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Identifying Team Dysfunctions within Two Natural Resources Conservation Service Offices

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Norman E. Pipkin entitled "Identifying Team Dysfunctions within Two Natural Resources Conservation Service Offices." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications.

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Identifying Team Dysfunctions within Two Natural Resources Conservation
Service Offices

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Science
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Norman E. Pipkin
August 2016

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Thank you my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for your grace and mercy throughout my life. Thank you my family for always loving and supporting me. Thank you Crystal for all the time you have spent with me and all the help you have given. I couldn't have made it without you. I love you all. Thank you Dr. Stripling for all of your help and guidance along the way.

Abstract

Many teams fail to recognize what causes dysfunction within their team. The purpose of this study is to examine team dynamics and produce an example of applied leadership research for leadership educators. By identifying the causes of dysfunction, teams will be able to advance the functionality and success of their team by achieving a higher level of cohesiveness and production for the customers and communities in which they serve. Leadership educators will be able to use this study in discussing how team functionality can be studied and improved.

NRCS offices in two counties were given the opportunity to participate in this study to evaluate dysfunction within their team. One instrument was used during this study for data collection, a *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* (Lencioni, 2002). The *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* was developed as a diagnostic tool for evaluating team susceptibility to five dysfunctions (Lencioni, 2002). The mean scores for NRCS Office One indicated all five dysfunctions could be a problem. The mean scores for NRCS Office Two indicated the dysfunctions were not a problem except for avoidance of accountability. The mean score for avoidance of accountability indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Based upon the findings of this study, recommendations for future research were made. After results are shared with each office, a follow-up study should be conducted to determine if the dysfunctions are continuing to persist, and what techniques and team exercises were effective or not effective when seeking to correct the dysfunction. Future research should determine if the case study is an effective exercise in helping

undergraduate students acquire the skills and dispositions needed to be better team members and leaders.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Significance and Stakeholders	3
Limitations of the Study.....	4
Assumptions of the Study	4
Definition of Terms.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review	6
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Beyond Lencioni: Absence of Trust	11
Beyond Lencioni: Fear of Conflict	12
Beyond Lencioni: Lack of Commitment	13
Beyond Lencioni: Avoidance of Accountability	14
Beyond Lencioni: Inattention to Results.....	15
Chapter 3 Methods.....	16
Research Design, Population, and Sampling	16
Instrumentation and Analysis of Data.....	17
Case Study	18
Chapter 4 Results	19
NRCS Office One	19
NRCS Office Two.....	20
Case Study	22
Introduction.....	22
Background.....	23
Meet the NRCS Employees	25
Questions.....	30
Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations.....	31
Conclusions.....	31
Recommendations.....	34
List of References	39
Appendix.....	42
Approval Letter	44
Vita.....	45

List of Tables

Table 1 NRCS Office One’s Team Dysfunction Assessment	43
Table 2 NRCS Office Two’s Team Dysfunction Assessment.....	43

List of Figures

Figure 1. Five Dysfunctions of a Team Model (Lencioni, 2002, p. 188). 7

Chapter 1

Introduction

Many companies and organizations stress the importance of strong leadership (Lencioni, 2002; Bolman & Deal, 2013). While strong leadership is an integral component of a successful business, the functionality of the team can be the most effective tool an organization can possess (Lencioni, 2002), and human history is essentially a story of people working together in groups to explore ideas and achieve common goals (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). The modern perception of work in large organizations that transpired in the late 19th and 20th centuries is largely based on work as a collection of individual jobs (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). A variety of global forces over the last two decades, however, pushed organizations to restructure work around teams to empower and enable more rapid, flexible, and adaptive responses to the unexpected (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). This shift in the structure of work has made team effectiveness a primary organizational concern (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006).

Teams touch our lives every day and their effectiveness is critical to well-being across a wide range of societal functions (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). “Much of the work in organizations of every sort across the globe is completed by groups or teams. When these units work well, they elevate the performance of ordinary individuals to extraordinary heights” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 97). Unfortunately, teamwork is elusive within many organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Lencioni, 2002). The problem is not all teams function at a high level, because teams are comprised of imperfect human beings and this can make them inherently dysfunctional (Lencioni, 2002). This is an

issue because as teams malfunction, potential contributions of even the most talented members are eroded (Bolman & Deal, 2013). By acknowledging the imperfections of their humanity, members of highly functional teams overcome the natural tendencies that make functionality so elusive (Lencioni, 2002).

With that in mind, the development of high performing teams does not simply happen (De Meuse, 2009). “Success is not a matter of mastering subtle, sophisticated theory, but rather of embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline and persistence” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 220). Teams “require an organizational culture which enables and fosters team work”(De Meuse, 2009, p. 2). In addition, high performing teams require time, effort, proper guidance, and support from the team leader in order to be effective (De Meuse, 2009). Team leaders who have highly functioning teams have a deep understanding of team dynamics and effectiveness (De Meuse, 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2013). Absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results are five dysfunctions that effect team effectiveness (Lencioni, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

According to Lencioni (2002), teams fail to achieve teamwork, because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls, which are the five dysfunctions of a team.

These dysfunctions can be mistakenly interpreted as five distinct issues that can be addressed in isolation of the others; but in reality they form an interrelated

model, making susceptibility to even one of them potentially lethal for the success of a team. (Lencioni, 2002, p. 187)

In order for teams to produce at an optimum level, dysfunction must be identified, and many teams fail to recognize what causes dysfunction within their team (Lencioni, 2002). Additionally, few real-world examples of team dynamics within the context of agriculture and natural resources organizations are available to be used by agricultural leadership educators and students during instruction of team effectiveness. As a result, this study will examine team dynamics within the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in two offices as a proactive means to improve team effectiveness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine team dysfunction within two NRCS offices and produce a team dysfunction case study for agricultural leadership educators and students. The following objectives framed this study:

1. Describe the level of team dysfunction within two NRCS offices in the following areas: (a) absence of trust, (b) fear of conflict, (c) lack of commitment, (d) avoidance of accountability, and (e) inattention to results.
2. Develop a team dysfunction case study based on two NRCS offices for agricultural leadership educators and students.

