



The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

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Author's Bio: Patrick Lencione is president of The Table Group, a San Francisco Bay Area management consulting firm, and author of the best selling books *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* and *The Five Temptations of a CEO*. Over the years, Pat has worked with hundreds of executive teams and CEOs- all struggling at one time or another, with the potential for dysfunction among their teams.

Author's big thought: This book is written in the form of a compelling leadership fable. Throughout the story, Lencione reveals the five dysfunctions that go to the very heart of why teams – even the best ones – often struggle. He outlines a powerful model and actionable steps that can be used to overcome these common hurdles and build a cohesive, effective team.

Book Notes:

Introduction:

- It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare. If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.
- Teamwork is as elusive as it has ever been in most organizations. The fact remains that teams, because they are made up of imperfect human beings, are inherently dysfunctional.
- Building a strong team is both possible and remarkably simple. But is it also painfully difficult.
- The five Dysfunctions of a Team begins with a story written in the context of a realistic but fictional organization that allows readers to learn and understand how these principles can be applied in a non-theoretical, real-world environment, where the pace of work and the volume of daily distractions make even the simplest of tasks seem arduous.

The Story

DecisionTech is a high tech company located in Half Moon Bay. They have more cash, more experienced executives, better technology, and more connections than any of their competitors, and yet at least two of them were way ahead of them in the market. They need to increase revenue, profitability, and customer acquisition and retention and maybe even put themselves in a position for an IPO. But none of this would happen if they didn't start functioning as a team.

DecisionTech's new CEO, Kathryn, understands that a strong team spends considerable time together, and that by doing so, they actually save time by eliminating confusion and minimizing redundant effort and communication. Added together, Kathryn and her team spend approximately eight hours each quarter in regularly scheduled meetings, which amounts to fewer than three days per month. As little as this seems when considered as a whole, most management teams balk at spending this much time together, preferring to do "real work" instead.

The Model: Understanding and Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions

Dysfunction 1: Absence of Trust

- Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible.
- 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. The vulnerabilities the author is referring to include weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes, and requests for help.
- It is only when team members are truly comfortable being exposed to one another that they begin to act without concern for protecting themselves. As a result, they can focus their energy and attention completely on the job at hand, rather than on being strategically disingenuous or political with one another.
- The costs of failing to do this are great. 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.
- Vulnerability-based trust cannot be achieved overnight. It requires shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members. However, by taking a focused approach, a team can dramatically accelerate the process and achieve trust in relatively short order.

Here are a few tools that can bring this about.

Personal Histories Exercise

- In less than an hour, a team can take the first steps toward developing trust. This low risk exercise requires nothing more than going around the table during a meeting and having team members answer a short list of questions about themselves. Questions need not be overly sensitive in nature and might include the following: number of siblings, hometown, and unique challenges of childhood, favorite hobbies, first job, and worst job. Team members begin to relate to one another on a more personal basis, and see one another as human beings with life stories and interesting backgrounds. This encourages greater empathy and understanding, and discourages unfair and inaccurate behavioral attributions. (Minimum time required: 30

minutes.)

Team Effectiveness Exercise

- This exercise requires team members to identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team, as well as the one area that they must either improve on or eliminate for the good of the team. All members then report their responses, focusing on one person at a time, usually beginning with the team leader.
- Though the Team Effectiveness Exercise certainly requires some degree of trust in order to be useful, even a relatively dysfunctional team can often make it work with surprisingly little tension. (Minimum time required: 60 minutes.)

Personality and behavioral Preference Profiles

- These help break down barriers by allowing people to better understand and empathize with one another.
- The best profiling tool, in the author's opinion, is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

360-Degree Feedback

- They are riskier than any of the tools or exercises described so far because they call for peers to make specific judgments and provide one another with constructive criticism.
- A 360-degree program work, should be used as a developmental tool, otherwise it can take on dangerous political undertones.
- *Experiential Team Exercises* Ropes courses and other experiential team activities

Members of teams with an absence of trust...

- Conceal their weaknesses and mistakes from one another
- Hesitate to ask for help or provide constructive feedback
- Hesitate to offer help outside their own areas of responsibility
- Jump to conclusions about the intentions and aptitudes of others without attempting to clarify them
- Fail to recognize and tap into one another's skills and experiences. Waste time and energy managing their behaviors for effect
- Hold grudges
- Dread meetings and find reasons to avoid spending time together

Members of trusting teams... .

- Admit weaknesses and mistakes.
- Ask for help
- Accept questions and input about their areas of responsibility
- Give one another the benefit of the doubt before arriving at a negative conclusion
- Take risks in offering feedback and assistance

- Appreciate and tap into one another's skills and experiences
- Focus time and energy on important issues, not politics
- Offer and accept apologies without hesitation
- Look forward to meetings and other opportunities to work as a group

The Role of the Leader

- The most important action that a leader must take to encourage the building of trust on a team is to demonstrate vulnerability first. This requires that a leader risk losing face in front of the team, so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves. What is more, team leaders must create an environment that does not punish vulnerability.
- Displays of vulnerability on the part of a team leader must be genuine

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.

