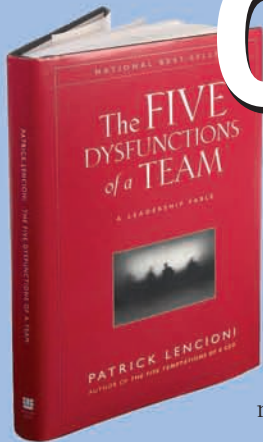


THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

By Eugene Habecker



In my nearly 25 years of experience as a CEO in Christian non-profits, I have found considerable confusion in organizations about teams and how they function. Patrick Lencioni masterfully provides clarity and insight in this critical area, and helps us see what a healthy team looks like in action.

In his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, he describes the five most common ways that teams are likely to struggle and fail:

DYSFUNCTION #1. ABSENCE OF TRUST

Lencioni defines trust as “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.” This means that team members are open and honest about their “weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes, and requests for help.”

Unfortunately, the vast majority of workers (even in Christian organizations) still opt to keep their vulnerabilities hidden—seeking to avoid criticism and protect their image among bosses and peers.

DYSFUNCTION #2. FEAR OF CONFLICT

Lencioni is not referring here to the “ideological conflict” of different ideas and concepts but rather to “destructive fighting and interpersonal politics.” Ironically, Christian organizations often create a climate that is adverse to healthy conflict. It happens when a corporate value of “community” is interpreted as “avoiding conflict at any cost.” In such cases, conflict remains largely unresolved—driven underground instead, and relegated to whispered exchanges in hallways and bathrooms.

DYSFUNCTION #3. LACK OF COMMITMENT

We know instinctively that forward momentum in an organization is stifled by workers who are not fully committed to the organization and its goals. Unfortunately, many leaders know the reality of “agreement in the room” only to see it evaporate when the meeting

adjourns and people return to their own turf and personal agendas. The result is pervasive organizational confusion, ambiguity, and misalignment of strategies and goals. Lencioni cautions that “more than any of the dysfunctions, this one creates dangerous ripple effects for subordinates” — resulting in even deeper discord.

**DYSFUNCTION #4.
AVOIDANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

Lencioni defines accountability as the need for members of a team to hold other members fully accountable for their part in contributing to the results and the behaviors agreed to by the team: “...specifically...the willingness of team members to call their peers on

performance or behaviors that might hurt the team.” Lencioni exhorts us to recognize the power of “peer pressure” and apply it constructively.

**DYSFUNCTION #5.
INATTENTION TO RESULTS**

Lencioni notes, “An unrelenting focus on specific objectives and clearly defined objectives is a requirement for any team that judges itself on performance.” Unfortunately, organizations too easily lose their focus on results, distracted by an emphasis on individual performance instead of team production; the substitution of activities for outcomes; an obsession with team status; or even an undue preoccupation with meetings.

Getting Better

Thankfully, Lencioni gives us practical help to transform teams and improve organizational effectiveness. The result is all-important Kingdom impact. In my opinion, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* is probably the best resource yet on teams and healthy team dynamics!

Eugene Habecker is president of Taylor University, Upland, Ind. (taylor.edu) and was the 1989 recipient of CMA's Christian Management Award.



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FEEDBACK ON THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

*A Dialogue with 4 CEOs on the 5 Dysfunctions:
Trust, Conflict, Commitment, Accountability and Results*

Recently, *Christian Management Report* asked Jim Dyke to assemble a virtual panel discussion of ministry leaders to get their take on Patrick Lencioni's book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Panelists joined



Larry
Donnithorne



Eugene
Habecker



Mark
Holbrook



Geneva
Vollrath

us from four states: Indiana, Missouri, Colorado and California, and they included:

Larry Donnithorne, President, Colorado Christian University, Lakewood, Colo. (ccu.edu)

Eugene Habecker, President, Taylor University, Upland, Ind. (taylor.edu)

Mark Holbrook, President/CEO, Evangelical Christian Credit Union, Brea, Calif. (eccu.org)

Geneva Vollrath, CEO, Stonecroft Ministries, Kansas City, Mo. (stonecroft.org)

CMR: Why don't we start our discussion with the most common dysfunction?

Geneva: In my experience, that would probably be the absence of trust.

CMR: It's the first one on Lencioni's list, so I have a feeling he would agree. What are some of the "Trust Busters" managers must avoid?

Mark: Building trust is all about keeping our promises to one another—expressed and implied. Most of us have a good grasp of expressed promises—delivering a report on time; reviewing compensation; solving problems. Those are things we have said out loud or even written in a memo.

Implied promises are the greater problem. These are things we expect, because they come from our background or

from the corporate culture. For example, it's demeaning to correct or discipline someone in front of other people, especially peers or colleagues; or... our organization has expressed a core value of life balance,

and so we don't penalize workers for placing family time ahead of work demands. We often do the greatest damage to team trust when we fail to honor the implied promises. They are subtle, but very important.

