

BUILDING A REAL TEAM

Lencioni, Patrick M. 2002. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Jossey-Bass.

Lencioni, Patrick. 2016. *The Ideal Team Player: How to recognise and cultivate the three essential virtues*. Jossey-Bass.

Most teams operate mainly as “working groups.” Each team member works independently with minimal collaboration with other members. The team leader holds it all together. This provides helpful clarity so that team members can focus on their jobs without the distractions and costs of trying to relate on decisions. Individuals in a working group will usually be friendly and cooperative, but they are not expected to make significant sacrifices for one another in order to achieve common goals.

However, the Bible suggests a different approach to team. God wants us to work together in love and relationship so that we grow as a body together. Paul describes this model in Ephesians 4:15-16:

^{EPH 4:15} Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

But this is not easy. There are significant obstacles to be overcome to build a real team. Patrick Lencioni (2002) calls these obstacles the “dysfunctions of a team” and describes five of them in his very popular and insightful book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (2002). Lencioni’s dysfunctions and solutions are summarised in the following diagram.



Building team is not an easy road. It requires considerable change in the behaviour that has helped individuals achieve their present position. It will be worth it if it is successful, but here is the cost - what Lencioni (2002) says that teams must be ready to do.

Overcoming the Five Team Dysfunctions (Lencioni 2002)

1. *Establish vulnerability-based trust.* Trust is the confidence that their peers’ intentions are good and that there is no need to be careful or protective around the team. This allows team members to focus their energies together on the job at hand rather than politics. It means that team members must be vulnerable with one another. They must learn to comfortably and quickly acknowledge their mistakes, weaknesses, failures, short-comings and need for help. They must also recognise the strengths of others, even when they exceed their own strengths. This is difficult because most successful people learn to compete with peers and protect their reputation. The only way this will happen is if the leader goes first. This requires great security on the leader’s part and challenges the leadership tendency to be confident and resolute in difficulty.

2. *Engage in healthy conflict.* All great relationships require productive conflict to grow. Fear and avoidance of conflict is a great inhibitor of teamwork. Conflict is often seen as destructive or at least a waste of time. It is viewed as a danger to the strength of a team. But avoidance of conflict just pushes issues underground where they fester and inhibit healthy relationships. However, productive conflict is limited to concepts and ideas and avoids personality-focused attacks. Team leaders identify artificial harmony and foster productive conflict in its place. Team members emerge from productive conflict with eagerness and readiness to take on the next issue.
3. *Commit unwaveringly to decisions.* Commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in. Decisions can rarely be made on the basis of perfect information and complete consensus, so after robust debate/conflict, teams have to commit unwaveringly to the final decision. Delaying important decisions tends to produce paralysis and lack of confidence in the team, and results in a continual revisiting of the same issues. Commitment is much more likely to occur when team members feel that their views have been openly expressed and clearly heard. Only when everyone has put their opinions and perspectives on the table can the team confidently commit to a decision knowing it has tapped the collective wisdom of the team.
4. *Provide unapologetic accountability.* Accountability refers to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviours that might hurt the team. When goals and decisions are clear, then real teams are comfortable calling one another on actions that are limiting the success of the team. Less-effective teams will report such actions to the leader or worse, back-channel gossip. This destroys morale and keeps negative issues unnecessarily alive. However, teams that are close often hesitate to hold each other accountable because they fear jeopardising valuable personal relationships. But actually, real friendships are bolstered by such honesty and openness. The most effective and efficient means of maintaining high standards of performance on a team is peer pressure. This reduces the need for performance management and corrective action.
5. *Orientate collectively to results.* The ultimate goal of a team is to achieve collective results and these results (more than just the financial metrics that they may drive) are the measure of success. Other possible drivers are team status (just being associated with the team is enough e.g. the nobility of our mission justifies our existence), and individual status (enhancing their own prospects or career at the expense of the team). Most leaders will choose individual success over team success when it comes to the crunch. This is deadly to a team. There needs to be zero tolerance for individually focused behaviour and a deep commitment to collective team achievements. Many teams are not results focused. They do not live and breathe in order to achieve meaningful objectives, but rather merely to exist or survive or maintain.

Success in forging team requires embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and perseverance.

