The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

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I've borrowed the title of this article from Patrick Lencioni's 2002 book of the same name. I've been using the book almost since it was published.

In the past, I've been surprised that Lencioni chose to approach the topic of teams from the downside rather than focusing on the positive. I've wondered, "Why didn't he entitle the book something like *The Five Characteristics of a Highly Functional Team*? Why would he take the opposite approach?"

Lencioni does briefly describe his five functions in positive terms. And they make sense to anyone who has participated with others in mutually supportive efforts:
1. Team members 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.

The majority of the book is a fable. I didn't like that, either. If I want to read a story, I'll buy a novel. I want substantial help in an "improvement" book. Admittedly, the final third of this book gives some beneficial guidance, both to the team members and to the team leader.

After working with teams for many years, I think I'm beginning to understand why Lencioni presented it as he did. And I'm beginning to come around, believing he made a wise choice.

Let me explain using another book. Many individuals who read Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* conclude, "I do most of the things that Covey suggests!" Yet from knowing the material and from knowing the individual, I perceive the person is looking at his or her behaviors very selectively and perhaps superficially.

We human beings like to look good. So, when leaders self-assess, they can easily deceive themselves. Though leaders' motives are generally honorable, many individuals they influence choose to not reveal to the leader how his or her behavior affects them. Those with less power often feel that it is too risky to share their perspectives. The leader perceives the silence as approval, thinking that he or she is making good decisions and executing well.

Think of a team in which you participate. Look at the five positive descriptions above. How easy is it to say, "Sure, we do those things"? Yet when the description is written in the negative, it seems easy to say, "Oh my, that's like us, too!" So, let's look at those five dysfunctional descriptions.

1. <u>Absence of trust.</u> Individuals are unwilling to be vulnerable to others in the group. They are not genuinely honest in sharing their observed weaknesses and mistakes. Behaviors are often passive-aggressive. When the culture is to hold back on sharing what you believe is the truth, it's hard to trust that others are being truthful with you!

2. <u>Fear of conflict.</u> Individuals who don't trust each other usually offer only guarded comments and veiled discussions. They do not engage in unfiltered and passionate debates of ideas, concepts, and potential approaches to dealing with unsatisfactory conditions. Team members talk behind others' backs to those who share their opinions.

3. <u>Lack of commitment.</u> Lacking the freedom to openly share opinions and perspectives, it's hard to feel committed to a specific decision. However, there is usually pressure to feign agreement during meetings and planning sessions. So, folks "go along," but they may be unreliable in execution, or they may give up easily in the face of obstacles.

4. <u>Avoidance of accountability.</u> Without a deep commitment to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven individuals are unlikely to confront their peers on behaviors that are counterproductive to the good of the team.

5. <u>Inattention to results.</u> In cultures that contain the previous four dysfunctions, individuals are unlikely to set aside their personal needs (such as ego, personal recognition, or career aspirations) for the good of the team. When team goals are not met, it's difficult to find individuals who will step forward and accept responsibility for the shortfall.

I'm changing my opinion on Lencioni's approach because effective teams are relatively rare. Most teams (groups) have areas of dysfunction, though they may not recognize them until exploring Lencioni's descriptions. When team members recognize limitations in their behavior, they seem less willing to tolerate those deficiencies any longer.

My clients typically are seeking improvement. I think that's what Lencioni wants, too. So, my apologies and my thanks, Patrick Lencioni. I confess that I would not have done it the way you did, but you are the guy who has nine best-selling books. And this particular one, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, has helped many organizations improve their effectiveness! Thanks for sharing your insights and experience with the rest of us!