Five Dysfunctions of a Team
by Patrick Lencioni

Best selling author, speaker and leadership expert Patrick Lencioni has created a common sense framework for understanding the dynamics in dysfunctional teams that result in paralysis, apathy, and destructive conflict. He gives a roadmap for moving from dysfunction to high performance that can clearly increase an organization’s ROI and positively impact employee engagement. While his framework was initially developed for executives it has also been highly effective for managers and employees at all levels as well as in churches, military, government, non-profits, high tech and many other organizations.

There are five common pitfalls that make up a team’s dysfunction. These interrelate and build off one another and can either significantly hamper the success of a team or paradoxically be the foundation for crystallizing to achieve great results. The five characteristics are:

1. Absence of Trust
2. Fear of Conflict
3. Lack of Commitment
4. Avoidance of Accountability
5. Inattention to Results

Absence of Trust
Trust is the foundation for real team work. The absence of trust stems from team members’ unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Vulnerability here is not about a ‘touchy-feely’ quality but for a high performing team to operate team members must be able to be open about their successes and failures, their strengths and weaknesses in order to build a foundation for trust. This is about disclosure and not about confession. When team members are vulnerable with each other and not trying to guard or protect themselves, then the focus can rest with getting the job done.

Overcoming the absence of trust requires team members sharing experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through to enhance and build trust, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of each team member. In building trust the role of the leader is most important. The leader must be first to demonstrate vulnerability.

Fear of Conflict
Once trust is enhanced, team members must constructively and respectfully engage in conflict. For the most part, people don’t need to have their way but they do need to express themselves and know that they have been heard and respected for their thoughts and beliefs. This is the heart of how buy-in happens and when skillfully handled, conflict leads to powerful commitments.

The role of the leader is to be a positive miner of conflict and to surface issues, perspectives, and opinions into the open rather than having them remain submerged and hidden. This is essential in order to have all the relevant information and to make informed timely decisions that all team members will support.
Lack of Commitment
Lencioni defines 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 about whether to support the actions agreed on. Buy-in is the achievement of honest emotional support. Clarity is the removal of assumptions and ambiguity from a situation.

Great teams are able to achieve commitment by engaging in constructive conflict that focuses on problems and not on personalized agendas. Dealing with objective issues takes precedence over ego conflict. In the process of constructive conflict people are able to express their thoughts and beliefs and that creates buy-in and clarity.

Once there is alignment and buy-in leadership teams can continue to drive clarity within their organization. This is often facilitated by the process of cascading communication. Taking key decisions and action items and ensuring that they are rolled out to staff in a way that includes why they are important.

Avoidance of Accountability
In this context, accountability is not only about a leader holding their direct reports accountable but it is also peers holding each other accountable by reminding each other of commitments agreed to when there are real or perceived breaches of performance or behavior agreements.

Leaders need to model accountability in a different way. Many are adept at dealing with performance issues but shy away from dealing with inappropriate behavioral problems because they can be emotionally charged. When leaders confront inappropriate behaviors they are role-modeling accountability in another constructive way that sets the stage for peer-to-peer engagement.

Inattention to Results
Two things that get in the way of achieving results are self-interest and self-preservation. Team members who put their individual needs or the needs of their department above the collective goals make it difficult to achieve better overall results. The overall team performance should come first. This is not to say that we shouldn’t look out for ourselves but there needs to be a connection between self-interest and getting results.

The distractions from collective results are:

1. Personal ego
2. Career development
3. Compensation
4. “My department”

The role of 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.

In summary, when teams build trust and engage in constructive conflict there is the potential for building commitment and accountability. When these are grounded and in place the team can focus on meeting and exceeding the organization’s goals and mission.
Mason Consulting Group has extensive experience working with leaders at all organization levels building high performing teams. We offer 1 and 2 day “Five Dysfunctions of a Team” workshops.

Notes