

Conquer Team Dysfunction

Like it or not, all teams are potentially dysfunctional. This is inevitable because they are made up of fallible, imperfect human beings. From the basketball court to the executive suite, politics and confusion are more the rule than the exception, which is a shame, because the power of teamwork is substantial.

A former client, the founder of a billion dollar company, best expressed the power of teamwork when he once told me, "If you could get all the people in the organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time."

Whenever I repeat this adage to a group of leaders, they immediately nod their heads, but in a desperate sort of way. They seem to grasp the truth of it while simultaneously surrendering to the impossibility of actually making it happen.

Fortunately, there is hope. Counter to conventional wisdom, the causes of dysfunction are both identifiable and curable. However, they don't die easily. Making a team functional and cohesive

answered "no" to many of these questions, your team may need some work.

The first step toward reducing politics and confusion within your team is to understand that there are five dysfunctions to contend with, and address each that applies, one by one.

The Dysfunctions

Dysfunction #1: Absence of Trust. Essentially, trust within a team is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is next to impossible. An absence of trust occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses, or needs for help.

Achieving vulnerability-based trust can be difficult, because in the course of career advancement and educational pursuits, many successful individuals sometimes become competitive with their peers and protective of their reputations. Often times, it is a challenge for executives to turn off those competitive instincts that run counter to building a cohesive team.

Creating trust is a process that takes time. In working to overcome a lack of trust, team members should come to know each other's working styles and personalities using nonintrusive exercises, such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, 360-degree feedback, and a Personal Histories Exercise, which is a simple exercise that helps team members relate to one another on a personal level by asking them to reveal something personal about themselves, such as their first job, favorite movie, etc.

Dysfunction #2: Fear of Conflict. Teams that are lacking on trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered, passionate debate about key issues, causing situations where team conflict can easily turn into veiled discussions and back-channel comments. In a work setting where team members do not openly air their opinions, inferior decisions are the result.

Unfortunately, conflict is considered taboo in many situations, especially at work. And, the higher up you go along the management chain, the more you witness individuals spending inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to avoid the kind of passionate debates that are essential to any successful team.

by Patrick Lencioni



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Addressing the Dysfunctions

To better understand the level of dysfunction you and your team may be facing, ask yourself these simple questions:

- Do team members openly and readily disclose their opinions?
- Are team meetings compelling and productive?
- Does the team come to decisions quickly and avoid getting bogged down by consensus?
- Do team members confront one another about their shortcomings?
- Do team members sacrifice their own interests for the good of the team?

Although no team is perfect and even the best teams sometimes struggle with one or more of these issues, the finest organizations constantly work to ensure that their answers are "yes." If you

The first step in conquering this dysfunction is to acknowledge that conflict is productive and many teams have a natural tendency to avoid it. As long as some team members believe that conflict is unnecessary, there is little chance it will occur. However, there are a number of tools and exercises that may help teams overcome the struggles of engaging in appropriate, ideological conflict. The Thomas Kilman Index is an excellent measure for understanding team members' different conflict styles. Once a team has bought in to the idea of conflict, it helps to role-play conflict by assigning a devil's advocate at each meeting.

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Dysfunction #3: Lack of Commitment. Without conflict, it is difficult for team members to commit to decisions, creating an environment where ambiguity prevails. Lack of direction and commitment can make employees...particularly star employees...disgruntled.

Often times a lack of commitment is caused by the desire for consensus and the need for clarity. It is important for teams to be able to find ways to achieve buy-in, even when complete agreement is not possible. Great teams make sure all the opinions are heard and then reach a decision based on the best solution. Certainty can impact commitment when teams are constantly searching for more information to make the "right" decision, which can paralyze a team.

Teams can create alignment by using a number of tools and exercises. Two exercises designed to promote a sense

of commitment are cascading messaging and deadlines. Cascading messaging forces teams to explicitly review the key decisions made during a meeting and agree on what needs to be communicated to employees and other constituencies. Team members then cascade the carefully articulated messages by sending consistent clear, messages to employees. Simple as they may seem, deadlines are also one of the best tools for ensuring commitment.

Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of Accountability. When teams don't commit to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven individuals hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that may seem counterproductive to the overall good of the team.

Team members who are close may hesitate holding one another accountable for fear it could jeopardize their relationships. Ironically, this only causes the relationships to deteriorate as team members begin to resent one another for not living up to expectations. 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.

Peer pressure helps in maintaining high standards, as does published goals and regular progress reviews.

Dysfunction #5: Inattention to Results. Team members naturally tend to put their own needs (ego, career

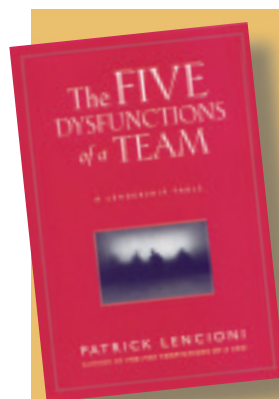
development, recognition, etc.) ahead of the collective goals of the team when individuals aren't held accountable. If a team has lost sight of the need for achievement, the business ultimately suffers.

The only way to conquer this dysfunction is to make desired results clear and reward those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results.

The Rewards

In today's age of nanosecond competitive advantage and rapid change, teamwork can provide a company with a variety of meaningful and sustainable competitive advantages. First, functional teams avoid wasting time talking about the wrong issues and revisiting the same topics over and over again because of lack of buy-in. Second, functional teams also make higher quality decisions and accomplish more in less time and with less distraction and frustration. Finally, "A" players rarely leave organizations where they are part of a cohesive team. If all of this sounds simple, that's because it is.

Successful teamwork is not about mastering subtle, sophisticated theories, but rather about 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 can overcome the natural tendencies that make teamwork so elusive and accomplish more than any mere group of individuals could ever imagine. ■



In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni offers a leadership fable that is as enthralling and instructive as his first two best-selling books, *The Five Temptations of a CEO* and *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive*. In this book, he turns his keen intellect and storytelling power to the fascinating, complex world of teams.

Lencioni's books are published by Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Company, and are available through most book stores.