

Teamwork can be hard to achieve, but it's not complicated.

That's the basic assertion of Patrick Lencioni, author of *The FIVE Dysfunctions of a TEAM* (2002) and several other useful and pithy management/leadership books. While his engaging style – he always tells a “leadership fable” that puts characters to his concepts – makes the books worth reading, it isn't necessary to study them to put the ideas into practice. As he would say, it's not that complicated!

A truly effective team produces the results it sets out to achieve. True teamwork is a competitive advantage no one can copy, because only you have YOUR team. But first a team must overcome the five dysfunctions listed here, by practicing the behaviors that exemplify each.

Dysfunction #1: Absence of Trust – trust comes when team members can be completely open with one another, comfortable being vulnerable about their weaknesses.

Dysfunction #2: Fear of Conflict – teams that trust each other can engage in passionate dialogue around key issues, without fear of retaliation. They don't hesitate to disagree, challenge and question each other, all in the spirit of finding the best answers and making great decisions.

Dysfunction #3: Lack of Commitment – an environment that allows for unfiltered conflict enables teams to achieve genuine buy-in on important decisions, even when some team members initially disagree.

Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of Accountability – teams committed to high standards do not hesitate to hold one another accountable to those standards, neither do they rely on the leader as the source of accountability, going directly to their peers.

Dysfunction #5: Inattention to Results – teams that trust one another, engage in conflict, commit to decisions and hold each other accountable are likely to set aside their individual needs and agendas to focus exclusively on what is best for the team.

Suggested ways to work with your team to overcome the common “dysfunctions”:

1. Do a team assessment, either rate-the-team by a numerical scale or do it anecdotally, by asking in a group setting for people to share which dysfunctions the team suffers from. (Lencioni provides some tools, and a simple set of questions such as “How much does absence of trust get in the way of producing results around here?” will elicit useful replies.)
2. The way to overcome a lack of trust is.... vulnerability. Sharing your weaknesses, fears, mistakes, dreams, and ideas creates a willingness to trust each other. So, having

each member of the team share something with the group is a way to open this up.

Suggested topics for team sharing (tell us a brief story about...):

- a. A mentor or favorite teacher you had
- b. The favorite place you went on a trip
- c. Your most embarrassing moment
- d. Something you are really passionate about that most people don't know
- e. Your personal history.

3. Most people are taught to be “conflict-averse” especially at work. Engaging in productive conflict is a skill that must be learned. Start by establishing norms for conflict. An easy exercise your team can do in about an hour is to have all team members write down their preferences relating to acceptable and unacceptable behaviors around discussion and debate. (These might include use of profanity, tone and volume of voice, emotional content, expectations of participation, ways to respond or not, and privacy.)

Then, have the team share their lists, while someone captures the key similarities and differences. Discuss them, especially the differences, and arrive at a common understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. You may want to formally record these “norms” once they are established and distribute them.

4. Holding peers accountable is a big challenge for many teams. This simple exercise gives team members a forum for providing each other with direct feedback they can act on about how their individual behavior can improve the performance of the team.

[This takes about two hours.]

- a. Have all team members answer the following questions about each member of the team (besides themselves):
 - I. What is that person's single most important behavioral quality that contributes to the strength of the team? (their strength)
 - II. What is that person's single most important behavioral quality that detracts from the strength of the team? (their weakness)

[Have them write down their responses so they are not tempted to change them based on what others have said.]

- b. Begin with the comments about the leader of the team, have all read their positive responses, one by one, until everyone has finished.
- c. Ask the leader to respond to what people have said. (“Any surprises? Any questions for clarification?”)
- d. Continuing to focus on the leader, have all read their negative responses, one by one, until everyone has finished.
- e. Continue this sequence for every member of the team.



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- f.** When all have received input from their peers, have them summarize the one or two key take-aways that they will work on individually. Have them e-mail those take-aways to the leader.
- g.** Track these so at future team meetings members can report on progress made.

Remember, it is possible to create bonds between team members that will last forever, and will produce results for many years. The work you do now to build and strengthen your team will pay dividends for a long time.