Book Summary: The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, by Patrick M. Lencioni

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This is a preview of the Shortform book summary of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick M. Lencioni. Read the full comprehensive summary at Shortform.

Contents

- 1-Page Summary
  - An Executive Team Divided
    - Exercise: Testing Teamwork
  - Dysfunction One: Absence of Trust
  - Dysfunction Two: Fear of Conflict
    - Exercise: Digging Into Discomfort
  - Dysfunction Three: Lack of Commitment
  - Dysfunction Four: Avoidance of Accountability
  - Dysfunction Five: Inattention to Results
    - Exercise: Defining Disarray
  - Solving Dysfunction One: Building Trust
  - Solving Dysfunction Two: Empowering Constructive Conflict
    - Exercise: Getting Comfortable with Conflict
  - Solving Dysfunction Three: Fostering Commitment
  - Solving Dysfunction Four: Promoting Accountability
  - Solving Dysfunction Five: Delivering Results
    - Exercise: Achieving Alignment
  - Epilogue: Realizing Results

1-Page Book Summary of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

What prevents a team from succeeding in its mission? This is the central question of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team. The book presents the five dysfunctions like a pyramid - each one builds on the next. And to solve all the dysfunctions, you need to start at the bottom and most fundamental dysfunction.

Here's an overview of the five dysfunction. Each one discusses what a healthy environment looks like, what the dysfunction looks
like, and how to overcome the dysfunction.

Absence of Trust

Absence of Trust

Trust is confidence that your peers have good intentions and aren't out to harm you. Teams that trust one another are comfortable being vulnerable, and can admit mistakes and weaknesses.

If you have an absence of trust, then you don't feel safe being vulnerable and admitting your weaknesses, because you fear your vulnerability will be used against you. As a result, teams that lack trust hesitate to ask for help, spend a lot of time managing behaviors and appearances, and hide their mistakes from one another. People who are afraid of being vulnerable receive feedback poorly, and they retaliate. As a result, productive feedback is stifled.

To overcome this dysfunction, teams should practice exchanging feedback in structured environments. In these safe environments, they can identify strengths and weaknesses without repercussions. Examples include personality profiles (like Myers-Briggs type), identifying each other's single biggest contribution and area for improvement, and 360-degree feedback.

Fear of Conflict

Fear of Conflict

Functional teams engage in ideological conflict. Because they trust each other, they feel comfortable expressing their true opinions and publicly disagreeing over important issues. With trust, they know that feedback isn't meant to damage a person, but rather to improve them.

When there is a fear of conflict, these conversations get swept under the rug and the team is unable to resolve critical issues. Teams that fear conflict don't tap into the full expertise and experience of their members and end up channeling their unspoken conflicts into personal attacks.

To overcome this dysfunction, teams should actively seek out sources of conflict instead of avoiding them. Leaders should give real-time permission for individuals to debate with one another, and hold back their urge to protect the team from conflict and disagreement.

Lack of Commitment

Lack of Commitment

Committed teams are those that have full buy-in from everyone. Because they've been able to passionately and productively debate ideas, they can move ahead with a decision knowing that everyone's opinions have been considered.

When there is a lack of commitment, teammates are unclear about priorities and expectations.

Teams that suffer from a lack of commitment lose opportunities due to delays, distractions, missed deadlines, and repeated discussions of the same issues.

To overcome this dysfunction, teams should review major decisions and responsibilities at the end of each meeting and assign deadlines to individual team members.

Avoidance of Accountability

Avoidance of Accountability

High-performing teams hold each other accountable to high performance standards. They are able to do this because everyone is clear on what is expected of themselves and their teammates (they have already engaged in healthy conflict to develop a plan that everyone is committed to). Moreover, they're comfortable being vulnerable and sharing feedback, so they can raise questions of performance in other people without fear of retaliation.

When there is a lack of accountability, teams encourage low standards and force the leader to become the sole source of discipline. Higher-performing team members resent lower performers. Mediocrity becomes the standard.

