Team dysfunction: Why it happens and how to fix it

Managers can bring the most intelligent, creative people to their departments, but if the employees aren't able to work as a team, the department's productivity will suffer.

If your team isn't firing on all cylinders, it's important to identify the reasons why … and what you can do to overcome the dysfunction.

The 5 big causes

Many teams don't work well for one reason: "Because they are made up of human beings with varied interests and frailties," says Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.* "When you put them together and leave them to their own devices, even the most well-intentioned people will usually deviate towards dysfunctional, unproductive behavior."

As a result, small problems left untreated can spiral into ugliness.

Here are the five major causes of team dysfunction that managers must routinely contend with, according to Lencioni, and the strategies to successfully overcome each one:

Dysfunction #1: Absence of trust

This occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes or need for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, trust is impossible.

Manager's role: Be vulnerable.

- Identify and discuss your strengths and weaknesses. Openly accept that a team member might be more skilled in a particular area than you.
- Spend considerable time in face-to-face meetings and working sessions. The goal is to get team members to open themselves up.

Dysfunction #2: Fear of conflict

Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered, passionate debate about key issues. This causes situations in which team conflict can easily result in veiled discussions and back-channel comments. In a setting

where team members don't openly air their opinions, inferior decisions are the result.

Manager's role: Demand debate.

- Acknowledge that conflict is required for productive meetings. Stress that conflict must be up front instead of underlying and underground.
- Establish common ground rules for engaging in conflict.
- Understand individual team members' natural conflict styles.

Dysfunction #3: Lack of commitment

Without conflict, it is difficult for team members to commit to decisions. This creates an environment where ambiguity prevails. Lack of direction and commitment can make employees, particularly star employees, disgruntled.

Manager's role: Force clarity and closure.

- Review commitments at the end of each meeting to ensure all team members are aligned.
- Adopt a "disagree and commit" mentality—make sure all team members are committed, regardless of initial disagreements.

Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of accountability

When teams don't commit to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven individuals hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that may seem counterproductive to the overall good of the team.

Manager's role: Confront difficult issues.

- Explicitly communicate goals and standards of behavior.
- Regularly discuss performance versus goals and standards.

Dysfunction #5: Inattention to results

Team members naturally tend to put their own needs (ego, career development, recognition, etc.) ahead of the collective team goals when individuals aren't held accountable. If a team has lost sight of the need for achievement, the business ultimately suffers.

Manager's role: Focus on collective outcomes.

- Keep the team focused on tangible group goals.
- Reward individuals based on team goals and collective success.

Teamwork traps: Groupthink and deadlocks

Groupthink occurs when everyone is *always* on the same page. It may feel comfortable, but in such a predictable, low-demand atmosphere, there's no creativity and nothing challenging the team's assumptions. To help break your team out of this rut:

- Solicit ideas and opinions in reverse order of rank/seniority during meetings. Asking rookies first frees them from the pressure to automatically side with the senior members.
- Occasionally invite employees from other parts of the organization to team meetings to share perspectives.

- Send team members out into the field to collect feedback and seek new ideas from customers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is when team members refuse to agree on anything, resulting in deadlocks.

What to do: Have each side debate from the other side's point of view. They might end up being more sympathetic with the opposing side's view after they've researched and argued its merits for themselves. Next, point out common ground (there's always *something*!), and then look for a possible alternative.