

BASED ON THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLER *THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM*

*Overcoming*  
The **FIVE**  
DYSFUNCTIONS  
*of a* **TEAM**

A FIELD GUIDE

FOR LEADERS, MANAGERS,  
AND FACILITATORS

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# **SECTION ONE**

## **Getting Clear on the Concept**

Because teamwork is a word that is used so loosely and frequently, it seems like a good idea to clarify exactly what I'm referring to when I talk about becoming a more cohesive team. That's what this section is about.



# THE CASE FOR TEAMWORK

Building an effective, cohesive team is extremely hard. But it's also simple.

What I mean is that teamwork doesn't require great intellectual insights or masterful tactics. More than anything else, it comes down to courage and persistence.

And so, if you're committed to making your team a healthy one, and you can get the rest of the team to share your commitment, you're probably going to make it. And just in case you're not sure this will be worth the time and effort—and risk—let me make a case for going forward.

I honestly believe that in this day and age of informational ubiquity and nanosecond change, teamwork remains the one sustainable competitive advantage that has been largely untapped. In the course of my career as a consultant to executives and their teams, I can say confidently that teamwork is almost always lacking within organizations that fail, and often present within those that succeed.

So why don't we hear more about the competitive importance of teamwork from business scholars and journalists? And why do so many leaders focus most of their time on other topics like finance, strategy, technology, and marketing?

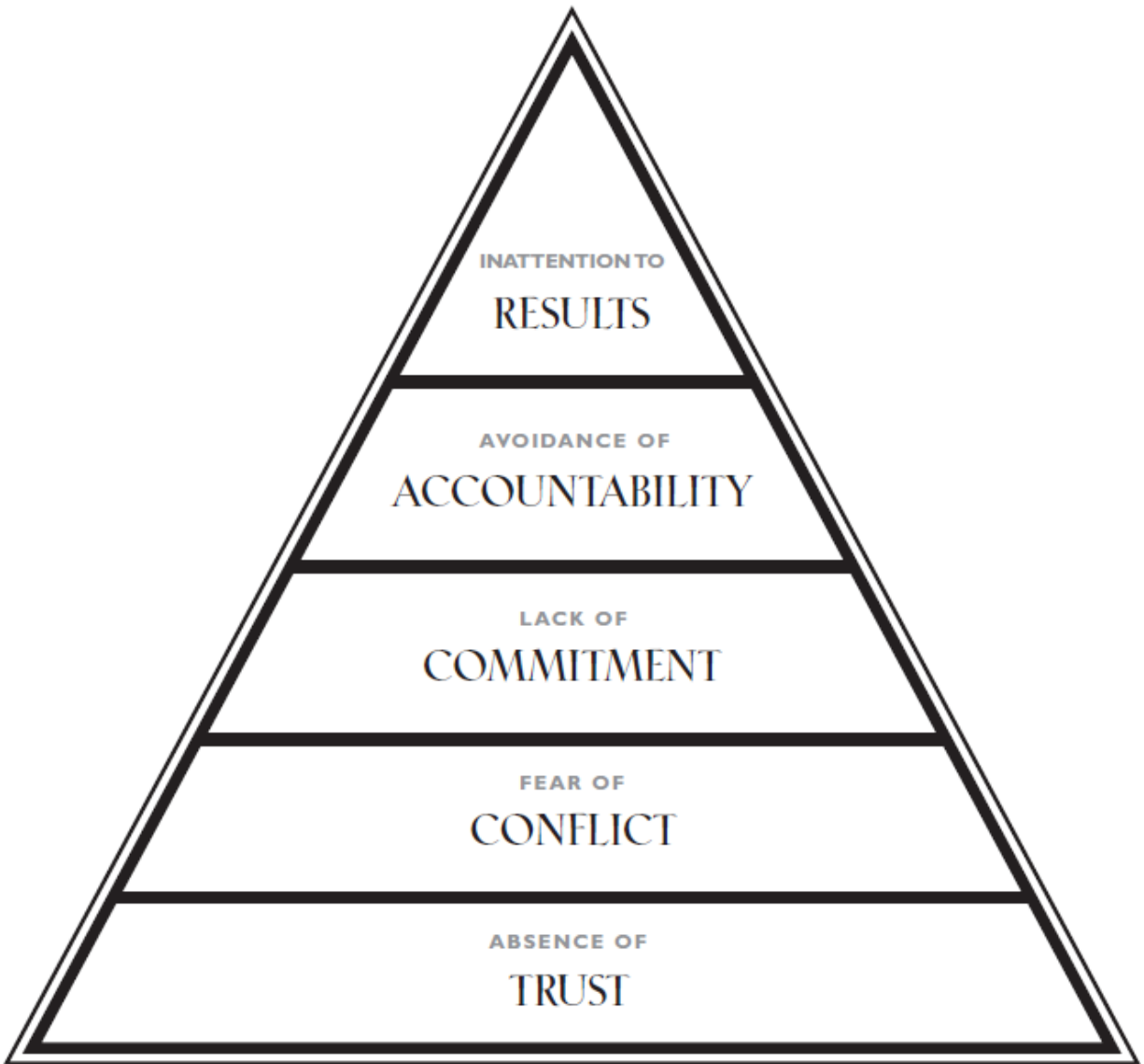
First, because teamwork is hard to measure. Why? Because it impacts the outcome of an organization in such comprehensive and invasive ways that it's virtually impossible to isolate it as a single variable. Many executives prefer solutions that are more easily measurable and verifiable, and so they look elsewhere for their competitive advantages.

