

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

By Patrick Lencioni

Points to Consider

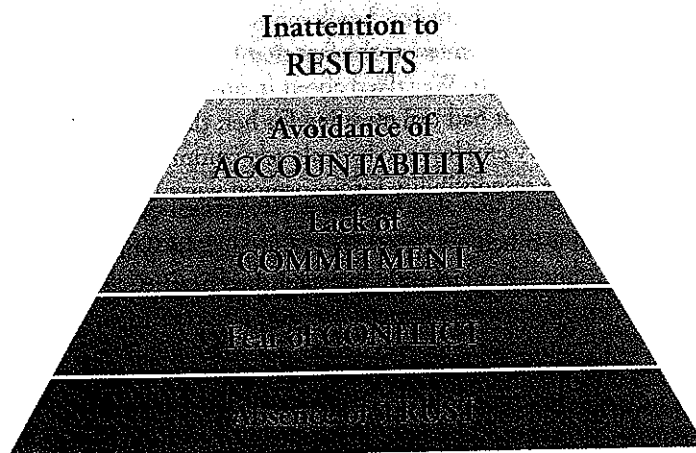
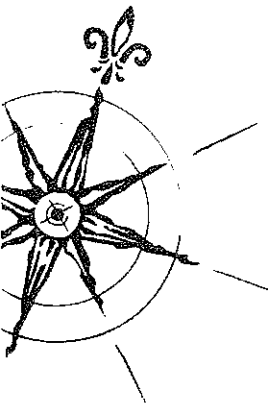
1. What factors impact your comfort level in being able to show vulnerability within a group?
2. What are some strategies for encouraging ideological conflict, while discouraging personality-based conflict in a group?
3. What are some strategies for encouraging buy-in, when a consensus decision isn't possible?
4. Lencioni refers to peer pressure as "the most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team." Do you agree? Is there a point at which peer pressure crosses an ethical boundary? Explain.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

An Overview of the Model

In the course of my experience working with CEOs and their teams, two critical truths have become clear to me. 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.

These dysfunctions can be mistakenly interpreted as five distinct issues that can be addressed in isolation of the others. But in reality they form an interrelated model, making susceptibility to even one of them potentially lethal for the success of a team. A cursory overview of each dysfunction, and the model they comprise, should make this clearer.



1. The first dysfunction is an **absence of trust** among team members. Essentially, this stems from their unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust.
2. This failure to build trust is damaging because it sets the tone for the second dysfunction: **fear of conflict**. Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas. Instead, they resort to veiled discussions and guarded comments.
3. A lack of healthy conflict is a problem because it ensures the third dysfunction of a team: **lack of commitment**. Without having aired their opinions in the course of passionate and open debate, team members rarely, if ever, buy in and commit to decisions, though they may feign agreement during meetings.
4. Because of this lack of real commitment and buy-in, team members develop an **avoidance of accountability**, the fourth dysfunction. 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. Failure to hold one another accountable creates an environment where the fifth dysfunction can thrive. **Inattention to results** occurs when team members put their individual needs (such as ego, career development, or recognition) or even the needs of their divisions above the collective goals of a team.

And so, like a chain with just one link broken, teamwork deteriorates if even a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish.

Another way to understand this model is to take the opposite approach—a positive one—and 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.

If this sounds simple, it's because it is simple, at least in theory. In practice, however, it is extremely difficult because it requires levels of discipline and persistence that few teams can muster.

Before diving into each of the dysfunctions and exploring ways to overcome them, it might be helpful to assess your team and identify where the opportunities for improvement lie in your organization.

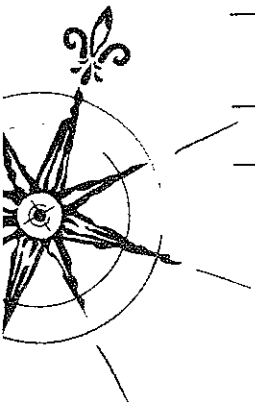
Team Assessment

The questionnaire on the following pages is a straightforward diagnostic tool for helping you evaluate your team's susceptibility to the five dysfunctions. At the end of the questionnaire, there is a simple explanation of how to tabulate the results and interpret the possible conclusions. If possible, have all members of your team complete the diagnostic and review the results, discussing discrepancies in the responses and identifying any clear implications for the team.

