The 5 dysfunctions of a (Scrum) Team: A coach’s approach

Introduction
Scrum is based on “Empirical Process Control”, utilising high performance teams to deliver complex products and systems in an emerging environment. The emphasis is on “high performance teams”. They are the foundation of the success of Scrum projects and as Scrum practitioners, coaches and trainers we need to leverage as many tools as we can to help guide our teams to their most productive state. In this article we will look at the “5 dysfunctions model” and how it can help Scrum teams to be more productive.

The 5 dysfunctions of a Team

I recently read “The FIVE dysfunctions of a TEAM” by Patrick Lencioni. The book is a New York Times bestseller and has sold over 1 million copies worldwide. Lencioni has taken an interesting approach in addressing this common topic by authoring the book as a fable which I must admit originally put me off buying it in the book store the first time I saw it. If you are like me, you visit the book store (often) and pick up books and flick through for the “juicy” bits. The title of this book drew my attention but when I saw the fictional approach and the rather abstract chapter headings I put it back on the shelf and continued to browse the plethora of other books available. A week or so later I found myself becoming more and more curious as to the content of the book and decided to buy a copy to investigate how Lencioni was painting his picture. That proved to be one of the best book buying decisions I have made in a long time. I am not renowned for reading a book cover to cover. I tend to flick to the chapters and sections of interest and work with those; however I sat down with this book and read it cover to cover in two sessions. The fable, centred on a dysfunctional executive team struggling to compete with their competitors proved compelling and I found myself turning pages eagerly to follow the story of Kathryn (the newly appointed CEO) and her team battling through and succeeding with their goals.

Lencioni proposes his “Five Dysfunctions Model” which he has made available via a free pdf here http://www.tablegroup.com/books/dysfunctions/the_five_dysfunctions.pdf. and is shown in Figure 1 below.
Lencioni bases his model on a pyramid of dysfunctions that a team should overcome step by step working from the bottom to the top, at which point you should be a productive and high performance team. I will talk briefly about the 5 dysfunctions and how we can apply these dysfunctions to Scrum teams.

**Absence of Trust**

“The fear of being vulnerable with team members prevents the building of trust within the team”

To ascend the pyramid of dysfunctions we must combat each one in turn. One of the most important dysfunctions within a team is a lack of trust. The team members must have a stable foundation of trust to build upon to achieve their goals. Without trust within the team, there can be little hope of ever becoming functional and performant.

**Fear of Conflict**

“The desire to preserve artificial harmony stifles the occurrence of productive, ideological conflict”

The idea of healthy conflict is for some people one of the hardest dysfunctions to overcome. Once the team have trust it is good for team members to debate the merits of an approach or ideas suggested by other members. Healthy, positive conflict helps drive better ideas and as importantly enables the team members to commit to an activity. Lencioni discusses that a majority of people will buy-in to an idea they don’t agree with if they have been involved in the debate and their point of view has been heard and discussed. Agreement by consensus is never normally an achievable or good thing.

**Lack of Commitment**

“The lack of clarity or buy-in prevents team members from making decisions they will stick to”

Commitment from a team (or individual) is based around trust and conflict; both of which enable the individuals to buy-in to the end goal and make the commitment required. Lack of trust and conflict will see team members taking on a passive-aggressive role and artificially agreeing with the team’s direction but lacking any real level of commitment.

**Avoidance of Accountability**

“The need to avoid interpersonal discomfort prevents team members from holding one another accountable for their behaviours and performance.”

Everyone in the team should be held accountable to the rest of the team for their involvement in meeting the goals. Trust, healthy conflict and commitment are enablers to this accountability.
Inattention to Results

“The pursuit of individual goals and personal status erodes the focus on collective success.”

Whilst it is still acceptable for people to strive for personal gain and status, each team member must put the team’s goals first in all cases and where these conflict, the personal goals should be discarded for the good of the team. A successful team should always reap personal rewards for the members of the team due to the very nature of the team’s progress and success.