But even if the impact of teamwork were more easily measurable, executives probably would still look elsewhere. Why? Because teamwork is extremely hard to achieve. It can't be bought, and it can't be attained by hiring an intellectual giant from the world's best business school. It requires levels of courage and discipline—and emotional energy—that even the most driven executives don't always possess.

As difficult as teamwork is to measure and achieve, its power cannot be denied. When people come together and set aside their individual needs for the good of the whole, they can accomplish what might have looked impossible on paper. They do this by eliminating the politics and confusion that plague most organizations. As a result, they get more done in less time and with less cost. I think that's worth a lot of effort.

One more thing is worth mentioning. When it comes to helping people find fulfillment in their work, there is nothing more important than teamwork. It gives people a sense of connection and belonging, which ultimately makes them better parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors. And so building better teams at work can—and usually does—have an impact that goes far beyond the walls of your office or cubicle.

So what are we waiting for? Let's get started.



**THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM**

# A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

As difficult as teamwork can be to achieve, it is not complicated. And so, if I can't describe it in a page or two, then I've probably made it too complex. Here goes.

The true measure of a team is that it accomplishes the results that it sets out to achieve. To do that on a consistent, ongoing basis, a team must overcome the five dysfunctions listed here by embodying the behaviors described for each one.

▲ **Dysfunction #1: Absence of Trust:** Members of great teams trust one another on a fundamental, emotional level, and they are comfortable being vulnerable with each other about their weaknesses, mistakes, fears, and behaviors. They get to a point where they can be completely open with one another, without filters. This is essential because ...

▲ **Dysfunction #2: Fear of Conflict:** ... teams that trust one another are not afraid to engage in passionate dialogue around issues and decisions that are key to the organization's success. They do not hesitate to disagree with, challenge, and question one another, all in the spirit of finding the best answers, discovering the truth, and making great decisions. This is important because ...

▲ **Dysfunction #3: Lack of Commitment...** teams that engage in unfiltered conflict are able to achieve genuine buy-in around important decisions, even when various members of the team initially disagree. That's because they ensure that all opinions and ideas are put on the table and considered, giving confidence to team

members that no stone has been left unturned. This is critical because ...

▲ **Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of Accountability:** ... teams that commit to decisions and standards of performance do not hesitate to hold one another accountable for adhering to those decisions and standards. What is more, they don't rely on the team leader as the primary source of accountability, they go directly to their peers. This matters because ...

▲ **Dysfunction #5: Inattention to Results:** ... teams that trust one another, engage in conflict, commit to decisions, and hold one another accountable are very likely to set aside their individual needs and agendas and focus almost exclusively on what is best for the team. They do not give in to the temptation to place their departments, career aspirations, or ego-driven status ahead of the collective results that define team success.

That's it.

# TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Before embarking on a team-building effort, your team needs to answer two big questions:

## **Question #1: Are we really a team?**

Sometimes a team improvement effort is doomed from the start because the group going through it isn't really a team at all, at least not in the true sense of the word. You see, a team is a relatively small number of people (anywhere from three to twelve) that shares common goals as well as the rewards and responsibilities for achieving them. Team members readily set aside their individual or personal needs for the greater good of the group.