Instructions: Use the scale below to indicate how each statement applies to your team. It is important to evaluate the statements honestly and without over-thinking your answers.

3 = Usually 2 = Sometimes 1 = Rarely

- _____ 1. Team members are passionate and unguarded in their discussion of issues.
- _____ 2. Team members call out one another's deficiencies or unproductive behaviors.
- _____ 3. Team members know what their peers are working on and how they contribute to the collective good of the team.
- _____ 4. Team members quickly and genuinely apologize to one another when they say or do something inappropriate or possibly damaging to the team.
- _____ 5. Team members willingly make sacrifices (such as budget, turf, head count) in their departments or areas of expertise for the good of the team.
- _____ 6. Team members openly admit their weaknesses and mistakes.
- _____ 7. Team meetings are compelling, and not boring.
- _____ 8. Team members leave meetings confident that their peers are completely committed to the decisions that were agreed on, even if there was initial disagreement.
- _____ 9. Morale is significantly affected by the failure to achieve team goals.
- _____ 10. During team meetings, the most important—and difficult—issues are put on the table to be resolved.
- _____ 11. Team members are deeply concerned about the prospect of letting down their peers.
- _____ 12. Team members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them.
- _____ 13. Team members end discussions with clear and specific resolutions and calls to action.
- _____ 14. Team members challenge one another about their plans and approaches.
- _____ 15. Team members are slow to seek credit for their own contributions, but quick to point out those to others.



Scoring

Combine your scores for the preceding statements as indicated below.

Dysfunction 1: Absence of Trust	Dysfunction 2: Fear of Conflict	Dysfunction 3: Lack of Commitment	Dysfunction 4: Playing Not to Lose	Dysfunction 5: Inattention to Results
Statement 4	Statement 1	Statement 3	Statement 2	Statement 5
Statement 6	Statement 7	Statement 8	Statement 11	Statement 9
Statement 12	Statement 10	Statement 13	Statement 14	Statement 15
Total	Total	Total	Total	Total

A score of 8 or 9 is a probable indication that the dysfunction is not a problem for your team.

A score of 6 or 7 indicates that the dysfunction could be a problem.

A score of 3 to 5 is probably an indication that the dysfunction needs to be addressed.

Regardless of your scores, it is important to keep in mind that every team needs constant work, because without it, even the best ones deviate toward dysfunction.

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.

Unfortunately, the word *trust* is used—and misused—so often that it has lost some of its impact and begins to sound like motherhood and apple pie. That is why it is important to be very specific about what is meant by trust.

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. For instance, one might "trust" that a given teammate will produce high-quality work because he has always done so in the past.

As desirable as this may be, it is not enough to represent the kind of trust that is characteristic of a great team. It requires team members to make themselves vulnerable to one another, and be confident that their respective vulnerabilities will not be used against them. The vulnerabilities I'm referring to include weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes, and requests for help.

As "soft" as all of this might sound, 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.

Achieving vulnerability-based trust is difficult because in the course of career advancement and education, 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.

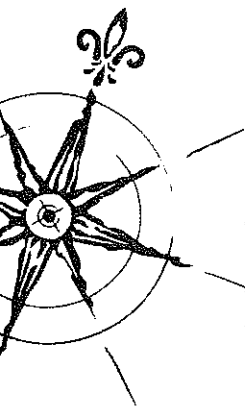
The cost of failing to do this are great. Teams that lack trust waste inordinate amounts of time and energy managing their behaviors and interactions within the group. They tend to dread team meetings, and are reluctant to take risks in asking for or offering assistance to others. As a result, morale on distrusting teams is usually quite low, and unwanted turnover is high.

