

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

A Leadership Fable by Patrick Lencioni

📋 CORE PREMISE

Teamwork is the ultimate competitive advantage because it is both powerful and rare. Most teams are dysfunctional due to inherent human behavioral tendencies. Building a cohesive team is theoretically simple but extremely difficult to execute. The book presents a hierarchical model of five interrelated dysfunctions that prevent teams from achieving their potential.

▲ THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS MODEL



Each dysfunction builds on the previous one, creating a cascading effect that undermines team performance.

🔍 DYSFUNCTION BREAKDOWN

1. Absence of Trust (Invulnerability)

Team members unwilling to be vulnerable and admit mistakes or weaknesses.

Solution: Personal histories, vulnerability exercises, behavioral profiling.

2. Fear of Conflict (Artificial Harmony)

Teams preserve fake harmony instead of engaging in passionate, unfiltered debate.

Solution: Mine for conflict, real-time permission to debate, productive ideological conflict.

3. Lack of Commitment (Ambiguity)

Without healthy conflict, team members don't buy in to decisions.

Solution: Cascading messaging, clear deadlines, "disagree and commit" principle.

4. Avoidance of Accountability (Low Standards)

Peers avoid confronting each other about behaviors and performance.

Solution: Publication of goals, regular progress reviews, peer pressure.

5. Inattention to Results (Status & Ego)

Team members prioritize individual success over collective goals.

Solution: Public declaration of results, results-based rewards, team scoreboard.

🎯 KEY LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

- **Go First:** Leaders must demonstrate vulnerability before expecting it from team members
- **Demand Debate:** Create an obligation for healthy conflict and productive disagreement
- **Force Clarity:** Push for specific, time-bound commitments and eliminate ambiguity
- **Confront Directly:** Address difficult issues head-on, especially peer-to-peer accountability

✅ CHARACTERISTICS OF A COHESIVE TEAM

- Team members trust one another and are comfortable being vulnerable
- They engage in unfiltered, passionate debate around ideas
- They commit to decisions and plans of action with clarity and buy-in
- They hold one another accountable for delivering against plans
- They focus on the achievement of collective results above individual goals

- **Focus on Results:** Make collective outcomes the primary measure of success
- **First Team Priority:** Executive team loyalty must supersede departmental loyalty

- Meetings are compelling, not boring
- Real issues are surfaced and resolved quickly
- Little time and energy is wasted on politics and confusion

PRACTICAL TOOLS & EXERCISES

For Building Trust:

- Personal Histories Exercise (hometown, siblings, hobbies, first job)
- Team Effectiveness Exercise (strengths and weaknesses)
- Personality and behavioral preference profiles (Myers-Briggs, DiSC)

For Embracing Conflict:

- Mining: Identify buried disagreements and force them to the surface
- Real-Time Permission: Acknowledge when conflict is necessary during meetings
- Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument

For Commitment:

- Cascading communication: Clear messaging throughout organization
- Deadlines: Explicit timeframes for decisions and action
- Contingency and worst-case scenario analysis

For Accountability:

- Publication of goals and standards
- Simple and regular progress reviews
- Team rewards over individual rewards

CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM THE FABLE

- **Trust ≠ Predictability:** Vulnerability-based trust means admitting weaknesses without fear of reprisal
- **Conflict ≠ Tension:** Productive conflict is ideological debate, not politics or personal attacks
- **Commitment ≠ Consensus:** Buy-in comes from being heard, not from getting your way
- **Accountability ≠ Management:** Best source is peer-to-peer, not just top-down
- **First Team Concept:** Executives' primary team is the leadership team, not their departments
- **Meetings Should Be Passionate:** If meetings are boring, something is wrong—they should be as engaging as movies

Key Takeaway: *"If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time." The five dysfunctions model provides a simple but profound framework for building the trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results focus necessary to achieve this alignment.*

Source: Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. Jossey-Bass.

This executive summary is prepared by Performa Advisors for internal knowledge sharing and leadership development purposes.

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