Significance and Stakeholders

This study is beneficial to communities, local landowners, customers, team leaders, and team members of NRCS offices and may help improve the overall functionality of NRCS offices. By identifying dysfunctions, team members will be able

to advance the functionality and success of the team by achieving a higher level of cohesiveness and production for the customers and communities in which they serve. Local landowners and customers will be better served because of higher levels of functionality produced by the team. Leadership educators will be able to use this study and the case study produced to discuss how team functionality can be measured and improved.

Limitations of the Study

A convenience sample was used and results were not intended to be representative of all NRCS offices. Therefore, the findings of this study should not be generalized beyond the sample, but the results can be used in leadership education.

Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions were made for the purposes of this study:

1. Participants involved in this study responded truthfully.
2. Absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results were measured accurately.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were operationally defined for this study:

1. Dysfunction are absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results within a team (Lencioni, 2002). In this study, each dysfunction was defined by the employee's score on 3 of 15 items contained in the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team Questionnaire* by Lencioni (2002).

2. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal organization that provides technical and financial services to land owners and agricultural producers, enabling them to be good stewards of the land (Natural Resources Conservation Service South Carolina, n.d., About Us section).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the benefits and need for team effectiveness and discussed the importance of team effectiveness in today's world. The purpose of this study is to examine team dynamics within two NRCS offices as a proactive means to improve team effectiveness and produce a team effectiveness case study for leadership educators and students. Chapter 1 also provided the objectives, significance, limitations, assumptions, and relevant terms of this study. This chapter describes Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions Model and discusses literature relevant to each of the dysfunctions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team. Lencioni (2002) stated not finance, not strategy, not technology, but "it is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare" (p. vii). Success comes only from groups that overcome behavioral tendencies that corrupt teams and breed dysfunctional politics within them (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni created a model to illustrate how the five dysfunctions of a team are interrelated (Figure 1), and the model includes the following dysfunctions: (a) absence of trust, (b) fear of conflict, (c) lack of commitment, (d) avoidance of accountability, and (e) inattention to results.



Figure 1. Five Dysfunctions of a Team Model (Lencioni, 2002, p. 188).

The first dysfunction discussed is absence of trust.

Essentially, absence of trust stems from the unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation of trust.

Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible (Lencioni, 2002, pp. 188, 195).

In the context of building a team, trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be defensive or careful around the group (Lencioni, 2002). Furthermore, teammates must become comfortable being vulnerable with one another in order to build a foundation of trust (Lencioni, 2002). Team members are required to make themselves vulnerable to one another, and be confident that their respective vulnerabilities won't be used against them (Lencioni, 2002). The vulnerabilities referred to include weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes, and requests for help (Lencioni, 2002). By building trust, a team makes conflict possible, because team members do not hesitate to engage in passionate and emotional debate (Lencioni, 2002). "Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 188).

The failure to build trust is damaging because it sets the tone for the second dysfunction which is fear of conflict (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni (2002) stated all great relationships that last over time require productive conflict in order to grow. It is important to distinguish productive ideological conflict from destructive fighting and interpersonal politics.

Ideological conflict is limited to concepts and ideas, and avoids personality-focused, mean-spirited attacks. However, it can have many of the same external qualities of interpersonal conflict – passion, emotion, and frustration – so much so that an outside observer might easily mistake it for unproductive discord. (Lencioni, 2002, p. 202)

Teams that engage in creative and productive conflict know the only purpose is to produce the best possible solution in the shortest period of time (Lencioni, 2002). Discussions of issues are resolved promptly and completely with no lingering feelings or collateral damage, and team members are enthusiastic and willing to take on the next important issue (Lencioni, 2002). Many teams avoid conflict in the name of efficiency, but healthy conflict is a time saver (Lencioni, 2002). Teams that avoid conflict doom themselves to revisiting issues again and again without resolution (Lencioni, 2002). Therefore, it is vital for each team member to acknowledge that conflict is productive and can be healthy (Lencioni, 2002). “By engaging in productive conflict and tapping into team members’ perspectives and opinions, a team can confidently commit and buy in to a decision knowing that they have benefited from everyone’s ideas” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 207).

Lack of commitment is the third dysfunction of a team and consists of clarity and buy-in (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni (2002) stated, “great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from every member of the team, even those who voted against the decision” (p. 207). Consensus and the need for certainty are the two greatest causes for lack of commitment (Lencioni, 2002). Highly functional teams understand the danger of seeking consensus, and determine ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible (Lencioni, 2002). Furthermore, great teams understand and ensure that each member’s ideas are genuinely considered, which creates willingness to rally around the group’s ultimate decision (Lencioni, 2002). Great teams also pride themselves on unity of decisions and commitment to a clear course of action

even with little assurance that the decision is correct (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni (2002) suggested that making a decision is better than making no decision because delaying important decisions can breed a lack of confidence within the team. Moreover, conflict underlies the willingness to commit without perfect information (Lencioni, 2002). In many cases, teams have all the information they need, but it resides within the hearts and minds of the team itself and must be extracted through unfiltered debate. “Only when everyone has put their opinions and perspectives on the table can the team confidently commit to a decision knowing that it has tapped into the collective wisdom of the entire group” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 208).

