

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary

By Patrick Lencioni

'It's a group project' can be four dreaded words for some of us. The problem is, like it or not, teamwork is a necessity in almost everything we do. Humanity's most significant accomplishments have resulted from coordinated group behavior directed towards a common goal.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team helps us identify and overcome the five root causes that lead to a team's failure. An absence of trust, a fear of conflict, a lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results, are the five dysfunctions of why teams so often struggle. The good news is, if we can diagnose them, they're fixable.

Fortunately, author and management consultant Patrick Lencioni has more than three decades of experience developing successful teams, and he knows the secrets of why teamwork doesn't always make "the dreamwork." All Lencioni's books open with a fable and conclude with a model that serves as the basis for the story's solution.

In this book, we start with the new CEO of Decision Tech, Kathryn Petersen, who faces the ultimate leadership crisis: Uniting a team in such disarray that it threatens to bring down the entire company. She tries to establish how the current culture impacts collaboration, idea generation, and execution. As she gradually works through each stage of "the five dysfunctions model," she re-positions the company for success.

We'll briefly learn the prerequisites for great teamwork, and how to handle interpersonal team dynamics. We'll unpack the teamwork model

and learn how to overcome each of the five dysfunctions. In doing this, we'll discover why conflict isn't always destructive, and how Jeff Bezos gets teams to "agree to disagree." We'll also interrogate why nobody likes the basketball player who doesn't pass and instead tries to take the "winning shot." And we'll learn that to win big; we need to put personal agendas aside and play for the good of the team.

Starting From the Bottom Up

Top performing teams have a bottom-up approach. The foundations for great teamwork are built layer-by-layer, and they start with the foundation of trust. With trust, teammates can engage in constructive conflict, commit to decisions, hold themselves and each other accountable, and follow through on collective goals.

Lencioni visually depicts the five dysfunctions in a pyramid form. At the base of the pyramid is trust. High levels of trust lead to healthy, constructive conflict or debate to unearth the best ideas. With trust and healthy discussions, team members are likely to be more engaged and display strong commitment. This engagement comes from feeling as if they've been heard. Even if their particular idea may not have won, their perspective was taken into account and respected. This attitude feeds into accountability, where teammates assume responsibility and hold their colleagues responsible for achieving agreed-upon goals. To do this requires a focus on delivering results, and if each fundamental behavior is maximized from the base up, then teams have the right ingredients to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Great teamwork remains the ultimate competitive advantage that any company can have, and it's both powerful and rare.

Teamwork Is Based on Trust and Vulnerability

Trust relies on our capacity to be vulnerable. In *The Culture Code*, Dan Coyle argues that vulnerability is never a weakness. On the contrary, he suggests that a team leader is usually the first to show vulnerability and admit to flaws.

High-performing teams are transparent, because teammates feel safe enough to talk openly about their shortcomings, mistakes, and weaknesses. When teams lack transparency, and operate within a competitive cut-throat atmosphere, the consequences are far-reaching. Teammates conceal imperfections, hesitate to ask for help, and avoid touchy topics. Members ultimately become disengaged, put their interests above the team, or become non-committal about team-driven goals.

However, if we want to identify and correct mistakes, and leverage strengths to ultimately help the team succeed, vulnerability-based trust is crucial. Trust automatically grows when we get to know and relate to our teammates in an open, honest, and supportive manner. The question is however, when it comes to being vulnerable, who goes first?

Here's where the importance of strong leadership comes in. Leaders go first. Leaders need to "show trust to get trust." If you're a leader, kickstart a meeting with a strengths and weaknesses exercise, and begin by openly discussing your own strengths and weaknesses. DecisionTech CEO Kathryn, shares her weaknesses early on to start the trust-building

process. She explains what type of management mistakes she has made in the past, and admits to being fired from a previous job.

This kind of willingness by the leader, to demonstrate vulnerability, shows your teammates that it's *okay* to be vulnerable. It may trigger a "vulnerability-domino effect," where others are more likely to admit one of their weaknesses and realize that it's okay to be honest and open with teammates. Trust fosters a safe environment in which to speak up and speak out. The advantage here is that team members become more willing to help one another, which means they can leverage team strengths, compensate for weaknesses, and avoid costly mistakes.

As with Kathryn, we can lead by example and demonstrate that vulnerability is admired and not punished. Only with a foundation of trust can we then advance to the next level and engage in "healthy conflict."

Teams Need To Learn To “Fight Right”

If team members trust one another, they start to feel sufficiently safe to engage in constructive conflict; ultimately helping them make better decisions.

How often have you shied away from saying something in a team to keep the peace?

We tend to think conflict is an inherently negative thing. So we avoid controversial topics, hold back on challenging others, and walk on eggshells to keep pseudo-harmony within the team.

But here's the problem. The desire for artificial harmony or "getting along

nicely," stifles productive conflict. People tend to go around problems. Problematic issues or behaviors aren't confronted, and a lack of transparency creates confusion. In contrast, high-performing teams speak, lean into cognitive friction, and depersonalize ideas and debates. They face problems and issues quickly, develop practical solutions, get input from team members, and minimize politics.

Constructive conflict often leads to the most constructive solutions. So perhaps it's time to redefine conflict. Lencioni argues that conflict is nothing but the passionate pursuit of truth. He says, 'If team members are not making one another uncomfortable at times and if they're not pushing one another outside their emotional comfort zones during discussions, it's doubtful they're making the team's best possible decisions.' In short, varied and clashing opinions often lead us to the best decisions.

Trust ensures we can speak truthfully without fear of rejection; however we need to go one step further, and encourage constructive conflict. So, how do we do this?

