The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

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STUDY GUIDE

This course offers two critical truths that are very clear in teamwork on the job. First, genuine teamwork in most organizations remains as elusive as it has ever been, and second, organizations fail to achieve teamwork because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls which are called, "the five dysfunctions of a team". This course will help you to deal with these critical issues. We are providing a cursory overview of each dysfunction and the model they comprise should make this clearer.

The first dysfunction is *an absence* of trust among team members. Essentially, this stems from their unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. The failure to build trust is damaging because it sets the tone for the second dysfunction; *fear of conflict*. The lack of healthy conflict is a problem because it ensures the third dysfunction of a team; *lack of commitment*. Without having aired their opinions in the course of passionate and open debate, team members rarely, if ever, buy-in and commit to decisions, though they may feign agreement during meetings. Because of this lack of real commitment and buy-in, team members develop an *avoidance of accountability*, the fourth dysfunction.

Failure to hold one another accountable creates an environment where the fifth dysfunction can thrive, *inattention to results.* Inattention to results occurs when team members put their *individual needs*, such as ego, career development, or recognition, or even the needs of their divisions above the collective goals of the team.

Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it *impossible* to build a foundation for trust. Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and *passionate* debates of ideas. Instead, they resort to veiled discussion and guarded comments. A lack of healthy conflict is a problem because it ensures a *lack of commitment.* Without committing to *a clear plan of action,* even the most focused and driven people often hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that seem counterproductive to the good of the team. And so, like a chain with just one link broken, teamwork deteriorates if even a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish.

Another way to understand this model is to take the opposite approach-a positive one-and imagine how members of truly cohesive teams behave:

1. They trust one another.
2. They engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas.
3. They commit to decisions and plans of action.
4. They hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans.
5. They focus on the achievement of collective results.

If this sounds simple, it's because it is simple, at least in theory. In practice, however, it is extremely difficult because it requires levels of discipline and persistence that few teams can muster. It might be helpful to assess your team and identify where the opportunities for improvement lie in your organization.

Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible. Unfortunately, the word trust is used-and misused-so often that it has lost some of its impact and begins to sound like motherhood and apple pie. That is why it is important to be very specific about what it meant by trust.

In the context of building a team, trust is 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. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another. As desirable as this may be, it is not enough to represent the kind of trust that is characteristic of a great team. To overcome the absence of trust, it requires team members to make themselves *vulnerable* to one another and be confident that their respective vulnerabilities will not be used against them. The vulnerabilities I'm referring to include weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes, and requests for help.

Achieving vulnerability-based trust is difficult because, in the course of career advancement and education, most successful people learn to be *competitive* with their peers, and protective of their reputations. It is a challenge for them to turn those instincts off for the good of a team, but that is exactly what is required. The costs of failing to do this are great. Teams

that lack trust waste inordinate amounts of time and energy managing their *behaviors* and interactions within the group.

Members of teams with an absence of trust tend to conceal *their weaknesses, and mistakes from one another*, hesitate to ask for help or provide constructive feedback, hesitate to offer help outside their own areas of responsibilities, *fail to recognize and tap into one another's skills and experiences,* waste time and energy managing their behaviors for effects, *hold grudges* and dread meetings and find reasons to avoid spending time together. Members of trusting teams admit weaknesses and mistakes and ask for help. They also *look forward to meetings and other opportunities to work as a group.*

Unfortunately, vulnerability-based trust cannot be achieved overnight. So how does a team go about building trust? *It requires shared experiences* over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and *an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members.* However, by *taking a focused approach*, a team can dramatically accelerate the process and achieve trust in relatively short order. Here are a few tools that can bring this about. Personal Histories Exercise can be the first step…in less than an hour; a team can take the first steps towards developing trust. This low-risk exercise requires nothing more than going around the table during a meeting and having team members answer a shortlist of questions about themselves.