Larry: We also make a lot of implied promises to one another about working together as a team—supporting each other and focusing on team objectives. That's why morale is damaged so severely when team members put their own interests above those of the team and organization. When that leads to unhealthy competition and one-upmanship, trust really gets "busted."

Gene: I agree that trust-busting can happen in subtle ways. For example, leaders help define reality and give hope. Overemphasis on either without the other tends to lead to disappointment and despair—even cynicism. What people look for in leaders is credibility in their message—an honest assessment of the current reality, but a future vision that is believably attainable. Small, successive steps toward that vision—steps that are accomplished successfully—really help build trust.

CMR: Let's talk about dysfunction number two. Can conflict ever be safe? How can we be sure that we are engaging in healthy, not harmful conflict?

Gene: That's like asking "are all medical procedures safe?" If organizational health is the bottom line, senior leadership

need to deal with conflict and accept the risk that some unhealthy aspects might emerge. The key, I think, is to accept and even pursue conflict over the right kinds of issues and at the same time, be diligent to build strong and healthy relationships among team members.

Mark: I think it's important for team members to be very clear about the difference between relational conflict, and conflict of ideas. The Bible is clear about relational conflict. We are to make every effort to resolve it. Paul tells the Roman believers "Insofar as it is possible be at peace with all men." The biblical priority is healthy, God-honoring relationships. As believers, this is our deeply held commitment—and one that should be common to everyone in a ministry work place.

Larry: I believe that conflict can be safe. But there are some important prerequisites. Safe relational conflict requires that team members are open, honest, and vulnerable about their failures and limits. Constructive conflict over ideas requires team members to be committed to the organization's success and the team's role in it.

CMR: What's the leader's role in all of this?

Mark: Leaders need to be willing to pay the price to develop healthy relationships! For example, would we be willing to suspend our most crucial organizational goal until an open conflict among team members is resolved? Or are we more likely to patch things up on the fly and just hope that if we ignore the issue, it will resolve itself?

Larry: I agree. The team leader must take the lead in encouraging conflict, even resisting the urge to jump in to halt the conflict when it becomes uncomfortable—instead, saying "This is good. Keep going." At the same time, the team leader has a responsibility to keep conflict from becoming unhealthy and crossing over the line into personal attacks.

Geneva: Leaders also have an important responsibility to model the healthy behaviors that are expected from every team member. That calls for real humility—a determination to listen openly and carefully to each person, and discern each one's unique perspective; their individual points of view.

Mark: And I might add—a willingness to set aside our egos; admit when we are wrong; and ask our team members for forgiveness! We talk a lot about this principle, but it doesn't happen often enough. Even in Christian ministries, I have seen the practice of maneuvering facts and arguments in order to minimize personal failure.

CMR: Since we're on the subject of the leader's role, let's talk about accountability. What do our fellow team members really expect from us?

Mark: Team members expect—really, demand—that personal integrity and corporate responsibilities be there for everyone to see and assess. Ethical compromises and questionable business practices should be unthinkable for any Christian organization. In addition, there must also be an accounting for real results.

Larry: Team members also hold leaders accountable for effective team practices. My team members expect that we will all be clear about what each of us will do to reach our team goals; that we will all admit when we need help from other team members; that we will all offer to help other team members when they need our assistance; that we will all receive feedback from fellow team members if we are not giving the team our full support. I am also expected to function in full reliance on God, and pray diligently—with and for my team members and for our organization as a whole.

CMR: Where do performance rewards fit in this discussion? Lencioni suggests that 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.

Larry: I don't think there should be any disconnect in Christian organizations between performance toward goals and rewards for that performance. If an organization's goals are worthy, then certainly it is a worthy thing to reward success in achieving those goals! The same reasoning applies to merit-based salaries and bonuses.

Mark: I would also encourage ministries to think about compensation in a broader sense than just cash and benefits. At ECCU, we understand the value of personal recognition, and how it can reward, inspire, and motivate people. We have a person in our organization whose sole responsibility is to search out stories of how individual team members have contributed personally and significantly to our mission. These stories are shared with the entire organization. That kind of recognition is a powerful "compensation" that has deep emotional and spiritual value for the individuals who are honored in this way.

Mark: But let's not forget the other side of that equation. We need an equal commitment to exercise grace with those who fail to perform. Understanding what that entails is a much more difficult task than deciding how to reward success.

CMR: Any other insights to share with our readers?

Geneva: Just one for me—choose your team members well! The first step of good team building is team selection. A leader will avoid a lot of future problems by hiring well. I recommend finding team members who are strong where you are weak. Then be willing to let them lead you appropriately in those areas. Many leaders make the mistake of hiring people just like themselves. That creates one-dimensional teams, and really defeats the whole purpose of having a team in the first place.

CMR: Thank you for that wise counsel! And thank you all for helping us have a clearer understanding of healthy teams!

Jim Dyke, who facilitated this interview, is President/CEO of Corporate Leadership Initiatives, Inc. and Founder/Director of The Center for Leadership Impact (CLionline.com). He's a graduate of the ELP and a member of CMA's Management and Leadership Section Resource Commission. Contact him at DoctorJamesDyke@cs.com.



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