

THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

by Patrick Lencioni

It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage.

A fractured team is just like a broken arm or leg; fixing it is always painful, and sometimes you have to re-break it to make it heal correctly. The re-break hurts a lot more than the initial break, because you have to do it on purpose.

Issues that are preventing people from acting like a team need to be addressed.

Trust is the foundation of real teamwork. Great teams do not hold back with one another, they air dirty laundry, admit mistakes, weaknesses and concerns without fear of reprisal. Signs of a trust problem: lack of debate during staff meetings and other interactions among the team.

Teamwork begins by building trust. The only way to do that is to overcome the need for invulnerability.

A team is **not** a collection of individuals who are foremost interested in enhancing his or her individual status or ego. The key is to make the collective ego greater than the individual ones.

Politics is when people choose their words and actions based on how they want others to react rather than based on what they really think.

When there is no trust, then there is no engagement in open, constructive, ideological conflict. There might be tension, but almost no constructive conflict.

Conflict is important when committing to a plan or a decision and getting everybody to clearly buy into it. When people don't unload their opinions and feel like they've been listened to they won't really get on board.

Consensus is horrible if it becomes an attempt to please everyone. (It may turn into displeasing everyone equally.)

Most reasonable people don't have to get their way in a discussion, they just need to be heard, and to know that their input was considered and responded to.

We have to hold each other accountable for high standards of performance and behavior. Don't get into the trap of avoiding interpersonal discomfort.

The single most important arena or setting for conflict are meetings. We must learn to engage in passionate, unfiltered debate, in productive, ideological conflict during meetings. This ability will determine our future. Every staff meeting should be loaded with conflict. They shouldn't be boring! If there is nothing worth debating, then don't have a meeting!

The leader needs to:

- be intolerant of behavior that demonstrates an absence of trust or a focus on individual ego
- encourage conflict, driving for clear commitments
- expect all to hold each other accountable
- call out bad behavior
- challenge people to decide what is more important – helping the team win or advancing one's own career

When a company has a collection of good managers who don't act like a team, it can create a dilemma for them, and for the company. It leads to confusion about who their first team is. The first team has to be the executive team (leadership team), and not the different ministry teams.

Do we have our resources in the right place to make this work?

Why do you get so defensive when someone makes a comment about your work?

Some people are hard to hold accountable because

- they are so helpful
- they get defensive
- they are intimidating

Trust is knowing that when a team member does push you, they are doing it because they care about the team.

Unacceptable behavior of team colleagues:

- no respect for colleagues – disrespectful behavior
- no willingness to open up
- during meetings extremely distracting and demotivating impact on all (like doing things on their laptop, not concentrating on the meeting, body language, etc)

The departure of even the most difficult employee provoke some degree of mourning and self-doubt among their peers. Be aware of that fact!

When do we tolerate behavior although we know that it damages the team and the productivity of people?

Anyone ever gets completely used to conflict. If it's not a little uncomfortable, then it's not real. The key is to keep doing it anyway. If it comes down to a little interpersonal discomfort versus politics, opt for the discomfort!

It's going to take more than a few weeks of behavioral change before a tangible impact on the bottom line can be seen. It needs discipline and persistence to keep going on.

The goal: to end debates with crystal-clear agreements and no sense of lingering bitterness. The larger the company, the smaller the team should be at the top. Eight people are barely manageable, in fact they are too many.

Building a cohesive team is difficult, but not complicated. Keeping it simple is critical.

The five dysfunctions:

1. **Absence of trust** – an unwillingness to be vulnerable. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation of trust.
2. **Fear of conflict** – teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas.

3. **Lack of commitment** – without having their opinions aired in the course of passionate and open debate, team members rarely buy in and commit to decisions, though they feign agreement during meetings.
4. **Avoidance of accountability** – without committing to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven people often hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that seem counterproductive to the good of the team.
5. **Inattention to results** – when team members put their individual needs (ego, career, recognition) or even the needs of their divisions above the collective goals of the team.

All of this requires levels of discipline and persistence that few teams can muster!

1. **Absence of trust**

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.

Teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another, and be confident that their respective vulnerabilities will not be used against them. Teams that lack trust waste much time and energy managing their behaviors and interactions within the group. They

- tend to avoid meetings
- are reluctant to take risks
- their morale is low
- the turnover is high

Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 1:

- shared experiences over time
- multiple instances of follow-through and credibility
- in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members

Tools:

a. Personal histories exercise – this encourages greater empathy and understanding

- number of siblings
- home town
- unique challenges of childhood
- favorite hobbies
- first job, worst job, ie

b. Team effectiveness exercise –

- team members to identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team;
- one area that they must either improve on or eliminate for the good of the team

c. Personality and behavioral preference profiles

d. 360 degree feed back –

peers to make specific judgments and provide one another with constructive criticism. Be aware: it should be completely divorced from compensation and formal performance evaluation. It is a developmental tool! Allowing to identify strengths and weaknesses without any repercussions.

e. Experimental team exercises - creative outdoor activities can enhance teamwork.