The Model Applied to Scrum

Lencioni’s book is centred on an executive team which is trying to improve the performance of the company; but his model and concepts apply directly to other teams and certainly to those in the Agile and Scrum community. Scrum is based in “Empirical Process Control” utilising high performance teams to deliver complex products and systems in an emerging environment. So how do we as team members, coaches, trainers and leaders facilitate the Scrum team’s transition to higher performance? I will walk you through the Scrum ceremonies of Sprint Planning, Daily Scrums, Sprint Reviews and Sprint Retrospectives and what we can do during these sessions to help achieve ultimate team performance using Lencioni’s model.

Before I continue, I would first like to propose a more positive message for the model and suggest that instead of focusing on the dysfunctions of a team; why not focus on the functions of a team? Let’s go forward and talk about the elements we are striving for and not against. This gives us a more positive focus and direction in building our teams. The inverted, positive model then becomes something like Fig 2.

![Figure 2. “The 5 Functions of a Team”](image)

So we are now striving to build Trust, (healthy) Conflict, Commitment, Accountability and Results Focus. With this in mind, let’s look at our first Scrum ceremony Sprint Planning.
Sprint Planning

The Scrum Process:
During Sprint Planning the Team, ScrumMaster and Product Owner get together to agree on what will be delivered in the coming Sprint. To do this they select items from the Product Backlog and agree on a Sprint Goal. The team breakdown the Product Backlog Items (PBI) into tasks which they estimate. The team negotiate with the Product Owner on what will be delivered and the Team makes a commitment to achieve this.

Referring back to Lencioni’s model we see that to get commitment (to achieve the Sprint Goal) we need trust and healthy conflict. In Scrum we should obtain trust both within the team, and between the team and the Product Owner.
We want internal team conflict and conflict between the team and the Product Owner. It is essential that the Team and Product Owner feel comfortable enough to debate openly and honestly for the good of the project. The Product Owner should drive the vision and goals and the team should contribute to how best to achieve it. An example of having this trust and conflict would be for the Team to generate and drive Product Backlog items that are none functional in nature or that address “Technical Debt”. This doesn’t mean however that the team are not able to generate ideas that are functional in nature and add direct and obvious value to the business.

Given trust and healthy conflict the team are able to commit to the Sprint Goal. The model expresses the importance of having a Sprint Goal, which based on my experience, can and is easily overlooked or, for that matter, poorly crafted. Scrum teams work more successfully given a single and focused goal which can be used to measure success at the end of the Sprint.
The remaining item we have not discussed is “Accountability” which sits neatly between commitment and the goal. Within Scrum we expect two levels of accountability, one of the Team which should stand up to external examination and one of each individual. Each individual is accountable for their actions during a Sprint to the rest of the Team. The Team have committed to the goal and each person must put the Team (Sprint) goal before any other personal goals. The Team should expect each person to be accountable to the other members of the Team.

Daily Scrums

The Scrum Process:
Each team meets daily at the same time and location and each member relays to the others what they have worked on since they last met, what they are going to work on and any impediments they have. In Scrum we call this daily planning. It allows the Team to align their activities and plan for the day ahead.

In a similar manner to Sprint Planning, each Scrum Team member is expected to be aligned with all 5 aspects of a functional team. To provide the most optimal update, the team should have trust and therefore the confidence to provide an honest report of the work they are completing. Conversations between team members (and ScrumMaster) are usually taken offline and these may sometimes require healthy conflict and debate. At all times the team members should be accountable and focused on the Sprint Goal.
**Sprint Reviews**

**The Scrum Process:**
At the end of the Sprint, the Team, ScrumMaster, Product Owner and any interested parties convene for a Sprint Review. Here the Team demonstrate the work that has been delivered and solicit feedback from the Product Owner. The Sprint Review is an essential part of the Scrum framework and provides the basis for iterative development. It is key to the success of a Scrum project for the Team and Product Owner to have a functional Sprint Review. The Product Owner will determine with the Team during this meeting if the Sprint Goal has been met.

A Scrum team always abides by the “Visibility and Honesty” mantra. No more so than the Sprint Review. It is essential for true progress measurement that the team demonstrate honestly what has and has not been completed. The team should be accountable for meeting the Sprint Goal. We always expect an amount of healthy conflict in a Sprint Review meeting, as the Product Owner and team discuss the delivered functionality and future expectations of the system. The team make another commitment to demonstrate the functionality which is in addition to the commitment to deliver the Sprint Goal. We therefore have all five of the model’s traits.

