

# Get Rid of Dysfunction

Patrick Lencioni on How to Build Your Company's Dream Team

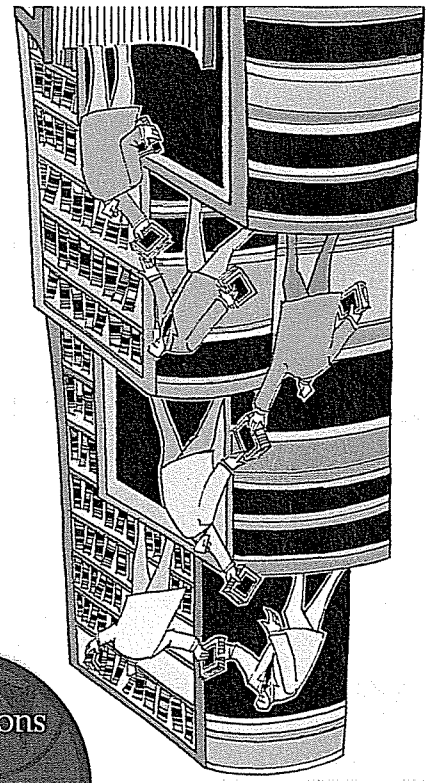
Tired of infighting, conflict and less-than-productive team efforts? As a small-business owner or an executive at a large corporation, dealing with your team's dysfunction can consume all your time and effort, if you let it. The answer, says Patrick Lencioni, best-selling author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, is building habits that help form a unified front.

**Teamwork gets a lot of lip service in business. Is teamwork really as critical for success relative to other disciplines like technology or marketing?**

I honestly believe that the single biggest competitive advantage that a company can pursue today is getting its leaders on the same page. I'm not implying that other disciplines aren't important—they are. But the truth is that without effective teamwork, without a cohesive group of people leading an organization, a company cannot begin to tap into the potential that it has in any other areas.

## What's the first step to building a strong team?

You need to make sure you hire people who are capable of being strong team players. Team members should fit the company's culture, be committed to the team and be capable of being genuinely vulnerable and selfless. Once the team is in place, make teamwork an ongoing priority, not just a slogan. Front load the team-building process by scheduling a meaningful offsite gathering. But remember, effective team-building has to be done in the context of real work, not tree climbing exercises. That doesn't mean you shouldn't get to



know one another on a personal level and understand people's different personalities and their life experiences though. Team-building exercises have to be grounded in the realities of doing our jobs. That's what makes the team-building process stick.

## How does the current economic crisis change the way you go about building teams?

I don't think it changes the approach as much as it creates a new challenge. We have to confront the misguided reluctance to focus on our teams during this crisis and realize that without it, we're not going to be able to effectively identify and implement new ways to survive and thrive.

## How can a leader build a unified team?

I encourage leaders and their teams to address the five causes of team dysfunction. To start, teams must address the first and most important dysfunction: **an absence of trust**. This sounds obvious, I know. But the kind of trust I'm referring to has to do with the ability of team members to be vulnerable with each other. Team members need to be able to admit their weaknesses and their mistakes, to acknowledge the strengths of others and to apologize when they do something wrong. This is critical on any team, but in a small company, people hiding their weaknesses and covering up their mistakes is particularly lethal because there is nowhere to run or hide. If even one team member can't be vulnerable, the work environment will likely be uncomfortable and the team will have difficulty taking on the next dysfunction: **fear of conflict**.

## You are encouraging conflict on teams?

Yes, the fact is that great teams argue. Not in a mean-spirited or personal way. But they disagree, and passionately, when important decisions are made. They argue about concepts and ideas and avoid personality-focused mean-spirited attacks. Of course, so many of us have been raised to avoid conflict and disagreement that we try to compromise and reach artificial consensus, and that only leads to mediocrity.

## But can't conflict break apart a team?

Only if there is too little trust. And that's why I say that **lack of trust** is the most important of the dysfunctions to overcome and why it must be addressed first. When team members trust each other and know that everyone is capable of admitting when they're wrong, then conflict becomes nothing more than the pursuit of truth or the best possible answer. Without trust, conflict becomes politics.

