

Characteristics of Dysfunctional Teams

Source: Monash University, (2010), Leadership and Development, Guide to Managing and Optimizing Team Performance

Dysfunction	Description
Absence of trust	Stems from a team member's unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust. 
Fear of conflict	This failure to build trust is damaging because it sets the tone for the second dysfunction: fear of conflict. Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas. Instead, they resort to veiled discussions and guarded comments. 
Lack of commitment	A lack of healthy conflict is a problem because it ensures the third dysfunction of a team: lack of commitment. Without having aired their opinions in the course of passionate and open debate, team members rarely, if ever, buy in and commit to decisions, though they may feign agreement during meetings. 
Avoidance of accountability	Because of this lack of real commitment and buy-in, team members develop an avoidance of accountability, the fourth dysfunction. Without committing to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven people often hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that seem counterproductive to the good of the team. 
Inattention to results	Failure to hold one another accountable creates an environment where the fifth dysfunction can thrive. Inattention to results occurs when team members put their individual needs (such as ego, career development, or recognition) the needs of the collective goals of the team.

Strategies to Address Team Dysfunction

Problem	Characteristic behaviors	Strategy
Absence of trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team members unwilling to be vulnerable within the group Team members are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and discuss individual strengths and weaknesses Spend considerable time in face-to-face meetings and working sessions
Unclear goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual members promote outcome that is in conflict with the team goals Team members capitulate too quickly in discussions Team is spending an inordinate amount of time discussing actions that are not aligned with team goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind members of team goals during each meeting Ask how each action being discussed will contribute to the teams goals Be suspicious of premature agreement. Ask members to play 'devil's advocate' about issues around which everyone quickly agrees
Team isn't communicating well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members interrupt or talk over others Some members are excessively quiet Problems are hinted at but never formally addressed Members assume meanings without asking for clarification Nonverbal signals are at odds with what is said 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review or create group norms for discussion Actively solicit all members' views Routinely ask members to be specific and give examples Address nonverbal signals that are at odds with verbal content Consider using an outside facilitator
Low participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assignments are not completed Poor attendance Low energy at meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirm that leaders' expectations for participation are shared by other members Solicit members' views on reasons for low involvement Develop a plan to address reasons for low participation Assess fit of members to team tasks
Fear of conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teams do not engage in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas Discussions characterized by veiled discussions and guarded comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge that conflict is required for productive meetings Establish common ground rules for engaging in conflict Understand individual member's natural conflict styles
Unhealthy conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal attacks Sarcasm Some members shut down in face of heated discussion Dialogue argumentative Absence of expressions of support for others' views Aggressive gesturing Talking <i>about</i> others rather than <i>to</i> them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interrupt personal attacks or sarcasm Ask members to describe behavior, rather than attack character Encourage all members to express views Review or create norms about discussing contentious topics Encourage members to confront others with concerns Discourage gossiping and listening to gossip

Trouble reaching consensus	Holding onto positions regardless of others' input Same argument continues to be repeated with no new information No one formally closes the discussion	Solicit input on members' key interests and needs Discuss consequences of not reaching consensus Ask what needs to happen in order to complete discussion
Lack of commitment	Teams do not engage in debate and discussion and therefore do not air their opinions regarding a course of action	Engage team members in discussion regarding a course of action and ask for their opinion Review commitments at the end of each meeting to ensure all team members are aligned Adopt a 'disagree and commit' mentality - make sure all team members are committed regardless of initial disagreements
Avoidance of accountability	Team members do not commit to a clear plan of action and therefore do not feel responsible for the outcome	Explicitly communicate goals and standards of behavior Regularly discuss performance versus goals and standards
Lack of progress	Meetings seem like a waste of time Action items are not completed on time Closed issues continue to be revisited	Restate direction and assess what is left to accomplish Ask members to identify causes of late work and brainstorm solutions Discourage revisiting closed issues by reminding team of previous decisions. Focus on next steps
Inept leadership	Leader does not solicit enough team involvement Leader does all the work Team falls behind Conflicts become unhealthy Lack of vision Leadership perspective is myopic; it represents one area rather than full constituency	Be brave: meet with leader to express concerns about perceived leadership deficiency Consider how you might help the leader to be more effective eg. Volunteer for additional tasks If leadership problems persist, express concerns to sponsor
Lack of management support	Work of team is rejected by management Senior managers express discomfort about the team's work Necessary resources are not provided	One of several preventable problems has occurred: Team does not have an adequate sponsor Sponsor has not 'signed off' on goals and resources Team sponsor and/or other stakeholders have not been adequately informed of team progress Work with sponsors to clarify team charter and resources
Lack of resources	Team 'work' assignments are not coupled with a trade-off from regular job responsibilities No budget for necessary materials or outside participation	Negotiate for budget. Negotiate trade-offs with sponsor and member's supervisors If sponsors and stakeholders will not contract for needed time or resources, team success is unlikely; consider disbanding the team
Inattention to results	Team members put their individual needs (such as ego, career development, or recognition) or even the needs of the collective goals of the team	Keep the team focused on tangible group goals Reward individuals based on team goals and collective success