The fourth dysfunction described is avoidance of accountability. Lencioni (2002) described accountability as “the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team” (p. 212). Many team members are unwilling to tolerate the personal discomfort associated with confronting a peer about his or her behavior (Lencioni, 2002). Teams who are particularly close to one another often hesitate to hold each other accountable because of the fear of endangering a personal relationship (Lencioni, 2002). In addition, this can cause relationships to deteriorate due to resentment for being unable to meet expectations and for allowing the standards of the team to erode (Lencioni, 2002). Members of highly functional teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, demonstrating respect, and high expectations for one another’s performance (Lencioni, 2002). As a result of maintaining respect and expectations among peers, fear of letting down teammates will motivate team members to improve their performance (Lencioni, 2002).

The final dysfunction is inattention to results (Lencioni, 2002). “The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 216). Whether a team is too focused on prestige and notoriety or members lack the vigor to put forth their best effort, a willingness to reach set goals is imperative. Other than results, Lencioni (2002) suggested teams may focused on team and individual status. Many teams fall prey to the lure of status and for some team members merely being part of a team may keep them satisfied (Lencioni, 2002). Some teams often see success in merely being associated with their special organization (Lencioni, 2002). However, teams must desire to excel and reach specific goals in order to be highly functional. Individual status refers to the tendency of people to focus on enhancing their own positions or career at the expense of their team (Lencioni, 2002). “A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members’ goals” (Lencioni, 2002, pp. 217-218). Highly functional teams must live and breathe to achieve their objectives (Lencioni, 2002). Unfortunately, no amount of trust, conflict, commitment, or accountability can compensate for the lack of desire to achieve team goals (Lencioni, 2002).

Beyond Lencioni: Absence of Trust

Glunk, Heijltjes, Raes, and Roe’s (2006) findings are similar to Lencioni (2002). Glunk et al. (2006) sought to analyze the evolution of intra-team conflict and trust in teams that perform complex tasks. Findings suggested two distinct temporal patterns,

which are associated with significant statistical differences in team effectiveness (Glunk et al., 2006).

One pattern develops in a stable manner and is characterized by high levels of trust and relatively low levels of task and relationship conflict. The other pattern is unstable with low, deteriorating levels of trust and high, amplifying levels of task and relationship conflict (Glunk et al., 2006, p.2)

On a self-perception as well as a stakeholder measure of team effectiveness, teams with high levels of trust and relatively low levels of task and relationship conflict outperformed teams with deteriorating levels of trust and amplifying levels of task and relationship conflict (Glunk et al., 2006).

For several decades, psychologists have suggested mutual trust and open communication are the foundation for successful relationships among team members (De Meuse, 2009). The development of interpersonal skills is essential when building relationships that foster trust (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). Team members must be able to exchange ideas honestly and openly in order to facilitate cooperation and trust (Glunk et al., 2006). Thus, team trust plays an important role in promoting healthy relationships that will enhance the functionality of teams (Glunk et al., 2006).

Beyond Lencioni: Fear of Conflict

According to Townsley (n.d.), conflict can be considered positive as it facilitates the surfacing of important issues and provides opportunities for team members to develop their communication and interpersonal skills. “While it is true that suppressed differences can reduce the effectiveness of a team, when they are brought to the surface,

disagreements can be dealt with and problems can be resolved” (Townesley, n.d., p. 2). In addition, by addressing conflict, ideas are enhanced, solutions are more innovative, and better decisions are reached (Townesley, n.d.). Ilgen and Kozlowski (2006) suggested conflict contributes positively to team performance and minimizes group-think. Group-think is described as the tendency for groups to discourage conflict by pressuring consensus and conformity (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). Conflict promotes diversity which enables teams to view problems using different perspectives (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). Also, Ilgen and Kozlowski (2006) purported conflict enhances team innovation and creativity, which leads to increased team performance.

Beyond Lencioni: Lack of Commitment

Research completed by Aube and Rousseau (2005) suggested team goal commitment effects team performance, the quality of group experience, and team viability. Aube and Rousseau’s (2005) also advised that leaders should promote members’ team goal commitment in order to improve team effectiveness. Aube and Rousseau (2005) stated the importance of team members to be considerate to each other and committed to the fulfillment of his/her contribution to the team as it effects the quality of group experience and overall team performance. The quality of group experience refers to the degree to which the social climate within the work team is perceived as positive (McGrath, 1991). This criterion enables one to evaluate whether team members have developed and maintained positive relationships while completing individual tasks to accomplish team goals (McGrath, 1991). McGrath (1991) suggested a positive relationship between team goal commitment and quality of group experience.

Team members who are committed to team goals will likely realize that they are collectively accountable for achieving those goals, thus inducing a shared vision and culture within the team (McGrath, 1991). The more team members are committed to their assigned team goals, the more they will be willing to take measures to reach those goals, and therefore increasing team performance (Aube & Rousseau, 2005).

Beyond Lencioni: Avoidance of Accountability

A study by Luca and Tarricone (2002) compared how well two teams performed by evaluating attributes identified for successful teamwork. One team was very successful in developing a quality product and cooperated in a highly successful manner (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). Another team experienced team problems which caused it to become dysfunctional (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). The successful team accepted individual accountability, personal responsibility, and experimented with ways to work more effectively (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). Additionally, the workload was divided fairly and members synchronized their efforts to reach team goals (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). Furthermore, participants understood their purpose and were willing to solve problems without waiting for direction (Luca & Tarricone, 2002).

The unsuccessful team lacked team accountability and some members were perceived by other team members as though they weren't contributing to the overall goal of the team (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). One team member was highly motivated and the others were content with putting in minimal effort (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). The mismatch of expectations caused many problems and frustrations for team members (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). De Meuse (2009) stated, "when teams do not commit to a

clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven individuals are hesitant to call their peers on actions and behaviors that may seem counterproductive to the overall good of the team” (p. 11). Lack of respect, lack of inclusion in decision making, and lack of communication among team members all contributed to the unsuccessfulness of the team (Luca & Tarricone, 2002).