If your "team" doesn't meet these criteria, you might want to consider whether you have a smaller subset of the group that is a real team. Or maybe the group is simply a collection of people who report to the same manager, but with relatively little interdependence and mutual accountability (that is, not a team).

And remember, it's okay to decide that your group isn't a team. In a world where teamwork is rarer than we might think, plenty of non-teams succeed. In fact, if your group is not meant to be a team, it's far better to be clear about that than to waste time and energy pretending you're something you're not. Because that only creates false expectations, which leads to frustration and resentment.

## **Question #2: Are we ready for heavy lifting?**

Having said all that (in question #1), let me be very clear: the advantages of being a true team are enormous. But they can't be achieved without a willingness to invest



considerable time and emotional energy in the process. Unfortunately, many teams aren't prepared for this, and try to take shortcuts and half measures. Not only does this prevent them from making progress, it can actually lead to a decrease in the team's performance.

It's important that you go into this process with eyes wide open, and with no illusions about what is required. That doesn't mean becoming a team takes years, or that it will be unpleasant. In fact, most teams can make significant progress in weeks or months, and find the process itself to be one of the most rewarding parts of their professional lives. If they do it right. Let's talk about how to do just that.

## **SECTION TWO**

# **Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team**

Okay, this is the meat of the book, the part where I go through the dysfunctions and explain what they mean, how you can help your team overcome them, and which tools and exercises my colleagues and I find to be most useful. A detailed explanation of the tools and exercises mentioned in these segments can be found in Section Four.



# OVERCOMING DYSFUNCTION #1

## BUILDING TRUST

Based on my experience working with teams during the past ten years or so, I've come to one inescapable conclusion: no quality or characteristic is more important than trust. In fact, my work with teams revolves around trust more than any other topic, and that's why this is the longest, most important section in this book.

Unfortunately, there is probably no quality or characteristic that is as rare as trust, either. But I suppose that's good news for your team, because if you can be the first on your block to build trust, the possibility of achieving a real competitive advantage is great.

So why is trust so rare? Two reasons. First, people use the word inconsistently, and so *trust* means different things to different people. Second, because it's just plain hard. Let's start by defining what we mean by trust, and the best way to do that is to clarify what trust is *not*.

### Defining Trust

Trust is not the ability of team members to predict one another's behaviors because they've known each other for a long time. Even the most dysfunctional teams, or families for that matter, can learn to forecast one another's words and actions based on observable patterns over a long period of time. So when, for example, a person says, "I trust that Bob will start swearing at me if I mention his inability to arrive at a meeting on time," know that this is not the kind of trust I'm talking about.

When it comes to teams, trust is all about vulnerability. Team members who trust one another learn to be comfortable being open, even exposed, to one another around their failures, weaknesses, even fears. Now, if this is beginning to sound like some get-naked, touchy-feely theory, rest assured that it is nothing of the sort.

Vulnerability-based trust is predicated on the simple—and practical—idea that people who aren't afraid to admit the truth about themselves are not going to engage in the kind of political behavior that wastes everyone's time and energy, and more important, makes the accomplishment of results an unlikely scenario.

Here's an example of how damaging a lack of trust can be in an organization.

## ***The Invulnerable Leader Story***

*I once worked with a large company—one that, if you haven't used their products, you've certainly heard of—that demonstrated how a lack of trust can destroy years of hard work and accomplishment. Let's call the company Passivity.*

*Passivity had been a highly respected and accomplished company over the years, but had recently fallen on hard times at the hands of a larger, more aggressive competitor. Still, the company had legions of dedicated customers and employees, if not Wall Street analysts.*

*Enter the new CEO of Passivity, a man who neither valued nor elicited trust among his executive team. As the company, under the guidance of its new leader, watched its demise accelerate, journalists and industry-watchers attributed the spiral to unwise decisions about products and strategy. And while those decisions certainly contributed to the problem, they were merely symptoms of a bigger issue.*

*That issue could only be observed behind the scenes, at executive staff meetings. It was there that a tornado of distrust was raging, leaving in its wake a sea of bad decisions and real human suffering. Not to mention drowning stock options.*

*As is often the case, the trust vacuum emanated from the leader, a brilliant man whose intelligence was rivaled only by his inability to acknowledge his own limitations. This was made apparent to me, and the rest of his team, on many occasions, but none more painfully so than when he reluctantly "shared" the results of his 360-degree feedback during a staff meeting.*