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Trust and Organizational Health
October 9, 2014

“The vast majority of organizations today have more than enough intelligence, expertise, and knowledge to be successful . . . Most organizations exploit only a fraction of the knowledge, experience, and intellectual capital that is available to all of them. But the healthy ones tap into almost all of it.”¹ These are the words of Patrick Lencioni, founder of the Table Group, one of the most sought after management consulting firms in America today. If what he says is true, we should sit up and listen, because untapped potential is something no organization, whether it be for profit or non-profit, can afford in our ever increasingly competitive marketplace.

But what Lencioni says is only helpful if we have a sense of what makes up a healthy organization that taps into all it has. Now certainly, a healthy organization can be said to have elements such a minimal politics, high morale, high productivity, and low turnover,² but is there something that lies at the bottom that creates the culture in which those elements and others like them emerge? Lencioni and many others³ who study organizational dynamics say yes. They say that what is at the bottom of a healthy organization, an organization that is able to tap into all of its knowledge, experience, and intellectual capital, is trust.

Now, before we go any further let me explain to you the kind of trust we are talking about. We are not talking about predictive trust. Often times we say that we trust that someone will get something done. That is predictive trust. And while that kind of trust is valuable it is not the kind of trust that is being talked about in regards to healthy organizations. You see, predictive trust can be good or bad. You can say, “You can always trust him to say something stupid at a moment like that.” That is trust, but it is certainly not the most important kind of trust when it comes to organizational health. No, when we talk about the kind of trust that builds healthy companies, what we are talking about is the kind of trust that comes about when people are vulnerable enough to be honest with how they see things, about their own failures, about what is going on inside of them and what they think of what others are doing.⁴

Now before you think I am encouraging some “hold-hands-and-sing” kind of organizational culture, I want you to picture this: what would happen if members of your team, whether it be at the top or bottom of a large corporate structure or whether it be the single layer of a small business, were able to sit around a table and say things like, “Cathy, you’ve got something better than me. Let’s go for that,” or “Why are we doing it that way again, when it hasn’t worked in the past,” or “I am really feeling like we are not getting at the bottom of what’s really important in this project,” or “Bob, you said you were going to get that by Friday, what happened?” or “I am sorry, I did not come through like I said I would.”⁵ That would be quite a table, wouldn’t it? It would be the type of table that would get down to the most important business in a hurry. It would discover the issues and let information flow. There would be no grandstanding or blame-shifting or guarding one’s image. Furthermore, there would be no avoiding the elephant in the room, or the skeleton in the closet, or the dirty laundry in the corner. Real problems would be addressed real fast because the right questions would be asked and the information that already exists in the organization would be brought to bear on the problems that exist.

Let’s get all this trust talk out of the theoretical, however, and let me tell you two stories. The first story has to do with the devastating results of the lack of trust.

At about 6:15 pm on December 28, 1978, United Airlines Flight 173 crashed into a wooded, but populated area outside Portland, Oregon.⁶ For the hour prior to the crash, the plane circled Portland International Airport as the flight crew considered what to do about a perceived landing gear malfunction. The plane crashed about six miles southeast of the airport, and the aircraft was destroyed. Of the 181 passengers and eight crewmembers aboard, ten were killed and twenty-three were seriously injured.

An investigation of the crash site, evaluation of the flight voice recorder, and post-crash interviews with the crew, all supported the fact that the plane met its demise due to an empty fuel tank and not due to any landing gear malfunction. The crash occurred despite the fact that the crew was well experienced and should have recognized that the plane was running out of fuel and needed to be brought to landing well before

it hit the ground. The question that investigators asked was how could such an oversight be made by such a highly experienced crew?

The conclusion of the FAA's report was that the mishap exemplified "a breakdown in cockpit management and teamwork." In the years prior to United Flight 173, the FAA had noted a recurring problem in the cockpits across America's airways. Due to the military training of many airline pilots, captains treated their fellow cockpit crewmembers as underlings who should speak only when spoken to. This intimidating atmosphere actually led to the dismissal of cockpit members at a captain's whim, and created a cockpit culture in which crewmembers did not trust their captains enough to relay sometimes critical information. Such was the case among the flight crew of United Flight 173. Fearing reprisal from the captain, crewmembers only gave subtle remarks about the fuel situation until the flight's fate was sealed.

What a sadly perfect story of people who were more than intelligent enough to get that plane down, but they didn't do so because of the lack of trust.

Now, let me share with you a second story. It's much more personal, and it has to do with this lunch. Some of you have seen the movie *Remember the Titans*. It is a football movie and tells the story of a team that was formed just after desegregation in the South. Black students and white students had previously gone to different schools and played on different teams in different leagues. Now, their school was going to play with both black and whites on the same team, and furthermore the white coach who had been the head coach was demoted to assistant and the black coach was named head coach. As you can imagine, there was just a little bit of tension at the start. But over time the players and the coaches began to trust one another, so much so that they found themselves in the state championship game. The first half of that game did not fare too well. The defense as led by the white coach was struggling. It could give all it had, but the coach knew it wouldn't be enough, a new strategy was needed. And so at halftime the white coach looked to the black head coach, and said something along these lines, "Herman, I am getting my butt kicked out there. I sure could use your help." Do you see what he did? Rather than say he had everything

under control, he was willing to be vulnerable and to trust others with that vulnerability. And when he was willing to trust in that way other ideas and resources were able to be unleashed, and the team took home the state championship.

So what does that have to do with this lunch? Well, we had set a launch date of just six weeks ago now, but with one month to go we did not have all the pieces together. We did not know who we were going to cater this meal every week; we didn't know where we would find the consistent kitchen help; we didn't know how we were going to make it financially work. I felt I could pull off giving these talks each week, but when it came to setting up the rest of the pieces of this lunch, I felt like that "my butt was getting kicked." And so I sat down with two of my fellow staff members, and I told them just that. I told them I needed help. And they gave me some good suggestions and in no time at all the pieces fell together, and what was just an idea became what you are enjoying today.

I don't think that would have happened without trust. I don't think that would have happened if I didn't have a team I could openly share about where I was falling short. And this is just a little lunch. No one's life or livelihood is hanging in the balance. For many of you the stakes are much higher. A team without trust who is designing a new rig could cause the loss of lives. A team that must find ways to develop a new product line when the competition is way ahead game but has no trust could bring about many layoffs if not the demise of a company. And even if the stakes aren't quite that high, a team without trust is sure to be an underperforming team, and who wants to be part of an underperforming team? Remember Lencioni's words: "The vast majority of organizations today have more than enough intelligence, expertise, and knowledge to be successful . . . Most organizations exploit only a fraction of the knowledge, experience, and intellectual capital that is available to all of them. But the healthy ones tap into almost all of it."

¹ Michael Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012) 8, 11.

² Lencioni, 6

³ See, for example, Patrick Lencioni, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team," in *The Leadership Summit 2003 Team Edition*, (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek

Association, 2003), 42; Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High Performance Organization* (New York: Harper Business Essentials, 1994), 109; James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 165; George Cladis, *Leading the Team Based Church: How Pastors and Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 117.

⁴ Lencioni, 27.

⁵ Lencioni, 27.

⁶ Information for this story is primarily derived from the National Transportation Safety Board, *Aircraft Accident Report: United Airlines, Inc, McDonnell Douglas DC-8-61, N8082U, Portland, Oregon, December 28, 1978* (Washington, D.C.: NTSB, 7 June 1979).