Beyond Lencioni: Inattention to Results

Team members naturally have a tendency to put their own needs such as ego, career development, and recognition ahead of the team’s collective goals (De Meuse, 2009). If team members lose sight of the overall goal of the team and the need for achievement, the team ultimately suffers (De Meuse, 2009). Therefore, it’s important for teams to realize its collective efficacy (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). Collective or team efficacy is a shared belief in a team’s collective capability to establish and execute courses of action required to produce given levels of goal attainment (Ilgen & Kozlowski, 2006). Bandura (1997) stated collective efficacy is hypothesized to influence what a team chooses to do, such as goal setting, the amount of effort and time it will exert, and its persistence to face and overcome failure.

Chapter 3

Methods

Chapter 1 provided an overview of team effectiveness. Chapter 2 detailed the theoretical foundation for this study and provided literature relevant to Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team. This chapter describes the methodology used to conduct the study.

Research Design, Population, and Sampling

This study utilized a quantitative research approach. The research design for this descriptive study was a one shot case study (Campbell & Stanley, 1963), which was conceptualized as a slice in time (Hinkle & Oliver, 1982). The target population for this study was team leaders and members of two NRCS offices. A census was conducted for both NRCS offices. The target population for this study was five employees from NRCS Office One and four employees from NRCS Office Two. These NRCS offices are a convenience sample. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) stated convenience sampling is appropriate as long as the researcher provides a detailed description of the chosen sample and reasons for selection. These offices were chosen because of the researcher's prior experience working in each office.

The sample consisted of five employees of NRCS Office One, four male and one female; and four employees of NRCS Office Two, three male and one female. The average age of NRCS Office One employees was 41.6 years old ($SD = 12.2$). The minimum and maximum ages for NRCS Office One were 23 and 61, respectively. NRCS Office One employees had combined 85 years of experience at NRCS with the average of

17 ($SD = 13.46$). The minimum and maximum years of experience for NRCS Office One were 1 and 41, respectively. The average age of NRCS Office Two employees was 45.5 years old ($SD = 14.17$). The minimum and maximum ages for NRCS Office Two were 26 and 60, respectively. NRCS Office Two employees had combined 60 years of experience at NRCS with the average of 15 ($SD = 11.55$). The minimum and maximum years of experience for NRCS Office Two were 4 and 28, respectively. All of the NRCS employees in both offices described their ethnicity as white.

Instrumentation and Analysis of Data

One instrument was used during this study for data collection, a *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* (Lencioni, 2002). The *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* was developed as a diagnostic tool for evaluating team susceptibility to five dysfunctions (Lencioni, 2002). The *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* consisted of 15 items that were answered on a scale of 1 to 3, where 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = usually. The scale was used for team members to evaluate how each statement applies to his or her team (Lencioni, 2002). There were three items for each of the five dysfunctions or constructs. The score for each dysfunction was calculated by adding the rating of the three corresponding items for each person. A score of 8-9 is a probable indication that the dysfunction is not a problem, a score of 6-7 indicates that the dysfunction could be a problem, and a score of 3-5 is an indication that the dysfunction needs to be addressed (Lencioni, 2002). Office means and standard deviations were also calculated for each dysfunction. The post-hoc reliabilities of the five dysfunctions are: (a) .73 – absence of trust, (b) .89 – fear of conflict, (c) .76 – lack

of commitment, (d) .76 – avoidance of accountability, and (e) .32 – inattention to results. All constructs have acceptable reliability estimates except for inattention to results based on Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker (2014). This may be due to the small sample size but we recognize the low reliability estimate for inattention to results as a limitation of this study.

Case Study

An analysis type case study was developed based off of the National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science (2016) example case studies. The analysis type case study focuses on teaching students analysis skills concerning team dynamics and leadership theory. Team dynamics were examined to produce an example of applied leadership research for leadership educators. Leadership educators will be able to use this study in discussing how team functionality can be studied and improved.

Chapter 4

Results

Chapter 1 provided an overview of team effectiveness. Chapter 2 detailed the theoretical foundation for this study and provided literature relevant to Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team. Chapter 3 described the methodology used to conduct the study. This chapter highlights the scores of each employee and NRCS office pertaining to Lencioni's (2002) *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire*.

NRCS Office One

Individual scores of employees from NRCS Office One were analyzed and recorded for each dysfunction (Table 1). Pertaining to the dysfunction Absence of Trust, one participant's score indicated the dysfunction needed to be addressed, one participant's score indicated the dysfunction could be a problem, and three participants' scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office One's mean score for Absence of Trust was 6.80 ($SD = 1.79$) with a minimum and maximum of 4 and 8, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Concerning Fear of Conflict, one participant's score indicated the dysfunction needs to be addressed, two participant's scores indicated the dysfunction could be a problem, and two participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office One's mean score for Fear of Conflict was 7.00 ($SD = 1.58$) with a minimum and maximum of 5 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Concerning Lack of Commitment, one participant's score indicated the dysfunction needs to be addressed, and four participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office One's mean score for Lack of Commitment was 7.60 ($SD = 2.07$) with a minimum and maximum of 4 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Regarding Avoidance of Accountability, one participant's score indicated the dysfunction needs to be addressed, three participant's scores identified the dysfunction could be a problem, and one participant's score indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office One's mean score for Avoidance of Accountability was 6.00 ($SD = 1.87$) with a minimum and maximum of 3 and 8, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Pertaining to Inattention to Results, four participant's scores reflected the dysfunction could be a problem, and one participant's score indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office One's mean score for Inattention to Results was 7.00 ($SD = 0.71$) with a minimum and maximum of 6 and 8, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

NRCS Office Two

Individual scores of employees from NRCS Office Two were analyzed and recorded for each dysfunction (Table 2). Pertaining to the dysfunction Absence of Trust, one participant's scores indicated the dysfunction could be a problem, and three participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office Two's mean score for Absence of Trust was 8.25 ($SD = 0.96$) with a minimum and maximum of 7 and 9,

respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction was not a problem.

