Book Review

Patrick M. Lencioni
The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable
San Fransico, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers, 2002

Reviewed by Carl Lee Tolbert

A New Take on Lencioni's Fable of Team Dysfunctions after Two Decades

It has been over 20 years since Lencioni published his global best-seller, *The Five Dysfunctions of Teams*: *A Leadership Fable*. Over 100,000 positive ratings on Amazon (2023) testify to the reviewers' comments that Lencioni's fable is easily relatable and pertinent to one's struggle to understand the complexity of organizations. A more formal book review focused on brand-new publications (Lewis, 2022). Still, after seeing the continued widespread use of Lencioni's take on team dysfunctions as a textbook by universities (e.g., Brigham Young University Idaho, 2022; Santa Clara University, 2023; The University of Texas at Austin, 2023) and, notably, being number three of the top-selling books for human resource professionals, the exception on timing can be made (Amazon, 2023). This review will summarize Lencioni's intent specific to the dysfunctions compared to academic applications in a constructive and heartening manner. However, the ambition of this piece is not to reprise the voluminous number of reviews but to offer an alternative conception and provide a potential opportunity for a thought experiment expanding the utility of Lencioni's work to a new audience.

During a keynote address, Kitao (1999) discussed Aesop's fables as having both a moral and a backing story. In Kitao's speech, she distinguished the moral as the shadow of the story that is not easily discerned and is often apparent only after a significant time of deeper penetration and reflection. The story is the entertaining vessel that ushers the reader into the pivotal learning moments crafted by the storyteller (Kitao, 1999; Kurtz and Snowden, 2007). When discerning the shadow from Lencioni's work, the reader faces two challenges: The reviewer must first ignore the lack of stated or implied academic validation, as Lencioni noted that the inspiration was from his experiences working with CEOs and from years of leadership. The second challenge is to go beyond the entertainment value of the story, which can sometimes be seen as campy and bromidic, to see the substrates of greater meaning.

The Primary and Secondary Shadows of Dysfunction

The story begins with the entrance of the protagonist, Katheryn Petterson, as the new CEO of DecisionTech, a company two years into a significantly underperforming start-up. Katheryn represents the perfect fictional leader encompassing many favorable yet generic attributes to become intentionally accessible by the greatest number of readers. She is a former

teacher, military member, and an all-American athlete. Katheryn was a basketball mom, venerable enough to be wise yet not too old to be unfamiliar and lack objectivity. She is the ultimate reluctant leader who is competent, patient, and feeling; yet, she is fierce and is cast by Lencioni as the hero.

The primary shadows are all intertwined as dysfunctions involving a lack of attributes such as trust, vulnerability, accountability, commitment, and feedback. The introductory lessons of Lencioni's fable are self-evident from the prose, from the beginning to the end of the book, where the dysfunctions are broken down even more clearly. The dysfunctions follow other famous leadership works (e.g., Finzel, 2013; Kouzes and Posner, 2017; Maxwell, 2005) and, in many ways, do not offer novelty. Lencioni provides a formulaic delivery and the best possible outcomes, almost linear, for each of Katheryn's decisions. In the real world, the scripted decisions could have easily terminated in a completely different manner. Still, the story would have suffered, as the linearity, the perceived expectations, is the heuristic draw for the popularity and longevity of the book, similar to that in a contagious meme (Blackmore, 2000).

The nonlinear aspects of Lencioni's fable become the secondary shadows beneficial to new readers after twenty years. To begin with, the first shift in unraveling the noted expectation is the abandonment of the pyramid as the leadership model. Lencioni assumes that each dysfunction remedy is the linear foundation for the next level of the pyramid: "And so, like a chain with just one link broken, teamwork deteriorates if even a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish" (p. 189). With the interrupted linearity from the complexity science perspective, researchers have looked at emergent behavior as the byproduct of sensitivity to organizational conditions (Grobman, 2005). The sensitivity is more easily understood, as all decisions have unintended consequences (Gell-Mann and Park, 1997). Team members work autonomously from an internal set of rules that lead to unpredictable nonlinear behavior nullifying a rigid model and, arguably, the ability of researchers to apply labels to any fixed conditions as if they were binary and without liminality (Grobman, 2005; Kurtz and Snowden, 2003).