Practical Suggestions for Overcoming Team Dysfunctions

1. *Absence of trust*
 - Personal histories exercise. Team members answer a short list of questions about themselves e.g. siblings, hometown, challenges of childhood, favourite hobbies, first job, worst job. It helps the team to relate on a more personal basis.
 - Teams effectiveness exercise. Team members identify the single most important contribution that each member makes to the team as well as one area they must improve or eliminate for the good of the team.
 - Personality and behavioural preferences profile. For example, MBTI.
 - 360-degree feedback. These are riskier because peers are making judgments.
 - Experiential team exercises. These are not as effective but they can contribute.

- Prayer meetings. (I've added this one.) When team members share personal needs and pray for each other, trust grows.
- Leadership. Team leaders must demonstrate vulnerability first. They must also create an environment that does not punish vulnerability.

2. *Fear of conflict*

- Teach on the productive nature of conflict and the tendency to avoid it.
- Mining. Someone has to mine for buried disagreements and expose them. It may be helpful to assign a team member to do this in a given meeting.
- Real-time permission. Team members need to coach each other not to retreat from healthy debate. One way is to recognise when someone is becoming uncomfortable with the level of conflict and to remind them of the importance of what they are doing. This diffuses tension.
- Other tools. Personality indicators show how different personalities deal with conflict. This helps personal awareness. A specific tool is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.
- Leadership. A leader can be over-protective of team harmony so that the team never develops conflict management skills. A leader has to model appropriate conflict behaviour.

3. *Lack of Commitment*

- Cascading messaging. At the end of each meeting, the team explicitly reviews the decisions made and agrees on what needs to be communicated (or kept confidential). This helps identify whether there is agreement and clarifies outcomes.
- Deadlines. Establish clear deadlines for when decisions need to be made and stick to them.
- Contingency and worst-case scenario analysis. When a team is afraid of making a wrong decision, it may help to explore contingency plans or worst-case scenarios, to help team members see that mistakes are less damaging than they imagined.
- Low-risk exposure therapy. Demonstrate decisiveness in low risk situations. The team realises that the quality of the decision was better than they expected.
- Leadership. The leader must be comfortable with making a decision that could turn out to be wrong and must constantly push for closure and adherence to schedules.

4. *Avoidance of Accountability*

- Publication of goals and standards. Clarify publicly exactly what the team needs to achieve, who needs to deliver what, and how everyone must behave in order to succeed. Keep agreements in the open so that no one can easily ignore them.
- Simple and regular progress reviews. Team members should regularly communicate with one another (verbally or written) about how they feel their teammates are doing against stated objectives and standards. Without some structure, it is unlikely to happen.
- Team rewards. Shift rewards from individual performance to team performance. A team then is unlikely to allow a peer to sabotage their success.
- Leadership. It's challenging for a leader to allow the team to serve as the primary accountability mechanism, but it is necessary. However, the leader must still be willing to serve as the ultimate discipliner. Accountability has not become a consensus responsibility but a shared responsibility. The team leader therefore steps in when necessary.

5. *Inattention to Results*

- Public declaration of results. Teams that are willing to commit publicly to specific results are more likely to work with a passionate, even desperate desire to achieve those results. Teams that say, "We'll do our best," are preparing themselves for failure.
- Results-based rewards. Tie the team's rewards, especially compensation, to the achievement of specific outcomes.
- Leadership. The leader must set the tone for a focus on results. If team members sense that the leader values anything other than results, they will take that as permission for themselves.

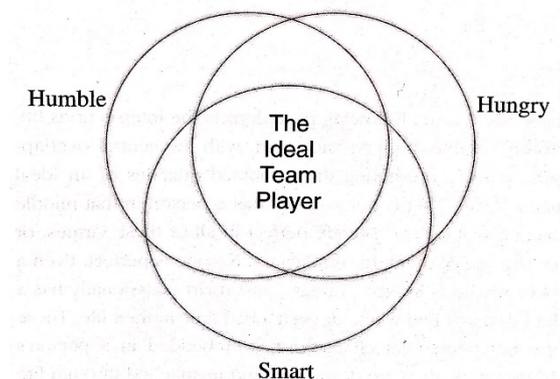
Team Reflection Activity

Please answer the following questions on a team you are leading or in which you are involved:

1. How close is your team to being a true team as defined by Lencioni? Do you think that your team has a will to move in this direction? Why or why not?
2. Which dysfunction is most seriously stopping your team from progressing at present?
3. Of the numerous practical suggestions listed above, which one would be most helpful for your team at the moment?
4. Pray for your team.

