# The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is a model introduced by **Patrick Lencioni** in 2002, in a leadership fable about a struggling executive team. It explains why groups of talented people often fail to work as a real team. Lencioni's answer is that teams fail for very human reasons, and that these reasons build on each other like the levels of a pyramid: **absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results**.

## Why the Model Matters

Many leaders try to fix team problems by changing structures, tools or strategy. Yet the real obstacles are usually behavioral: people do not trust each other, avoid difficult conversations, leave meetings without real agreement, and protect their own areas instead of the team's goals. The model gives leaders a simple diagnosis and a clear order of work. Because each level depends on the one below it, fixing the base first makes every level above it stronger.

## 1. Absence of Trust

Trust, in Lencioni's sense, is **vulnerability-based trust**: being willing to show weakness, to admit mistakes, ask for help and say "I don't know" without fear. When people hide their weaknesses, they waste energy on self-protection, hold back useful information and avoid asking for help.

**Signs:** people rarely admit errors, hesitate to ask for help, and hold grudges.

**Example:** a senior manager opens a meeting by admitting that her forecast was wrong and asking the team for ideas. Others soon feel safe to do the same.

## 2. Fear of Conflict

Without trust, people avoid conflict. Meetings become polite but boring, and real disagreements are discussed later in the corridors. **Healthy conflict** is not personal; it is a passionate debate about ideas, which leads to better decisions and saves time.

**Signs:** boring meetings, hidden disagreements, back-channel politics.

**Example:** a leader asks each member to argue for a different option before a decision, so that concerns are heard openly.

## 3. Lack of Commitment

When people have not debated openly, they do not truly commit. They may nod in the meeting but leave with doubts. Commitment does not require everyone to agree; it requires everyone to **feel heard and then support the final decision**, even if it was not their first choice.

**Signs:** unclear decisions, repeated discussions of the same topic, second-guessing.

**Example:** every meeting ends with a short "commitment check": what did we decide, who does what, and by when?

## 4. Avoidance of Accountability

Without real commitment, people avoid holding each other accountable. Nobody wants to call out a colleague about a plan they never believed in. On great teams, **peers challenge each other directly and respectfully**, instead of waiting for the manager to do it. Peer accountability is the most efficient source of high standards.

**Signs:** missed deadlines without consequences, resentment toward high performers, the leader as the only enforcer.

**Example:** team members review each other's progress against shared goals in a weekly meeting.

## 5. Inattention to Results

Finally, when nobody is held accountable, people put their own needs first: their status, their ego or their department. The team's collective results slip out of focus. Great teams keep **shared results at the center of every decision** and measure success by what the team achieves together.

**Signs:** departmental goals come before company goals, individual recognition matters more than team success.

**Example:** a leadership team publishes one shared scorecard and reviews it at the start of every meeting.

## Applying the Model at Work

- **Build trust by going first:** leaders share their own mistakes and weaknesses.
- **Use personal histories:** short exercises where members share background and experiences.
- **Mine for conflict:** actively look for hidden disagreements and invite them into the room.
- **Close with clarity:** end every meeting with clear decisions, owners and deadlines.



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- **Encourage peer accountability:** make goals and progress visible to everyone.
- **Focus on shared results:** use a team scorecard, not only individual targets.

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Trying to fix accountability or results while trust is still missing.
- Confusing harmony with health: quiet meetings are not always good meetings.
- Waiting for full agreement before committing to a decision.
- Leaving all accountability to the leader.
- Rewarding individual stars while team results suffer.

## Measuring Team Health

- **Trust:** members' willingness to admit mistakes, measured in team surveys.
- **Conflict:** the number of real options debated before decisions.
- **Commitment:** how clearly members can state decisions after a meeting.
- **Accountability:** how often peers, not only the leader, raise performance issues.
- **Results:** progress on the shared team scorecard.

## Example: A Polite Management Team

A management team always agreed in meetings, yet its projects kept failing. The new leader started by sharing her own mistakes from the previous year and invited others to do the same. She then asked for honest debate on every major decision, assigning one person to challenge each proposal. Each meeting ended with clear commitments, names and dates. Within months, members began challenging each other directly, a shared scorecard replaced separate departmental reports, and the team delivered its most important project on time for the first time in two years.

## Quick Checklist

- Do team members admit mistakes and ask for help?
- Are disagreements discussed openly in meetings?
- Does every meeting end with clear commitments?
- Do peers hold each other accountable?
- Are shared team results more important than individual goals?

## Key Takeaways

- The five dysfunctions are absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability and inattention to results.
- They build on each other like a pyramid, from trust at the base to results at the top.
- Vulnerability-based trust makes healthy conflict possible.
- Commitment requires being heard, not full agreement.
- Great teamwork comes from human behavior, not genius.



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