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Development, Dysfunction and Death

by Steven J. Gaspar

A Parable

She had succeeded in virtually everything she had attempted, until now. Failing was something distant and foreign to Janet Zantmoer, who had breezed through the credentialing process to become a Fellow of the Society of Actuaries in only three years. She had also nailed every technical assignment that had been sent her way. But now Janet was faced with a new kind of challenge, one that she could hardly identify, let alone overcome. She did not know what exactly was going wrong. But she did know one thing: Her new team of actuaries was costing more and accomplishing less than any other in the company. Her team was failing, and as its leader, so was she.

What you have just read is an amateur attempt at the writing style of Patrick Lencioni, author of several best-selling books on management and leadership. His expert use of the parable draws the reader into his books quickly and, once there, the pages keep turning. More important than his ability to entertain is his knack for providing crystallized applicable information—the concepts are both easy to understand and easy to apply. Lencioni's recipe is simple: (1) describe a near-enough-to-real-life business drama that includes a problem caused by a lack of leadership, (2) allow the main character to solve the problem so the reader has the satisfaction of closure (not to mention a demonstrated solution), and (3) outline the hows and whys behind Lencioni's theory for that leadership principle. This latter part, summarizing the key points in the back of the book, makes Lencioni's work particularly handy for future reference.

Development

One characteristic common among high-performance leaders is that they take responsibility for developing themselves. Top leaders, like top athletes, are continuously working on their game to make sure they maintain an edge over the competition. Self-development is achieved through a variety of activities including taking on stretch assignments, attending seminars, reading books on leadership, etc. In early October 2005, I had the opportunity to listen to Lencioni at a conference and to meet him afterward. In person his energy is contagious. In print his insight is lucid. Lencioni's company, The Table Group (www.tablegroup.com), provides consultative services to corporations to build stronger leadership teams, among other things. Several of his books are mandatory reading for any new manager and highly recommended for the seasoned leader. At worst his books give positive reinforcement to habits you may already have, and at best they provide a basis for developing strong leadership skills. This article is the first of a two-part series in which I will review Lencioni's books that are currently in print.

Dysfunction

Most of us can think of teams we have led or have been part of that were truly great. I can. We were more than the sum of our parts, and we were energized by simply being with each other and by the things we accomplished together. I can also recall some painfully dysfunctional teams and the wasted time and money that resulted. In The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Lencioni leads us through the challenges faced by savvy leader, Kathryn Petersen, who inherits a new team that has significant problems. We watch as Kathryn makes deliberate moves to repair the team, dysfunction by dysfunction, and we learn of the essential steps to building a high-performance team. When I first read this book I could put real names to the fictitious characters on the team, which I am now learning is common for Lencioni's readers. Moreover, it was by relating real people to the characters

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that I could see how I had failed in leading one of my teams. This epiphany was both stinging and liberating. I have since put the concepts of the book to work with great satisfaction and success.

In The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Lencioni suggests that there are five aspects of a team that must be functional for optimal results to occur: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and a focus on achieving results. In his parable he describes a team that is dysfunctional in each of the five areas, which makes the value of each easier to see. This is the genius—and primary source of entertainment—of Lencioni's writing style. He maintains that his books portray fictitious companies because, as he says, "If I wrote about real companies no one would believe me."

Few would argue with the premise that trust forms the foundation for an effective team. Lencioni discusses in detail how to develop team trust. He further asserts that the five functions are ordered; that is, trust must be present before conflict, and so on. This assertion is easy to support. Have you ever seen conflict without trust? It's called 'fighting,' or at best 'politics.' Creative conflict, however, is extremely valuable in a team and only occurs when trust is present. When teammates challenge each other in a trusting environment, best practices are discovered. Lencioni advocates using trust-based conflict to guide a team to optimal solutions. In his October speech he went further into this concept and offered that the leader must demonstrate "genuine human weakness" as a way to build team trust. "People will walk through walls of fire for a leader if he will admit to genuine human weakness," said Lencioni.

