



The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

A Leadership Fable

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Patrick Lencioni offers a fable about an executive wrestling to take hold of a company and create a smoothly functioning executive team. The novel is interesting, and you can read through it easily, getting to know the characters and participating in their business decisions. However, if you just want to learn about better teamwork quickly and leave, skim to the final chapters where the author outlines a detailed model for diagnosing the five dysfunctions of a team and provides exercises and techniques to ameliorate those dysfunctions. The advice is complete and concrete.

Take-Aways

- Everyone talks about teamwork but hardly anyone does it effectively.
- Five pitfalls prevent most companies or organizations from achieving teamwork.
- The first pitfall is a lack of trust.
- The second pitfall is a fear of confrontation.
- The third pitfall is an absence of commitment.
- The fourth pitfall is absence of accountability.
- The fifth pitfall is a failure to focus on goals.
- Building trust, courage, commitment, accountability and a proper focus does take time and effort.
- Written goals and standards and regular performance reviews can help.
- Leadership is indispensable.

Summary

The Story, in Brief

The new CEO of Decision Tech, Kathryn Peterson, is trying to cope with an executive team in chaos. She must muster her personal strength to diagnose what has gone wrong with her top staff members and try to fix it before the bottom line bottoms out. She learns some valuable lessons on the way to creating a functional team. In fact, team building is conceptually simple, uncluttered and straightforward. Two things are critically true about teams: most organizations fail to achieve teamwork and those which try run into five common pitfalls. Those five pitfalls, labeled "the five dysfunctions of a team," are:

1. **Lack of trust** — When they don't trust each other, team members are afraid to communicate honestly and openly. They hide their real thoughts and feelings. They are unwilling to take responsibility for fear of making mistakes. If team members cannot communicate honestly, they cannot possibly build a platform of trust.
2. **Fear of confrontation** — When they don't trust each other, teammates are reluctant to confront each other. Because they hide their feelings and do not communicate, they cannot engage in constructive conflict and debate. Discussion is muted, indirect and vapid. Ideas don't get worked through. Progress stalls and the team is ineffective.
3. **Absence of commitment** — When team members are not committed to the team and the project, they just go through the motions of attending meetings and appearing to follow up. They do not seize opportunities. Progress stalls.
4. **Absence of accountability** — When team members don't trust each other, won't discuss things honestly and aren't committed, they don't hold each other to a standard of accountability. Thus, efforts lack focus, energy dissipates and everything unaccountably, but predictably, falls apart.
5. **Failure to focus on goals** — Members of a dysfunctional team pursue personal or departmental agendas instead of the team's goal. They may be out to score ego points or undercut a rival, but whatever their object is, it isn't what the team needs to do.

"Organizations fail to achieve team - work because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls."

In contrast, the members of successful teams trust each other. They bat ideas around, debating and discussing without reservation. They make decisions and resolve to act according to plans. They hold each other to account, thereby showing that each individual is an important part of the team and does work that is valuable to the team. And, members of successful teams keep their eyes on the prize: meeting the team's goal.

Dysfunction 1: Lack of Trust

Trust is a hard word because it can mean so many different things. In the context of a team, trust means confidence that each member has good intentions and a sense you do not need to be overly cautious or apprehensive in the company of your teammates. In this context, trust does not mean confidence in one's ability to predict how teammates will act in a given situation or circumstance. Trust is not confidence in a teammate's performance. Trust is confidence that teammates will not slip a knife in your back as soon as you turn it.

“Teamwork deteriorates if even a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish.”

This kind of trust allows teammates to be honest about their deficiencies and shortcomings, to admit to mistakes and errors, and to ask for help when needed. Because they trust each other, teammates can put all their attention on the task at hand, without worrying about what political game or Machiavellian maneuver might be unfolding just out of sight.

“Remember teamwork begins by building trust.”

Achieving this level of trust is difficult in a business context because business teaches people to compete and to project a bold, invulnerable front.

Use these exercises to help the people on your team reach this stage of trust:

- **Personal history** — Team members take turns answering a few basic and unthreatening questions about their lives and experiences, such as: How many brothers and sisters do you have? Where did you grow up? What was your first job? What is your most memorable experience? This exercise allows team members to get to know each other as human beings with personal lives.
- **Team effectiveness** — Team members point out the most important talent, skill or aptitude that each member brings to the work of the team, and the one thing that each individual must improve to help the team even more.
- **Personality profile** — Some tests, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, profile personality and behavior. Insight gained from using these tests can be quite helpful to the team.
- **360-degree evaluations** — These are risky and difficult to use where trust is low in a team because they require people to pass judgment on each other and offer useful criticism.
- **Rope courses and such** — These can be a useless waste of time, but if they are properly layered into team development, they may contribute to cohesion and trust.

Dysfunction 2: Fear of Confrontation

Confrontations and conflict are necessary goods, not necessary evils. In confrontation, people struggle together toward truth, not only in business but also in marriage, friendship and politics.

But good and bad confrontations are very different. Good confrontations are honest, open and goal-directed. Bad confrontations are underhanded contests for ego or political advantage. Even in a constructive conflict, people may lose their tempers, but if they step over the line and say something hurtful or offensive, they are quick to make amends. To make confrontations more useful and more frequent, get everyone to accept the idea that confrontation and conflict are, in fact, necessary goods.

“Teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with each other.”

To do that you should consider:

- **Digging for disagreements** — Team members agree to look for areas of disagreement, point them out and force each other to work through them.
- **Give permission to engage** — Team members who are unaccustomed to conflict may shy from it. Recognize when a conflict is beginning. Interrupt and remind the conflicting parties that what they are doing is good, useful and necessary.
- **Tests** — The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument may be a useful test to help team members make more informed decisions about conflicts.

Dysfunction 3: Absence of Commitment

Teams work effectively when every member clearly understands, endorses and commits to the goals. Without commitment, efforts dissipate. The team's work is not teamwork. Members may focus elsewhere.

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

The following techniques and tools can help build commitment:

- **Decision by consensus** — Consensus decision-making involves everyone. Naturally, if people disagree about an action or direction, some may be less than elated with the eventual decision. But a consensus decision allows everyone to be heard and demands that everyone endorse and commit to the final decision. The leader should not put forth a solution and demand assent. Instead, while recognizing areas of disagreement, team members should work out a solution to which everyone can agree.
- **Reliability** — Understanding that having "no decision" is the worst possible outcome, team members rely on the decision, whatever it is, as a better alternative. A clear, certain and reliable decision beats procrastination or deferral, so members commit.
- **Wrap-up** — Use a short wrap-up at the end of each meeting to summarize each decision or resolution so that members can understand and communicate to others. Often, the wrap-up reveals a disagreement or a difference in understanding about what the team has agreed to do. Addressing those discrepancies helps build commitment.

- **Set deadlines** — Establishing a certain date for task completion is one way of making sure that people commit (especially if the team has a spirit of accountability).
- **Scenario analysis** — Members discuss various scenarios as they try to solve a problem. Seeing the worst possible scenario can help them commit to something better.
- **Commitment in small things** — Making and committing to decisions when the stakes are low helps build the commitment muscle to attack bigger, weightier issues.

Dysfunction 4: Absence of Accountability

When team members are uncomfortable holding each other to commitments and pointing out problems or deficiencies, the team cannot progress. A team member may be unaware of a problem, and may need some feedback. Properly directed and expressed, peer pressure is a source of support and encouragement.

“One of the best tools for ensuring commitment is the use of clear deadlines for when decisions will be made.”

To build accountability you should do the following for your team:

- **Make goals and responsibilities clear** — Leave no doubt about what the team is trying to achieve and who needs to do what tasks to achieve it.
- **Do regular check-ups** — Progress reviews and reports help motivate performance and establish a venue where team members can hold each other accountable.
- **Offer team-based rewards** — Build cohesion and common purpose by basing rewards on team achievements rather than individual performance.

Dysfunction 5: Failure to Focus on Goals

When members don't pursue the team's agenda or when they focus on personal objectives instead of the team's objective, the team loses. To improve performance, have the members publicly commit to achieving the team's objectives. To help them focus on the team's goals, make results public and tie any rewards to those results. Pay a bonus and reward team members well when they achieve their goals, but do not reward them if the goals aren't met.

Diagnostic Questionnaire

Use this questionnaire to check your team's health. Have each member grade each statement. If the answer is, "as a general rule," give three points, "occasionally," two points and "infrequently," one point.

1. Team members talk about ideas without abandon or reservation.
2. Team members point out each other's shortcomings or problems.
3. Team members understand each person's task and know how it adds to the team's work.

4. Team members sincerely say they are sorry when they offend each other or inadvertently undercut the team's work.
5. Team members give things up to forward the goals of the team, even power, personnel, money or perks.
6. Team members freely admit when they have made an error or have a weak skill.
7. Team meetings are interesting, not dull.
8. After each meeting, team members are sure that they've reached agreement, even after debate, and that everyone has signed on to the mission.
9. If the team does not attain its objectives, morale suffers.
10. Team meetings tackle critical issues, even if they are difficult to discuss.
11. Team members worry about disappointing their teammates.
12. Team members are aware of each other's home lives and talk about them easily.
13. Team members finish discussions with firm decisions and actionable tasks to perform.
14. Team members question and argue with each other to determine tactics and blueprints.
15. Team members freely praise each other, but demur about claiming individual credit.

"The enemy of accountability is ambiguity."

To determine if a certain dysfunction is a problem for your team, score each person's exam by adding up the answers to the set of questions for each area.

- For lack of trust, add questions number 4, 6 and 12.
- For fear of confrontation, add 1, 7 and 10.
- For absence of commitment, add 3, 8 and 13.
- For absence of accountability, add 2, 11 and 14.
- For failure to focus on goals, add the answers to 5, 9 and 15.

"Sometimes strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving themselves as the only source of discipline."

In each area, a score of 8 or 9 means your team does not have a problem with this dysfunction; a score of 6 or 7 suggests the possibility of a problem and a score of 3 to 5 is a blinking yellow light calling attention to this dysfunction.

About the Author

Patrick Lencioni is president of The Table Group, a San Francisco consultancy. He is the author of *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* and *The Five Temptations of a CEO*.



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