The Ideal Member of a Real Team (Lencioni 2016)

Lencioni (2016) has furthered his work on the five team dysfunctions by writing on the ideal team player (the type of team member that is needed to work effectively through the five dysfunctions to create real team). He suggests that the best team players have three virtues in common: humility, hunger and people smarts. Here is a summary of his ideas.



The ideal team player (2016, 155-161)

1. **Humble.** Great team players lack excessive ego or concerns about status. They are quick to point out the contribution of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit and define success collectively. Humility is the single greatest and most indispensable attribute to being a team player. There are two basic types of people who lack humility (usually driven by insecurity): a. The overtly arrogant. They are ego driven and diminish teamwork. b. Those who lack self-confidence. This is not humility. CS Lewis wrote : “Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less.” They won’t advocate for their own views or deal with problems with others.
2. **Hungry.** Hungry people are looking for more: more to do, more to learn, more responsibility. They never have to be pushed to work harder because they are self-motivated and diligent. They constantly think about the next step and the next opportunity. They loathe the thought of being perceived as a slacker. Some people are unhealthily hungry (driven or filling a personal gap) but healthy hunger is a manageable and sustainable commitment to doing a job well and going above and beyond when it is truly required.
3. **Smart.** This simply refers to a person’s common sense about people. Smart people are interpersonally appropriate and aware. They tend to know what is happening in a group situation and how to deal with others in the most effective way. They ask good questions, listen well and stay engaged in conversation intently. It’s like emotional intelligence but simpler. Smart people have good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics. They don’t say or do things (or fail to say or do things) without knowing the likely response of others.

It’s the combination that is key. If even one is missing in a team member, teamwork becomes significantly more difficult.

What if team members are not ideal? (2016, 165-173)

a. Those who lack all of the virtues

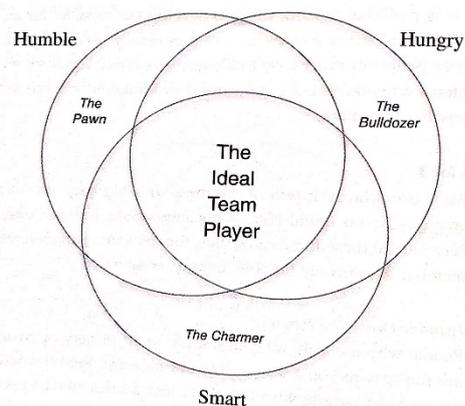
If team members possess none of these qualities, they have little chance of becoming valuable team members. They are easy to identify and are unlikely to make it onto healthy teams.

b. Those who lack two of the three virtues

Humble only: the pawn. These are pleasant, kind-hearted, unassuming people who don't feel a great need to get things done and who don't relate really well with others. They have little impact on the performance of a team. They don't make waves and can survive for a long time on teams that value harmony and don't demand performance.

Hungry only: the bulldozer. These people will be determined to get things done, but with a focus on their own interests and an insensitivity to how they are impacting others. They thrive in environments that place an emphasis on production alone, but they are easy to identify.

Smart only: the charmer. They get on well with others, but have little concern for the well-being of the team or their colleagues. They are smooth but make little significant contribution.



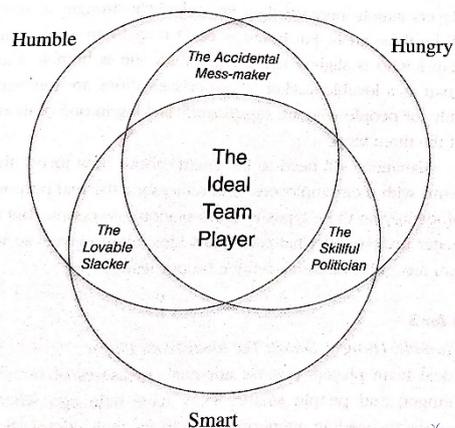
c. Those who lack one of the three virtues

These are more difficult to identify because their strengths often camouflage their weaknesses. But lacking one of the three virtues can seriously impede the team building process. But with work they may become an ideal team player.