The most important action that a leader must take to encourage the building of trust on a team is to demonstrate vulnerability first. It requires the risk of losing face in front of the team. Don't manipulate team members emotionally.

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

2. Fear of conflict

All great relationship, the ones that last over time, require productive conflict in order to grow. 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. Still it can have passion, emotion and frustration.

To engage in productive conflict has one purpose – to produce the best possible solution in the shortest period of time.

Teams that avoid ideological conflict often do so in order to avoid hurting team members' feelings and then end up encouraging dangerous tension. Healthy conflict is a time saver.

Suggestions for overcoming dysfunction 2:

- acknowledge that conflict is productive
- have courage and confidence to call out sensitive issues and force team members to work through them
- requires a degree of objectivity during meetings and a commitment to staying with the conflict until it is resolved
- real-time permission – don't retreat from healthy debate, especially encourage team members when conflict becomes uncomfortable with the level of discord; give participants the confidence to continue; that drains tension from a productive

but difficult interchange. Once the discussion has ended remind the participants that the conflict they just engaged in is good for the team!

- Appoint a conflict-miner

A difficult challenge for the leader 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. By depriving the participants of an opportunity to develop conflict management skills the relationships will be strained more. Therefore: leaders must demonstrate restraint when their people engage in conflict and allow resolution to occur naturally. Essential is also the leaders' ability to personally model appropriate conflict behavior.

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

3. Lack of commitment

Commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in.

Great teams make clear and timely decisions, they move forward with complete buy-in from every team member.

The two greatest causes of the lack of commitment:

- a. **Desire for consensus** – you need to find ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible. 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. That creates a willingness to rally around whatever decision is ultimately made. When the group doesn't come to a decision, the leader is allowed to make the call.
- b. **Need for certainty** – you need to be able to unite behind decisions and commit to clear courses of action even when there is little assurance about whether the decision is correct. Reason: a decision is better than no decision. Conflict underlies the willingness to commit without perfect information. Often teams have all the information they need, but it resides in the hearts and minds of the team itself. It must be extracted through unfiltered debate. Everyone has to put their opinions and perspectives on the table – that is the collective wisdom of the entire group. One of the greatest consequences for an executive team that does **not** commit to clear decisions is unresolvable discord deeper in the organization. Small gaps between executives high up in an organization become major discrepancies by the time they reach employees below.

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

At the end of the staff meeting explicitly review the key decisions made during the meeting and agree on what needs to be communicated to other employees (members). The use of deadlines for when decisions will be made is one of the best tools for ensuring commitment. Honor those dates with discipline and rigidity. Discuss contingency plans, clarify the worst-case scenario for a decision people are struggling to make. With a team low on commitment start with relatively low-risk situations, increase the decisiveness gradually. The leader must be comfortable with the prospect of making a decision that ultimately turns out to be wrong. Don't place too high a premium on certainty or consensus. Teammates must have a clear sense of what is expected.

4. Avoidance of accountability

Accountability is the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team. The essence of this dysfunction: the unwillingness of team members to tolerate the interpersonal discomfort. Great fear of jeopardizing a valuable personal relationship.

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 is the most effective means for maintaining high standards of performance.

Tools:

- Publication of goals and standards – clarifying publicly exactly what the team needs to achieve, who needs to deliver it, etc
- Simple and regular progress review – regular communication
- Team rewards – not individual ones

The leader must encourage and allow the team to serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism. Don't leave yourself as the only source of discipline. This is a danger for strong leaders!! Still – if the team fails to discipline or hold accountable the leader needs to do it.

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

5. Inattention to results

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

Other focuses than results:

- Team status – for some it is enough to be part of the team. Plenty of teams fall prey to the lure of status
- Individual status – tendency of people to focus on enhancing their own positions or career prospects

A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals. 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.

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

Therefore:

- Make results clear
- Reward only those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results

Teams that say “we’ll do our best” are subtly if not purposefully preparing themselves for failure. The leader must set the tone for a focus on results. Team leaders must be selfless and objective.

Teamwork ultimately comes down to practicing a small set of principles over a long period of time. Success is embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence.

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.

A strong team spends time together (considerable time!!), and by doing so they actually save time by eliminating confusion and minimizing redundant effort and communication.

The ultimate test of a great team is results!