To overcome this dysfunction, teams should engage in peer pressure tactics, which is scalable and reduces the bureaucracy needed for oversight. This means publishing team goals and standards and instituting regular process reviews. They can also receive team rewards, which...

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Unlock the full book summary of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by signing up for Shortform.
Five Dysfunctions of a Team explores the dysfunctions that prevent teams from working cohesively as a unit and outlines some key strategies that teams can employ to identify and resolve them. The book does this through a parable about a troubled (fictional) company called DecisionTech, whose executive team exhibits all five of the dysfunctions.

Missed Opportunities

DecisionTech seems to have everything going for it. They have a seasoned executive team, a solid business plan, plenty of startup capital from investors, and leading-edge technology.

Unfortunately, they find themselves unable to capitalize on these advantages and are instead mired in dysfunction. With missed product delivery deadlines, a growing turnover problem, and an eroding cash position, the company is on the brink of failure.

The problem is the executive team, which is:

- Mistrustful of one another
- Unable to discuss issues
- Ambiguous and unclear about priorities
- Unwilling to hold one another accountable
- Overly focused on individual and departmental goals

Amid this turmoil, the Board of Directors asks the CEO and cofounder to step down, replacing him with their new choice, Kathryn Petersen. Kathryn may lack experience in tech, but she is brought in for her track record in building great executive teams.

The Executive Team

All the executives are highly skilled, experienced business leaders who have achieved notable success at previous companies. Unfortunately, they are far less than the sum of their parts. Each exhibited some dysfunctions in their approach to teamwork.

Jeff Shanley, Co-Founder and CEO

Jeff was afraid of conflict, and never used the opportunity of meetings to discuss important issues. This led to ambiguity and lack of commitment on the part of the team, with nothing ever being decided or accomplished. He was also unwilling to hold his team accountable because he didn’t like being seen as an authority figure.

Michele Bebe (“Mikey”), Head of Marketing (#michele-bebe-“mikey”-head-of-marketing)

**Mikey was known for her...**

Shortform Exercise: Testing Teamwork

By thinking about DecisionTech’s flaws, you can improve your effectiveness as part of a team.
Have you ever been part of a team that was unable to work together and achieve its stated goals? How do you think you might have contributed to this dynamic?

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Dysfunction One: Absence of Trust

DecisionTech suffers from an absence of trust.

“Trust” is an often-misused word, and tends to be used to signify predictability in someone’s behavior (as in, “I trust that you will get this done”).

When discussing interactions between members of a team however, it means something deeper. Trust is the quality of being able to feel safe and unjudged by one’s teammates. It is the ability to be vulnerable with one another (by being willing to admit mistakes and reveal weaknesses). The root of this is fear that exposing your weaknesses will be used against you. You don’t believe that other people have your best interests at heart.

Without trust, teams miss important opportunities and channel their energy into unproductive behavior, suppressing their true feelings. Instead of honesty and openness, you get politics—people acting and speaking based on how they believe they will be perceived by others, not on what they truly feel. Without that foundation of openness and honesty, team members become quick to attribute disagreements to malice and are more likely to hold grudges.

In such an environment, colleagues are reluctant to ask for or offer help, because they either don’t feel comfortable being wrong, or are afraid of looking inexperienced in the eyes of their colleagues if they step outside their field of expertise.

The consequences to the organization are severe: issues don’t get resolved, mistakes are repeated, and team meetings become meaningless theatrical displays. Since such meetings achieve nothing and waste everyone’s time, colleagues dread them and look for ways to avoid spending time with one another.

Taken together, Dysfunction One prevents colleagues from taking full advantage of each other’s skills.

Example 1

Carlos is criticized by his colleagues for being too reserved...

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Dysfunction Two: Fear of Conflict

Passionate, ideological conflict is necessary for teams to learn from past mistakes, take decisive action, and tap into the full team’s talent and experience. This requires healthy conflict, but dysfunctional teams have a fear of conflict.

