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The Case for Organizational Health

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I read quite a few leadership books last year. One of the most impactful to me was *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* by Patrick Lencioni. I received a complimentary copy as the organizer of my team's Chick-fil-A Leadercast last year at which Lencioni was a speaker. His presentation on organizational health was great, so I couldn't wait to dig in and learn all about it.

His thesis: The greatest advantage any organization can achieve is to become healthy. Most leaders ignore this in favor of focusing exclusively on "smarts"—things like finance, strategy, innovation and technology. Becoming a smarter organization is certainly important. However, if unhealthy, organizations do not have a framework for tapping into the collective smarts contained within them.

So, what does a healthy organization look like? To give you a glimpse, Lencioni states, "*A good way to recognize health is to look for signs that indicate an organization has it. These include minimal politics and confusion, high degrees of morale and productivity, and very low turnover among good employees.*"

In this article, I want to share three key lessons learned from this book. I also suggest ways to help you put them into action. I believe by working to make your organization (or team) healthier, you tap into the great human potential around you and take your organization to the next level.

LESSON #1: MANY TEAMS ARE DYSFUNCTIONAL.

Functional teams embrace five behavioral principles: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability and results.

Let's start with trust as it is the starting point for becoming a healthy team. Chances are you "trust" your teammates by some moral standard. But, the trust Lencioni describes goes beyond showing up

for work on time or not stealing change from your neighbor's desk drawer. Healthy teams exhibit what he calls *vulnerability-based trust* where team members are willing to discuss weaknesses, admit failures, and speak openly and freely.

On unhealthy teams, people tend to avoid conflict. In fact, Lencioni says, "*the fear of conflict is almost always a sign of problems.*" Doing great things like solving problems and finding the best solution requires people to be willing to share their ideas and openly debate real issues.

When teams are willing to engage in healthy conflict, the stage is set for building commitment. When team members can share ideas, ask questions, and push back when they disagree, they buy into decisions. Have you ever been in a meeting where a decision was made only to have someone not support it when you talked about it in the hallway afterwards? I know I have. And when I reflect on those situations, it is because the environment was not conducive to building commitment.

Once a team has bought into a decision, the door is open to holding each other accountable. In other words, the environment is conducive to calling out any rogue behavior or misaligned activity by team members. And finally, when accountability is in place, you have a team that is truly committed to its goals, which leads to the actual achievement of results.

Several times throughout my career, I've had people remark that leadership and team development were great and all, but that they took away from the importance of achieving results. Unfortunately, this couldn't be further from the truth. By becoming an effective leader, you develop the skills to build a functional team. And functional teams are necessary to achieve truly lasting results.

Action Item: Have the members of your team perform an individual assessment where they learn about their strengths and weaknesses. I recommend

those found in *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath or *StandOut* by Marcus Buckingham. Bring the group together to talk about which strengths they bring to the team. The group should then discuss their blind spots to practice being vulnerable (the ultimate point of the exercise). It is important that the leader participate, so if you are uncomfortable leading and fully participating, utilize a neutral facilitator.

LESSON #2: MANY EMPLOYEES SUFFER FROM CHRONIC CONFUSION.

Can your team accurately articulate the goals and strategies of the organization? Do they embrace the organization's values, know what is expected of them, and hold each other accountable? Does your organization even have values? I could go on. My point is to illustrate how easy it is to become accustomed to operating in an environment of confusion. To build healthy organizations, leaders must eradicate confusion. Lencioni discusses disciplines leaders must master to do so: creating, over-communicating and reinforcing clarity.

Leaders are often quick to blame others when employees are confused. They say things like "well, of course they understand our strategy; it is on the intranet site!" or "I mention our values at every all-employee meeting, but they still don't get it." Regardless of such efforts, an organization's leaders are on the hook for any employee confusion. To create clarity, Lencioni advises leaders to answer six critical questions about their organization.

1. Why do we exist?
2. How do we behave?
3. What do we do?
4. How will we succeed?
5. What is most important, right now?
6. Who must do what?

By aligning on the answers to these questions, leaders create an environment where employees aren't all moving in different directions. When teams are

engaging in activity that isn't aligned with the values and goals of the organization, time is wasted, morale is compromised, and the bottom line suffers. Lencioni recommends that leadership teams create a "playbook" where the answers to these six questions can be readily found and used for communications. Once clarity is established, then leaders are responsible for over-communicating it. Leaders must be careful not to confuse the transfer of information with employee understanding and implementation. Lencioni says, "*Great leaders see themselves as Chief Reminding Officers as much as anything else.*"

Once leaders create a framework of over-communicating key messages, it must be reinforced. Here's an example. If your organization has a core value of "innovative thinking," ((2) *How do we behave?*), then you must hire people who are willing and able to embrace innovative thinking by recruiting and hiring for it. Likewise, when people are promoted or given raises, you must reward those who are successfully living out innovative thinking. If this is a value, but leaders do not specifically reward for it, employees become confused. This is the essence behind reinforcing clarity.

Action Item: Start the process of building a leadership playbook. Gather your leadership team and work to answer the six clarity questions above. If they are not supportive, this represents a significant barrier. In that case, you still must create a pocket of clarity in your own shop. Answer the questions as best as you can and share them with your team. Hopefully, this will inspire the other leaders to get on board with creating, over-communicating, and reinforcing clarity.

LESSON #3: MANY TEAMS HAVE THE WRONG KINDS OF MEETINGS.

Ah, meetings. Everyone loves meetings, right?

Wrong. Most people dislike meetings. Have you

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Don't have a set agenda. Instead, gather everyone's top priorities and key activities at the beginning of the meeting.

considered why meetings are so disliked, or have you just accepted them as a necessary evil in the business world? The reason you and most other employees dislike meetings is because teams have the wrong ones. So the answer to this issue isn't to have fewer meetings; it is to have the right ones—and to make them effective.

Lencioni recommends leadership teams have four types of meetings: daily check-ins, weekly staff, ad hoc topical, and quarterly off-site reviews. The details of each type of meeting can be found in the book. The bottom line is most teams try to cram everything into a staff meeting where attendees are forced to take on all types of meeting activity (brainstorming, problem solving, administrative items, etc.). Lencioni calls this *meeting stew* which ends up exhausting and frustrating people, in addition to not accomplishing much.

On the leadership team of which I'm a member, we have implemented daily check-in meetings. We meet every day for 10 minutes at 8:45 a.m. and have experienced great success. When you know you are going to meet with your leader and peers every day, it alleviates the pain of trying to find ways to efficiently share critical pieces of information needing to be addressed throughout the day.

Action Item: Start the practice of what Lencioni calls a *real-time agenda build* for your team/staff meetings. Don't have a set agenda. Instead, gather everyone's top priorities and key activities at the beginning of the meeting. Then, discuss those things which are most important to the group. This will spare everyone from having to sit through topics of little importance or items needing a separate, dedicated time for discussion.

My hope is that this will inspire you to examine yourself as a leader, your team, and your organization, and look for ways to make them healthier. Lencioni encourages us with these words: *"At the end of the day, at the end of our careers, when we look back at the many initiatives that we poured ourselves into, few other activities will seem more worthy of our effort and more impactful on the lives of others, than making our organizations healthy."*

To hear more about this book, I will be discussing it at a Management and Personal Development (MPD) Section leadership book review breakfast at the SOA Health Meeting in Baltimore, Md. in June. ●