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 policies
- Offer and accept apologies without hesitation
- Look forward to meetings and other opportunities to work as a group



Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 1

How does a team go about building trust? Unfortunately, vulnerability-based trust cannot be achieved overnight. It requires shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and 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, unique challenges of childhood, favorite hobbies, first job, and worst job. Simply by describing these relatively innocuous attributes or experiences, 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. It is amazing how little some team members know about one another, and how just a small amount of information begins to break down barriers. (Minimum time required: 30 minutes.)

Team Effectiveness Exercise

This exercise is more rigorous and relevant than the previous one, but may involve more risk. It requires team members to identify the single most important contribution that each of the peers makes to the team, as well as the one area that they must either improve upon 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.

While this exercise may seem somewhat intrusive and dangerous at first glance, it is remarkable how manageable it can be and how much useful information, both constructive and positive, can be extracted in about an hour. And 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

Some of the most effective and lasting tools for building trust on a team are profiles of team members' behavioral preferences and personality styles. These help break down barriers by allowing people to better understand and empathize with one another.

The best profiling tool, in my opinion, is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). However, a number of others are popular among different audiences. The purpose of most of these tools is to provide practical and scientifically valid behavioral descriptions of various team members according to the diverse ways that they think, speak, and act. Some of the best characteristics of tools like the MBTI are their nonjudgmental nature (no type is better than another, although they differ substantially), their basis in research (they are not founded upon astrology or new age science), and the extent to which participants take an active role in identifying their own types (they don't simply receive a computer printout or test score that alone dictates their type). Many of these tools do require the participation of a licensed consultant, which is important to avoid the misuse of their powerful implications and applications. (Minimum time required: 4 hours.)

360-Degree Feedback

These tools have become popular over the past twenty years and can produce powerful results for a team. 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. The key to making a 360-degree program work, in my opinion, is divorcing it entirely from compensation and formal performance evaluation. Rather, it should be used as a developmental tool, one that allows employees to identify strengths and weaknesses without any repercussions. By being even slightly connected to formal performance evaluation or compensation, 360-degree programs can take on dangerous political undertones.

Experiential Team Exercises

Ropes courses and other experiential team activities seem to have lost some of their luster over the course of the past ten years, and deservedly so. Still, many teams do them with the hope of building trust. And while there are certainly some benefits derived from rigorous and creative outdoor activities involving collective support and cooperation, those benefits derived from rigorous and creative outdoor activities involving collective support and cooperation, those benefits do not always translate directly to the working world. That being said, experiential teams exercises can be valuable tools for enhancing teamwork as long as they are layered upon more fundamental and relevant processes.

While each of these tools and exercises can have a significant short-term impact on a team's ability to build trust, they must be accompanied by regular follow-up in the course of daily work. Individual developmental areas must be revisited to ensure that progress does not lose momentum. Even on a strong team—and perhaps especially so—atrophy can lead to the erosion of trust.

The Role of a 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. Even well-intentioned teams can subtly discourage trust by chastising one another for admissions of weakness or failure. Finally, displays of vulnerability on the part of a team leader must be genuine; they cannot be staged. One of the best ways to lose the trust of a team is to feign vulnerability in order to manipulate the emotions of others.

Connection to Dysfunction 2

How does all of this relate to the next dysfunction, the fear of conflict? 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.

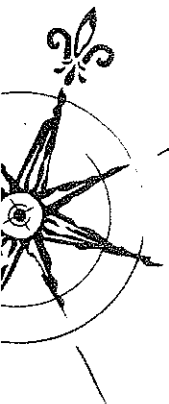
Dysfunction 2: Fear of Conflict

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.

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

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. However, it can have many of the same external qualities of interpersonal conflict—passion, emotion, and frustration—so much that an outside observer might easily mistake it for unproductive discord.

But 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.

It is also ironic that so many people avoid conflict in the name of efficiency, because 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. They often ask team members to take their issues "off-line," which seems to be a euphemism for avoiding dealing with an important topic, only to have it raised again at the next meeting.

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

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 2

How does a team go about developing the ability and willingness to engage in healthy conflict? The first step is acknowledging that conflict is productive, and that many teams have a tendency to avoid it. As long as some team members believe that conflict is unnecessary, there is little chance that it will occur. But beyond mere recognition, there are a few simple methods for making conflict more common and productive.

