SOCIAL STYLE™ and The Five Dysfunctions of a Team
by Strategic Learning, Inc.’s Alliance Partner
The TRACOM Group

“The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” by Patrick Lencioni outlines five common pitfalls that prevent teams from achieving their full capabilities. And given the widespread use of teams in the business world, these dysfunctions have significant impact on overall organizational performance. This whitepaper looks at how the behavioral preferences and emotional intelligence (EQ) components of TRACOM’s SOCIAL STYLE model relate to “Five Dysfunctions” concepts.

SOCIAL STYLE Connections

SOCIAL STYLE is the world’s most effective interpersonal skills model. This Connections Series looks at how learning to apply our SOCIAL STYLE model complements and supports popular training models including Situational Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Crucial Conversations and The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.
Introduction

Much of the work performed in organizations today is done by teams. It’s hard to imagine not contributing to at least one team on any given day. Teams are critical to every organization’s success; they determine and set strategies, generate ideas for new products, and solve problems. Given their importance, why do so many people complain about their teams? If you ask Patrick Lencioni, it is because most teams are dysfunctional.

In his book, “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” Lencioni outlines five common pitfalls that prevent teams from achieving their full capabilities. Underlying each of these five dysfunctions is the failure to have an in-depth understanding of one another’s Style. According to Lencioni, “some of the most effective and lasting tools for building trust on a team are profiles of team members’ behavioral preferences and personality styles. These help break down barriers by allowing people to better understand and empathize with one another” (p. 199).

The SOCIAL STYLE Model provides an ideal platform and starting point for teams seeking to overcome the Five Dysfunctions. SOCIAL STYLE and the application of behavioral Versatility offer a usable model to understand individual behavioral preferences, strengths and weaknesses. It also provides interpersonal skills feedback and realistic advice about making team contributions. By applying these skills, team members increase interpersonal awareness, understanding, and team productivity.
Overview - The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

According to Lencioni, most teams unknowingly fall victim to five interrelated dysfunctions. Teams who suffer from even one of the five are susceptible to the other four. Solving all five is required to create a high functioning team. The Five Dysfunctions are displayed in a Pyramid.

**Dysfunction One – Absence of Trust.** When team members do not trust one another, they are unwilling to be vulnerable within the team. It is impossible for a team to build a foundation for trust when team members are not genuinely open about their mistakes and weaknesses.

**Dysfunction Two – Fear of Conflict.** Failure to build trust sets the stage for the second dysfunction. Teams without trust are unable to engage in passionate debate about ideas. Instead, they are guarded in their comments and resort to discussions that mask their true feelings.

**Dysfunction Three – Lack of Commitment.** Teams that do not engage in healthy conflict will suffer from the third dysfunction. Because they do not openly surface their true opinions or engage in open debate, team members will rarely commit to team decisions, though they may feign agreement in order to avoid controversy or conflict.

**Dysfunction Four – Avoidance of Accountability.** A lack of commitment creates an atmosphere where team members do not hold one another accountable. Because there is no commitment to a clear action plan, team members hesitate to hold one another accountable on actions and behaviors that are contrary to the good of the team.

**Dysfunction Five – Inattention to Results.** The lack of accountability makes it possible for people to put their own needs above the team’s goals. Team members will focus on their own career goals or recognition for their departments to the detriment of the team. A weakness in any one area can cause teamwork to deteriorate. The model is easy to understand, and yet can be difficult to practice because it requires high levels of discipline and persistence.
How SOCIAL STYLE and Versatility Enhance Teamwork

SOCIAL STYLE and Versatility provide a proven and easy-to-use strategy for team members to understand themselves and one another, and to overcome the five dysfunctions. The Model provides an awareness of how people behave towards others, use their time, and make decisions. Further, the Versatility component of the Model provides advice for increasing interpersonal effectiveness with individuals regardless of their particular Styles. Research has shown that SOCIAL STYLE is easier to learn and apply than either DiSC or Myers-Briggs. Of additional importance, the SOCIAL STYLE Profile is available as a multi-rater instrument, providing feedback from other team members, which helps to overcome the biased and inaccurate perceptions people often have of themselves.

In the following sections we describe how Style and Versatility help team members manage the five team dysfunctions.

**SOCIAL STYLE and Teamwork**

Awareness of SOCIAL STYLE is particularly important for the first two dysfunctions, absence of trust and fear of conflict. Understanding one another’s Styles helps teams develop trust and learn to debate in healthy and productive ways. This provides a solid basis for managing the other three dysfunctions, where Versatility plays an important role in reaching commitment, holding one another accountable and achieving results.

**Absence of Trust**

Lencioni states that trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team, and that without trust teamwork is all but impossible. Members of trusting teams admit weaknesses, take risks by offering one another feedback and assistance, focus their energy on important issues, and are willing to ask for help. Teams that use a focused approach can achieve trust, and one of the best ways to do this is to utilize a behavioral styles profile.

The SOCIAL STYLE Model focuses on people’s behavior – the things they do and say to one another. It provides a very clear description of people’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as insight into people’s work preferences. This knowledge is invaluable for creating an atmosphere of trust. Different Style expectations often lead people to have a difficult time working together, and this can lead to a breakdown of trust. Because they have very different behavioral preferences, people with opposite Style expectations are even more likely to experience this type of teaming difficulty.