Fear of conflict is a direct outgrowth of the first dysfunction, absence of trust. Without the guardrails that trust provides, teammates will be fearful that any conflict will devolve into personal sniping and unproductive arguing—so they avoid conflict altogether. Trustful teams don’t have this problem, because their conflicts are about substantive issues, not personal feelings.
Productive, ideological conflict is different from interpersonal conflict. **Ideological conflict is driven by concepts, ideas, and goals.** Teams avoid these discussions because they fear (often correctly) that they will get heated and become uncomfortable. But that's ok! Passion, emotion, and even frustration are all natural and important parts of the process.

What's not ok is when conflict is rooted in interpersonal politics. This kind of ideas-free conflict achieves nothing and only leads to bitterness and resentment that lingers after the argument is over.

In an environment absent of trust and healthy conflict, **teams substitute artificial harmony for productive conflict, pretending to agree with one another in order to avoid the discomfort that comes with toxic conflict.** Without regular, healthy conflict, **hostilities and tensions simmer just beneath the surface,** coming out as personal attacks, sarcastic and biting remarks, and passive-aggressive undermining.

The consequences of...

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**Shortform Exercise: Digging Into Discomfort**

These questions will help you identify sources of discomfort and examine why you might be holding back from your colleagues.

Do you feel comfortable admitting your own weaknesses among your team? Why or why not? Describe a recent example.

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**The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Dysfunction Three: Lack of Commitment**

Teams need to be committed and on the same page in order to succeed. There can be no ambiguity around what goals the organization is trying to achieve, and all team members must fully buy in to the plan. **Most importantly, they must decide.**

Dysfunctional teams, however, fail to achieve commitment and lumber from one non-decision to the next.

This problem stems from a fear of conflict. When teammates haven't had the opportunity to hash out disagreements through productive, ideological debate, they feel that their ideas haven't been proper consideration. It is also harder to make any decision when alternative points of view have not been considered, because it feels there might be better options that lay undiscovered. The result is a lack of commitment: ambiguity about goals, confusion regarding individual responsibilities, and indecision.

Lack of commitment also stems from a desire for consensus and certainty.

**Consensus—universal agreement—is impossible to achieve and is actually counterproductive.** Striving for it will only waste valuable time and end up producing false consensus, in which alternative points of view remain undiscovered (which also increases the possibility that flaws in the plan will go undetected).

**Certainty**—or wanting to know 100% what all the effects of any decision will be—is likewise impossible to achieve. Teams that try to achieve this end up wasting time and energy in round after round of analysis and delay. As a result teams, lose focus and confidence in their decision-making, and become unable and unwilling to commit to anything. **A decision is better than no decision.**

Teams that suffer from a lack of commitment squander opportunities through their indecision, fail to keep their members on the same page about priorities and results, waste time revisiting the same topics over and over again, spread confusion to subordinates within the organization, and over time, lose the ability to commit to any decisions at all.
Example 1
Kathryn shares an anecdote about how her husband's high school...

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary

Dysfunction Four: Avoidance of Accountability

Effective teams hold other accountable in order to correct problematic or counterproductive behavior and maintain consistent high standards.

Dysfunctional teams, however, are unable to call out their peers for unproductive behavior and falling below standards. This avoidance of accountability stems from the first three dysfunctions.

- Lack of trust inhibits constructive pushback, since every criticism in such an environment would either be taken personally, cause interpersonal discomfort, or be met with defensiveness and retaliation.
- Fear of conflict makes teammates unwilling to puncture the false harmony they've created and shy away from any controversial topics.

Lack of commitment has the most powerful effect in fostering avoidance of accountability. Without clarity and buy-in, teammates feel they have no right to call others out over team priorities that were either 1) unclear or 2) never bought into in the first place. Moreover, when a team is suffering from the indecision that defines lack of commitment, there simply won't be any goals or priorities to which teammates can hold each other accountable.

Avoidance of accountability leads to low standards. When team members know they won't face peer pressure for shirking their responsibilities or delivering poor results, there's less of an incentive to put in the effort to do a good job.