Mining

Members of team that tend to avoid conflict must occasionally assume the role of a "miner of conflict"—someone who extracts buried disagreements within the team and sheds the light of day on them. They 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. Some teams may want to assign a member of the team to take on this responsibility during a given meeting or discussion.

Real-Time Permission

In the process of mining for conflict, team members need to coach one another not to retreat from healthy debate. One simple but effective way to do this is to 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. As simple and paternal as this may sound, it is a remarkably effective tool for draining tension from a productive but difficult interchange, giving the participants the confidence to continue. And 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.

Other Tools

As mentioned earlier in this section, there are a variety of personality style and behavioral preference tools that allow team members to better understand one another. Because most of these include descriptions of how different types deal with conflict, they can be useful for helping people anticipate their approach or resistance to it. Another tool that specifically relates to conflict is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, commonly referred to as the TKI.

It allows team members to understand natural inclinations around conflict so they can make more strategic choices about which approaches are most appropriate in different situations.

The Role of a 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. This is not unlike parents who overprotect their children from quarrels or altercations with siblings. In many cases, it serves only to strain the relationships by depriving the participants of an opportunity to develop conflict management skills. It also leaves them hungry for resolution that never occurs.

Therefore, 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.

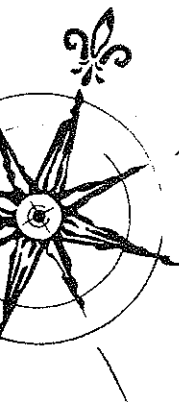
Finally, as trite as it may sound, a leader's ability to personally model appropriate conflict behavior is essential. By avoiding conflict when it is necessary and productive—something many executives do—a team leader will encourage this dysfunction to thrive.

Connection to Dysfunction 3

How does all this relate to the next dysfunction, the lack of commitment? 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 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. Great teams ensure that everyone's ideas are genuinely considered, which then creates a willingness to rally around whatever decision is ultimately made by the group. And when that is not possible due to 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.

Contrast this with the behavior of dysfunctional teams that try to hedge their bets and delay important decisions until they have enough data to feel certain that they are making the right decision. As prudent as this might seem, it is dangerous because of the paralysis and lack of confidence it breeds within a team.

It is important to remember that conflict underlies the willingness to commit without perfect information. In many cases, teams have all the information they need, but it resides within the hearts and minds of the team itself and must be extracted through unfiltered debate. Only when everyone has put their opinions and perspectives on the table can the team confidently commit a decision knowing that it has tapped into the collective wisdom of the entire group.

Regardless of whether it is caused by the need for consensus or certainty, it is important that one of the greatest consequences for an *executive* team that does not commit to clear decisions is unresolvable 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 discrepancies by the time they reach employees below.

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

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 3

How does a team go about ensuring 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

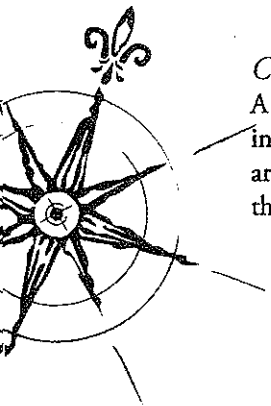
One of the most valuable disciplines that any team can adopt takes just a few minutes and is absolutely free. At the end of a staff meeting or off-site, a team should explicitly review the key decisions made during the meeting, and agree on what needs to be communicated to employees or other constituencies about those decisions. What often happens during this exercise is that members of the team learn that they are not all on the same page about what has been agreed upon and that 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

As simple as it seems, 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. The worst enemy of a team that is susceptible to this dysfunction is ambiguity, and timing is one of the most critical factors that must be made clear. What is more, 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 Analysis

A team that struggles with commitment can begin overcoming this tendency by briefly discussing contingency plans up front or, better yet, 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. When teams force themselves to make decisions after substantial discussion but little analysis or research, they usually come to realize that the quality of the decision they made was better than they had expected. What is more, they learn that the decision would have been much different had the team engaged in lengthy, time-consuming study. This is not to say that research and analysis are not necessary or important, but rather that teams with this dysfunction tend to overvalue them.