For example, during team meetings a person with Expressive Style expectations speaks loudly, frequently, and likes to make decisions quickly. In contrast, a person with Analytical Style expectations speaks softly, less frequently, and wants to take time before coming to decisions. Because their Style expectations are at odds, their behavioral differences are more likely to lead to conflict and a lack of trust.
SOCIAL STYLE helps. By recognizing Style differences, these individuals are able to develop a better understanding, adjust their expectations, and accept one another. SOCIAL STYLE helps them identify one another’s strengths and potential “blind spots.” It provides tools for accepting the person, managing blind spots, and capitalizing on strengths. Since differences are merely behavioral and are not a reflection of character or personality disputes, team members are much more likely to develop a trusting and cohesive culture that focuses on work rather than individual preferences, assumptions, and expectations.

**Fear of Conflict**

Team members sometimes engage in heated and unhealthy conflict that undermines effective teamwork. Instead it becomes very personal and results in damaged relationships and an atmosphere where productive debate is virtually nonexistent. The SOCIAL STYLE Model helps in two specific ways. First, it describes a predictable process by which individual preferences and expectations change under stress and in response to conflict. This process is called “Backup Behavior” and it helps team members understand the value of recognizing and adjusting their expectations for how people engage in conflict. Second, the Model explains how to manage unproductive behavior and act in ways that allow productive problem solving.

Returning to our example, a person with Expressive preferences in Backup tends to attack. They are likely to become confrontational and verbally aggressive. In contrast, a person with Analytical preferences tends to withdraw and avoid the situation. Conflict between people with these two opposed styles often leads to a situation where healthy debate is nearly impossible. One person is displaying outright hostility while the other person goes out of their way to avoid another outburst. Both approaches lead to a poisonous atmosphere without meaningful discussion of ideas. However, simply learning about these Backup Behavior differences begins to neutralize their negative impact. This is because the SOCIAL STYLE Model provides techniques for engaging others in ways that focus on ideas rather than personalities and behavioral differences. This approach leads to more effective conflict, where team members solve problems without wasting time on SOCIAL STYLE preferences and missed Style expectations.

**Versatility and Teamwork**

SOCIAL STYLE helps team members and whole teams trust one another and engage in productive debate. With an understanding of Style differences as a foundation, the skill of Versatility provides the fuel to overcome the next three dysfunctions – lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. The teaming activities Lencioni recommends are valuable, but without a disciplined use of Versatility skills, a critical element is missing.
Lack of Commitment

According to Lencioni, commitment is a function of clarity and buy-in. Effective teams make timely and clear decisions with buy-in from all team members, even those who do not agree with the decision. Teams with commitment have common objectives, move forward without hesitation, change direction when necessary, and learn from their mistakes.

To reach commitment, the Five Dysfunctions model recommends techniques such as establishing clear deadlines and communicating the team’s goals throughout the organization. This happens through effective discussion, which is a reflection of Feedback. Feedback involves active listening and understanding other team members’ concerns and viewpoints. It also includes adapting communication to match the Styles of other team members. When team members practice Feedback, it helps create an atmosphere where teams can reach commitment. Competence is also important for achieving commitment. Team members need to be flexible to changing circumstances and make decisions when information is ambiguous or imperfect. As Lencioni makes clear, effective teams move forward without getting stuck in “analysis paralysis.”

Avoidance of Accountability

Accountability requires that team members call their peers on performance shortfalls and behaviors that might hurt the team. Team members that hold one another accountable identify problems quickly by questioning one another’s actions, hold one another to the same standards, and avoid needless bureaucracy around managing performance.

Lencioni states that making the team’s goals public and conducting regular progress reviews are techniques that can contribute to individual accountability. Private Accountability is especially important. Individuals need to take responsibility to meet their obligations and persevere to achieve their goals. Optimism is also important. An optimistic outlook is critical since it communicates confidence to other team members and to the rest of the organization that the team is on the right track. An optimistic team is more likely to hold one another accountable for achieving its goals.
**Inattention to Results**

The most frustrating dysfunction for team sponsors shows up when members put their own status or personal goals above the best interests of the team. Teams that focus on results minimize this type of self-centered behavior. Publicly declaring the team’s results and offering results-based rewards are techniques for managing this dysfunction.

Beyond structuring rewards and consequences for the entire team, versatile team members understand the importance of acknowledging results in ways that are likely to be most meaningful based on each individual’s Style preferences and expectations. The opportunity to present to an auditorium full of peers would likely drive a person with Expressive preferences to get results and drive a person with Analytical preferences to avoid doing anything.

Effective teams leverage their understanding of SOCIAL STYLE preferences and their skilled use of Versatility skills to ensure the whole team is focused on results. They also use these same competencies to ensure individual team members find achieving results personally meaningful and satisfying.

**Benefits & Summary**

The model developed in The Five Dysfunctions of a Team provides a persuasive analysis of the common pitfalls of many teams, as well as effective strategies for overcoming these hazards. An understanding of one another’s strengths, blind spots, and Style preferences is at the heart of effective teamwork. It is the foundation for teamwork, and it is best achieved through the insights and tools provided in our SOCIAL STYLE Model. In this position paper we have described how SOCIAL STYLE provides a basis for overcoming Lencioni’s team dysfunctions, and how Versatility builds on Style awareness to further enhance individual and team performance.
About the Author
Casey Mulqueen, Ph.D. — Director of Research & Product Development Casey Mulqueen oversees the research and development of TRACOM’s various assessment instruments and products. He has experience developing a wide variety of assessments such as personality inventories, 360-degree feedback programs, performance appraisal systems, and employee opinion surveys. His expertise in cross-cultural assessment and norming has helped ensure that TRACOM’s global surveys are valid and reliable throughout the world. He is a writer who has authored a variety of materials including books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Casey holds an M.S. in clinical psychology and a Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology.

Special Thanks
We are grateful to Dr. Karl Krumm for his review and comments on this whitepaper.


ii Interpersonal Skills Comparison Study.