Dysfunction 2: Fear of Conflict

- 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.
- 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.
- Ironically, teams that avoid ideological conflict often do so in order to avoid hurting team members' feelings, and then end up encouraging dangerous tension. 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.
- People avoid conflict in the name of efficiency, but healthy conflict is actually a time saver. Contrary to the notion that teams waste time and energy arguing; those that avoid conflict actually doom themselves to revisiting issues again and again without resolution.

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 2

- The first step is acknowledging that conflict is productive, and that many teams have a tendency to avoid it. There are a few simple methods for making conflict more common and productive.
- *Mining* - Members of teams that tend to avoid conflict must have the courage and confidence to call out sensitive issues and force team members to work through them. This requires a

degree of objectivity during meetings and a commitment to staying with the conflict until it is resolved.

- *Real-Time Permission* - recognize when the people engaged in conflict are becoming uncomfortable with the level of discord, and then interrupt to remind them that what they are doing is necessary.
- Once the discussion or meeting has ended, it is helpful to remind participants that the conflict they just engaged in is good for the team and not something to avoid in the future.

The Role of the Leader

- One of the most difficult challenges that a leader faces in promoting healthy conflict is the desire to protect members from harm. This leads to premature interruption of disagreements, and prevents team members from developing coping skills for dealing with conflict themselves.
- It is key that leaders demonstrate restraint when their people engage in conflict, and allow resolution to occur naturally, as messy as it can sometimes be. This can be a challenge because many leaders feel that they are somehow failing in their jobs by losing control of their teams during conflict.
- A leader's ability to personally model appropriate conflict behavior is essential. By avoiding conflict when it is necessary and productive something many executives do-a team leader will encourage this dysfunction to thrive.

Teams that fear conflict. . .

- Have boring meetings
- Create environments where back-channel politics and personal attacks
- thrive
- Ignore controversial topics that are critical to team success
- Fail to tap into all the opinions and perspectives of team members
- Waste time and energy with posturing and interpersonal risk management

Teams that engage in conflict.. .

- Have lively, interesting meetings
- Extract and exploit the ideas of all team members.
- Solve real problems quickly
- Minimize politics
- Put critical topics on the table for discussion

Connection to Dysfunction 3

- By engaging in productive conflict and tapping into team members' perspectives and opinions, a team can confidently commit and buy in to a decision knowing that they have benefited from everyone's ideas.

Dysfunction 3: Lack of Commitment

- 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. They leave meetings confident that no one on the team is quietly harboring doubts about whether to support the actions agreed on.

- The two greatest causes of the lack of commitment are the desire for consensus and the need for certainty:
 - *Consensus*. 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. This creates willingness to rally around whatever decision is ultimately made by the group. And when that is not possible due to an impasse, the leader of the team is allowed to make the call.
 - *Certainty*. Great teams also pride themselves on being able to unite behind decisions and commit to clear courses of action even when there is little assurance about whether the decision is correct. That's because they understand the old military axiom that *a* decision is better than *no* decision. They also realize that it is better to make a decision boldly and be wrong-and then change direction with equal boldness-than it is to waffle.
- Only when everyone has put their opinions and perspectives on the table can the team confidently commit to a decision knowing that it has tapped into the collective wisdom of the entire group.
- It is important to understand that one of the greatest consequences for an *executive* team that does not commit to clear decisions is irresolvable discord deeper in the organization. More than any of the dysfunctions, this one creates dangerous ripple effects for subordinates. When an executive team fails to achieve buy-in from all team members, even if the disparities that exist seem relatively small, employees who report to those executives will inevitably clash when they try to interpret marching orders that are not clearly aligned with those of colleagues in other departments. Like a vortex, small gaps between executives high up in an organization become major discrepancies by the time they reach employees below.

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 3

- A team ensures commitment by taking specific steps to maximize clarity and achieve buy-in, and resisting the lure of consensus or certainty. Here are a few simple but effective tools and principles:
 - *Cascading Messaging* - At the end of a staff meeting or off-site, a team should explicitly review the key decisions made during the meeting, and agree on what needs to be communicated to employees or other constituencies about those decisions. They need to clarify specific outcomes before putting them into action. Moreover, they become clear on which of the decisions should remain confidential, and which must be communicated quickly and comprehensively. Finally, by leaving meetings clearly aligned with one another,

leaders send a powerful and welcomed message to employees who have grown accustomed to receiving inconsistent and even contradictory statements from managers who attended the same meeting. (Minimum time required: 10 minutes.)

- *Deadlines* - One of the best tools for ensuring commitment is the use of clear deadlines for when decisions will be made, and honoring those dates with discipline and rigidity. Committing to deadlines for intermediate decisions and milestones is just as important as final deadlines, because it ensures that misalignment among team members is identified and addressed before the costs are too great.
- *Contingency and Worst-Case Scenario* - *Clarifying* the worst-case scenario for a decision they are struggling to make. This usually allows them to reduce their fears by helping them realize that the costs of an incorrect decision are survivable, and far less damaging than they had imagined.
- *Low-Risk Exposure Therapy* - Another relevant exercise for a commitment-phobic team is the demonstration of 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.

