

Can We Really Fix Dysfunctional Teams?

By Joe Hunt

Dysfunctional teams are not the reason for all business failures, but from what I witness in organizations, bad teamwork (collaboration) plays a major role in most unsuccessful projects and missed business goals.

Organizations waste vast amounts of time, effort and money each year by failing to recognize or correct dysfunctional teams.

A PWC study of 200 global companies - involving more than 10,000 projects - found less than 3% successfully completed their plans. Similar research reveals 60%-70% project failure rates. In the United States alone, IT project failures cause estimated losses of up to \$150 billion per year.

As readers of my monthly newsletter column, you are aware I am an avid student of business and regularly reference interviews I've conducted with CEO's and books I've read (or re-read) to add more credibility to my insights. Many of the competencies we study using our **LeaderShift Architect** still tie into acclaimed NY Times bestseller & organizational consultant Patrick Lencioni who first identified the five big dysfunctions of teams. I've never seen sustainable success in any organization without addressing the following:



The true measure of a team's success is its ability to accomplish the results it sets out to achieve. This requires managerial courage, discipline, and emotional energy that even the most driven executives don't always possess.

While it's easy to make a list of faults, fixing them is no simple task. Lack of trust is the core dysfunction, the one that leads to all other problems. When there is insufficient trust, teamwork fails. Let's explore.



"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." - Patrick Lencioni: [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable](#)

Absence of Trust

Several group behaviors demonstrate distrust. Team members may have low confidence in others. They may fear that any sign of personal weakness could be used against them. Consequently, people are unwilling to be vulnerable, transparent or open when exchanging ideas or expressing their feelings.

A lack of trust creates defensiveness in team members. Defensive team members feel the need to protect themselves.

Leaders who want to rebuild trust should try the following strategies:

- **Vulnerability:** Create an environment in which team members can safely feel vulnerable. Draw out people's personal experiences by sharing your own stories, thereby setting the proper tone and lowering barriers.
- **Honest Feedback:** Team members must learn how to provide feedback. Acknowledging and affirming others with constructive feedback set the stage for positive reinforcement and encouragement.
- **Authenticity:** Practice humility to tear down walls. If you and your team can admit that you don't know everything, the experience will be freeing.
- **Integrity:** Model integrity in group dynamics. Everything you do is magnified and often copied. When you "walk the talk," others will follow your example.



Fear of Conflict

Lack of trust within a team easily leads to fear of conflict, confrontation, criticism and/or reprisal. When teammates and leaders are seen as potential threats, people adopt avoidance tactics. This sets up an artificial harmony that has no productive value. There is no true consensus, just a risk-preventing sentiment of "yes" feedback. True critique is avoided. Genuine solutions are not explored, and the team functions poorly.

This dynamic allows a domineering team member to take over, with a unilateral-control mentality. Dominant personalities believe they're always correct, and anyone who disagrees is wrong and disloyal. Independent ideas are stifled. Negative feedback creates discomfort. People's spirits and self-esteem eventually plummet, crippling group performance.

Conflict-resolution training can help you encourage productive debate without hurting feelings or wounding character.

