

Coaching Notes

FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFLICT

Here's the paradox: it's important to have conflict, not to avoid conflict, for the health of a team.

You're probably thinking that can't be right – surely we should be aiming for consensus, harmony, agreement among team members? Isn't conflict inherently destructive, negative, counter-productive? Patrick Lencioni's big insight when he wrote his management fable "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" was to see that conflict is healthy and necessary to achieve buy-in and commitment. His point was that it is futile to expect a multiple number of human beings to have the same opinion on important issues. It can actually be dangerous if that expectation leads to artificial harmony, agreeing for the sake of appearances while withholding real support for a decision or, worse still, actively undermining a decision outside the room. Healthy conflict

is a critical precondition to commitment – because healthy conflict allows differing opinions to be heard by other team members and the team leader. So long as team members feel listened to, when the team leader makes a decision the team as a whole is much more likely to commit to it because they know he has heard them, acknowledged them, respected them – and because they know that full consensus is rarely the way to get things done.

The Five Dysfunctions Model



After all, we know that from our families, don't we? When six-year old Jonny wants a hamburger for dinner and his older sister Emily wants chicken, they will accept it when their parents say: "We'll have chicken tonight and hamburgers tomorrow night". Is it worth spending time persuading Emily that she really prefers hamburgers, or Jonny that he prefers chicken? It is surely much more fruitful to devote the time to creating the kind of environment where everyone can feel open about saying what their own opinions are, confident that their opinions will be heard and taken into account. And isn't it the same in a team? One of the most important tasks of the leader is to create the kind of team environment where strong opinions can be openly

expressed in an acceptable way, where issues can be debated, diversity acknowledged and decisions made, committed to and carried out.

What are we having for dinner?