This, unsurprisingly, has a harmful effect on team performance. Mediocrity comes to set the standard across the organization as people realize that they won't be criticized or reprimanded for poor results. Even those who might otherwise be motivated to achieve at a high level quickly become discouraged from doing so—after all, why work hard when your peers are slacking off and facing no repercussions?

In this scenario, achievement-driven individuals leave the organization, with the few high performers that remain resenting their colleagues for their poor standards and failure to adequately pull their weight. Within this vacuum of accountability, it falls to the leader to be the sole source of...

Dysfunction Five: Inattention to Results

Functioning teams are focused on achieving results. They have an ultimate mission and clear, defined objectives along the way to help them achieve that mission.

Dysfunctional teams, however, don't define their goals or establish clear, universal benchmarks for success.

This stems directly from the fourth dysfunction: without clear decisions, defined goals, and well-articulated responsibilities for everyone, teammates will be unable and unwilling to hold their teammates accountable to high standards. In the absence of accountability, people will naturally pursue whatever is best for themselves.

If individuals know they can get away with blowing off deadlines on team projects without having their feet held to the fire by their colleagues, individual egos will rule the roost. This leads to the team devolving into a collection of individuals working at cross-purposes, rather than a cohesive group working together to achieve common goals.

READ FULL SUMMARY OF THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary

READ FULL SUMMARY OF THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM
The effects are crippling for a team. The predominance of individual egos will prevent the team from taking advantage of new opportunities or growing to meet new challenges (because changes to the status quo might impact someone’s status), they will fall behind their competitors (because they haven’t even articulated how they should measure success), and they will easily lose focus as the excessive focus on individual ego and status pulls the organization back and forth between competing priorities.

Example 1
Kathryn draws the analogy between the DecisionTech executive team and a basketball team with a roster of star players. While on paper, these teams laden with individual talent ought to crush the competition, in reality they frequently don’t.

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Shortform Exercise: Defining Disarray
Use these questions to see if you’re on the same page with your teammates.

Do you know what your teammates are working on? Explain why knowing this is important.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Solving Dysfunction One:
Building Trust
Now that we’ve identified the dysfunctions and examined their causes and effects, we can work through some strategies for overcoming them.
The overall goal is to build a healthy environment where all five dysfunctions are solved. Picture this high-functioning team:

- They trust one another and are comfortable sharing weaknesses and knowing other people have their best interests at heart.
- Given this trust, they have healthy conflict and discussions to arrive at the best ideas.
- Given that everyone feels heard, they confidently commit to the final plan.
- Given the commitment to the plan and clear responsibilities, they hold each other accountable for executing the plan.
- Given the accountability, they pull together as a team, rather than focusing on individual outcomes.

This needs to be approached from the ground up, starting with the first dysfunction.

To review, Dysfunction 1 is an absence of trust, where people are uncomfortable being vulnerable with one another. This leads to people withholding feedback from each other, being unwilling to ask for help, and playing politics.

The general theme to fixing this is to provide structured environments for team members to exchange feedback, without threat of retaliation. Once team members get used to being vulnerable, they can do it freely in less structured environments.

Here are specific strategies to accomplish this:

### Sharing Personal Histories

This exercise requires teammates to answer personal questions about themselves and reveal some basic details about their lives (like how many siblings they have, where they went to school, and their hobbies). By revealing even these innocuous details to each other, teams can go a long way toward breaking down the barriers that inhibit trust. It is easier to trust someone and be vulnerable in front of them when you see them as a complete person, with their own unique life story, anxieties, and aspirations.

### Team Effectiveness Exercise

Here, every member of the team identifies the most important contribution and the...

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**The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Solving Dysfunction Two: Empowering Constructive Conflict**

To recap, Dysfunction 2 is fear of conflict, in which teammates avoid having productive, ideological debate and steer away from discussing controversial topics. When this happens, problems go undetected, mistakes are repeated, and opportunities are squandered.

