The Five Characteristics of a Highly Functional Team

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My article last week focused on *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni's 2002 book. I expressed disappointment that Lencioni titled his book in such a negative way. I suggested he might have entitled his book something like the title of this week's article.

In the end, however, I concluded that Lencioni may have made a wise decision, since many individuals are involved in dysfunctional teams and can easily recognize the characteristics he describes. Maybe the motive to improve is greater if you more easily recognize your team's deficiencies.

To keep your team from becoming dysfunctional, today's article offers some preventive measures.

1. Team members trust one another. "Trust" is a conclusion people draw without fully understanding the facts that lead to that conclusion. Subconscious perceptions are made in three areas that lead to "trustworthiness." First is competency. Individual team members are supposed to be skilled at the unique roles they play on the team. You should make every effort to enhance your skills and volunteer them any time there is a need you can satisfy.

Next, we all judge the motives of others. If your team members believe your motives are selfish, they'll tend to not trust you. So, get your head on straight and focus your energies on serving the team and its customers. Ask your team what you can do above and beyond the basics!

Finally, team members expect you to carry through on promises you make. It doesn't take many examples of unreliable follow-up for you to develop a reputation of poor commitment.

2. Team members engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas. Teams that understand their values and have a clear purpose for existence can usually debate issues vigorously and examine the advantages and disadvantages of alternative options. How does a team arrive at common values?

First, have all team members identify their individual values by reflecting on what's important to them personally. Many people never take the time to make this self-examination. Then have the team work to specify a group of collective values.

Some consultants suggest teams work to identify behavioral norms. This is similar to identifying shared values; it's essentially agreeing on how the team will work together to address issues. Having established some clear guidelines, the team is free to openly debate the merits of pursuing various responses to situations they encounter.

3. Team members commit to decisions and plans of action. Although consensus is sometimes possible, achieving total buy-in from every team member is rare. However, once each person has felt heard and genuinely understood, they can usually concede and find some compromise option.

 Members of effective teams are willing to advocate for a given position, and then assume responsibility for follow-through. Obviously, the person who champions a given proposal will likely have more energy for making it work than other members of the team. A sure sign of an ineffective team, however, is when people openly resist contributing to the work required to actually execute a plan.

4. Team members hold one another accountable for delivering against those plans. In the "scientific management" of a hundred years ago, the boss held people accountable through a "command and control" system of rewards and punishments. Effective teams today are filled with individuals who hold themselves accountable and invite their teammates to offer suggestions and improvement ideas.

Seeking and offering feedback to one another is characteristic of effective teams. Each person realizes that what he or she intends with a given behavior may not deliver the result desired. Many times the effect of a given action is different from what was intended. People who do good work for the team and its customers welcome the perspective of others, especially if improvement in the future is likely.

5. Team members focus on the achievement of collective results. We humans want to look good, and we want to feel good about our personal contributions. However, members of effective teams make the team look good first, and they put achieving genuine success for the team ahead of personal glory.

Successful teams don't mind the star player looking good as long as the desired team results are achieved. But if the star player starts doing things that hurt the team, strong feedback to that individual will usually occur quickly.

Establishing and maintaining an effective team does not occur automatically. In addition to doing the work for which the team was assembled, the members of the team must work hard on their relationships to meet their expected outcomes. Patrick Lencioni may not have the only model for effective teams, but the five characteristics he specifies are certainly necessary.

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