

# Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

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## The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and serve as a guide for church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams*

I find myself often sharing with pastors and church leadership teams (including governing boards) that are experiencing difficulties. What is usually communicated to me is that there are ongoing or periodic unresolved conflicts, passive-aggressive behaviors, a lack of unity or unifying purpose, and other such symptoms that plague the leadership team and are causing divisions and ineffectiveness. I find myself over and over again asking these leaders and teams if they have ever read a certain book and talked together about its content.

The book is *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni (Jossey-Bass, 2002). In terms of the current typical shelf life of books, this twelve-year-old book might be considered “old.” But I have repeatedly found it effective in helping church leaders create new behaviors among and between themselves that help the team achieve unity and results. That must be why this book is a New York Times Best Seller.

It intrigues me that we sometimes seem to think that unity in church leadership teams somehow will come about through the general, day-to-day processes of working and conducting business together. In this context, I define unity as healthy team cohesion surrounding the church's purposes and its strategies to attain them – I do not mean a team where there are no differences, conflicts, or strong personalities.

Healthy team unity does not come about naturally or by accident – it is a result of intentional behaviors.

What are we doing to achieve healthy team unity? That's something to talk about.

In his book, Lencioni creates a fable to illustrate five dysfunctions of a team, and he uses these dysfunctions as a springboard to help leaders and team members recognized these destructive behaviors and develop new behaviors that will lead toward team unity. I'll briefly summarize the five dysfunctions below to whet your appetite.

**Dysfunction 1 – Absence of Trust:** Do the members of the team truly trust one another? Is it really possible to share what people are thinking at their deepest levels? Or, must we be guarded in our conversations?

**Dysfunction 2 – Fear of Conflict:** Every new idea creates conflict with the current idea or the current way of doing things. There can be no progress without conflict. Is our conflict healthy or divisive? Do we come to our meetings fearing conflict, or embracing it?

**Dysfunction 3 – Lack of Commitment:** Lencioni writes that commitment is a function of clarity and buy-in. It is present when team members “leave meetings confident that no one on the team is quietly harboring doubts about whether to support the actions agreed upon.” I must confess that I have left meetings with such a lack of commitment – have you?

**Dysfunction 4 – Avoidance of Accountability:** Simply put, are members of the team willing to endure the discomfort of calling out others’ behaviors that might hurt or are hurting the team? Or, do we simply put off or avoid such difficult encounters? When we are unwilling to fix that which is broken, we have by default decided to continue in that brokenness and accept its destructive outcomes.

**Dysfunction 5 – Inattention to Results:** Is our team devoting its attention to things other than our collective goals? Are we paying attention to those things that are really important, or do we allow ourselves to drift toward those things that might be easier to understand or decide? Do we have clarity of purpose and pay attention to what is being done to achieve it?

Although I am an avid reader, I seldom make wide-spread reading recommendations – this is an exception. This book has been very valuable to me, my own teams, and to every team that has followed my suggestion to read and talk about it together. If your team is not united, if your team has fractured relationships, if your team spends its time considering or doing unimportant things, if your team displays one or more of these dysfunctions, time spent reading and discussing this book could help create and sustain healthy unity within your team. If you’ve used this tool in the past, you might consider briefly reviewing it again.

What are we doing to create and preserve unity within our team? That’s something to talk about.

*Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob@efcawest.org](mailto:bob@efcawest.org).*