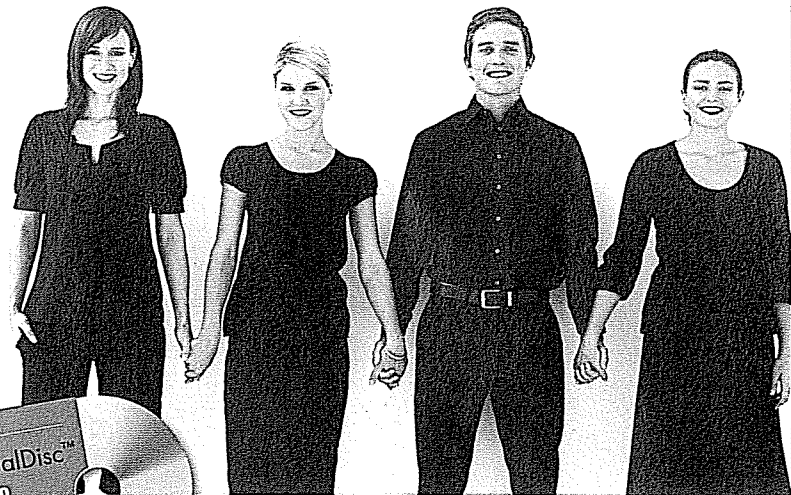
Engaging in conflict is necessary to achieving commitment on a team, which brings us to the next dysfunction: **lack of commitment**. When team members openly and passionately share their opinions about a decision, they don't wonder whether anyone is holding back. Then, when the leader has to step in and make a decision because there is no easy consensus, team members will accept that decision because they know that their ideas were heard and considered.

**"We simply can't afford to waste our time and energy with infighting and redundancy."**

didn't choose, but only if we think the people who made the decision *listened and considered* our input. Leaders have to realize that employees have a great capacity for rallying around a decision and that they don't have to get their way. They just need to have their way heard and considered.

## Assuming the team is able to commit to a decision, how does a leader ensure follow-through?

Teams need to overcome the fourth dysfunction: **avoidance of accountability**. The best kind of accountability on a team is peer-to-peer. Peer pressure is more efficient and effective than going to the leader, anonymously complaining and having them stop what they're doing to intervene. On great teams—the kind where people trust each other, engage in open conflict and then commit to decisions—team members have the courage and confidence to



confront one another when they see something that isn't serving the team. The only way team members will be able to do this is if the leader can effectively demonstrate their willingness to hold people accountable first.

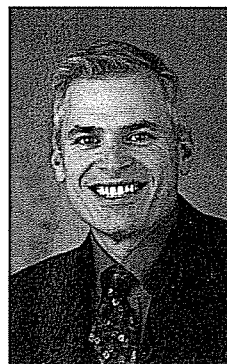
## What is the fifth cause of team dysfunction?

It is **inattention to results**. Team members have to be focused on the collective good of the team. Too often, they focus their attention on their department, their budget, their career aspirations, their egos. Great teams put the tangible results of the team ahead of their individual needs. That might sound idealistic, but it is something that truly great teams do. Team members won't subjugate their own needs if they aren't held accountable. And they probably won't be held accountable if they haven't actively committed to the intended results. And they can't commit to those results if they haven't debated and weighed in on the decision. And they won't debate and weigh in if they don't have confidence that everyone on the team is vulnerable enough to be trustworthy.

## How long does it take to build an effective team?

It depends. If a team works together over a relatively short period of time, they can achieve this kind of team dynamic in a matter of weeks. But that means they talk about being a team, both in terms of interpersonal dynamics and specific goals and results. The fact is, some teams can work together for years and still be dysfunctional, and others can come together over the course of a month and become remarkably cohesive.

Let me just add one important point. Building a team is a process that never ends. Like a marriage, it requires a constant investment of time and energy. For those entrepreneurs willing to make teamwork a priority, they will enjoy a powerful competitive advantage that is essential for maneuvering in today's marketplace.



*Patrick Lencioni is the founder and president of The Table Group, a leadership and organizational consultant and speaker, and best-selling author of eight books, including his latest, The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family.*