

Leading and Managing an Effective Team

On Tuesday Debra Sabatini Hennelly introduced this series that will discuss *leading and managing an effective team*. Today she discuss the case for focusing on team dynamics.

Key Highlights of this Article

1. With a small staff, a tight budget and rigid timeframes, we have to fully engage our teams and put a premium on their collaboration.
2. Enabling the creativity and power of our teams—sparking and fueling their “team mojo”—is our best hope for delivering on all the requirements and expectations we are juggling and finding innovative, enduring solutions.
3. Applying the lessons from Patrick Lencioni’s *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* can be a powerful leader’s guide for facilitating the ability and commitment to work as a team toward a collective goal.

THE CASE FOR FOCUSING ON TEAM DYNAMICS

Leading and managing an **effective** team comes with its own set of challenges, but they are well worth overcoming. While sometimes it might seem easier to just do everything yourself (especially if you are barely staying on top of today’s fire drills), that certainly is not a viable long-term solution—nor would it generate the best-informed decisions or enduring programs.

Let’s face it, with a small staff, a tight budget and rigid timeframes, we have to fully engage our teams and put a premium on their collaboration. That means ensuring that we are facilitating strong team dynamics, even if it means investing time in activities that are not directly related to things like writing a policy, analyzing data or delivering a training program.

Enabling the creativity and power of our teams—sparking and fueling their “team mojo”—is our best hope for delivering on all the requirements and expectations we are juggling and finding innovative, enduring solutions.

In his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team – A Leadership Fable*, Patrick Lencioni frames the case this way:



| Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate

competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare... A friend of mine... once told me, '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 fact remains that teams, because they are made up of imperfect human beings, are inherently dysfunctional.[1]

We probably can nod in agreement with those remarks. Hopefully, each of us has experienced the reverberating, positive effects when a team's working dynamic is healthy. The enthusiasm and perseverance can be contagious—that team can accomplish far more than the sum total of what the individuals could on their own. Their energy, ideas and creativity feed off of one other. The team has an “esprit de corps”—a team mojo—that can move mountains and magnetically draw followers.

A leanly staffed department with a collaborative, committed team engaged in meaningful work together is unstoppable. They have the potential to take on and deliver far more than a large department that is rife with subtext and squandered energy.

Lencioni makes the case this way:

When people come together and set aside their individual needs for the good of the whole, they can accomplish what might have looked impossible on paper. They do this by eliminating the politics and confusion that plague most organizations. As a result, they get more done in less time and with less cost. I think that's worth a lot of effort.[2]

So how do we build and sustain a collaborative, healthy team dynamic? How can we help our teams avoid or eliminate the politics and the confusion?

Again, for the purposes of this discussion, let's assume you have hired the right mix of team members or assembled the right extended team with regard to their collective expertise, talent and skills. The special ingredients, then, are their ability and commitment to work as a team toward a collective goal. Will their work styles and perspectives mix well? Have you set them up for success?

Lencioni asserts, “Success comes only for those groups that overcome the all-too-human behavioral tendencies that corrupt teams and breed dysfunctional politics within them.”[3] He does a masterful job of laying out the “Five Dysfunctions,” each building on another, ultimately leading to the team's inability to deliver results.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team



Lencioni offers some straightforward suggestions for addressing these dysfunctions in the book and in its companion “Field Guide,” *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Achieving the functionality of a high-performing team is not easy, as it requires an investment of time and attention to developing and reinforcing some basic behaviors and really sticking to them—even under the inevitably stressful situations and competing priorities of the workplace.

But many teams have achieved and sustained these behaviors—building trust, mastering candid debate, committing to the team’s objectives, holding each other accountable for them and ultimately focusing on collective results. They deliver together far more than they could accomplish collectively as individuals, and their success continues to feed their undeniable team mojo.

Getting the team “rowing in the same direction”—avoiding the inevitable dysfunctions—does not have to wait until we can invest some time in digging into Lencioni’s suggestions. We can lay the groundwork by focusing on two practical considerations:

- Avoiding the confusion and waste that comes from ambiguity in the team’s mission or roles; and
- Nurturing a healthy team dynamic by avoiding some basic political undercurrents.

Opportunities for Action

1. Take the time to read Lencioni’s (very readable and short) book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, and see whether his observations offer insights that might enhance your team’s ability to work toward the collective results you desire.

2. If you want to take it a step further, read his companion “Field Guide,” *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. He offers interesting and practical ways to address each of the dysfunctions.
 3. Be transparent with your team about how you would like to enhance the team dynamic—help them feel invested (as you do) in a collaborative, creative, productive working model. It will be in everyone’s interest to candidly discuss how to “row the boat in the same direction.”
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[1] Lencioni, Patrick, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team – A Leadership Fable* (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), p. vii.

[2] Lencioni, Patrick, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team – A Field Guide*, Jossey-Bass (2005), p. 4

[3] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team – A Leadership Fable*, p. viii.