The general theme to fixing this is by encouraging teams to deal directly with sources and topics of disagreement, rather than ignoring them. Once they see that conflict can be a productive endeavor, they will get comfortable making it a more regular part of their decision-making process.

Here are some specific tactics teams can use to get comfortable leaning into conflict.

### Mining

This involves teams bringing up previous disagreements and forcing them to work through issues that they would otherwise avoid. This direct acknowledgment is key, since not talking about a conflict doesn't resolve the underlying issue at all—it just causes it to manifest in other, more destructive forms (like personal grudges).

When employing the mining technique, it's important to limit the discussion to one disagreement at a time, to avoid getting sidetracked by smaller, tangential disagreements. Once the main disagreement is resolved, move on to the next one. Assign a member of the team to take on a supervisory role if needed.
Real-Time Permission

Here the leader coaches and encourages the conflict. When people get uncomfortable with conflict, the leader reminds the team that debate is a productive and necessary part of team-building. Since dysfunctional teams are often accustomed to team leaders suppressing debate or shielding individuals from conflict, this exercise reverses that effect and gives the team the confidence and permission structure to continue on with debate.

The Leader’s Role

To promote healthy and productive conflict, a leader must resist the urge to protect the team from peer criticism. Stifling a lively debate is one of the...

Shortform Exercise: Getting Comfortable with Conflict

Think about these questions to see how you can get more comfortable with your teammates.

How much do you know about your teammates on a personal level? Do you find yourself working better with people when you know more about their lives?

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Solving Dysfunction Three: Fostering Commitment

As a refresher, Dysfunction Three is lack of commitment. This is when teams don't have clarity around priorities and fail to get their members to buy in to the plan. It leads to ambiguity around team and individual priorities and wasted time, energy, and opportunities due to indecision.

To solve this dysfunction, teams need to create clarity around specific responsibilities and expectations and encourage decisiveness. Below are some tools that can help teams move in this direction.

Cascading Messaging

At the end of every meeting, review key decisions and agree on what needs to be communicated to stakeholders who were not at the meeting. Think through the messaging to each successive layer of the organization. This reveals any points of disagreement between the team and fosters clarity about next steps. It also gives clear instructions on what should be conveyed to subordinates, so that all parts of the organization are receiving the same message.

Deadlines

Assign clear timing around project deliverables. This will reduce ambiguity, since everyone will know when and what they are expected to deliver. Deadlines must be rigorously enforced, both for final and intermediate decisions, so that team members can remain in sync throughout the full life cycle of a project.

Contingency and Worst-Case Scenario Analysis

Explore alternative courses of action, while modeling for the worst possible outcome.

Doing so encourages teams to make decisions, since they will know that there is always a way to change course if they're on the wrong path.
Worst-case scenario analysis demonstrates that downsides to a decision are seldom as bad as an overly cautious team might think they are. This eliminates the need for absolute certainty before committing to a decision and increases decisiveness.

Low-Risk Exposure Therapy
Display decisiveness in low-risk areas before applying it to more consequential decisions. Start with decisions that have lower stakes, where the worst-case scenario is not all that bad.

Like the tactics above, **this...**

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary Solving Dysfunction Four: Promoting Accountability

To recap, Dysfunction Four is avoidance of accountability. This is when teammates fail to hold each other to high standards of performance and force the leader to become the sole source of discipline. It results in the spread of low standards across the organization, an exodus of achievement-oriented people, and resentment towards those who refuse to pull their weight.

In general, this can be fixed by making clear what goals the organization is meant to achieve and incentivizing individuals to work for the group rather than for themselves. For accountability, teams should engage in peer pressure tactics, which is scalable and reduces the bureaucracy needed for oversight.

Below are some tools designed to achieve this shift in behavior.

Publication of Goals and Standards
This clarifies what the team needs to accomplish, everyone’s individual responsibilities to the team, and a code of conduct so people know how to behave.