Concerning Fear of Conflict, two participant's scores indicated the dysfunction could be a problem, and two participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office Two's mean score for Fear of Conflict was 8.00 ($SD = 1.15$) with a minimum and maximum of 7 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction was not a problem.

Concerning Lack of Commitment, all participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office Two's mean score for Lack of Commitment was 8.25 ($SD = 0.50$) with a minimum and maximum of 8 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction was not a problem.

Regarding Avoidance of Accountability, two participant's scores indicated the dysfunction could be a problem, and two participant's scores identified that the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office Two's mean score for Avoidance of Accountability was 7.5 ($SD = 1.29$) with a minimum and maximum of 6 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction could be a problem.

Pertaining to Inattention to Results, one participant's scores reflected the dysfunction could be a problem, and three participant's scores indicated the dysfunction was not a problem. NRCS Office Two's mean score for Inattention to Results was 8.25 ($SD = 0.96$) with a minimum and maximum of 7 and 9, respectively. Overall, this indicated the dysfunction was not a problem.

Case Study

Introduction

Have you ever been on an exemplary or substandard team? You may have played little league baseball or participated in the 4-H program. You may be part of a learning community or an extramural team now. Most everyone will be part of a team at some point, so understanding the susceptibilities that negatively affect team dynamics and performance will improve the overall functionality of your team and your performance as a team member.

So, how does one determine team effectiveness or if a team performs at an exemplary or substandard level? If team members do not know what to look for, these are difficult questions to answer. How team members perceive the functionality of their team sheds light on effectiveness and performance. According to Lencioni (2002), author of *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*, a highly functional team recognizes the possibility of failure and is willing to embrace common sense principles with exceptional levels of discipline and persistence. With that in mind, Lencioni (2002) stated, “By acknowledging the imperfections of their own humanity, members of functional teams overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and a focus on results so elusive” (p. 220). Many teams fail to recognize dysfunction within their team (Lencioni, 2002). In the next few paragraphs, you will explore how two Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) teams perceived the functionality of their team and consider and discuss thought provoking questions.

Background

NRCS is the principal federal agency that works with landowners to help them conserve, maintain, and improve their natural resources, and their motto is “helping people help the land” (NRCS South Carolina, n.d., About Us section). The culture of NRCS is the superglue that binds and unites the organization. This culture embodies wisdom accumulated from years of experience, and is renewed and re-created as new employees learn, adapt, and become teachers themselves (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This shared culture is the passion each employee possesses to help sustain our nation’s natural resources. NRCS’s purpose as an organization is defined by the values and culture reflected through the services it delivers, such as providing landowners and producers opportunities to maintain their natural resources while improving their overall operation (Natural Resources Conservation Service South Carolina, n.d., About Us section).

In order for NRCS to provide a high level of service to its customers, each NRCS office would do well to understand their susceptibility to Lencioni’s (2002) five dysfunctions of a team. According to Lencioni (2002), absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results are five dysfunctions that effect team effectiveness. This case study provides an opportunity to examine team dynamics as it provides real-world examples of applied leadership research.

Essentially, absence of trust stems from the unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. In the context of building a team, trust is the confidence among team members that their peers’ intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be defensive or careful

around the group (Lencioni, 2002). Furthermore, teammates must become comfortable being vulnerable with one another in order to build a foundation of trust (Lencioni, 2002).

Many teams avoid conflict in the name of efficiency, but healthy conflict is a time saver (Lencioni, 2002). It is vital for each team member to acknowledge that conflict is productive and can be healthy (Lencioni, 2002). “By engaging in productive conflict and tapping into team members’ perspectives and opinions, a team can confidently commit and buy in to a decision knowing that they have benefited from everyone’s ideas” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 207).

Lack of commitment consists of clarity and buy-in (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni (2002) stated, “great teams make clear and timely decisions and move forward with complete buy-in from every member of the team, even those who voted against the decision” (p. 207). Consensus and the need for certainty are the two greatest causes for lack of commitment (Lencioni, 2002). Highly functional teams understand the danger of seeking consensus, and determine ways to achieve buy-in even when complete agreement is impossible (Lencioni, 2002).

Lencioni (2002) described accountability “as the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team” (p. 212). Teams who are particularly close to one another often hesitate to hold each other accountable because of the fear of endangering a personal relationship (Lencioni, 2002). In addition, this can cause relationships to deteriorate due to resentment for being unable to meet expectations and for allowing the standards of the team to erode (Lencioni, 2002). Members of highly functional teams improve their relationships by holding one another

accountable, demonstrating respect, and high expectations for one another's performance (Lencioni, 2002).

Inattention to results is the fifth dysfunction. "The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 216). Whether a team is too focused on prestige and notoriety or members lack the vigor to put forth their best effort, a willingness to reach set goals is imperative. "A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals" (Lencioni, 2002, pp. 217-218).

With these dysfunctions in mind, NRCS offices in two counties were given the opportunity to participate in a study to evaluate dysfunction within their team. Each office is located in a rural community where agriculture plays a major role in their economies, and many private landowners and farmers are located in these communities. NRCS plays a major role in providing technical and financial assistance for these landowners and producers. Five employees from NRCS Office One and four employees from NRCS Office Two completed a dysfunction assessment and a brief description of each employee is below.

Meet the NRCS Employees

Gary is a 39 year old white male who has worked for NRCS for 10 years. He is the District Conservationist for NRCS Office One. His job responsibilities include: (a) managing office employees, (b) program management, (c) contract management, and (d) making sure all deadlines are met. Gary's job is much more stressful than any other

employee's job in the office, because he is ultimately responsible for the overall functionality of the office. Gary feels improvements need to be made concerning the five dysfunctions. He is slightly disgruntled from the lack of cohesiveness of the team which resulted in his scores being lower than the other team members.