Not smart: the accidental mess-maker. They genuinely want to serve the team and in sharing the credit, but their lack of awareness will create interpersonal problems on the team. Team members will respect their work ethic and desire to be helpful, but will tire of the problems they create. However, they belong to the least dangerous group for team building as they have good intentions and will listen to corrective feedback.

Not hungry: the lovable slacker. They are not looking for attention and they work well with others, but they only do as much as they are asked and they have limited passion for the work the team is doing (their energy is often absorbed by other interests). But it's hard to challenge them because they are nice people.

Not humble: the skilful politician. They are cleverly ambitious and willing to work extremely hard, but only as much as it will benefit them personally. But being smart, they are adept at portraying themselves as humble, making it hard to identify them and address their behaviour. They tend to rise in the ranks of teams that reward individual performance over teamwork.



Warning:

1. Don't label others quickly or flippantly. It can be damaging.
2. Don't assign these labels to ideal team members because they are relatively stronger or weaker in one area. These classifications are only for people who are significantly lacking in one or more of the traits.

Team Reflection Activity

To check where you sit as a team player according to Lencioni's virtues, please complete the self-assessment. It is based on Lencioni's assessment tool (2016, 192-193) but I have added a few statements.

Share the virtues in which you have your highest and lowest scores with your team and give examples. Remembering that everyone has room for growth, would you see yourself fitting into Lencioni's "ideal team player" category? Why or why not?

Use the scale below to indicate how each statement applies to your actions on the team. Respond as honestly as possible to accurately identify areas in which you can develop.

Scale: 3 = Usually; 2 = Sometimes, 1 = Rarely

HUMBLE. My teammates would say:

	1. I compliment or praise them without hesitation.
	2. I easily admit my mistakes.
	3. I am willing to take on lower-level work for the good of the team.
	4. I gladly share credit for team accomplishments.
	5. I readily acknowledge my weaknesses.
	6. I listen carefully to healthy criticism and seek to learn from it.
	7. I offer and accept apologies graciously.
	TOTAL /21

HUNGRY. My teammates would say:

	1. I do more than what is required in my job.
	2. I have a passion for our mission and calling and devote myself to it.
	3. I feel a sense of personal responsibility for the overall success of the team.
	4. I am willing to contribute to and think about work outside my normal hours.
	5. I will take on new, challenging tasks with enthusiasm.
	6. I dream of what could be in my areas of responsibility and beyond.
	7. I look for opportunities to contribute beyond my normal responsibility.
	TOTAL /21

SMART. My teammates would say:

	1. I generally understand what others are feeling during meetings and conversations.
	2. I am genuinely concerned and interested in others on the team.
	3. I am an attentive listener.
	4. I find it easy to motivate others.
	5. I am seldom surprised by the reactions of others to my words or actions.
	6. I adjust my behaviour and approach to fit the nature of a conversation/relationship.
	7. I easily relate to people and am well liked by others.
	TOTAL /21

Developing Team Members in the Virtues (2016, 195-207)

Important Issues

1. The key factor in developing virtues in team members is the leader's commitment to constantly remind team members when they are not yet doing what is needed. Without this, improvement will not occur. This is uncomfortable for the leader. It's unpleasant and awkward, but absolutely essential. When this happens, team members will eventually either commit to improvement or decide to leave. Team leaders must constantly, repeatedly, kindly, constantly (yes I said it twice) let team members know how they need to improve in the virtues until each virtue becomes a strength.
2. Ideal team members also need to improve in virtues that are not as strong. The best way to do this is to use team members who are strong in a virtue as coaches. For example, get team members who are strong in humility to coach those who would like to improve in humility. When every ideal team member is coaching and being coached, not only do team members grow, but community and accountability strengthens.

Developing Humility

Because lack of humility is always related to insecurity (much of which is rooted in childhood and family issues), it is the most sensitive of the virtues. It is important for team members who struggle with humility to know that everyone is insecure in some way. If team leaders or coaches can share their own challenges with insecurity, it makes it easier for team members.

