It's not just about finding superstars. Building a great team means overcoming the five dysfunctions that plague most groups
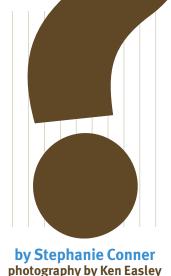
GO TEAM, GO?

by **Stephanie Conner**
photography by **Ken Easley**

Whether it's major-league baseball or a big project, success depends on the same variables: talent, conditions and, most of all, teamwork. The principles that hold World Series champions together are the same that can elevate your corporate team to greatness.

While teamwork may seem natural, Patrick Lencioni, president of a San Francisco management-consulting firm, says the opposite is true. "Without a compelling reason to set aside individual needs for team needs, most people will do what is best for themselves," he says. "And since most groups that call themselves 'teams' shy away from taking difficult action to become a true team, teamwork remains rare."

Despite the odds, one group of University of Phoenix MBA students had such a positive team experience that they continued a class project beyond their 2000 graduation. Led by CEO and President Jeff Baugus, the group launched InsuranceBeacon.com. The company's financial success was largely a result of the group's ability to work together.

"Each individual brings unique strengths to the group. There is tremendous synergy that is created when we are all working together," Baugus says.

But even successful teams have their challenges, and Baugus can attest to the need for overcoming the shortcomings that can befall a team.

The Teamwork Shift

So, why is teamwork such a struggle? Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D., teamwork consultant and author of *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill*, offers one theory. There are two dynamics, he says: differentiation and integration. Differentiation involves making each person's job different, while integration is the pulling together of those parts. At work, our responsibilities are distinct, and our salaries and rewards are based on individual performance.

"It's a social design problem," Avery says. "Teams are not unnatural, but we've made it difficult by the way we've socialized and organized ourselves."

According to Paul Glen, founder of C2 Consulting and author of *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology*, the team model comes out of the trend toward more intellectual work, from technology to legal services.

"We're grappling with how to make people productive in an intellectual environment," Glen says. "The teamwork thing isn't just about feeling good. At its core, it's really about productivity."

A healthier corporate culture, happier employees and greater productivity? Sounds like a dream. But while Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,* says that teamwork isn't impossible, it is difficult. To help combat the dysfunctions of teamwork, many companies use retreats or special meetings to attempt to solve the problem.

It's important to note that a simple exercise cannot "cure" a dysfunction, but it can make strides in the right direction. Here's an overview of Lencioni's five team dysfunctions and just one of several suggestions for defeating each.

1 ABSENCE OF TRUST

The absence of trust is the first of the dysfunctions because trust is a team's foundation; without it, teams set themselves up for the other dysfunctions. In his book, Lencioni notes that trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good.

"Without the willingness to be vulnerable with one another—to admit weaknesses, to acknowledge failures, to ask for help, to genuinely apologize from time to time—team members will suspect one another of being disingenuous and protective," Lencioni says.

Suggestion: Lencioni advises a team-effectiveness exercise. Each team member must tell the group the most significant contribution each of his peers makes to the team and the one area team members can improve on for the good of the whole.

2 FEAR OF CONFLICT

Teams who don't trust one another can't engage in meaningful debate. Without conflict, emotions and opinions are bottled up without resolution. Even worse, important ideas aren't voiced, giving the team less to work with in whatever their current project or assignment might be.

Conflict is necessary for a relationship to grow in business as well as in marriage, parenthood and friendship, Lencioni writes. To be productive, the conflict can't have personal attacks, but instead should be limited to concepts and ideas.

Suggestion: Once the entire team agrees that conflict is good and necessary, Lencioni recommends "mining," the process of extracting buried disagreements. Each team member at some point must be the "miner"—the person who instigates the conflict.

3 LACK OF COMMITMENT

Commitment, Lencioni writes, "is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in." Lively, meaningful debate leads to an ultimate decision that has the input and buy-in of the entire team—commitment.

He adds that there is a danger in seeking consensus, because it's so challenging to find a solution that everyone agrees with. Great teams, he says, understand that people don't need to get their way. The key is making sure that every-

GETTING A LEG UP

Most of us didn't grow up learning how to work in teams. Starting in kindergarten, we were organized competitively, with rows of desks facing the front and an emphasis on individual achievement. But research shows that when people know how to work in teams, their satisfaction and productivity go up—in the classroom and the workplace. That's why University of Phoenix builds the skill into its curriculum through learning teams, which involve three to five students working together on assignments that help to clarify the class material.

