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Five factors for discovering your compliance team's effectiveness

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As compliance professionals, we know that we can't accomplish great things alone. We achieve our goals through others, within a team structure. In this way, we scale our influence and have the potential to exponentially increase gains.

But there are many factors that have the potential to negatively affect team performance. Organizational culture, competing initiatives, and intrateam issues may affect your ability to keep projects focused and on track. Compliance teams are often spread across geographies, and now with the pandemic, everyone is likely working apart, interrupting communication and flow even further.

So how do you know when your team is working effectively together? How do you assess its performance based on the goals?

There are numerous models for leadership, but one I have used with great success is from Patrick Lencioni.^[1] He breaks teamwork down into five critical competencies, each of which can be measured and improved. Let me take you through those along with some real-world examples to help you understand some of the pitfalls.

1. Building trust

Trust is a critical foundation for working well together. It ensures that all members of a team believe that their peers' intentions are good, and they can be open and honest with each other. However, this does require vulnerability—and unfortunately, along their career advancement path, most people learn to view their colleagues as competitors and therefore become conditioned to defend what they view as their territory.

One team I worked with was wasting excessive amounts of time and energy grappling with their interactions after an external “key talent” hire was brought in to join the team. Perceived as “ambitious and aggressive,” the star hire threw off the balance of the team, and the lead executive failed to take quick action to stop the behavior. The team began to dread group meetings, avoided speaking directly, and essentially shut down. When one of her best performers quit, the leader brought me in to facilitate a reset of group norms^[2] and reestablish trust.

If you have a team where individuals compete for attention, good intent is questioned, and business information is traded like poker chips, you know you have a problem with trust. There is no quick fix for this, and the solution starts with leadership. Trust (especially where it's been breached) must be built over time, through multiple experiences of commitments combined with follow-through and credibility.

2. Mastering conflict

When I was leading teams as a corporate exec, I was committed to creating an environment where everyone felt valued and understood. I wanted the best ideas brought to light.

This approach, of course, is easier said than done. An honest sharing of ideas and opinions can lead to conflict. Everyone has different working styles and preferences, and those are exacerbated when colleagues disagree on the best course of action.

The best way to begin improving this skill on your team is to accept that conflict is a part of being human and it is essential to achieving greatness. It is actually something that is required in order to innovate, break through, and solve. It's something we can't, and shouldn't try to, eliminate.

But *unresolved* conflict is costly! The negative behaviors that happen when conflict is unaddressed—like backstabbing, negativity, arguments, and unnecessary tension—can be reduced or eliminated with the right tools and coaching.

As a leader, it's important to be aware of your team's relationship with conflict. If each team member knows how they are wired to respond under stress or challenge, they can learn to shift the way they handle conflict in the workplace to improve relationships. (Another cool byproduct of this experience is that you can apply these strategies to your personal relationships as well as your professional ones.) There are a few insightful personality and behavioral preference tools out there that can equip team members to anticipate their reactions to conflict, both individually and with each other. When completed as a team in a psychologically safe space, major breakthroughs can happen between people that result in transformative team behavior.

3. Achieving commitment

Once you have mastered the art of conflict to have meaningful team conversations in a situation, then you are ready to commit. As Lencioni said, "In the context of a team, commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in."^[3] Decisions must be clear around direction and priorities, and to avoid paralysis and the costs of inaction, a team must gain buy-in and agreement to move forward even (and especially) when they may disagree.

This principle was aptly memorialized by Amazon's CEO, Jeff Bezos, in his annual report to shareholders. His leadership mantra to ensure high velocity decision-making is, "Disagree and commit."^[4] He recognizes the value in trusting others' decisions, even when he disagrees, and moving forward.

A lack of commitment is most often caused by the drive for consensus and desire for certainty. Great teams don't seek consensus. They rely on people understanding they can't always agree. They ensure that all ideas are put on the table before making a decision (endorsing productive conflict as a helpful vehicle). Then they hash it out, make a decision, and commit to moving forward—together.

Great teams also know that certainty is a fool's bargain. They recognize the need to come together and support decisions and take action even when they don't have complete assurance that it is the right course. Consider this: If you require more than 70% of the information to make a decision, think again. Do you really need to set a higher standard than Jeff Bezos?