Dustin is a 61 year old white male who has 41 years of experience working with NRCS. He is a soil conservationist for NRCS Office One. His job responsibilities include: (a) meeting with landowners and producers to provide technical assistance regarding conservation, (b) conducting field surveys for erosion control structures, and (c) writing contracts based on field surveys. Dustin is very friendly and willing to help team members, but he lacks technology skills and knowledge. This hinders him from being as effective as he should be. As a result of his lack of technological skills, design work must be completed by Dave. This increases Dave's workload and also causes some resentment toward Dustin.

Dave is a 46 year old white male who has worked with NRCS for 20 years. He is a conservation technician for NRCS Office One. His job requirements include: (a) survey and design work, (b) overseeing structural implementation, and (c) writing conservation plans. Dave is technically savvy and has extensive knowledge in conservation planning and farming. He has a strong work ethic and other members of the team depend greatly on his knowledge and expertise. Dave feels overwhelmed at times because he has a large workload. He feels that he is being taken advantage of because of his knowledge and experience. Dave also feels he should be paid more because of his productivity.

Lance is a 23 year old white male who has worked with NRCS for 1 year. He is also a conservation technician who has the same job responsibilities as Dave. Lance has a good work ethic and is eager to learn. Lance lacks experience, but he often works alongside Dave to improve his knowledge and skills.

April is a 39 year old white female who has worked with NRCS for 13 years. She is the secretary for NRCS Office One. Her job responsibilities include: (a) answering phone calls, (b) filing folders, (c) logging drill rentals, and (c) recording the minutes at district board meetings. April does not put forth much effort at completing daily tasks. The other team members feel that she should no longer be employed, because she contributes very little to the team.

Austin is a 60 year old white male who has worked with NRCS for 25 years. He is the District Conservationist is NRCS Office Two. His job responsibilities include: (a) managing office employees, (b) program management, (c) contract management, and (d) making sure deadlines are met. Austin's job is very stressful. He has a tremendous workload and feels that he is understaffed. He highly regards members of the team, but feels hiring one soil conservationist would greatly increase productivity. Austin is very nice and charismatic but fails to involve team members in completing projects. He tries to handle too much of the workload by himself, which hinders productivity. He does not like to delegate and feels it's his responsibility as the District Conservationist to make sure things are done correctly. Team members are willing to do more, but are often not given the opportunity.

Rob is a 58 year old white male who has worked with NRCS for 28 years. He is a conservation technician for NRCS Office Two. His job responsibilities include: (a) survey and design work, (b) overseeing structural implementation, and (c) completing construction check-outs. He is very experienced and works extremely hard. He is willing to do more, but Austin insists he focus on doing excellent work in the field. Rob sometimes wonders if Austin does not have confidence in him to take on more responsibility.

Eric is a 26 year old white male who has worked with NRCS for 4 years. He is also a conservation technician for NRCS Office Two. He has the same job responsibilities as Rob. He is very assertive and knowledgeable. He has a great work ethic and wants more responsibility. Eric's persistence in asking Austin for more responsibility frustrates Austin at times, but he does allow him to work on new projects from time to time. This bothers Rob and makes him feel as if Austin has more confidence in Eric's abilities.

Destiny is a 38 year old white female who has worked with NRCS for 3 years. She is the secretary for NRCS Office Two. Her job responsibilities include: (a) answering phone calls, (b) filing folders, (c) logging drill rentals, and (d) recording the minutes at district board meetings. Destiny completes daily tasks and provides assistance to all members of the team. She is considerate and willing to take on new responsibilities.

All employees from each office completed Lencioni's (2002) *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* online. The mean score for NRCS Office One indicated all

five dysfunctions could be a problem. Gary's scores were particularly low compared to the rest of the team's scores. Absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and avoidance of accountability were all identified as needing to be addressed. His score for inattention to results indicated the dysfunction could be a problem. Dustin's scores indicated absence of trust, lack of commitment, and inattention to results was not a problem, while fear of conflict and avoidance of accountability could be a problem. Dave's scores indicated absence of trust, fear of conflict, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results could be a problem, while lack of commitment was not a problem. Lance's scores indicated absence of trust, fear of conflict, and lack of commitment was not a problem, while avoidance of accountability and inattention to results could be a problem. April's scores indicated absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and avoidance of accountability was not a problem, while inattention to results could be a problem.

The mean score for NRCS Office Two indicated all dysfunctions were not a problem except avoidance of accountability. The mean score for avoidance of accountability indicated that the dysfunction could be a problem. Austin's scores indicated absence of trust and lack of commitment were not a problem, while fear of conflict, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results could be a problem. Rob's scores indicated absence of trust and fear of conflict could be a problem, while lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results were not a problem. Eric's scores indicated all dysfunctions were not a problem. Destiny's scores

indicated absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and inattention to results were not a problem, while avoidance of accountability could be a problem.

Questions

1. For each office, which dysfunctions do you believe are an issue? Explain your answer.
2. If you were a supervisor, how would you address the dysfunctions identified in the previous question?
3. How do teams build trust (Lencioni, 2002)?
4. How are teams able to mature and develop the ability and willingness to engage in healthy conflict (Lencioni, 2002)?
5. How can a team ensure commitment (Lencioni, 2002)?
6. What are ways team members can hold each other accountable (Lencioni, 2002)?
7. How do teams ensure their attention and effort is focused on results (Lencioni, 2002)?
8. If you were the supervisor and as a last resort you must replace one employee, who would you fire and replace?

