

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

In a noisy atmosphere, like a restaurant or crowded gathering, I sometimes struggle to pick out conversation. The competing cacophony of others' conversations can turn everything into a jumble for me. When my wife is trying to communicate with me in these circumstances, I can see the frustration growing in her expression as she has to repeat herself to me until it finally clicks with me what she is trying to say. Then the light comes on for me.

Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* was published in 2002 and since that time, there have been plenty of books and studies that are revealing the absolute necessity for those in leadership to be somewhat vulnerable and transparent as this generates psychological safety within organizations. This takes us back to my wife when she is frustrated that she can't get her message across to me in a crowded room. We've been hearing for years the same message that unapproachable, mysterious, and less than humble leaders need to learn the most important lesson of all, vulnerability and humility. This ties directly in with the first dysfunction of a team; absence of trust.

We start with trust because without its foundation, teams are doomed to be mediocre, underachieving, and in some cases volatile. The leader sets the tone for trust in the team environment, so if you can't seem to get this going, your teams may struggle for a very long time. Other elements for trust exist for sure, such as knowing each other well enough to reserve judgment, and attribute positive light to motives, but the leader will be best at beginning to set trust as a high value.

Lencioni lists clearly the five dysfunctions:

- **Absence of Trust**
- **Fear of Conflict**
- **Lack of Commitment**
- **Avoidance of Accountability**
- **Inattention to Results**

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is a pretty quick read. The fable portion of the book demonstrates a wise and competent executive as she evaluates her leadership team from the perspective of the dysfunctions. Clear explanations of how the dysfunctions interlock and depend upon each other provide a way to see how teams can become dysfunctional, and presents some practical steps to bring a team back from the brink of disaster to a place where the team can function well.

It doesn't necessarily follow that all team individuals can be convinced to embrace the steps necessary to become healthy. So as the book demonstrates, some team members may have to leave in order for the team to have a chance of reaching its potential. Naturally, this can be a very tough and difficult decision to make, but if team goals and organizational success are to have a chance, hard decisions and difficult paths sometimes have to be taken.

When it comes to understanding how the dysfunctions interlock, a sequence of relationships seems to make sense. Absence of trust leads to a fear of conflict because there is no safety in what should be healthy conflict. Lack of commitment arises from a fear of conflict because people who haven't expressed themselves aren't willing to commit to ideas and actions they don't feel confident in. Once commitment is avoided, no one wants accountability because they are not really committed to following through on team initiatives. Inattention to results shows up when egos and agendas play a bigger role than a commitment to the team norms and successes.

(Credit to Patrick Lencioni, Jossy Bass, 2002, Available on Amazon)