

# 3 TYPES OF DYSFUNCTIONAL TEAMS AND HOW TO FIX THEM

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**FAST COMPANY**

IS YOUR WORKPLACE A BATTLEFIELD, A LOVE-IN, OR DOES IT BARELY FUNCTION? LEADERS CAN SAVE THESE TEAMS BY INSTILLING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY.

**You might be reading this while taking a break from any of the team meetings that** are integral to your job. Maybe it's a team of company all-stars—a cross-functional team of high performers—that is key to tackling important challenges at your company.

Regardless of the type, how is your team working out?

That question surfaces regularly for most of us—and it usually comes from the boss or other higher-ups in a ritual pulse check. There's good reason for making sure things are clicking. According to a EY (formerly Ernst & Young) survey of global business executives, most business leaders view high-performance teams as essential to success.

Yet, very often top leaders themselves struggle the most on teams, especially leadership teams that are often chock-full of members who don't mesh and often endure a dynamic one would hardly call a team.

Leaders come together from very different professional and business perspectives, such as functions, product, or lines of business. They often need to vie for resources, influence, and sometimes even their superior's job. This is all part of the deal—to represent their unique perspectives, to have a say about their beliefs, and ultimately to run the place if they get the nod.

But how can you be a part of a team that builds alignment and drives results? How well leadership teams step up to this challenge can be one deciding factor in an organization's ability to succeed in an unpredictable and often unforgiving business world. It's great when it works—but here are three patterns to look for when it doesn't:

## 1. THE WAR ZONE

This team environment is characterized by watching one's back, the formation of factions, and

maneuvering behind closed doors. Members are primarily competitive with one another, and the team leader may use that dynamic to maintain control.

Agreement is hard to reach and the leaders often fail to act in concert in the organization, sending contradictory messages to their staff that can strain people's ability to work together across formal lines of authority.

## 2. THE LOVE FEST

The focus here is on getting along. You might hear comments like: "If only our people could get along as well as we do." One risk to these teams is that they can become insular; separated from the overall organization.

They might have a tendency to assume that all the important perspectives are already in the room. They can be inclined to avoid the tough issues in the interest of maintaining good feelings.

## 3. THE UNTEAM

These leaders function separately, but their main connection is to their leader. Meetings are used for status updates and top-down communication. They build little to no shared perspective on the broader organization or industry, and their meetings are seen as a waste of time.

One might hear comments such as: "We run different functions, the overlaps are always hard, but people will work it out." They may get along as individuals, but they have little connection to one another or a larger purpose they all share.

## THE HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE: TEAM AS ECOSYSTEM

In nature, one quality of healthy ecosystems is their vibrant and interdependent biodiversity, enabling

adaptation to environmental shifts and threats. Healthy leadership teams, especially in today's dynamic world, display divergent perspectives that they respect and value. They avoid getting stuck because they can evaluate options based on data and members' individual knowledge, and ultimately find places of agreement. They see conflicting opinions as dilemmas to grapple with rather than fights to win.

Communication in healthy ecosystem teams is respectful but unforced. Structure in meetings and processes aids communication rather than constraining forthright exchange. Decision making is clear in terms of team members' input and authority, and the leader balances a fair hearing for differences with finding agreements where they exist and breaking impasses when time demands it. Issues and conflicts are delivered in a straightforward manner, rather than underground where they can taint the dynamics and trust.

Building a healthy ecosystem in a leadership team requires close attention and focus from the person in charge. Leaders looking to build a thriving leadership team should focus on three priorities:

### **1. SURFACE AND MANAGE DIFFERENCES**

Effective leaders don't shy away from having it out in the team to surface valuable differing opinions. To keep things civil and respectful, it's important to set up ground rules and enforce them. While most teams would say that they are committed to listening with respect, or that they will debate, decide, and commit, anyone who has ever been in an argument knows how hard it is to keep one's cool. Leaders create a safe space to disagree by modeling behavior and making explicit the expectation that conflicts can be surfaced and resolved.

But be aware--passionate team members may get angry. For some leaders, forceful opinions or feelings can raise anxiety. Be willing to hear a strong objection to a pet idea, or learn to tolerate the discomfort of divergent and passionate viewpoints, despite the tension it may raise for the team.

It's the leader's job to figure out how to contain or even reframe his own reactions so that he fosters forthright exchange rather than blocking it. One leader I worked with developed a silent mantra that he learned to say to himself when those feelings arose: "This is exciting." Coaching helped him report on his success--or lack thereof--until it became a regular internal process.

### **2. BUILD HEALTHY INTERDEPENDENCE**

The leader will often know where members need to create synergy across their groups or functions. But it's too easy--and not healthy--for the leader to have offline, one-off conversations about what the team should get together on, without holding the right leaders accountable.

A key opportunity for interdependence exists if team members support one another's goals, and seek each other's unique expertise and perspectives. If this inclination is absent in a team, then the leader can encourage team members to bring appropriate issues to the team meeting for dialogue and input.

The final frontier is feedback between team members. Even the most stand-up leaders on Earth can have trouble giving direct feedback, especially to peers. It is easier to dump complaints about a peer on the boss and hope for the best. A leader who wants his team to thrive needs to insist that team members give one another direct feedback rather than filtering everything through him.

### **3. ENGAGE THE ORGANIZATION AS A ROUTINE PRACTICE**

In the interest of solidarity--or some would call it a united front--leadership teams can become insular and self-referential. It might be necessary for the leader to encourage an inward-looking team to tap other organizational stakeholders for input and alignment on operational--and even strategic--matters.

To maintain a kind of semi-permeable membrane between the team and the broader organization or even industry, at times leaders can invite guests in for informal listening sessions to hear what people are thinking, observing, or working on. Set clear outcomes for information exchange, but skip the slideshow.

Finally, while avoiding the risk of insularity, leadership team members still need to know they can speak without being quoted about sensitive matters. Teams need to close the door sometimes for the sake of maintaining stable leadership, while members work out issues and differences. Therefore, it pays off to develop clear agreements about what is not to be shared outside the team. This must include the leader's own communication so that no team member gets blindsided.

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