

OVERCOMING THE

DYSFUNCTIONS

OF MINISTRY TEAMS

BY NANCY ORTBERG



MY FIRST introduction to Patrick Lencioni's leadership work was when my boss at Willow Creek Community Church assigned us to read the first 30 pages of *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* by our next meeting. Perhaps you've been in that situation: Your boss wants you to read the latest "next-big-idea-that-will-change-your-life-forever" book. Two weeks later, the book sits on your desk, untouched in the midst of the urgency of your job.



I'd been "burned" enough times to be skeptical. So I smiled, took the book, nodded my head, and left with absolutely no intention of reading it. The night before the meeting a sliver of guilt crept into my soul, and since my husband was already asleep, I grudgingly opened the book to skim the contents so that I could at least nominally participate in a staff meeting the next day.

I ended up reading the book cover to cover. I was captivated by the leadership principles as well as Patrick Lencioni's belief in the dignity of people. I sensed that I had just read one of those rare books that would be a template for my leadership for many years to come.

I read another of Patrick's books much more quickly after Steve, my associate director of Axis (the postmodern ministry I led for five years at Willow Creek) came into my office one day and said: "Your meetings suck."

"Tell me more, Steve." Actually that *isn't* what I wanted to say, but it's what I said. I wanted to get defensive and rationalize. But somewhere lurking in my head and heart was a voice saying, *What part of what he's saying is not true?* So I listened.

Steve went on to tell me that when I first arrived in my leadership role, I designed and delivered great meetings. There was a lot of energy and focus. People liked them, even looked forward to them. But something had changed. The way Steve put it was: "I don't know what else is taking your time and attention, but it isn't your meetings."

I bought Patrick's *Death by Meetings* the next day. Read it cover to cover. Couldn't put it down. Loved it. More importantly it helped me get our meetings (which are a large part of the work of leadership) back on track, better than ever.

This is a long way to introduce Patrick's hallmark work, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. What I found in this book was a model for leadership that could bring health to our team, as well as effectiveness. It fit in a post-modern setting and focused on the role of the leader in bringing a team together to do its best work. And it worked great in a ministry context.

Patrick talks about "teams," but that's just business-world lingo for *community*. Healthy leadership happens in teams, and teamwork ►►

is not just a slogan or a buzzword, it's a strategy...a choice. It's a declaration that our best work will come out of doing it in and through teams...healthy teams.

Having said that, and knowing that teams are made up of people, you should know that you will encounter dysfunction. In my consulting work, I'll get a call from a prospective client who will hesitatingly say, "I think we might have some dysfunctions." My diagnostic question is always the same: "Do you have people on your team?"

If the answer is yes, then you have dysfunctions.

One of the key roles of a leader is to move teams out of dysfunction and into health. The resulting product will be a team that is aligned with team members' gifts, makes great decisions, gets great results, and loves working together. That is an attractive outcome in any setting. Let's look at the five dysfunctions, and how to overcome them.

DYSFUNCTION #1 ABSENCE OF TRUST

This first dysfunction is the most important because much of what happens on a team is predicated upon trust. And while trust is composed of character and competency, Patrick pushes our thinking to say that the most important kind of trust on a team is vulnerability-based trust. That can be pretty counterintuitive for leaders who think in terms of presenting an image of "omnicompetence."

Vulnerability-based trust makes a team great. Without trust, people position themselves and teams become what Patrick calls a "petri dish for politics." When leaders name their weaknesses, they're only stating what everyone else on the team already knows. In addition, they're then inviting others to participate in leadership to fill in the gaps of what the leader cannot do. No one can do everything, and vulnerability-based leadership allows for everyone on a team to contribute in meaningful ways.

I've worked for leaders who led from a facade of omnicompetence, and the best I could hope for was to be an implementer of their vision and their decisions. I've worked for leaders who, because of their appropriate admission of weaknesses, have invited me to participate as a peer and really lead. I'll take the latter any day.