Creating public goals and standards puts everyone on the same page. It facilitates accountability, since everyone knows what the proper measurement of success is and what each individual’s responsibility is toward the achievement of the goal.

Team Rewards
This shifts performance incentives from individuals to teams, rewarding individuals based on how their team performs, not how they perform personally.

This discourages turf wars and rivalries, since anyone’s failure becomes everyone’s failure. There’s no point in hoarding resources for your department if it’s going to harm other departments and drag down the team as a whole. Instead, team rewards encourage cooperation and efficient pooling of resources across departments.

The Leader’s Role
A leader must be willing to step back from being the sole source of discipline, and encourage peers to hold one another to high standards. This is more scalable and reduces the overhead needed to build high-functioning teams.

When disagreement arises, the leader must also serve as the judge to decide cases, then return power back to peer accountability.

...
Delivering Results

To recap, Dysfunction Five is inattention to results. It’s when teammates let their personal ambitions and egos get in the way of achieving team priorities. Inattention to results leads to a failure to capitalize on new opportunities, lost ground to competitors, and whipsawing back and forth between competing personal agendas.

The best way to resolve this dysfunction is to define clear goals for the organization and articulate how each individual’s work aligns with these broader goals.

Public Declaration of Results

Clearly express and publicize results and expectations. This brings clarity, as everyone knows precisely which goals the organization is working toward, and how their work fits into the overall goals.

Results-Based Rewards

Link rewards to the achievement of specific outcomes, rather than vague behaviors like “working hard” and less useful metrics like hours worked.

This provides a financial incentive to get things done for the team. Teams should be cautious about relying too heavily on this approach, since it reduces motivation to a simple function of financial incentives (when, in reality, they’re far more complicated than that).

The Leader’s Role

A leader needs to make it clear that results, and nothing else, are the sole measurement of success. Those who receive recognition should be those who contribute toward defined objectives. The leader needs to avoid playing favorites and rewarding anything other than results.

Benefits

By...

READ FULL SUMMARY OF THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

Shortform Exercise: Achieving Alignment

Use these exercises to help get on the same page with your teammates.

Have you ever been part of a team where there was a lack of commitment around goals? After reading the section above, describe which strategy for overcoming this dysfunction would have been the best to use in this situation.

SIGN UP FOR FULL EXERCISE

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Summary

Epilogue: Realizing Results

As a result of the team’s in-depth exploration of the Five Dysfunctions, DecisionTech undergoes a series of large-scale changes. These changes do not suit everyone’s personality and working style, but they are necessary: those who are unable or unwilling to adjust their behavior and thinking will only drag the organization down. The team emerges as a stronger and more cohesive unit by losing those members of the team who can’t make this transition.

A New Direction
The team ultimately decides on new customer acquisition as the company's overarching goal for the year, landing upon 18 new deals as the target number. They reason that the achievement of this goal will generate positive press, create references for the subsequent round of customers, and prove that there are customers interested in DecisionTech's products.

**JR Quits**

JR's attitude indicates that he was not a good cultural fit for the company DecisionTech needs to become in order to succeed. His ego, inattention to detail, and refusal to set aside his own agenda demonstrate why he had to go.

He was also afraid to be vulnerable, having confessed to Jeff that he didn't know how to sell in DecisionTech's emerging market without a strong brand name. The way he chose not to fail was to quit—showing that he was always more concerned with his reputation than with helping the company succeed.

**Nick Expands his Role**

JR's sudden departure expands Nick's role and gives him a greater commitment to DecisionTech's success, one which he was sorely missing when he was floundering looking for a way to define himself at the company.

Furthermore, the decision to head up sales is one he made himself, which only strengthens his commitment and buy-in to the new approach.

**Mikey is Fired**

After observing Mikey's destructive and egotistical behavior over the course of the retreats, Jan decides that she is a poor fit for the company.

She cites Mikey's pattern of uncooperative (and borderline abusive) behavior towards her colleagues, like the constant eye-rolling, her hurtful...