Some of the assignments are simulations; for example, developing a product and creating a marketing plan in the group. "It simulates what is going on in the actual world," explains Bob Nixon, an emergency medical services program manager in California and an MBA candidate at University of Phoenix.

"The University of Phoenix taught us to quickly identify the strengths of each member and to utilize those strengths to get the assignments done," adds Jeff Baugus, a 2000 MBA graduate.

In a recent survey, University of Phoenix graduates were asked if their education

Jeff Baugus used his University of Phoenix skills to launch his own business.

prepared them with the skills important to their profession. When asked about team skills, 89.3 percent said they were taught how to learn from others, and 88.6 percent said they were prepared to be an effective team member.

Baugus must have been paying attention. He's now the CEO of a successful company that originated as a class assignment. "For me personally, I now realize that other people can do things better than I can. And I don't need to be an expert at all things. I can accomplish so much more by relying on talented people who can do certain tasks better than I can," he says.

RETREAT! RETREAT!

When challenges arise, don't run for the hills; retreat. Plan a retreat, that is. But don't be fooled. Successful retreats are not about singing "Kum-ba-yah" around a campfire. They're serious work. Some tips for planning yours:

• **LEAVE THE OFFICE.** "When you're in the office, there are temptations and distractions," says Paul Glen, founder of C2 Consulting. "Whatever crisis is going on in the office—big or small—will interrupt the meeting." Head for the hills or a local hotel, but leave computers and mobile phones behind.

• **HAVE A GOAL.** Make sure you know what you want your team to get out of the session.

• **INVITE THE RIGHT PEOPLE.** "The critical thing to me is that given what we're trying to accomplish in that meeting, who are the people who ought to be in the room?" says Al Vicere, a leadership consultant with Vicere Associates, Inc., in State College, Pa. That doesn't always mean senior management. Sometimes, the "critical stakeholders" are middle managers or other employees.

• **STATE THE PURPOSE.** Make sure everyone knows why they're missing a day at the office. "Start with a clear understanding of why we're here," Vicere says.

• **BRING DATA.** "If you're going to have some discussions about critical issues, there's always going to be contention and tension," Vicere says. One way to diffuse people's emotions is to show surveys or other data.

• **FOLLOW THROUGH.** Agree on visible indicators of progress, Glen says. "Otherwise, everybody goes back to their daily lives and forgets everything that happened."

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one feels his or her input was heard and considered. Even without consensus on the solution, every team member should back the final decision.

"Get every team member to have ownership into the decisions that are made, and then review these expectations often and make adjustments where necessary," Baugus adds.

Suggestion: Lencioni suggests "cascading messaging." At the end of a meeting, the team should review the decisions that were made and then agree on what communication needs to happen from the meeting. What happens, Lencioni writes, is that some teams find they aren't all in agreement. The exercise allows teams to leave meetings with a clear understanding of (and, hopefully, commitment to) the final solution.

4 AVOIDANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

When team members don't universally commit to a plan, they also don't have a real understanding of what's expected of them. Therefore, members struggle to hold each other accountable, to call attention to counterproductive behavior.

Lencioni acknowledges that some team members also hesitate to point out a colleague's counterproductive behavior for fear of jeopardizing a good personal relationship. But great teams demonstrate respect for each member and the collective by holding individual members accountable.

> ### Our Faculty Recommends
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> • *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick M. Lencioni
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> • *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology* by Paul Glen
>
> • *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill* by Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D.

"Communication of expectations of team members is critical at the beginning of the relationship," Baugus says. "I have learned that the hard way several times over. People just want to be nice to each other, and either they take on more than they can chew or they don't want to rock the boat by asking others to do their part."

Suggestion: Lencioni advises keeping in public view exactly what the team's goals are and how each team member must perform to achieve them.

5 INATTENTION TO RESULTS

Without accountability, an inattention to results ensues, Lencioni writes, adding that this occurs when team members put their own needs (ego, career development and recognition, for example) ahead of the team's needs. While the results measurement might be profit or other financial goals, it doesn't have to be.

Suggestion: Use results-based rewards, Lencioni says. Tie rewards—especially compensation—to the desired results. He does, however, warn that relying on this alone can cause a problem "because it assumes that financial motivation is the sole driver of behavior." Nonetheless, rewarding results sends the message that they really are important.

Regardless of what particular dysfunctions plague your team, the key is to monitor and attack them—not once, not twice, but continuously. Once you identify the dysfunction, you can gauge it, Glen says. "It's like getting on a scale every morning," he adds. "By habitually doing that, you're constantly reminding people of its importance." •