One such non-binary label is trust, as Lencioni indicates, which represents the foundation of all teams. Lencioni used the lack of debate as proof that there was little to no trust in the leadership team before Katheryn's arrival, which is a somewhat vague assertion. To some degree, Axelrod and Hamilton's (1981) cold war experiments established that cooperation could be established axiomatically with the time and consistency of personnel and actions without trust. The DecisionTech team had been together for two years with the same people and activities that created the cooperation and trust from Lencioni's descriptions of the team to a greater extent. The lack of debate has more to do with the lack of tension being a function of the default condition of any group as it seeks homogeneity, or sameness (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Nemeth et al., 2004). As the catalyst, Katheryn represented the disruption to the established trust thrust upon the team that interrupted the ritual and norms, creating tension. The nonlinear aspect of this example was not that the team did not have trust but that the insertion of Katheryn was positive as a means to create tension through change and diversity, adding to the organizational fitness (Grobman, 2005; Kauffman, 1990).

Tension significantly benefits organizational fitness for many reasons (Grobman, 2005). Nemeth et al. (2004) analyzed a considerable amount of research and summarized that, despite

the often debated and mixed results, the notion of conflict for idea- and problem-solving is far superior to team harmony, producing a paradox for Lencioni alluded to in the story. The paradox is the freedom to share without fear of reprisals and to be vulnerable while allowing for the specific criticism that enhances tension leading to less imitative behavior in the group (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Nemeth et al., 2004). What Lencioni captured about vulnerability echoes through other research regarding the balance of openness and tension. In 2012, Google started the "Aristotle project," dubbed the "search for the perfect team" (Duhigg, 2016). They used 180 teams across the face of the company from every area of expertise; some of the teams were the best, and some were the worst—they found no conventional data patterns and had to look at other disciplines for answers (Duhigg, 2016). The critical difference between successful and unsuccessful teams was the vulnerability of the members concerning each other and the leaders being the foundation of psychological safety and creativity (Duhigg, 2016).

According to Exploding Topics (2023), "psychological safety" has grown in popularity by over 400% in the last five years. Edmondson and Lei (2014), the foremost researchers of psychological safety, stated that the definition is the perception of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in the context of environments such as a workplace. The research began in the 1960s and today is one of the critical organizational research topics based on the power that psychological safety has over creativity and innovation (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). As noted, the default condition of any team is to move toward uniformity, where to be creative and productive requires a disruptive tension on balance with vulnerability akin to Bradley et al.'s (2015) statement, "Most people consider interpersonal conflict unpleasant and uncomfortable. Yet such conflict, especially when it occurs in work groups, can lead to superior performance" (p. 243).

Lencioni alluded to another crucial secondary shadow as the power of leadership vision through commitment and accountability through seeking measurable goals. As a part of game theoretical constructs, the "Prisoner's Dilemma" and other games assist researchers in understanding that the predictable behavior of individual team members is to defect and seek personal utility (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981). Lencioni stated, "The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group" (p. 216). Lencioni described defection yet offered no straightforward preventative, proffering a paradox, instead. The paradox that Lencioni provided is the notion that clarity and buy-in are the basis of commitment and create the collective vision of the teams that later drives accountability and realistic goals. The fear of defection is indirectly related to the dysfunction caused by a lack of commitment, as noted by several leadership authors in addition to Lencioni (e.g., Bryson, 2018; Collins, 2011; Kouzes and Posner, 2017). In other words, this means that the choice of individuals to forgo personal utility for the greater good in the form of commitment is motivated by a compelling vision or mission of the organization. It is as if Lencioni works with the team to create the vision yet never broadcasts the direct power of the vision as a motivator to the team.

Thought Experiment and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, all of the dysfunctions outlined by Lencioni are similar to ones identified by other authors in popular leadership research and publications. Suppose each original dysfunction was stripped into single interpreted positive traits desirable for a team: trust, commitment, accountability, feedback, and vulnerability. The thought experiment would be to exchange the original five traits from Lencioni with captured alternative ideals. A randomly chosen sample can be seen in Figure 1, with the first alternative set as transparency, ethics, service, stewardship, and resilience. In this case, the foundation of Lencioni's pyramid could be transparency. Could a leader construct a similar Lencioni-like story with morals encompassing four additional attributes and complementary to transparency? The answer is that, with narratives and storytelling, the possibilities are endless, but to what extent and for what benefit?

