



The Key to Developing and Sustaining Great Teams: A Different Paradigm for our Times

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Sometimes at the beginning of a team training session, I will use the following quote:

“Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.”

It is from Patrick Lencioni’s book, ‘The Five Dysfunctions of a Team’. This quote really speaks to me because I also believe that good teamwork has a profound impact in our work

results and in our personal wellbeing.

Mr. Lencioni unveils the key dysfunctions that undermine good teamwork by way of a leadership fable in which the five dysfunctions are revealed and resolved. (See the footnote for the list of dysfunctions¹, but don’t get distracted ... come back!). In the concluding chapters of the book, he reinforces the notion of teamwork as a rarity. Mr. Lencioni states that *“teamwork is rare and elusive and takes hard work”* and concludes that *“in his experience, teamwork is elusive and rare, primarily because of the lack of trust and the fear of conflict.”* I believe that Mr. Lencioni’s thesis about the difficulty in building good teamwork is true only because of our current approach to decision making. If we used another approach, would teamwork be so elusive and rare? Let me make the case.

First, let’s begin with the premise outlined in the book. The book is written as a fable, and the newly installed leader informs her team that *“trust is an absolutely critical part of building a team. In fact, it’s probably the most critical”*. In a subsequent meeting with the team, the leader informs the team that once team members gain trust in each other, the next step is to *“engage in open, constructive, ideological conflict”*. In Mr. Lencioni’s post-fable summary, he reframes this as *‘passionate debate’*. Further, he concludes that the ability to have *‘passionate’* debate is essential to any great team and is built on the foundation of trust in which team members make themselves vulnerable to one another by sharing their weaknesses and mistakes.

In a previous role as leader of a culturally diverse team in the humanitarian sector, I also felt that building trust and engaging in healthy conflict was the foundational formula for team productivity and wellbeing. Even before we knew about Mr. Lencioni’s formula of good teamwork, we were trying to address frustrations that arose from our interactions in the decision-making process. I believe our team did the hard work that Mr. Lencioni recommends in his book. We had meetings, retreats and team building sessions. Experts were engaged to work with the team to build trust, improve our communication skills, and to mediate honest conversations between team members. We leaned into our empathy, our strengths, and our passion for our mandate. All this and still, our team experienced the one step forward one step backward scenario that the leader in the book experienced. However, unlike the outcome in the fable (spoiler alert!) we could not get out of the cycle of backward movement.

¹ i) Absence of Trust, ii) Fear of Conflict, iii) Lack of Commitment, iv) Avoidance of Accountability, v) Inattention to Results

Why? Many reasons perhaps, but I believe at the root of it, trust is fluid and depends on a number of things. Specifically, the people in the room (which can change, or sometimes not change), the context that each individual brings to the table, and the issues that are being discussed.

So, if we struggle with one aspect of the formula, that is, building trust, how can we get to the next part of the formula “*well intentioned passionate debate*”, as outlined in the book? In real life, our team’s trust would unravel when we had to make decisions on controversial or divisive issues. Ravel, then unravel. How did we escape this cycle? We chose a different formula for decision making for our team. We adopted a ‘Parallel Thinking’ formula.

What is Parallel Thinking? It's when the team works together as a group, looking at an issue from one aspect at a time. Most teams are already using Parallel Thinking, but it is generally reserved for getting creative in meetings. We use brainstorming techniques to generate ideas without judgement. No judgment, no argument, no unhealthy conflict. But for the other aspects of thinking, most teams rely on argument and debate.

For example, if we are looking at the pros and cons of an idea, most teams use the formula of argument to see if the pros outweigh the cons, or visa-versa. We have been told that by using this formula, we will arrive at the merit of one side over another. If instead we adopt Parallel Thinking, everyone looks at the pros of an issues together, then moves on to look at the cons of an issue. The merits of each direction of thinking are tabled by collective group effort, one after another which eliminates the need for argument.

Through Parallel Thinking, you introduce a system that people trust, and the consequence is that you are also building team trust through this collaborative and inclusionary process. People can participate without fear of conflict and all the diverse voices around the table are heard. The de Bono Six Thinking Hats is a Parallel Thinking framework that encompasses six different aspects of thinking for a 360-degree analysis of any issue. These six aspects include: (1) the focus of the meeting, (2) the facts, (3) feelings about the issue at hand, (4) the positive aspects of an issue or idea being discussed, (5) the risks associated with the issue or idea, and (6) alternatives or innovations that could improve the approach to this issue.

This framework provides a practical and easily implementable solution for at least two of the five dysfunctions identified in Mr. Lencioni’s leadership fable. It addresses the first dysfunction, that is, dysfunction arising from a lack of team trust by introducing a system that people can trust. It addresses the second dysfunction, that is, to ensure ‘good intentions in a passionate debate’ by substituting this with a system that removes the need for debate entirely. Further, it goes a long way in addressing another dysfunction, that of “lack of commitment” as this process is more likely to generate buy-in from team members by including input from the entire team.

Of all the tools and interventions we adopted as a team, it was the Six Thinking Hats methodology that was the game changer. We experienced more team members stepping up to contribute in team meetings, where previously they would avoid speaking up in an attempt to stay clear of conflict or argument. We were able to leverage the diverse thinking and talent of all the individuals that made up the team. The impact was eye opening! People got along better, they felt valued, and we all benefited immensely from the collaborative atmosphere generated by thinking ‘in parallel’. In summary, we ended up being a healthier, happier team, passionate about our mandate, and working in a supportive and collaborative team environment.

Learn More

If you are interested to learn more, check out the 6-minute explainer video on the [Six Thinking Hats Methodology](#). Additionally, there is an Edward de Bono *Six Thinking Hats* book that expands more specifically on each of the six aspects of decision making to ensure a robust analysis of any issue.

Let us know what your learning needs are and how we can help. We are happy to explore training and facilitation options that would fit your team and situation.

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