1. *Identify root causes.* Without getting too deep into psychological analysis, it helps if the general cause of insecurity can be identified. If team members can identify and admit where their struggle with insecurity comes from, their chances of growth are greatly enhanced. For some it may be related to personality type (some types are likely to find humility more difficult). To understand this can be of relief to team members.
2. *Exposure therapy.* Team members can make progress by simply acting like they are humble. By intentionally making themselves compliment others, admit mistakes and take an interest in others, team members can begin to experience the liberation of humility. Team members can make a list of the desired behaviours and track their actions. Team leaders can oversee this, but the best way is having other team members coach by encouraging and challenging them.
3. *Leader modelling.* It really helps to know that the team leader values humility, tries to demonstrate humility, and admits struggles with humility.

Developing Hunger

Hunger is the least sensitive and nuanced of the virtues, but it is also the hardest to change. It's fairly easy to identify lack of hunger and demonstrate to a team member that they seem less hungry than others in the team. Unfortunately, acknowledgment of the problem doesn't mean a desire to change because some people prefer to be less hungry. Less hunger means more free time, less responsibility, more preferred activities, more fun. These are not bad people, just bad team members. No-one really prefers to lack humility or people smarts, but lack of hunger is preferable for some. The key is to find out whether team members who lack hunger prefer to be that way and to support those who want to change and to help the others find a job that doesn't require hunger.

1. *Passion for the mission and team.* The most important part of growing hunger is to help team members see the importance of the work they are doing. The best way to do this is by team members sharing their passion for and connection to the mission. Non-hungry team members may get infected by the passion for the mission or at least may come to realise that they play an important role in helping others fulfil their passion for the mission.
2. *Clear expectations.* Team leaders must set clear behavioural expectations for team members and hold them accountable. Performance targets are also important, but they don't create hunger,

merely willingness to meet minimum standards. Behaviours associated with hunger include helping others achieve their goals, taking on some additional responsibilities and working more hours. If team members can't or won't develop hunger, they need to move off the team to a job that doesn't require much hunger (there are plenty of these).

3. *Not-too-gentle reminders.* Habits of lethargy are often developed over time and require some time to break. So team leaders and teammates need to overcome their reticence to call out non-hungry team members when they see behaviours that need to change. Don't wait until a performance review. Team members need immediate and unambiguous feedback. Tough love associated with encouragement, support and patience is the answer.
4. *Encouragement.* When non-hungry team members start to exhibit signs of hunger, team leaders and members need to praise them publicly. This may seem like special attention for doing what the hungry team members are already doing, but they need it.
5. *Leader modelling.* As with humility, the team leader needs to be hungry, demonstrate their hunger, and admit when they struggle with hunger.

Developing Smarts

Helping team members become smarter with people is not quite as sensitive as humility and not quite as hard as hunger, but it's still a challenge. It needs to be clear to everyone that deficiency in people smarts is not intended. No-one wants to create interpersonal problems with their teammates. If everyone understands this, it makes helping team members develop in people smarts both easier and more effective.

1. *Basic training.* Like training a pet (Lencioni's analogy), training someone in people smarts requires constant, loving feedback. As soon as team members say or do something not smart, they need feedback. They really do want to change, so make sure that you help them.

Embedding this Model into Team Culture (2016, 207-211)

Working as a team is a choice that is not for everyone. It's better to admit this is not your direction than to pretend that it is but not put in the effort required. If you make the choice for team, here are some ideas for embedding the virtues of humility, hunger and people smarts into your culture.

1. *Be explicit and bold.* Tell everyone – team members, boards, customers, prospective employees. Let everyone know who deals with the team that this is the type of people you can expect. This is not corny, it's what all effective organisations do.
2. *Catch and revere.* Be constantly on the lookout for any displays of these virtues and hold them up as examples for everyone to see. Team leaders greatly underestimate the power of a comment or gesture of approval for the individual and the whole team.
3. *Detect and address.* When you see a behaviour that violates one of the values, let the violator know that their behaviour is out of line. This requires tact and good judgment, but don't squander opportunities for constructive learning.

Team Reflection Activity

Have each team member share what would most help them grow as a team member. Talk together about how you can help each other.