Questions need not be overly sensitive in nature and might include the following: number of siblings, hometown, and unique challenges of childhood, favorite hobbies, first job, and worst job. Simply by describing these relatively innocuous attributes or experiences, team members begin to relate to one another on a more personal basis, and see one another as human beings with life stories and interesting backgrounds. This encourages greater empathy and understanding and discourages unfair and inaccurate behavioral attributions. It is amazing how little some team members know about one another and how just a small amount of information begins to break down barriers.

The most important action that a leader must take to encourage the building of trust on a team is to demonstrate *vulnerability* first. This requires

that a leader risk losing face in front of the team, so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves. What is more, team leaders must create an environment that does not punish vulnerability. Even well-intentioned teams can subtly discourage trust by chastising one another for admissions of weakness or failure. Finally, displays of vulnerability on the part of a team leader must be genuine; they cannot be staged. One of the best ways to lose the trust of a team is to feign vulnerability in order to manipulate the emotions of others.

The second dysfunction of a team is Fear of Conflict. All great relationships, the ones that last over time, require *productive conflict* in order to grow. This is true in marriage, parenthood*,* friendship, and certainly business. Unfortunately, conflict is considered taboo in many situations, especially at work. And the higher you go up the management chain, the more you find people spending inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to avoid the kind of *passionate debates* that are essential to any great team. But teams that engage in productive conflict know that the only purpose is to produce the *best possible solution* in the shortest period of time. They discuss and resolve issues more quickly and completely than others, and they emerge from heated debates with no residual feelings or collateral damage, but with eagerness and readiness to take on the next important issue. Ironically, teams that avoid
ideological conflict often do so in order to avoid hurting team members' feelings, and then end encouraging dangerous tension.

Here are some suggestions for overcoming the second dysfunction. How does a team go about developing the ability and willingness to engage in healthy conflict? The first step is *acknowledging that conflict is productive*, and that many teams have a tendency to avoid it. As long as some members believe that conflict is unnecessary, there is little chance that it will occur. Teams that fear or avoid conflict *have boring meetings, create environments where back-channel politics and personal attacks thrive, ignore controversial topics that are critical to team success, fail to tap into all the opinions and perspectives of team members, and waste time and energy with posturing and interpersonal risk management.*

"Mining" members of teams that tend to avoid conflict must occasionally assume the role of a *"miner of conflict";* someone who extracts buried

disagreements within the team and sheds the light of day on them. They must have the courage and confidence to call out sensitive issues and force team members to work through them. This requires a degree of objectivity during meetings and a commitment to staying with the conflict until it is resolved.

In the role of the leader, one of the most difficult challenges that a leader faces in promoting healthy conflict is the desire to *protect* members from harm. This leads to premature interruption of disagreements, and prevents team members from developing coping skills for dealing with conflict themselves. Therefore, it is key that leaders demonstrate restraint to when their people engage in conflict, and allow resolution to occur naturally, as messy as it can sometimes be. By engaging in productive conflict and tapping into team members' perspectives and opinions, a team can confidently *commit* and buy into a decision knowing that they have benefited from everyone's ideas.

The third dysfunction is "Lack of Commitment". 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. Great teams understand the danger of seeking *consensus,* and find ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible. They understand that reasonable human beings do not need to get their way in order to support a decision, but only need to know that their opinions have been heard and considered. Only when everyone has put their opinions and perspectives on the table can the team confidently commit to a decision knowing that it has tapped into the collective wisdom of the entire group. Regardless of whether it is caused by the need for consensus or certainty, it is important to understand that one of the greatest *consequences* for an executive team that does not commit to clear decisions is unresolvable discord deeper in the organization.

A team that fails to commit *creates ambiguity among the team about direction and priorities,* watches windows of opportunity close due to excessive analysis and unnecessary delay, breeds lack of confidence and fear of failure, revisits discussions and decisions again and again, and encourages second-guessing among teal members. More than any other member of the team, the leader must be *comfortable* with the prospect of

making a decision that ultimately turns out to be wrong. The leader must be constantly pushing the group for closure around issues, as well as adherence to schedules that the team as set. What the leader cannot do is place too high a premium on certainty or consensus. How does all of this relate to the next dysfunction, the avoidance of accountability? In order for teammates to call each other on their behaviors and actions, they must have a clear sense of what is expected.