A team that fails to commit...

- Creates ambiguity among the team about direction and priorities
- Watches windows of opportunity close due to excessive analysis and unnecessary delay
- Breeds lack of confidence and fear of failure
- Revisits discussions and decisions again and again
- Encourages second-guessing among team members

A team that commits...

- Creates clarity around direction and priorities
- Aligns the entire team around common objectives
- Develops an ability to learn from mistakes
- Takes advantage of opportunities before competitors do
- Moves forward without hesitation
- Changes direction without hesitation or guilt

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.

Dysfunction 4: Avoidance of Accountability

- *Accountability* in the context of teamwork refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team.
- The essence of this dysfunction is the unwillingness of team members to tolerate the interpersonal discomfort that accompanies calling a peer on his or her behavior and the more general tendency to avoid difficult conversations. Members of great teams overcome these natural inclinations, opting instead to "enter the danger" with one another.
- Team members who are particularly close to one another sometimes hesitate to hold one another accountable precisely because they fear jeopardizing a valuable personal relationship. Ironically, this only causes the relationship to deteriorate as team members begin to resent one another for not living up to expectations and for allowing the standards of the group to erode.
- 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.
- The most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team is peer pressure.

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 4

- The key to overcoming this dysfunction is adhering to a few classic management tools that are as effective as they are simple.
- *Publication of Goals and Standards* - A good way to make it easier for team members to hold one another accountable is to clarify publicly exactly what the team needs to achieve, who needs to deliver what, and how everyone must behave in order to succeed.
- *Simple and Regular Progress Reviews* - Team members should regularly communicate with one another, either verbally or in written form, about how they feel their teammates are doing against stated objectives and standards. Relying on them to do so on their own, with no clear expectations or structure, is inviting the potential for the avoidance of accountability.
- *Team Rewards* - By shifting rewards away from individual performance to team achievement, the team can create a culture of accountability.

A team that avoids accountability. . .

- Creates resentment among team members who have different standards of performance
- Encourages mediocrity
- Misses deadlines and key deliverables
- Places an undue burden on the team leader as the sole source of discipline

A team that holds one another accountable...

- Ensures that poor performers feel pressure to improve
- Identifies potential problems quickly by questioning one another's approaches without hesitation
- Establishes respect among team members who are held to the same high standards
- Avoids excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action

The Role of the Leader

- One of the most difficult challenges for a leader who wants to instill accountability on a team is to encourage and allow the team to serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism.
- Once a leader has created a culture of accountability on a team, however, he or she must be willing to serve as the ultimate arbiter of discipline when the team itself fails.
- It must be clear members that accountability has not been relegated to a consensus approach, but merely to a shared team responsibility, and that the leader of the team will not hesitate to step in when it is necessary.

Connection to Dysfunction 5

- An absence of accountability is an invitation to team members to shift their attention to areas other than collective results.

Dysfunction 5: Inattention to Results

- The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group. An unrelenting focus on specific objectives and clearly defined outcomes is a requirement for any team that judges itself on performance.
- This dysfunction refers to a far broader definition of results, one that is related to outcome-based performance.
- While profit may be the ultimate measure of results for a corporation, the goals and objectives that executives set for themselves along the way constitute a more representative example of the results it strives for as a team. Ultimately, these goals drive profit.
- *Team status.* For members of some teams, merely being part of the group is enough to keep them satisfied.
- *Individual status.* This refers to the familiar tendency of people to focus on enhancing their own positions or career prospects at the expense of their team. A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals.
- No amount of trust, conflict, commitment, or accountability can compensate for a lack of desire to win.

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 5

- A team goes about ensuring that its attention is focused on results by making results clear, and rewarding only those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results.
- *Public Declaration of Results*
- *Results-Based Rewards* -An effective way to ensure that team members focus their attention on results is to tie their rewards, especially compensation, to the achievement of specific outcomes. Letting someone take home a bonus merely for "trying hard," even in the absence of results, sends a message that achieving the outcome may not be terribly important after all.

A team that is not focused on results...

- Stagnates/fails to grow
- Rarely defeats competitors
- Loses achievement-oriented employees
- Encourages team members to focus on their own careers and individual goals
- Is easily distracted

A team that focuses on collective results. . .

- Retains achievement-oriented employees
- Minimizes individualistic behavior
- Enjoys success and suffers failure acutely
- Benefits from individuals who subjugate their own goals/interests for the good of the team
- Avoids distractions

The Role of the Leader

- 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 that as permission to do the same for themselves.

Summary

- The reality remains that 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 of 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.

Recommendation: I heard Pat speak at the HR.com conference. He is as compelling in person as he is a writer. There is no better way to learn than through stories. The lessons in this book are very valuable in real life situations.

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About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD

Many CEO's find themselves asking "What now?" to sensitive situations that only an experienced former CEO can understand. Frumi is brought in to solve problems and often remains to work with you, as your confidante and secret weapon. She has an uncanny knack of getting to the heart of your corporate climate and maximizing your team's performance, profitability and sustainability.

To schedule a free ***Break From the Pack to Success*** consultation email ceocondfidante@frumi.com or call 949-729-1577