

Defusing Team Dysfunctions Worksheet

What we know about groups

Research shows that groups, including medical teams, often experience dysfunctions as they work together. There are many reasons for this but some of the most common causes include:

- Poor communication where information is misinterpreted or not shared clearly
- Ambiguous KPIs or goals where criteria are vague or timeframes not specified
- Changing group membership where new personalities disrupt the group dynamic
- External factors and demands from patients, suppliers, clients or regulators

Additionally, under stress and time pressure, these risks can become magnified. Yet you as the leader of your practice or work area need people to work smoothly, flexibly and adaptively to achieve the best patient outcomes.

Research from Healthcare

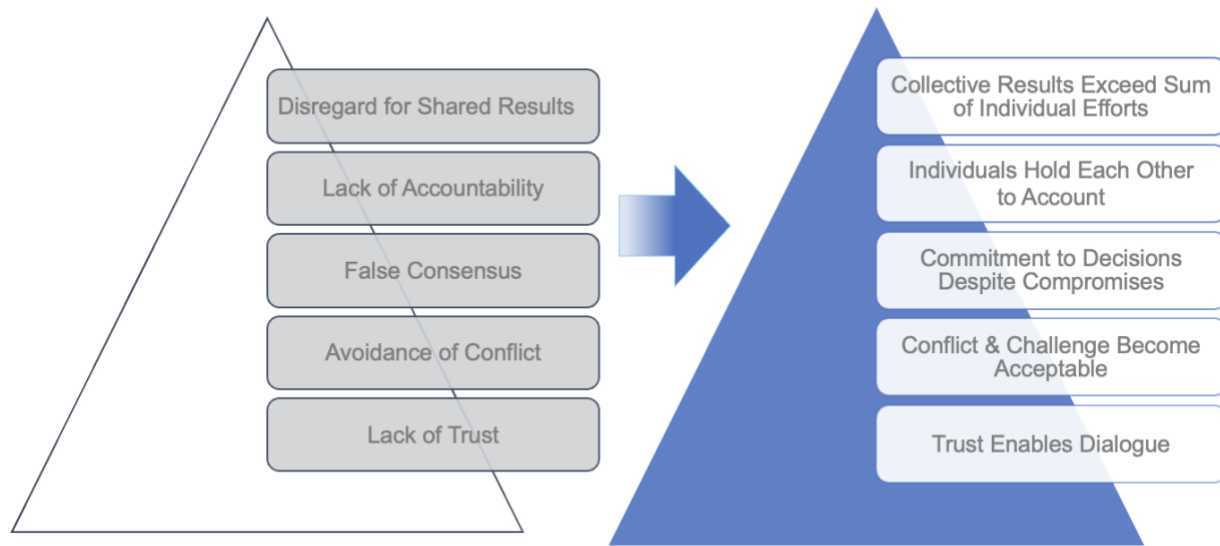
Team and group effectiveness in medical settings is particularly prone to dysfunction given the nature of the work, where procedures are complex and errors can have serious consequences on patient wellbeing. In these situations, the quality of leadership – that is, your ability to effectively direct others – is the critical factor in avoiding group dysfunctions. Leadership expert Professor Amy Edmondson at Harvard has studied group dynamics in the medical context for many years and found:

- Groups with identical hierarchies can perform statistically differently from each other
- The key differentiator is Psychological Safety that allows open, non-judgmental challenge
- The role of the leader in creating this joint problem-solving orientation is essential

Yet as she says: *“Human nature makes the right behaviors really hard”*, meaning that in the absence of focused and deliberate leadership, dysfunctions and disconnects are likely to occur, leading to lower performance and more mistakes.

The Five Dysfunctions

Academic research into group dynamics has identified five predictable dysfunctions that occur in professional working groups. By understanding these better as a leader you can diagnose when they are happening and then address them with specific actions to defuse situations that otherwise block group effectiveness. The dysfunctions operate as a hierarchy where each one is “fed” by the preceding one, so leaders need to look at all of them together to diagnose and address group performance issues. Taken together, the *Five Dysfunctions* provide a reliable and proven model leaders can use to maintain group performance.



Source: Lencione, P. "The Five Dysfunctions" 2002

Explanation

Here is how the dysfunctions work in practice.

Level 1: What happens

- Levels of perceived trust typically vary between group members
- Yet groups need strong trust as the basis of collaboration and to perform well
- When trust is low in a group, there is often no debating mechanism to address it
- Since trust is subjective it is also therefore difficult to address objectively and improve

Level 2: What happens

- When trust is low, conflict can intensify and becomes more difficult to discuss
- Since humans are generally conflict-averse, conflict is often ignored or hidden
- Without proper debating mechanisms for conflict, group performance suffers
- Conflict needs to be reframed as a source of improvement rather than fear or blame

Level 3: What happens

- Consensus is easier to adopt than openly address conflict in most groups
- Yet unchallenged consensus is risky as each group member keeps their views private
- False consensus is then the result when groups fail to state their different opinions
- "Agreement" in the room is typically followed by personal agendas still being pursued

Level 4: What happens

- Accountability requires commitment
- Commitment also requires consensus

- Consensus can't occur without productive debate in the group about options and choices
- If people do not feel accountable, results suffer because no one challenges each other

Level 5: What happens

- The dysfunctions begin to cumulate and groups fail to focus on joint results
- If the group does manage to debates issues, people often say yes but mean no
- Personal agendas or sub-group agendas get prioritized at the expense of the wider group
- Disagreement is stifled and leaders become sidelined as they are unable to drive results

Actions you can take

- Address trust as the basis of all group dynamics (see further resources on the Trust Equation)
- Make debate and difference a strength rather than a weakness in the group
- Allow a diversity of views to generate options and always seek to hear the quieter voices
- Frequently test your assumptions as a group and revisiting until true consensus occurs
- Use the “*Meeting Canoe*” with open questions for contribution and closed ones for commitment

Key takeaways

- Research shows that there are five predictable group dysfunctions
- These occur as a hierarchy and so cumulate to create greater blocks to performance over time
- In a multigenerational and cross-cultural world, dysfunctions can often become magnified
- Remember that a change in any one group member affects all the others
- Dialogue and discussion as a group are key to correcting dysfunctions

Questions for reflection

- What is the current dynamic in your team or work group?
- Which dysfunctions do you see occurring?
- Are there additional lower-level dysfunctions feeding into them?
- How could you begin a dialogue with your group to surface these dysfunctions?
- How could you then translate this into closing performance gaps and addressing blind spots?
- What might be possible if all dysfunctions in your group were fully defused?