

Principles for Principals November

For questions or comments, please contact LouisianaLeaders@la.gov.

November's Topic: School & Community Environment - Atmosphere

*"A bad system will beat a good person every time," and "A company could put a top man at every position and be swallowed by a competitor with people only half as good, **but who are working together.**"* W. Edward Deming

Dr. Amanda Austin
Principal
MSA East



School administrators, system leaders, and teachers often use the language of "family" to describe the interpersonal atmosphere of their campus, and, like all "families," they are best defined by their ability to function as a team of supportive partners rather than a dysfunctional collection of individuals.

Generally, regardless of whether the characteristics of partnerships on a school campus are defined as a "team" or a "family," significant effort must be made to both evaluate the current dynamics of those relationships and directly address any dysfunctions that may emerge from that evaluation.

Fortunately, this month's principle, "**Building Functioning Teams**," provides a process for defining the most common dysfunctions and offers direct steps leaders can take to address them and rebuild teams into fully functioning organizations dedicated to advancing student achievement.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team by Patrick Lencioni

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni employs a narrative fable to outline what research has identified as the five most common causes of team dysfunction.

My Three Things

1. **One thing I wish I would have done differently my first year:** I wish I had delegated more — trying to do everything myself limited team growth and led to unnecessary stress and burnout.
2. **One thing I was glad I did my first year:** I prioritized building strong relationships with staff, students, and families — it created trust, opened communication, and laid the foundation for a positive school environment.
3. **One thing every principal should know/do:** Every principal should listen more than they speak — understanding your people is key to leading effectively, making informed decisions, and fostering a supportive school environment.

1. **Absence of Trust:** The first dysfunction is a lack of trust among team members, rooted in an unwillingness to be vulnerable. Without trust, individuals hesitate to share weaknesses, ask for help, or admit mistakes, leading to guarded interactions.
2. **Fear of Conflict:** Teams that lack trust often avoid healthy conflict, stifling productive debate. This dysfunction prevents the free exchange of ideas, leading to suboptimal decisions.
3. **Lack of Commitment:** Without healthy conflict, teams struggle to achieve buy-in on decisions, leading to ambiguity and indecision. Commitment requires clarity and consensus, even if not everyone entirely agrees.
4. **Avoidance of Accountability:** When commitment is weak, team members hesitate to hold each other accountable for behaviors or performance that undermine the team's goals. This dysfunction allows mediocrity to persist.
5. **Inattention to Results:** The final dysfunction occurs when teams prioritize individual goals, status, or egos over collective outcomes. This leads to a focus on personal success rather than team achievements.

Diving Deeper

What you are sure to notice when viewing all five dysfunctions is that they routinely build on each other. Many teams may build trust among themselves, but if they never use that trust to have the difficult conversations necessary to move schools forward, the dysfunction has ruptured the core outcomes all schools are designed to achieve: student growth. Likewise, even for those teams that have built trust, have had difficult conversations, and acted with responsibility and conviction, if they do not review the results and adjust accordingly, then the dysfunction has ruptured the core outcomes all schools are designed to achieve: student growth. To move students forward, we must move teachers forward; to move teachers forward, we must also insist on advancing our lead learner teams.

Addressing the Dysfunction

Despite using the fable to share organizational research, Lencioni does not leave the reader without a process for applying that information to build a better team. His steps are below:

1. Identify the dysfunctions: Teams are encouraged to take a self-assessment (included in the book or [online](#)).
2. Specifically, team members should complete this assessment individually, then have an open discussion of the results as a team. Through this process, leaders are given an immediate opportunity to model a willingness to engage in unfiltered conversations that may involve potential conflict. These conversations should also be guided by the leader's desire to be vulnerable and open to their staff's thoughts, feelings, and ideas.
3. Act on the results: Leaders are encouraged and directed to take the lead in directly addressing the assessment results. Example actions include:
 - a. **To Build Trust:** Leaders foster trust through open communication, personal sharing, and demonstrating vulnerability. For example, team-building exercises and honest discussions about individual strengths and weaknesses can create a safe environment for trust to develop.

- b. **Inviting Healthy Conflict:** Leaders can encourage teams to embrace constructive conflict by establishing norms that promote respectful disagreement. Leaders should model this behavior by inviting diverse perspectives and ensuring discussions remain issue-focused rather than personal, enabling teams to address challenges directly.
- c. **To Build Commitment:** Leaders must ensure all voices are heard during discussions and then drive clear, decisive action. Setting deadlines and summarizing decisions at the end of meetings helps solidify commitment and align the team.
- d. **To Build Accountability:** Leaders can foster a culture of accountability by setting clear expectations and promoting peer-to-peer feedback. Leaders must model accountability themselves and be willing to address underperformance directly, fostering a sense of collective responsibility.
- e. **To Focus on the Results:** Leaders should reinforce a results-oriented culture by celebrating team successes and aligning incentives with group objectives. Lencioni emphasizes the importance of defining clear, measurable team goals and regularly tracking progress toward them.

Closing Notes:

1. This process is not a one-time evaluative and prescriptive process. Leaders should regularly engage in reflection and solicit feedback on all aspects of the team's functioning because “it is important to keep in mind that every team needs constant work, because without it, *even the best ones deviate towards dysfunction* (Lencioni, 2002, p. 194).”
2. These steps are not designed for whole-school “team building” exercises. They should focus only on those team levels where real intimacy and vulnerability can occur (e.g., Instructional Leadership Teams, Administrative Teams, individual teacher collaboration teams, etc.).

Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. Jossey-Bass.

Questions for Reflection:

Based on this month's topic.

1. Reflect on recent team discussions — do you actively encourage respectful disagreements to surface diverse ideas, or do you tend to avoid tension? How might inviting healthy conflict improve decision-making in your school?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable are you demonstrating vulnerability with your team, such as admitting mistakes or sharing personal weaknesses, and what specific actions could you take to model this behavior more effectively?
3. When making team decisions, how consistently do you ensure all members' perspectives are heard and clarified before moving forward? What steps could you implement, like setting deadlines or summarizing agreements, to foster greater buy-in?
4. How willing are you to address underperformance directly, both in yourself and others, without hesitation and with grace? Consider how establishing clear expectations and providing peer feedback can strengthen collective responsibility within your team.

5. How frequently do you engage yourself and/or your team in self-assessments and open discussions about dysfunctions, and what ongoing strategies could you adopt to prevent deviations toward dysfunction in key groups like leadership or collaboration teams?
6. Reflect on how regularly tracking progress and celebrating shared successes could realign your team's focus on student growth.