**Sprint Retrospectives**

**Scrum Process:**
The Sprint Retrospective happens at the end of the Sprint and as the names suggests is a time when the Team look back over the Sprint and discuss what went well and what didn’t. The Sprint Retrospective forms the basis for the team to “Inspect and Adapt” in order to enable continuous improvement.

The discussions at these sessions are facilitated by the ScrumMaster and should be a “warts and all” forum for debate. To do this in the most productive manner the team must have trust and conflict. The team members must feel comfortable and trust everyone in the room which provides a safe forum for discussion. Many Scrum coaches and trainers use the word “Safe” to describe the need to provide an environment where the team feel able to discuss openly the issues of the recently completed Sprint. We can therefore map safety directly to trust. They must also be committed to continuous improvement and accountable for what they did during the sprint. The goal of continuous improvement is ever lasting.
Conclusions

The application of the “Five Dysfunctions Model” gives us five discreet yet highly integrated areas to focus on. We must first build trust within the team. Trust is the most important part of team work and only with trust in place can we ascend to becoming goal focused. The area that most individuals (and therefore teams) struggle with is the concept that healthy conflict is good and essential to producing the best solution and gaining commitment.

In our discussion of accountability we see the two levels required internally between each team member and externally between the team and the Product Owner or customer. The Scrum framework provides us with the Sprint Goal which helps maintain the focus of a Sprint and enables the team to achieve the fifth level of the model.

In summary if we apply the model to Scrum I suggest that we need the following:

- Trust between each team member
- Trust between the Team and the Product Owner
- Conflict between each team member
- Conflict between the team and the Product Owner
- Commitment from the Team (To deliver the Sprint Goal)
- Accountability of the Team to external entities such as the Product Owner
- Accountability of each individual team member to the remainder of the Team.
- Product Owner and the Team to be goal focused
- A goal for each Sprint

Lencioni’s model adds great value to Scrum Teams. The 5 dysfunctions (which I have inverted to functions) provide us with a checklist to head towards a truly functional and therefore productive team.

The importance of training

Training is one of the most important enablers of this model. Training should be given on the core concepts of the model and how it is applied to the Scrum process. Knowledge workers such as those found in Scrum projects relate and absorb models like this very easily. They grasp the concepts very quickly and it provides a common language for discussions going forward. Training will help with the most difficult area of healthy conflict. Once an understanding has been gained as to what healthy conflict is and how it can benefit the team, the model then demonstrates how this conflict is built on top of trust and how we aim for accountability and results focus.

The importance of coaching

Essential to the Kathryns’s implementation (in the Fable) was the need to re-enforce and re-iterate her team on their dysfunctions. Acceptance of the model and grooming of the team may take some time, and there will certainly be points where the team struggle with the basics of trust and conflict. Coaches play an essential role in Scrum projects, adding not only technical (Scrum) value but direction, facilitation and guidance. As a Certified Scrum Coach I see it as my role to provide such tools to my teams and coach them to be the best they can possibly be.
Further Reading

After reading “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” I become a great fan of Lencioni’s work, both for the concepts and theories he has developed and his use of “Fables” to facilitate better learning. A little like a late comer to Harry Potter, I immediately went out and brought the next book “Silo’s, Politics and Turf Wars” and I have to say I have also read that cover to cover too. In this second book Lencioni proposes a model to help overcome teams with silos. I plan to write a follow up article to discuss how this theory is already embedded within the heart of Scrum and how we can map his model to the components of Scrum and iterative development. Whilst researching for this article I came across the following question posed to Lencioni and his subsequent response....

Lencioni was asked “Why do you convey your messages through fables?”

Answer: I believe that readers learn more through fables because they can relate to the characters and more easily internalize the messages. In addition, they are more apt to finish a book if they find it intriguing and fun to read. Finally, because I’ve had some experience writing screenplays, I enjoy the process of bringing my theories to life through interesting dialogue and character development.

I couldn’t agree more!

References

http://www.tablegroup.com/books/dysfunctions/