Dysfunction 4 is the avoidance of accountability. Accountability is a buzzword that has lost much of its meaning as it has become as overused as terms like empowerment and quality. The essence of this dysfunction is the unwillingness of team members to tolerate the interpersonal discomfort accompanies calling a peer on his or her behavior and the more general tendency to avoid difficult conversations. In fact, team members who are particularly close to one another sometimes hesitate to hold one another *accountable* precisely because they fear jeopardizing a valuable personal relationship.

As politically incorrect as it sounds, the most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team is peer pressure. One of the benefits is the reduction of the need for excessive bureaucracy around performance management and corrective action. More than any policy or system, there is nothing like the fear of letting down respected teammates that *motivates* people to improve their performance. How does a team go about ensuring accountability? The key to overcoming this dysfunction is adhering to a few classic management tools that are effective as they are simple. They are *publication of goals and standards, team rewards, simple and regular progress reviews.*

The role of the leader is one of the most difficult challenges especially for the leader who wants to instill accountability on a team is to encourage and allow *the team* to serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism. Sometimes strong leaders naturally create an accountability vacuum within the team, leaving themselves as the only source of discipline. This creates an environment where team members assume that the leader is holding others accountable, and so they hold back even when they see something that isn't right. Once a leader has created a culture of accountability on a team, however, he or she must be willing to serve as the ultimate arbiter of

discipline when the team itself fails. This should be a rare occurrence. If teammates are not being held accountable for their contributions, they will be more likely to turn their attention to their own needs, and to the advancement of themselves or their departments. An absence of accountability is an invitation to team members to shift their attention to areas other than collective results.

Dysfunction 5 is inattention to results. The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about *something* other than the collective goals of the group. An unrelenting focus on specific objectives and clearly defined outcomes is a requirement for any team that judges itself on performance. It should be noted here that results are not limited to financial measures like profit, revenue, or shareholder returns. Every good organization specifies what it plans to achieve in a given period, and these goals, more than the financial metrics that they drive make up the majority of near- term, controllable results. So, while profit may be the ultimate measure of results for a corporation, the goals and objectives that *executives* set for themselves along the way constitute a more representative example of the results it strives for as a team. Ultimately, these goals drive profit.

For some members of some teams, merely being part of the group is enough to keep them satisfied. As ridiculous and dangerous as this might seem, plenty of teams fall prey to the lure of status. Though all human beings have an innate tendency towards *self-preservation,* a functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals. As obvious as this dysfunction might seem at first glance, and as clear as it is that it must be avoided, it is important to note that many teams are simply not *results-focused.* A team that focuses on collective results *retains achievement-oriented employees,* minimizes individualistic behavior, enjoys success and suffers failures acutely, benefits from individuals who subjugate their own goals/interests for the good of the team, and avoids distractions.

How does a team go about ensuring that its attention is focused on results? By making results clear, and rewarding only those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results. In the mind of a football or basketball coach, one of the worst things a team member can do is *publicly guarantee*

that his or her team will win an upcoming game. Teams that are willing to commit publicly to specific results are more likely to work with a passionate, even desperate desire to achieve those results. Teams that say, "We'll do our best", are subtly, if not purposefully, preparing themselves for failure.

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. Relying on this alone can be problematic because it assumes that financial motivation is the sole driver of behavior. Still, letting someone take home a bonus merely for "trying hard", even in the absence of results, sends a message that achieving the outcome may not be terribly important after all. Perhaps more than with any of the other dysfunctions, 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. Team leaders must be selfless and objective, and reserve rewards and recognition for those who make real contributions to the achievement of group goals.

In summary, as much information as is contained here, the reality remains that teamwork ultimately comes down to practicing a small set of principles over a long period of time. Success is not a matter of mastering subtle, sophisticated theory, but rather of embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence. Teams succeed because they are exceedingly human. By acknowledging the imperfections of their humanity, members of functional teams overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and a focus on results so elusive.