Figure 1: The Original Lencioni Traits Compared to Three Alternative Sets
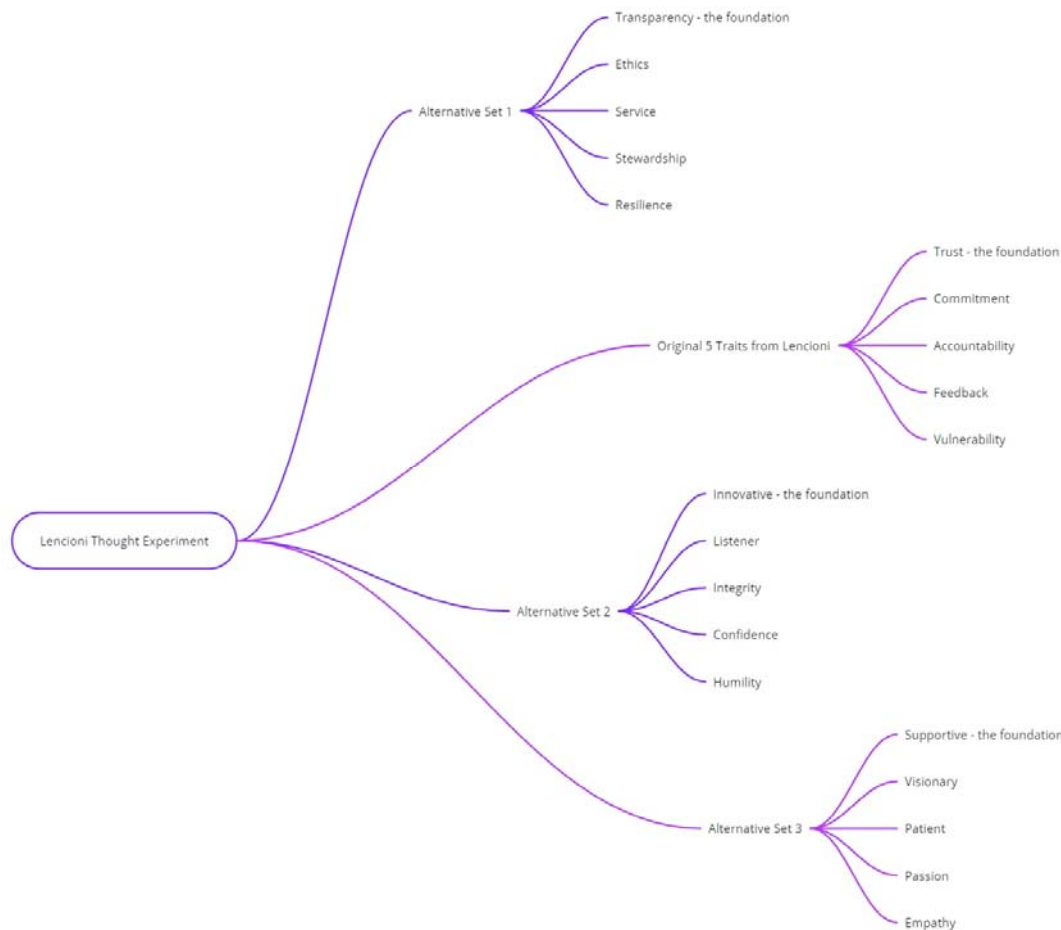
Note. Original figure based on Lencioni's text for the original set. The alternative sets were compiled by Tolbert (2022).

Returning to the keynote address from Kitao (1999), she referenced fables that contain stories where the morals are the shadows. The lesson concluded with the view that education is a realm in which the courses are the stories, and the shadows become the personal gains made

while working through the synthesis over time (Kitao, 1999). Lencioni can be seen as part of the initial synthesis two decades ago, investigating team dysfunctions from a heuristic perspective, where nonlinear secondary shadows requiring synthesis and the thought experiments surrounding new fables add a possible continuation of the genuine worth of Lencioni's work for past and future readers.

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