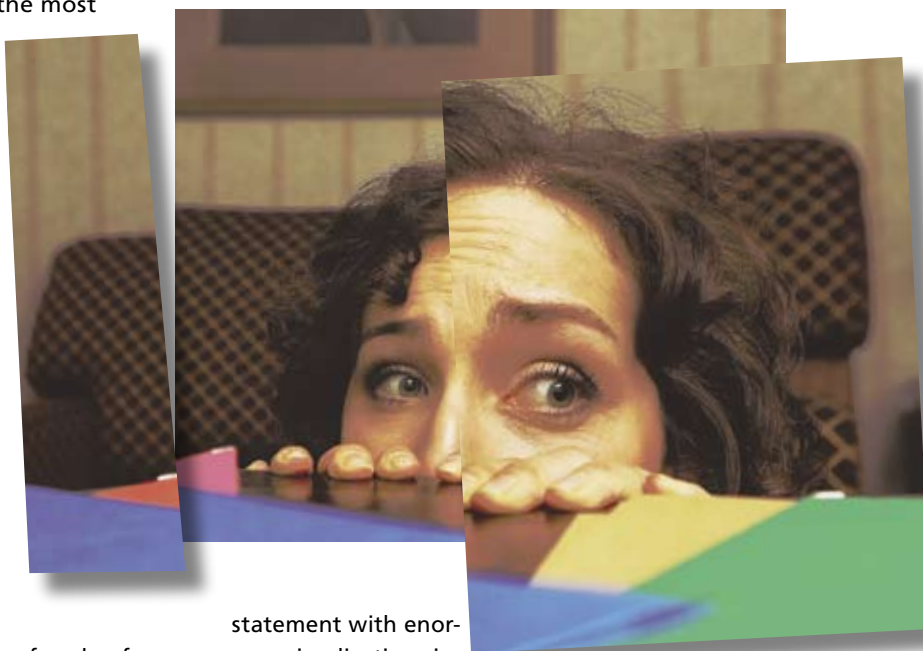
Trust isn't just some touchy-feely concept—it's a practical, actionable component of leadership that allows for

teams to make better and faster decisions, directly affecting results. Of all teams in the world, church leadership teams need to be building and maintaining trust. The kind of trust that exists among leadership will inevitably replicate itself throughout the church. Doing the work of the ministry ought to result in the work of Christ being accomplished in us.

DYSFUNCTION #2 FEAR OF CONFLICT

Of all the organizations with which I work, churches tend to be the worst at engaging fearlessly in conflict. Somewhere along the way we turned Jesus into a milquetoast in an immaculate white robe, with softly permed hair, who goes around uttering nice little sayings. However, one look at the gospels will tell you that Jesus was a walking defining moment. His call for transformation was often embedded in rather terse and direct language.

Les and Leslie Parrott, Christian psychologists who work primarily in the area of marriage, have written, "Conflict is the only way to intimacy." That's a pretty startling



statement with enormous implications in the context of teams.

Our avoidance of conflict almost guarantees that we'll fail to build relationally authentic teams. We'll be unable to make the best decisions for the organization.

When teams don't engage in healthy, passionate, unfiltered debate around the most important issues, they inject more politics into the organization and make ▶▶

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mediocre decisions guaranteed to deliver mediocre results.

Conflict is basically energy, and when it's not dealt with directly, it leaks out elsewhere. We learned that in our high school physics class. Unaired conflict leaks into meetings in the church parking lot, transmits through telephones, or seethes behind closed doors. It becomes "malicious compliance," such as my story above about nodding my head "yes" to reading the book with no sincere inten-



tion of opening it.

If we're passionate about our churches, we will fearlessly engage in conflict so that the church can

resolve issues and move toward a shared vision. Conflict also enables us to "disagree and commit," a phrase coined at Intel, but applicable to all teams.

DYSFUNCTION #3 **LACK OF COMMITMENT**

Have you ever gone to a meeting, endured the meeting, and left the meeting without really knowing what, if

anything, got decided? Ever *led* one of those meetings? Healthy teams know when it's time to make a commitment—and then they *do* it. There are no perfect decisions, but there are good and great ones. At the end of an appropriate amount of debate, there

comes a time to plant the flag.

I attended a leadership conference where I heard a speaker say, "A mediocre strategy well implemented is better than a great strategy poorly implemented." I think I snapped to attention because I'm often guilty of waiting for the "perfect" strategy.

