent within the desire for consensus and certainty.

   • Cascading messaging – leave meetings clearly aligned with one another

   • Deadlines – make clear deadlines for when decisions will be made, and honor those deadlines with
   discipline and rigidity.

   • Contingency and worst-case scenario analysis

   • Low risk exposure therapy – demonstrate decisiveness in relatively low-risk situations

   • **The role of the leader:** the leader must be comfortable with the prospect of making a decision that
   ultimately turns out to be wrong. And the leader must be constantly pushing the group for closure around
   issues, as well as adherence to schedules that the team has set. What the leader cannot do is place too
   high a premium on certainty or consensus.

4. **Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 4**

   • Accountability refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or
   behaviors that might hurt the team.

   • Publication of goals and standards – the enemy of accountability is ambiguity

   • Simple and regular progress reviews

   • Team rewards

   • **The role of the leader:** to encourage and allow the team to serve as the first and primary accountability
   mechanism. (Sometimes strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving
   themselves as the only source of discipline).

5. **Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 5**

   • Team status – plenty of teams fall prey to the lure of status.

   • Individual status – the familiar tendency of people to focus on enhancing their own positions or career
   prospects at the expense of the team.

   • Recognize that many teams are simply not results focused – they do not live and breathe in order to
   achieve meaningful objectives, but rather merely to exist or survive.

   • Public declaration of results – teams that are willing to commit publicly to specific results are more likely to
   work with a passionate, even desperate desire to achieve those results.

   • Results based rewards – letting someone take home a bonus merely for "trying hard" sends a
   message that achieving the outcome may not be terribly important after all.

   • **The role of the leader:** perhaps more than any of the other dysfunctions, the leader must set
   the tone for a focus on results. If team members sense that the leader values anything other than results,
   they will take it as permission to do the same for themselves.

Some observations:

1. Team success requires great and lasting trust.

2. Trust enables success at dealing with conflict in a way that does not "break" the team.

3. Trust leads to mutual commitment.

4. Trust leads to genuine accountability.

5. For all of this to happen, the leader is critical – truly important.
   Every team has to have a very good leader.

Some questions:

1. Have you ever been on a team that worked well?
   What made it work so well?

2. Have you ever been on a team that did not work so well?
   What caused the problems?

3. As a leader, how can you build an atmosphere of trust?

4. As a leader, how can you help the group hold itself accountable –
   how can you build an atmosphere of "mutual accountability?"

5. How can you be a team leader and a team member at the same time?

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