

Effective Teams: The Real-World Competitive Advantage

By Edward Hindin

Healthcare leaders daily face the challenges of meeting increased demands with limited resources. They struggle to identify the critical areas that will yield the greatest returns.

Patrick Lencioni, management consultant and author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, asserts that teamwork—not finance, strategy or technology—creates the ultimate competitive advantage. Most leaders find the idea compelling, yet daunting because it is so hard to accomplish.

Here's the promise, according to an unnamed CEO/entrepreneur who built a \$1B company:

“If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time.”

We know from high-school physics that focusing energy output in a common direction has a significant multiplier effect.

Healthcare organizations, like their business counterparts, have increasingly turned to teamwork to produce the necessary results. But what can healthcare leaders learn about effective teamwork from other industries?

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

The difficulty of creating effective teams shouldn't surprise us. The people who make up teams, Lencioni notes, are imperfect and inherently dysfunctional. And in healthcare, they are smart, accomplished and focused on their functional responsibilities. It's no wonder that putting people in a room with a mission and a flip chat—supported by little or no team-building training—fails to produce intended results.

Successful teams resemble a pyramid based on **Trust**, which permits honest, open discussions. The second building block is comfort with **Conflict**, or the ability to debate and disagree without fear of repercussion. The next block is genuine **Commitment** to the work at hand, followed by **Accountability** for actions and attitudes of team members. The top of the pyramid, built on and impossible without the other levels, is attention to producing **Results**.

Conversely, absence of **Trust** prevents honest dialogue about strengths and weaknesses and discourages risk taking. Fear of **Conflict** hinders open debate and precludes discussing tough questions. Lack of **Commitment** encourages ambiguity, evasion and empty discussion. Avoidance of **Accountability** produces mediocrity and missed deadlines. Inattention to **Results** reinforces the status quo and silo thinking.

In developing effective teams, we often focus on the top the pyramid: the results we want. Ignoring the foundational stones, however, limits team success.

Some Keys to Overcoming Dysfunction

To overcome . . .	The leader must . . .	The team must . . .
Absence of Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an environment where people feel safe. • Take the risk and demonstrate vulnerability first. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share experiences over time through a series of bonding activities. • Discuss personal history: family, hobbies, challenges, strengths and weaknesses. • Spend time together regularly. • Use assessment tools to learn about each other. • Develop an in-depth understanding of each member’s unique attributes.
Fear of Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote healthy conflict and protect members from harm. • Remind participants in the midst of conflict how necessary and helpful it is. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign someone to act as <i>conflict miner</i>. Ask him or her to identify conflict and to initiate discussion. • Identify how different team members approach conflict and interact with others during disagreements.
Lack of Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel comfortable making a decision that may turn out wrong. • Establish clear deadlines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate. At the end of meetings, determine what information to communicate to others outside the team. • Set up contingency plans, and plan for worst-case scenarios • Practice <i>low-risk exposure therapy</i>. Make decisions in low-risk situations to build confidence in the decision-making process.
Avoidance of Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish team rewards for goals achieved. • Conduct simple and regular progress reviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism. • Publish specific goals and standards.
Inattention to Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the tone for focusing on results. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declare the desired results publicly. • Develop a system of results-based rewards.

How Do You Build a Team and Still Get the Real Work Done?

Lencioni believes that effective team-building is the real work that makes a difference. Building a team takes time. He recommends devoting the equivalent of three days per month, spent in a combination of annual meetings and quarterly, weekly and ad hoc sessions. These conferences need to focus both on developing an effective team and on producing the desired results

“Success is not a matter of mastering subtle, sophisticated theory, but rather of embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence.”

—Patrick Lencioni

To learn how we can help you master this and other challenges, call (201) 656-1004 or email us at ehindin@hhadvisors.com.

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