When people leave a meeting unclear on the decision, they will go back to their jobs focusing on whatever is urgent or easy because they lack clarity on exactly what

it is that they are supposed to be doing. Commitment helps direct us to translate vision onto the pages of our daily calendars, aligning our activity with our strategy. I've known church staff members whose primary role was leadership development, but they lacked clarity. So instead of leading, they filled their days with computer time, meetings, and event planning not associated with leadership development.

Focusing on clarity and closure can drive a team toward the kind of commitment that begins to produce ministry results that, in turn, move a church toward vision.

DYSFUNCTION #4 **AVOIDANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

Holding people accountable is hard work, and it's not usually fun. No wonder we avoid it. But we need accountability. Healthy teams find a way to move from simply the leader holding individuals accountable to peer-to-peer accountability, where everyone on the team is holding each other accountable. That is a very powerful place for a team to be.

Holding each other accountable is another way of living out our mutual investment in the cause. I may be responsible for one particular area in my department, but I'd better care and expect that each area is being well-led and keeping commitments. Avoiding this can cause ►►

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an organization to become a series of “silos.” Churches may have well-run departments, but I want the worship leader to care about the parking lot attendants, and those that lead small groups to care about the sermon, and the children’s minister to care about world missions.

In my second year of leading the Axis ministry, we were gearing up for our spring retreat. This was a big ministry event, and it provided a way for us to take our people into a deeper teaching and worship experience, as well as connect people who were relatively new to our ministry. It was one of the banner events of our year, and we were three days away from the retreat. We held our leadership team meeting outside that day. I remember because that can be pretty rare in Chicago even in May. As we did a final check-in, it became painfully clear that one of the key leaders in this retreat effort had dropped some pretty significant balls regarding the retreat. (Did I mention that the retreat was only three days away?!)

I was at first shocked, and then incredibly frustrated; and no one on the team said a word. I don’t know that I handled it perfectly, but I asked this person first for clarifications to be sure I understood, then I asked him to leave the meeting for 20 minutes.

Then I directed my response to the team. I asked them how they felt about now having to pitch in, work extra hours, and get everything done in the next three days—in addition to all the work they’d already done on time.

As soon as they understood what this would cost them, they began to speak up. They began to talk about not only the extra work they would have to do, but also how this could jeopardize one of our most important ministry efforts of the year.

When this leader returned to the meeting, team members were able to express, in healthy ways, their frustration at what had happened, as well as say which part of his job they would pick up to ensure the retreat went well.

We became a better team that day, more willing and able to hold each other accountable for the work we had promised each other we would do in pursuit of the cause about which we felt so deeply.

Leadership is about promises, and when we make and keep them—and expect each other to do the same—we live out our leadership with integrity.

DYSFUNCTION #5 INATTENTION TO RESULTS

When businesses have a quarterly loss, they talk about poor return on investment. In churches we tend to “spiritualize” ministry failures with such language as, “Well, I guess God must have only wanted three people to come.”

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Of course, those of us called to leadership in the church need to understand that the results are not completely in our hands. We are not ultimately responsible for everything. Leaders will probably need to keep learning this most of their lives. However, that is very different from saying that it is okay to rationalize and defend that the ministry is not moving forward because of our poor or quickly thought-out efforts.

Few of us wake in the morning only *praying* for our oatmeal. Most of us move to cook the oatmeal.

Great leaders do “autopsies” on poor results. They’re constant learners and students. They listen to God as best they can and relentlessly pursue doing things better. They’re passionate about results because results affect people. Sometimes results *are* people.

“What could we have done differently?” “What did we learn from this, for future decisions?” “Has this effort been allowed to go past its prime, and is there, perhaps, a new and better way?” These types of questions build a healthy, high-performing team, and leaders must not be afraid to ask them of their teams.

Every church ought to be led by teams that are healthy: spiritually, relationally, and intellectually. Teams are community. They are the environments for great leadership. As a leader, I hope you will work relentlessly to overcome these areas of dysfunction on your team, and also in yourself. It will take courage and perseverance to change, but I promise it’s worth it. You’ll create a culture in your church in which teams are a place where people can come and do what they do best, and with people who love being with each other. What a great combination. What a great picture of the community of God. 🔄



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