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 1 provided an overview of team effectiveness. Chapter 2 detailed the theoretical foundation for this study and provided literature relevant to Lencioni's (2002) Five Dysfunctions of a Team. Chapter 3 described the methodology used to conduct the study. Chapter 4 discussed the scores of each employee and NRCS office pertaining to Lencioni's (2002) *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire*. This chapter discusses conclusions and makes recommendations based on the findings.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to examine team dynamics within two NRCS offices as a proactive means to improve team effectiveness and produce a team effectiveness case study for leadership educators and students. According to Lencioni (2002), absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results are five dysfunctions that effect team effectiveness. Teams fail to achieve a high level of teamwork because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls, which are the five dysfunctions of a team (Lencioni, 2002). In order for teams to produce at an optimum level, dysfunction must be identified. This study examined each employees' score on Lencioni's (2002) *Team Dysfunction Assessment Questionnaire* in order to recognize which dysfunction was not a problem, could be a problem, or which dysfunction needs to be addressed within each team.

The overall scores for NRCS Office One indicated all five dysfunctions could be a problem. Participant five's scores were generally lower than the other four participants'

scores, and this contributed to all five dysfunctions being identified as could be a problem. Thus, the scores reveal NRCS Office One is not functioning as effectively as it could.

In regard to NRCS Office Two, dysfunction scores indicated four of the five dysfunctions were not a problem. Scores for avoidance of accountability suggested the dysfunction could be a problem. NRCS Office Two's scores indicated less overall dysfunction and a higher level of cohesiveness as compared to NRCS Office One.

More specifically, NRCS Office One's scores indicated a lack of trust could be a problem. Lencioni (2002) identified trust as the foundation and heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Glunk et al. (2006) suggested low deteriorating levels of trust amplifies the levels of task and relationship conflict, thus inhibiting teams from functioning at a high level.

NRCS Office One's scores also indicated fear of conflict could be a problem. Ilgen and Kozlowski (2006) suggested conflict contributes positively to team performance. Also, Ilgen and Kozlowski (2006) purported conflict enhances team innovation and creativity, which leads to increased team performance. Lencioni (2002) stated all great relationships that last over time require productive conflict in order to grow.

Lack of commitment was indicated as possibly being a problem for NRCS Office One as well. Research completed by Aube and Rousseau (2005) suggested team goal commitment effects team performance, the quality of group experience, and team viability. Team members who are committed to team goals will likely realize they are

collectively accountable for achieving those goals, thus inducing a shared vision and culture within the team (McGrath, 1991). The more team members are committed to their assigned team goals, the more they will be willing to take measures to reach those goals, and therefore increasing team performance (Aube & Rousseau, 2005).

NRCS Office One's scores indicated the dysfunction avoidance of accountability could be a problem. Lack of respect, lack of inclusion in decision making, and lack of communication among team members all contribute to unsuccessful teams (Luca & Tarricone, 2002). Members of highly functional teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, demonstrating respect, and high expectations for one another's performance (Lencioni, 2002). As a result of maintaining respect and expectations among peers, fear of letting down teammates will motivate team members to improve their performance (Lencioni, 2002).

NRCS Office One's scores also reflected inattention to results could be a problem. If team members lose sight of the overall goal of the team and the need for achievement, the team ultimately suffers (De Meuse, 2009). Team members naturally have a tendency to put their own needs such as ego, career development, and recognition ahead of the team's collective goals (De Meuse, 2009). "A functional team must make the collective results of the group more important to each individual than individual members' goals" (Lencioni, 2002, pp. 217-218).

Scores for both offices indicated the dysfunction avoidance of accountability could be a problem. Luca and Tarricone (2002) stated successful teams accept individual accountability, personal responsibility, and experiment with ways to work more

effectively. Many team members are unwilling to tolerate the personal discomfort associated with confronting a peer about his or her behavior (Lencioni, 2002). Teams who are particularly close to one another often hesitate to hold each other accountable because of the fear of endangering a personal relationship (Lencioni, 2002).

Recommendations

Each NRCS Office's scores reflected improvements could be made to improve team effectiveness. Lencioni (2002) suggested teams should identify and discuss opportunities and improvements within before diving into each dysfunction and exploring ways to overcome them. Several characteristics or pitfalls commonly emerge as teams fall victim to the five dysfunctions. Suggestions for helping each team overcome these dysfunctions will now be discussed.

Pertaining to absence of trust, employees of NRCS Office One should admit weaknesses and mistakes (Lencioni, 2002). Concealing weaknesses and mistakes from one another will only deteriorate the level of trust among team members (Glunk et al., 2006). Employees should not be afraid to ask for help or take risks in offering feedback and assistance (Lencioni, 2002). Hesitating to ask for help or provide constructive feedback will also aid in the deterioration of trust (Lencioni, 2002). Jumping to conclusions about team members' intentions without attempting to discuss or clarify assists in the breaking down of trust (Lencioni, 2002). Team members should "give one another the benefit of the doubt before arriving at negative conclusions" (Lencioni, 2002, p. 197). Team members should not hold grudges; instead they should offer and accept apologies without reluctance (Lencioni, 2002). Spending time together as a group is very

beneficial for attaining trust to build relationships and communicate more openly. Group time also allows team members to become comfortable being vulnerable, which encourages the building of trust (Lencioni, 2002). For several decades, psychologists have suggested mutual trust and open communication are the foundation for successful relationships among team members (De Meuse, 2007). Lencioni (2002) suggested teams should take a focused approach by completed a *Team Effectiveness Exercise* to accelerate the process of building trust. This exercise does involve some risk.

It requires team members to identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team, as well as the one area that they must either improve upon or eliminate for the good of the team (Lencioni, 2002, p. 198).

All team members must report their responses, focusing on one team member at a time. Very constructive and positive information can be extracted in approximately one hour (Lencioni, 2002).