The Role of a Leader

More than any other member of the team, 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.

Connection to Dysfunction 4

How does all of this relate to the next dysfunction, the avoidance of accountability? 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 brought in to or made clear in the first place.

Dysfunction 4: Avoidance of Accountability

Accountability is a buzzword that has lost much of its meaning as it has become as overused as terms like *empowerment* and *quality*. In the context of teamwork, however, it 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.

Of course, this is easier said than done, even among cohesive teams with strong personal relationships. In fact, 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.

As politically incorrect as it sounds, the most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team is peer pressure. One of the benefits is the reduction of the need for excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action. More than any policy or system, there is nothing like the fear of letting down respected teammates that motivates people to improve their performance.

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

Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 4

How does a team go about ensuring accountability? 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. The enemy of accountability is ambiguity, and even when a team has initially committed to a plan or a set of behavioral standards, it is important to keep those agreements in the open so that no one can easily ignore them.

Simple and Regular Progress Reviews

A little structure goes a long way toward helping people take action that they might not otherwise be inclined to do. This is especially true when it comes to giving people feedback on their behavior or performance. 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 teams can create a culture of accountability. This occurs because a team is unlikely to stand by quietly and fail because a peer is not pulling his or her weight.



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. Sometimes strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving themselves as the only source of discipline. This creates an environment where team members assume that the leader is holding others accountable, and so they hold back even when they see something that isn't right.

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. This should be a rare occurrence. Nevertheless, it must be clear to all team 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

How does all of this relate to the next dysfunction, the inattention to results? If teammates are not being held accountable for their contributions, they will be more likely to turn their attention to their own needs, and to 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.

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.

It should be noted here that results are not limited to financial measures like profit, revenue, or shareholder returns. Though it is true that many organizations in a capitalist economic environment ultimately measure their success in these terms, this dysfunction refers to a far broader definition of results, one that is related to outcome-based performance.

Every good organization specifies what it plans to achieve in a given period, and these goals, more than the financial metrics that they drive, make up the majority of near-term, controllable results. So, 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.

But what would a team be focused on other than results? Team status and individual status are the prime candidates:

Team Status

For members of some teams, merely being part of the group is enough to keep them satisfied. For them, the achievement of specific results might be desirable, but not necessarily worthy of great sacrifice or inconvenience. As ridiculous and dangerous as this might seem, plenty of teams fall prey to the lure of status. These often include altruistic nonprofit organizations that come to believe that the nobility of their mission is enough to justify their satisfaction. Political groups, academic departments, and prestigious companies are also susceptible to this dysfunction, as they often see success in merely being associated with their special organizations.

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. Though all human beings have an innate tendency toward self-preservation, a functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals.

As obvious as this dysfunction might seem at first glance, and as clear as it is that it must be avoided, it is important to note 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. Unfortunately for these groups, no amount of trust, conflict, commitment, or accountability can compensate for a lack of desire to win.

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

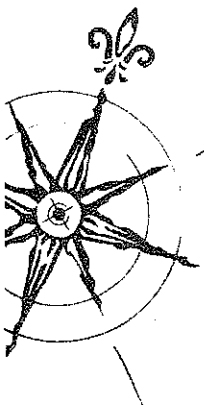
Suggestions for Overcoming Dysfunction 5

How does a team go 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

In the mind of a football or basketball coach, one of the worst things a team member can do is publicly guarantee that his or her team will win an upcoming game. In the case of an athletic team, this is a problem because it can unnecessarily provoke an opponent. For most teams, however, it can be helpful to make public proclamations about intended success.

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. Teams that say, "We'll do our best," are subtly, if not purposefully, preparing themselves for failure.



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. Relying on this alone can be problematic because it assumes that financial motivation is the sole driver of behavior. Still, 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.

The Role of the Leader

Perhaps more than with 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 that as permission to do the same for themselves. Team leaders must be selfless and objective, and reserve rewards and recognition for those who make real contributions to the achievement of group goals.

Summary

As much information as is contained here, 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.

Lencioni, Patrick. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.