

## **Five Dysfunctions of a Team: Lessons for Nonprofits**

Patrick Lencioni's popular book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" provides a simple yet powerful look into the lives of most teams. Nonprofit organizations have all sorts of teams to work with – board, staff, volunteer, etc. How do Lencioni's ideas apply to nonprofits? Read below for a summary of each of the five dysfunctions and how you might diagnose their presence in the boardroom. While board teams serve as the examples below, you might reflect on applications to the other teams you work with as well.

### **Dysfunction #1: Absence of Trust**

How vulnerable are the members of your board or staff team willing to be with each other? How readily will members of your team discuss their weaknesses, mistakes, and fears with each other? Team members may respect each other, but true trust comes from a deeper, more emotional level. When trust does not exist, then motives are questioned and opinions are seen as attacks. A board with an absence of trust shows up in the following ways:

- Group discussions are stilted and awkward.
- When the group assembles, there is very little collegiality, or it is very forced.
- A few board members dominate the conversation.

### **Dysfunction #2: Fear of Conflict**

Without trust, team members are unlikely to engage in passionate discussions about their organization. This shows up as a fear of conflict. Team members avoid "rocking the boat" or challenging each other's ideas. Conflict is inevitable in teams, and it's always lurking around the corner. Ignoring it only prolongs the inevitable – and most likely makes conflict resolution more difficult. Effective teams recognize the importance of conflict and are willing to endure the discomfort it creates. A board with a fear of conflict shows up in the following ways:

- When difficult decisions or conversations begin to emerge, they are quickly postponed or moved to a committee.
- Meeting time is spent on problems that are easily solved, such as operational decisions.
- The team slowly isolates members who actively challenge ideas.

### **Dysfunction #3: Lack of Commitment**

By not permitting unfiltered conflict, teams are putting the commitment of their members at risk. Individuals are typically more committed to an idea when they can help shape it, develop it, or at least feel satisfied that they provided input. However, a team that avoids conflict essentially avoids the spirited debate that happens when people are attempting to gain buy-in to an idea. Thus, their

personal commitment to an idea and the team's success is diminished. If a board lacks commitment, this may be what you see:

- Board members refer to the organization in the third person, instead of "we."
- Board members rarely show up to events unless they have a prominent role.
- Meeting attendance is scattered and unpredictable.

#### **Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of Accountability**

When a team member falls short of their responsibilities, or are simply not doing what's expected, which is the most likely path your board or staff takes: (a) actively confront that individual and give them an opportunity to meet standards, or (b) talk about that individual's performance to every person EXCEPT him/her? We often let people off the hook because they have a helpful spirit, or they are defensive, or they are intimidating. A team without accountability is a team without standards. It looks like this:

- There are board members that haven't been to a meeting in 2 years, but are still considered to be on the board.
- If staff doesn't implement an idea or solution generated in a board discussion, it doesn't get done.
- Board member expectations are never created or never reviewed.

#### **Dysfunction #5: Inattention to Results**

When the other four dysfunctions are present, a natural result is that individuals begin working in their own best interests and no longer care about the success of the team. The results they seek are selfish and ego-driven. Teams can work to overcome this by working together to define simple, attainable, and easily measured results that are focused on the organization. A board team that doesn't attend to team results shows up in this way:

- Group discussions become a series of monologues instead of a conversational exchange.
- Team members rarely volunteer to go above and beyond their minimum expectations.
- The group has to be constantly reminded of the greater cause for which they are working.

Every team struggles with these dysfunctions. Some may be more severe for your organization than others. Identifying the problems is fairly simple. So now what?

*Source: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable by Patrick Lencioni (2002)*