Concerning fear of conflict, employees of NRCS Office One should acknowledge conflict is productive and shouldn't be avoided (Lencioni, 2002). Complete buy-in from all team members is important (Lencioni, 2002). Teams who embrace conflict as a means to increase creativity and productivity have lively, interesting meetings where all ideas and opinions are considered (Lencioni, 2002). Instead of ignoring controversial topics that are critical to team success, topics should be put on the table for open discussion and problems should be solved quickly without hesitation (Lencioni, 2002). *Mining* may be useful during team meetings (Lencioni, 2002). Team members who tend

to avoid conflict should accept the responsibility of “miner of conflict” (Lencioni, 2002). The minor will extract buried issues or disagreements that have never been resolved in an attempt to force team members to work through and fix sensitive issues (Lencioni, 2002).

Regarding the dysfunction lack of commitment, NRCS Office One must take specific steps to maximize clarity and buy-in (Lencioni, 2002). Clarity must be created around specific direction, priorities, and goals (Lencioni, 2002). The entire team must align common objectives and take advantage of opportunities as soon as they arise (Lencioni, 2002). Excessive analysis and unnecessary delay breeds a lack of confidence and fear of failure (Lencioni, 2002). Team members should be willing to move forward after decisions are made without hesitation (Lencioni, 2002). A simple way to ensure commitment is the use of deadlines (Lencioni, 2002). Deadlines should be set for when decisions should be made, and those dates should be honored with discipline and rigidity (Lencioni, 2002). Committing to deadlines for intermediate decisions along the course of the year is just as important as meeting final deadlines (Lencioni, 2002). This is important for ensuring that misalignment among team members is identified and addressed before costs are too excessive (Lencioni, 2002).

Concerning inattention to results, NRCS Office One must make results clear and reward only those behaviors and actions that contribute to those results (Lencioni, 2002). Team members should be willing to put their individual goals or interests away for the overall good of the team (Lencioni, 2002). Team members should also avoid distractions and focus on achieving the goals of the team (Lencioni, 2002). Results based rewards is

an effective way to ensure team members focus on reaching team goals and achieving specific outcomes. (Lencioni, 2002).

Pertaining to avoidance of accountability, NRCS Office One and NRCS Office Two must be willing to call out team members and hold each other accountable for their actions (Lencioni, 2002). Peer pressure is an important tool to ensure that poor performers feel the need to improve (Lencioni, 2002). Peer pressure can be greater than any policy, system, or bureaucratic management tool (Lencioni, 2002). Lencioni (2002) stated “there is nothing like the fear of letting down respected teammates that motivates people to improve their performance” (p. 213). Teams can hold each other accountable by avoiding excessive bureaucracy regarding performance management and corrective action by establishing the same high standard for all team members to follow (Lencioni, 2002). This can be achieved by making a publication of goals and standards (Lencioni, 2002). The document should clarify exactly what the team needs to achieve, responsibilities of each team member, and how everyone must behave in order to succeed (Lencioni, 2002). The use of team rewards is another way to create a culture of accountability (Lencioni, 2002).

By shifting rewards away from individual performance to team achievement, the team can create a culture of accountability. This occurs because a team is unlikely to stand by quietly and fail because a peer is not pulling his or her weight (Lencioni, 2002, p. 215).

Based upon the findings of this study, the following recommendations for future research were made:

1. After results are shared with each office, a follow-up study should be conducted to determine if the dysfunctions are continuing to persist, and what techniques and team exercises were effective or not effective when seeking to correct the dysfunctions.
2. Future research should determine if the case study is an effective exercise in helping undergraduate students acquire the skills and dispositions needed to be better team members and leaders.
3. A study on leadership styles should be conducted to determine how different leadership styles effect team dynamics.
4. Further research should be conducted to evaluate team leader fit and motivational influences. This research will seek to evaluate how leaders can use motivation to improve team effectiveness.

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Appendix

Table 1 NRCS Office One's Team Dysfunction Assessment

Participant	Absence of Trust	Fear of Conflict	Lack of Commitment	Avoidance of Accountability	Inattention to Results
1	8	8	9	8	7
2	8	9	9	6	7
3	8	6	8	7	8
4	6	7	8	6	6
5	4	5	4	3	7

Table 2 NRCS Office Two's Team Dysfunction Assessment

Participant	Absence of Trust	Fear of Conflict	Lack of Commitment	Avoidance of Accountability	Inattention to Results
1	9	9	8	7	9
2	7	7	8	9	9
3	9	9	9	8	8
4	8	7	8	6	7

Approval Letter

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE 
KNOXVILLE
Office of Research & Engagement
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

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August 18, 2015

Norman E Pipkin
UTIA - RES-College of Agriculture & Natural Resources

Re: UTK IRB-15-02448-XP

Study Title: Identifying Team Dysfunctions and Leadership Styles within the NRCS Office in Lauderdale and Tipton Counties

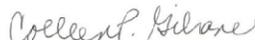
Dear Mr. Pipkin:

The Administrative Section of the UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your **application** for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for **expedited** review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), category (6). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application version 1.0 as submitted. Approval of this study will be valid from August 18, 2015 to August 17, 2016.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, **re-approval** of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,



Colleen P. Gilrane, PhD
Chair
UTK Institutional Review Board

Vita

Ethan Pipkin was born January 15, 1989. He grew up in Jackson, Tennessee. He grew up hunting, fishing, and enjoying the outdoors. He attended Jackson State Community College where he received a degree in agriculture with a focus in plant and soil science. He then attended Middle Tennessee State University where he received a degree in plant and soil science with a minor in business administration. Ethan began his career in Lauderdale County, Tennessee where he worked as a county technician alongside employees from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. He enrolled at the University of Tennessee in the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication program. Ethan now works for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) as a Soil Conservationist in Carroll County, Tennessee. After completion of his program, Ethan will seek to continue his career with NRCS.