Review: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team
By Patrick Lencioni
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A potential client suggested that I read the book: *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,* by Patrick Lencioni.

So I went in search of it at the library. It was a great suggestion, as the book provides a really useful lens through which to look at teamwork.

Published in 2002, the *Five Dysfunctions* is really two books in one. The first part of the book is a self-described "leadership fable." The second is a more logical re-presentation of the same information in a more traditional, linear fashion. The second part also includes a short self-assessment tool that teams can utilize to see how they're doing and which "dysfunction" may be causing them problems.

The Fable

The leadership fable follows the challenges of Kathryn, the CEO of an unnamed corporation who's brought in to take charge of an organization that should be doing well (based on fundamentals), but is lagging behind its competitors.

She quickly diagnosis the problem as a lack of teamwork among senior executives and the remainder of the fable outlines the months long process that she goes through to achieve that elusive term: "teamwork."

Although the fabled company was described as in the high tech world, the situation presented and personalities described were sufficiently universal that I could immediately draw parallels to my own history in the nonprofit conservation world.

A few thoughts stood out for me upon reading the fable.

First, as CEO, Kathryn was willing to prioritize teamwork to the extent that she forced her senior team to go through two, separate 3-day "off site" retreats, despite their initial opposition.   While the retreats ultimately involved making key substantive decisions for the business, their first focus was on teamwork.

In my experience, finding the time to prioritize this type of "soft" time together is undervalued in the nonprofit sector, both with staffs and boards.

Second, Kathryn taught teamwork by addressing the subject directly, not coming at it sideways. She didn't put together a made-up exercise and then suggest the lessons for teamwork. Or worse, she

didn't just assume people can go through some team building exercise and learn the lessons by osmosis. Rather, she directly defined for her team what she felt were the keys to good or bad teamwork and led an open discussion about the dysfunctions.

Too often, in my experience, we are afraid to discuss with our team these basic building blocks of effective organizations because it will somehow seem insulting or beneath them. The fable reminded me that even seasoned executives can be weak team players and getting everyone to view teamwork (or other management issues) through the same lens has tremendous power.

Lastly, not to give too much away, the fable made clear that sometimes the only route to a solid team is to "break" the team by cutting out a weak link. That weak link may not be weak for lack of substantive expertise, but rather weak in that the person involved just plain doesn't play well with others. While causing pain for results in the short-run, the fable brought to mind several of my experiences where the long-term health of an organization I worked for went up significantly after "breaking" the team deliberately.

The Five Dysfunctions

While the five dysfunctions are first introduced over the course of the fable, they are laid out more explicitly in the last part of the book. The five are:

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results

My short reinterpretations of them follow:

If you *lack trust* in your co-workers, you are unlikely to form an effective team. This means a willingness to make yourself vulnerable to them by exposing your weaknesses without repercussion.

If you *fear conflict*, it means you will create artificial harmony that makes it appear your organization is on the same page, but it will mask real, substantive disagreements that are better aired openly.

Particularly if you create artificial harmony, the team will *lack commitment* to decisions because there will not have been full and vigorous debate before decisions are made – or worse yet, decisions will be put off in the hope that conflict will magically disappear.

If you lack clear committed decisions, you will *avoid accountability* and low standards will come to pervade the organization. Only a team that trusts each other, is willing to engage in constructive conflict, and has commitment to group decisions, can take the next step and hold each other accountable to high standards.

And lastly, if you don't *pay attention to collective results*, teamwork will suffer. If a basketball player is more concerned with their scoring average than the team's winning/losing then they are not good for the team.   Good for-profit and nonprofit organizational teams come up with their own version of "winning/losing" by which to measure results and then stick rigorously to them.

The book, of course, goes into these in significant depth and I found it to be convincing as several of them rang particularly true to me based on my own experience with teams. Even more importantly, in each section, the author provides several concrete methods for how to address the dysfunction if your team is facing it.

I also liked the inclusion of a short self-assessment survey teams can take to see how they're doing. Unfortunately, I'm not currently part of a team where taking the assessment makes sense, so it's harder for me to evaluate how useful it is as a tool.

Conclusion

Bottom line: this was a quick, useful read.   It was engaging and yet also provided concrete advice. I encourage anyone who's struggling with questions around teamwork to read it.

I'm also curious to hear back from anyone who's used the book (or the dysfunctions from the book) explicitly with a team to tackle a teamwork challenge.