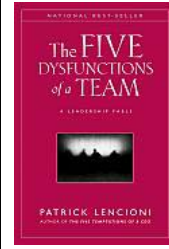




Jossey-Bass 1988

THE FIVE TEMPTATIONS OF A CEO THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM by *Patrick Lencioni*

Book Review by **Richard F. Ludeman**



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Art Imitates Life

Management books are peppered with anecdotes in an often vain attempt to demonstrate relevance to real life. Patrick Lencioni, management consultant and part-time screenwriter, takes this approach to its logical extreme in his series of “leadership fables.”

Lencioni’s premise is that leadership is not complicated, just difficult given our human frailties. He conveys his concepts in an easily digestible format featuring chapters that are short enough to read during the commercial breaks of your favorite TV program. In fact, if leadership was as easy as these books are to read there would have been no need to publish them.

Both *The Five Temptations of a CEO* and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* offer useful insights for leaders. At the same time, the author tends to be glib in his assumptions, prescriptions, and rationale. The result is works that are at once profound and superficial.

Temptation at the Top

Andrew O’Brien is failing as the CEO of Trinity Systems. Riding the train home he meets an elderly gentleman, Charlie, who wants to talk. *The Five Temptations of a CEO* is not so much a story as an extended dialogue. For the next 60 pages Charlie engages Andrew in an impromptu tutorial on the essence of leadership.

Charlie, with the aid of a few fellow travelers, slowly reveals that the secret to success at the top comes down to resisting five temptations:

1. Choosing status over results.
2. Choosing popularity over accountability.
3. Choosing certainty over clarity.
4. Choosing harmony over productive conflict.
5. Choosing invulnerability over trust.

Initially skeptical, Andrew becomes a believer. This sets the stage for a dramatic scene in the board room and an ending with a twist.

After the conclusion of the story Lencioni provides more about the model including his theory that there is a “sequential impact of the principles on one another.” It progresses in reverse order beginning with trust, and achieving each principle enables the realization of the next. The author also offers a self-assessment section for those curious about the dark side of their leadership.

I find it hard to argue with the temptations. Certainly every organization would benefit from a leader dedicated to results, accountability, clarity, productive conflict, and trust. The real world scenario and specific advice enhance the messages and enable Lencioni to effectively translate abstract concepts of leadership into ideas that can make a difference. At a minimum this book is valuable to the extent that it encourages leaders to reflect upon their assumptions, beliefs, style, and role.

In spite of these strengths *The Five Temptations of a CEO* left me vaguely unsatisfied, as if I had eaten an appetizer and was still hungry for the meal. Unfortunately, the author offers nowhere to go for more. The book sheds no light on what thinkers may have influenced his model nor does it offer a bibliography, references or suggestions for further reading. While I appreciate his organizational development and executive coaching experience, Lencioni presents no other basis for his theories.

Furthermore, while I respect the logic of the model, the author glosses over meaningful questions, complexity, and nuance. For example, I wondered about non-linear linkages between the Temptations, e.g., it seems possible that leaders favor certainty (#3) because it helps them preserve an image of invulnerability (#5). Similarly, I imagine there is a connection between the desire for popularity (#2) and its usefulness as a tool to promote harmony (#4).

More broadly, I resist the author's sweeping assumption that humans are imperfect and therefore leaders and teams are inherently dysfunctional. While there is some truth to this claim, it seems more convenient than useful for developing a model of leadership. For example, a more proactive point of view might suggest instead that the real challenge is in organizing the workplace and teams to better align with human nature.

Lastly, while I agree that the CEO is ultimately responsible for the success of an organization, leadership by definition requires others. Perhaps that's why he wrote a sequel.

Camelot

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is derived directly from *The Five Temptations of a CEO*. As Lencioni explains in the introduction it grew out of his observation that clients were applying his theories to improving leadership teams.

This fable follows Kathryn Petersen, CEO of Decision Tech, from her difficult start through her first year or so. Throughout the story the former 7th grade teacher delivers what amounts to a running lecture punctuated by demonstrations of class management. Along the way she reminds her "students" that they may flunk or withdraw (be fired or quit) at any time.

Like Charlie before her, Kathryn describes five key factors that undermine success. With the exception of one, each maps to a Temptation described above, however, in this case the consequence is a dysfunctional team.

1. Inattention to results.
2. Avoidance of accountability.
3. Lack of commitment.
4. Fear of conflict.
5. Absence of trust.

The story of Kathryn's struggle is more interesting than Andrew's travels with Charlie perhaps because it features more and better developed characters. While the ending is never really in doubt, Lencioni nevertheless makes a convincing case that creating effective teams is central to leadership. Through Kathryn's story he illustrates what it might be like to actually pursue this goal using his model.

After the story Lencioni again presents more details of his model along with an assessment tool. Like its predecessor the five elements of this model are linked in a serial progression, now represented in the form of a pyramid with trust at the base. However, this time he offers a more complete exploration of his ideas. The section entitled Understanding and Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions is a welcome addition along with the related notes on The Role of the Leader. I especially appreciate his insights that a lack of energetic debate is a sign of an unhealthy team and that conflict often makes leaders uncomfortable because they feel their job is to maintain "control" of the group.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team is a natural extension of Lencioni's first book. It retains the strengths of *The Five Temptations of a CEO* while improving both the quality of the story and the subsequent explanation of the model. Not surprisingly, however, it also shares many of the same limitations, most a result of the trade-offs required to achieve simplicity. For example, Lencioni defines productive conflict as heated debates without the personal attacks. I believe it requires much more in the way of leadership than throwing penalty flags at meetings. Perhaps as the model continues to develop Lencioni and his clients will elaborate on this as well as other aspect that call for more depth.

The Five Questions

In the midst of so many dull management books, I find the innovative format of these "leadership fables" refreshing. Together they outline a useful framework for examining leadership even if parts of the structure are thin.

In the spirit of Charlie and Kathryn I close with *The Five Questions*:

1. Are these books earth-shattering? *No.*
2. Are they worth reading? *Yes.*
3. Do I have to read them both? *No.*
4. Can I really use the concepts? *Yes.*
5. Will there be a movie? *Maybe.*