Lack of Commitment

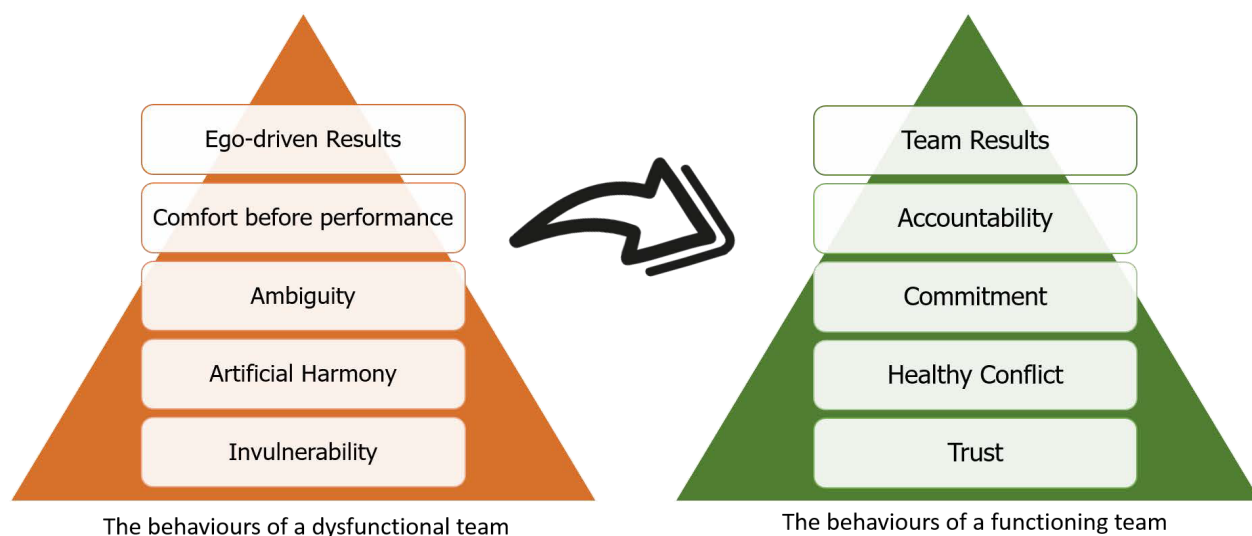
When teams lack trust and fear conflict, they're likely to avoid commitment. We focus on self-preservation and maintaining amicable relationships. As we attempt to avoid confrontation, we stop listening to others' concerns. Discussions become superficially polite.

Most people can sense when someone isn't listening to their ideas or questions. This single dynamic—often subtle—will shut down team engagement and commitment, and tension continues to grow.

Teammates who are cut off or ignored feel left out. They're less committed to team effort, so they're unlikely to “get with the program.” It becomes difficult for a team to move forward amid stalled decisions or incomplete assignments. Enthusiasm for projects takes a nosedive, and confrontations become commonplace. Some members even stop caring about whether the team succeeds.

Lack of commitment also becomes a problem when you fail to convey clear goals or direction. People are left to wonder what they're supposed to do, and the team's success is no longer their top priority. They mentally check out and just start going through the motions.

You can reestablish commitment by prompting team members to ask questions. When you invite dialogue, teammates learn more about each other. They'll see others' intentions, attitudes, motives and mindsets more clearly, eliminating the need to guess or assume.



Adapted from Patrick Lencioni "Five Behaviours of a Dysfunctional Team"

No Accountability

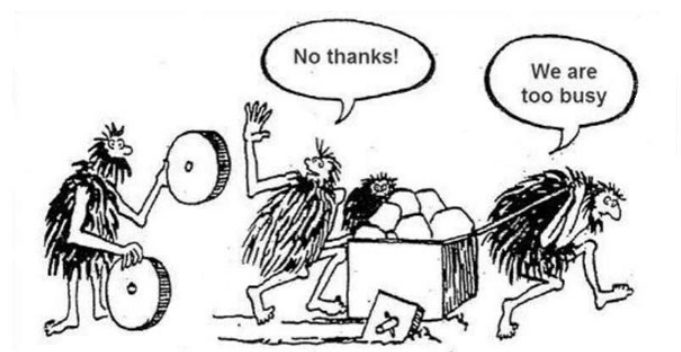
If you fail to reverse a lack of commitment, dysfunctions will intensify. Team members will lose their sense of accountability. If there's little buy-in, there's no desire to meet obligations, follow directions or help others. This is most common in environments where progress isn't adequately assessed and definitive project schedules don't exist.

Work toward establishing clear directions, standards and expectations. All team members need to work with the same information set at all times. Realistic, understandable schedules help drive activities and allow work flow to meet interconnected goals.

Activity tracking methods should clearly report which tasks are on time and which are late. Corrective action plans should make the necessary adjustments and redirect activities accordingly.

Lack of Attention to Results

Without team accountability, the criticality of group success is lost in the shuffle. Self-preservation and self-interest trump results in a climate of distrust and fear. Your inability to track results leaves you with no way to judge ongoing success or failure, progress or pitfalls. No one is praised for good results, and no one is corrected for the lack thereof.



Effective project management methods must track progress toward intermediate and final goals. Affirm team members (and their interdependence) through their accomplishments and struggles. This draws them together and lets them know they're valuable to the organization, their team, and ultimately to themselves.

Team coaching is foundational to **LeaderShift** Development, as it teaches skills and tactics for contributing to organizational success, thereby reversing any longstanding trends of project failure. This doesn't have to break your zero-based budget (ZBB). It can be done through simple internal facilitation and discussion.

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