Firstly we can make it a norm for team members to get out of "the emotional comfort zone." Lencioni describes one leader who established new benchmarks for healthy conflict. He called for "candid debate," where teammates share their ideas and opinions without fear of judgment or rejection. He wrote the following on a norms chart: 'We will address conflict-laden issues, and not withhold commentary.' Everyone on the team signed the charter, and every team member brought a copy of that charter to every meeting.

The trick to overcoming the fear of conflict is to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Our author writes, 'I don't think 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.'

Why is conflict so important? It's essential because without it, we will encounter the team's third dysfunction, which is the lack of commitment. Teams that don't engage in open healthy conflict, don't wholly commit to the decisions that are made. This leads to passivity and a lack of follow-through on action items.

Commitment Follows Healthy Conflict

Great teams make clear and timely decisions, and stand by those decisions, even if agreement isn't unanimous. For teams to succeed, everyone must commit to the team decision, even if they're uncertain about it, or even disagree with it.

Think of the last time you were in a discussion, and didn't end up getting your way. What frustrated you most, the fact that you "lost" the argument, or that you didn't feel heard? For most of us, not feeling listened to, causes residual resentment during heated encounters, leading to a lack of commitment towards team-driven goals.

Eric Schmidt from Google believes that when teammates participate in the decision-making process, and feel heard, they will continue to fight for the team, even if they "lose" an argument. All team members need to genuinely feel heard and valued in the decision-making process. Instilling good communication is the simplest, most effective way to ensure that everyone commits to a team decision, even if there's disagreement. However, even if everyone feels heard, we still need to reach a consensus on what needs to get done. Our author says leaders need to

enforce "clarity and closure." How do we do this?

Perhaps ask people if they'll take a gamble? When Amazon founder Jeff Bezos can't get a team to reach a consensus on something, he says, 'Look, I know we disagree on this, but will you gamble with me on it?' This usually gets him a quick 'yes.'

Our author reminds us that, 'Great teams leave meetings confident that no one on the team is quietly harboring doubts about whether to support the actions agreed on.' And this leads us to the fact that the enemy of accountability is ambiguity. Therefore leaders need to set clear, defined, and measured goals. For example, in the story, Kathryn starts to set specific objectives such as, 'by the end of the year, DecisionTech will have 18 new customers.'

Commitment needs total buy-in, but also results from clarity around what needs to get done. Everyone's goals need to be made clear and transparent to the team. That way, everyone can be held accountable, which brings us to the next level; accountability.

Great Teams Hold One Another Accountable to High Standards

Have you ever had the awkward conversation where you've had to call someone out on their poor performance or inappropriate behavior?

This conversation isn't a crowd favorite, and it's generally left to the team's leaders to follow through on this. But here's the thing, the most effective type of accountability is peer-to-peer accountability. So,

leaders, you may just be off the hook. Studies show that peer pressure is the most effective means of maintaining high-performance standards.

However, peer-to-peer accountability can be tricky. Our author empathizes, 'Some people are hard to hold accountable because they're so helpful. Others because they get defensive. Others because they're intimidating.' Often, peers resist holding one other accountable for performance, because they feel they don't have the authority and the accompanying permission to hold others responsible. If we've developed a good rapport with our colleagues, we think holding them accountable might jeopardize the "friendship."

The problem is, if we don't hold one another accountable, we create an environment that tolerates mediocrity. If ongoing poor performance is tolerated, deadlines may be missed, and objectives might not be achieved. Such failures can create an atmosphere of resentment and hopelessness. As for the "friend thing," holding each other accountable to high-performance standards, tends to deepen respect between teammates and improve relationships.

One strategy to encourage peer-to-peer accountability, is to host a "lightning round" status meeting.

In a lightning round status meeting, everyone has a chance to report their top priority for the week and give feedback on the previous week's priority status. If someone didn't complete the last week's priority, the person running the meeting must inquire 'what went wrong, and what that team member can do better.' Since everyone takes turns to host team meetings, people of "lower status" have the power to question people who have "higher status," and hold those people accountable for what they had said they would do.

With trust, healthy debate, clarity, and 100% buy-in, even if we're uncertain about the overall decision, we can learn to confront complex issues and hold each other accountable. If we do this, results follow.

The Only True Measure of a Team

What's the true measure of a team's success? Lencioni suggests that it is to "achieve results." If we look at top-performing teams, they're results orientated, but they focus on "collective outcomes."

What exactly does our author mean by "collective outcomes?"

We all know *that* player, the guy on the basketball team who won't pass the ball to his teammate because he wants to look good and go for the winning shot. In the book, Kathryn's husband is a basketball coach who had to drop the most talented player because he did just that. This player wasn't focused on the team, and his ego made him want to take the "big shot," even if it cost his team the game.

Effective teams focus on collective rather than individual outcomes.

Lencioni reminds us that 'If teams lose sight of collective goals, they lose their competitive edge.' One way to ensure that your team stays focused on team outcomes, instead of individual results, is to tie individual results to team outcomes. For example, leaders can factor in rewards such as giving everyone a day off at the end of the month if they hit the monthly target. This reward system ensures that if the team doesn't win, then no-one wins.

Great teams demonstrate recurring high-performance and focus on team results.

In Conclusion

Nothing can replace the actual experience of being part of a good team, under a good team leader's guidance. As far as corporate literature goes, this book offers valid and practical advice. It's a well-written, easy read that captures the human essence of teamwork and connects the dots from trust to results.

Just as a rowing boat goes nowhere if each oarsman pulls in a different direction, so a team will go nowhere if they don't reach a consensus on where they're going. To know, and agree on where the team is going, and to coordinate everyone's efforts to get there, we need to start with the basics. And it all begins with trust. Trust allows for constructive conflict, commitment to decisions, holding ourselves and others accountable, and following through on collective goals.

They say that "there's no I in team," but all of us have to focus on ourselves, and reflect on how we interact in team situations.