After establishing base trust and a willingness to engage freely in healthy conflict, commitment is necessary for a team to reach its potential. Who will consistently put forth discretionary effort for the good of the team when one or more members of the team is not committed? Not one person, that's who. Each member must share a commitment to that team. But more than committing to the group, team members must quickly commit to the team's decisions regardless of initial opinions. This

practice enables fast and binding decisions rather than backsliding and renegotiating, which is common in some dysfunctional teams.

Once team members trust each other, are willing to challenge each other and are committed to the group, they can hold themselves and each other accountable. Accountability is what keeps the team honest and true to the cause. And it is the team members themselves, not the leader, who are the primary drivers of holding each other accountable. "The most powerful thing we have in our teams is peer pressure," remarked Lencioni in his October presentation. The pressure to not let the team down can provide strong motivation for high performance.

Being focused on results is another clear winner. Effort is nice, but results matter. The team that has trust, conflict, commitment and accountability, but does not achieve results, is simply a lively social gathering, not an effective business team. The team that measures its success on achievement of results is a team that is relevant to an organization.

If I had to pick just one of Lencioni's books for a new team leader, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team would make the short list. The concepts are difficult to dispute and easy to apply. Further, if you have an underperforming team, the chances are good that it is dysfunctional in one of these five areas, most commonly in the area of trust.

Death

Death by Meeting is another excellent book by Lencioni. I routinely recommend this to business colleagues. The concept that we attend enough meaningless meetings to be fatal resonates with most people. The response invoked by merely mentioning the title suggests that there may indeed be a better approach to meetings than that

which is most commonly employed. This book looks at why meetings are typically ineffective and makes recommendations for simple but effective improvements.

Death by Meeting uses the tried and true format of the fable. In this story an unlikely hero arrives to save Yip Software. Will Petersen is a temporary employee with a condition that resembles Tourette's syndrome. His disorder is expressed by an occasional tendency to blurt out whatever he is thinking. Most of us have worked with people like this, which makes relating to the story very easy, not to mention amusing. Lencioni uses this characteristic to create tension (you never know what Petersen will say) and to move the plot along quickly.

One key problem, argues Lencioni, is that we abuse our meetings by using the same forum (often the staff meeting) for multiple purposes. Strategic issues are readily discussed alongside tactical or even trivial issues. "This is like having the following conversation with your spouse while you're getting ready for work one morning," said Lencioni in October as he acted out brushing his teeth. "What do you want for dinner tonight? Hey, did we decide where we're going on vacation this year? Do you like this tie? I think we should move." This is similar to discussing product placement strategy in the same meeting as the company picnic. This "meeting stew" as he calls it generates frustration, confusion and inefficiency by giving equal billing to issues that have significantly different value to the company.

Lencioni's remedy to a fatal dose of ineffective meetings is to categorize events by purpose: daily check in, weekly tactical, monthly strategic, and quarterly off sites. He believes there is value in having different meetings for different purposes, and he recommends that discipline to the stated purpose to be maintained. Parking lots for ideas are utilized to maintain the integrity of the meeting. As with most business texts, I find the recommended recipe close, but not perfect for my situation

with my teams. However, many of the concepts are viable.

Lencioni identifies another problem with most meetings—they're boring and they don't have to be. In fact, he argues that meetings can-be-should-be-must-be productive, interesting, and maybe even exciting. I agree with him. The most memorable meetings I have held or attended were those wrought with conflict and heated debate. However, the meetings resulted in decisions and actions. And, the debate was steeped in trust, which brings me to a common thread between Death by Meeting and The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: the clear need for trust and open constructive conflict. Once again, Lencioni offers that trust is required for conflict, and conflict is required for discovery of the best answers. Conflict in meetings is the honey that attracts the bees of the participants' attention. This conflict makes the meetings interesting and invigorating. But as illustrated by The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, conflict without trust is destructive rather than constructive.

One reaction to Lencioni's work is "Much of this is common sense." While I can relate to that sentiment, I still find great value in reading Lencioni's work because it is one thing to see that something makes sense and quite another to put that common sense into action. Patrick Lencioni does the work of translating that common sense into actionable items that provide the basis for developing leadership skills.

In the next issue, I will review The Four Obsessions of the Extraordinary Executive, The Five Temptations of a CEO and a give sneak peek at Lencioni's next book on silos and turf wars. ❑