4. Embracing accountability

Accountability has a very specific meaning in the context of assessing team effectiveness. It is the degree to which team members are willing to call each other out on behavior that is damaging to team relationships and the achievement of goals.

Most people avoid the personal discomfort that accompanies holding peers accountable, as such conversations can be difficult. But they are crucial to a well-functioning team.

If you establish healthy group norms and equip your team with a framework for having an open dialogue, you will be building a self-governing team. Teams that hold each other accountable establish mutual respect (everyone is held to the same high standard), create an environment where poor performers feel pressure to improve, and enable problems to be quickly identified and resolved because it's safe to talk about them.

In a former executive role, I inherited a team that had been traumatized for years by the behavior of a toxic leader. Morale was in the swamp, talent was at risk of unwanted turnover, and we had tough goals to execute. We needed a reset. Over a two-day off-site retreat, my team discussed what was working/what was not working, decided on group behavior norms, and created a simple report card.

Every six weeks, we added the report card to our team meeting agenda and rated ourselves on whether we were living up to the standards we ourselves had set. Then we discussed what we were doing that resulted in the high or low scores. It was a game changer in keeping an open dialogue and holding us accountable for the behavior standards we set. A little structure can go a long way in supporting your team and creating a shared responsibility.

A final note on this: When a norm is violated, if the team fails to address it, the leader must step in. This occasionally happens even in the best self-governing teams. But by creating an accountability system that usually works, it removes an undue burden on the leader as the sole source of authority.

5. Focusing on results

Great teams set clear and measurable goals, and then drive together to achieve them. The leader is responsible for ensuring that rewards and recognition are performance-based.

Some teams fail in this dimension because individual goals are allowed to trump team goals. Another reason—as strange as this may sound—some companies actually cultivate organizational complacency and are not driven to achieve. They view themselves as special, on a pedestal, and not needing to strive to achieve measurable results. If you manage a team, you need to report the results of the work as accountability to the business and in support of the individuals who are tracking their career goals.

Interrelating the five behaviors

While you can work on improving in each of these areas one at a time, it's important to understand that these qualities interrelate and affect one another. For example, let's look at the combination of conflict, trust, and results.

One team I worked with was achieving extremely high results due to exceptional pressure and crisis, which was driving them hard. However, their trust and conflict management capabilities were low. Few on the team were happy, and team interactions were fraught with back-channel politics and personal attacks. The results they were achieving were not sustainable, so we began addressing the foundational issues of trust and productive conflict.

These five qualities I've reviewed with you overlap and intersect with one another. Improving one improves the whole system, and it is the whole system that empowers your team to do its best work.

Achieve together

All teams stand to benefit from an awareness of their effectiveness and an ability to measure the behaviors that affect performance. By identifying performance gaps, you can then take action to improve. It requires investment and work over time to be a highly functional, cohesive team. Understanding your relative strengths and weaknesses enables you to take the first step toward achieving together at a higher level, with greater ease, less stress, and more personal satisfaction.

About the author

Amii Barnard-Bahn has been recognized by *Forbes* as one of the top coaches for legal and compliance executives. A former Fortune Global 50 executive and member of Marshall Goldsmith's 100 Coaches, Amii is a leadership consultant, keynote speaker, fellow at the Harvard Institute of Coaching, guest lecturer at Stanford and UC-

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Takeaways

- All meaningful compliance work is accomplished through the structure of teams.
- Many teams lack a helpful framework to measure, understand, and improve their effectiveness.
- Patrick Lencioni’s model breaks teamwork down into five interrelated competencies: building trust, mastering conflict, achieving commitment, embracing accountability, and focusing on results.
- These five competencies can be measured and improved.
- Understanding your team’s relative strengths and weaknesses enables you to begin achieving together at a higher level with less stress and more personal satisfaction.

1 Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

2 Sabina Nawaz, “How to Create Executive Team Norms — and Make Them Stick,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2EPPZUt>.

3 Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 207.

4 Jeff Bezos, “2016 Letter to Shareholders,” *Day One* (blog), April 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2QGBIMm>.

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