

Building a Healthy Team

Lessons from the book "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team"

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I think almost everyone has been on a struggling team. It can seem like such a waste of time and energy—a real distraction that is filled with relational wounds. A few years ago, I was looking for a simple, practical model to help strengthen mission/aid teams, and to prevent team meltdown. The book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni has been a real answer for me. The first section of this popular and easy-to-read book is a fascinating narrative about how a dysfunctional leadership team overcame its entrenched problems. The second section discusses the five-part model of team life which was used to help this leadership team. And with some adjustments for multicultural contexts, this model can be very useful for many mission/aid teams too.

Lencioni's model starts with the premises that true teamwork is elusive, and that teams "unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls." The antidotes for these pitfalls are straightforward, yet challenging to put into practice: build trust, engage in constructive discussions and debate, make appropriate commitments, embrace mutual accountability, and scrupulously attend to results and collective performance. Each part builds on the other, and a deficit in any one of them will wreak havoc on a team.

The main strength of the book is also its weakness: the use of a "simple" model that emphasizes open, direct communication. Of course, teams are not always so simple. Team members from different cultures—including organizational, gender, disciplinary, and generational cultures—have different preferences for "doing teams." This is especially true in the areas of negotiating "power distance" between leaders and members, showing respect, tolerating diversity, and welcoming opinions.

Often it seems that the most articulate and verbal will influence their teams the most. And this puts others at a disadvantage. Further, when those "others" are from a different culture, with the team language being a second or third language for them, and they are dependent in some ways (financially) on the other more verbal folks, then we see what regularly happens in multicultural groups: namely, *cultural domination*, even if it is not "intentional or malicious."

The book also deals a lot with trust, and this raised some questions for me about how trust is built and broken. What can we do once trust in teams is shattered? It is so easy to destroy trust. Team building, when trust is unstable, often seems more like team re-building.

I like to distinguish between *functional trust* and *foundational trust*. Lencioni does not. Nor do most of the teams with which I have worked. Functional trust is *assumed*, and needed so that we can work together. Foundational trust is *earned*, and developed over tough times together. These two types of trusts overlap. Yet it is a real mistake to think that being friendly colleagues in a work context (functional trust) is the same as being true friends in a non-work context (foundational trust). The shift from functional to foundational trust is slow, easily hindered, and essential to understand as a team!

"Trust shifts" happen via consistent demonstrations over time that people are seriously and sacrificially committed to each other. This is especially evident during crises, such as a natural disaster that forces people to work together closely, with mutual dependency. Further, there is the genuine willingness to put someone else's best interests over one's own. There is also the deep sense that people are doing their utmost to respect and understand each other. People communicate regularly and equitably. And finally, people simply follow through on their promises. Where foundational trust flows, entrenched conflicts usually break up—or never form in the first place.

Here are some more ideas that may help create or re-create this foundational trust:

- verifiable contrition and behavior change (over time) on the part of one or both of the parties
- exploring different "ways of being"—leadership styles, work styles, processing styles, etc.
- new leaders or power structures are put into place in an organization
- changing departments or teams for a better "fit" and not trying to make a relationship work that is not working—people then connect with each other better in different settings/roles
- personal therapy and/or additional training in management
- good conflict mediation
- interventions (organizational) that can appropriately remove and require restoration for dysfunctional people and the dysfunctional systems that they help engender
- going through an interpersonal skills course together
- unilaterally humbling oneself and/or unilaterally making amends and/or unilaterally changing

Another consideration for me is Lencioni's emphasis on "debate." Teams are encouraged to passionately discuss important ideas and issues of an ideological rather than personal nature. In practice however, it is not always so easy to separate the ideological from the personal. Also, people wound easily. As part of our commitment to "love truth and peace" in our relationships (Zech. 8:19), we want to discuss matters in ways that honor each other and help us to connect. Yet I do appreciate the author trying to free us up from just being nice with each other when honesty and sharing differences are more important.

I want to advocate for *responsible openness*, which acknowledges that personal disclosures must consider the best interests of the group. For example, "spontaneous and authentic" comments can actually be too much for a group to handle at times, especially poorly-timed, negative ones shared by a person of influence. I also want to endorse the idea of having *realistic relationships* which acknowledges that there will be different levels of intimacy between team members. Not every one can be best friends with each other, and so connecting with most people as colleagues rather than as confidants is likely to be the norm.

I find that the prevailing organizational culture in many mission/aid groups—as reflected in their stated values and actual practices—really do appreciate cultural diversity and the commitment to maintain good interpersonal relationships. The weakest area in Lencioni's model varies for each organization. For many the weak link may be the fear of conflict and hence not speaking up about any concerns nor actively engaging in discussion about goals, methods, progress etc. Added to this is the normal "political overlay" of organizational life in which those who control the agendas and power either foster or stifle creative and active participation. Organizations are encouraged to continue to develop acceptable, safe forums where people can share their ideas and concerns in ways that foster trust, commitment, accountability, and ministry effectiveness.

In summary, I really appreciate this creative book and recommend it widely. Get it, consider its multicultural applications, and discuss it in depth as a group!

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable, by Patrick Lencioni; published in 2002 by Jossey-Bass. Also, consider Lencioni's *Overcoming The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide*; published in 2005 by Jossey-Bass. (www.tablegroup.com is Lencioni's website for teams)

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