

The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business **By Patrick Lencioni**

Jossey-Bass, 2012. 216 pp.

Reviewed by David W. Gill

www.ethixbiz.com

Patrick Lencioni is founder and president of The Table Group, a management consulting firm based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is the author of nine little books with over three million copies sold. His *Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and other books provide insightful lessons on leadership and management built around modern fables he creates. Simple without being simplistic, Lencioni is one of our wisest and best business thinkers today.

The Advantage is Lencioni's first "straight ahead" management book that doesn't require going through a fable first (thank you for that!). Lencioni begins: "The single greatest advantage any company can achieve is organizational health. Yet it is ignored by most leaders even though it is simple, free, and available to anyone who wants it" (p. 1). Leaders ignore this because it seems unsophisticated, it goes against the urge to accelerate, and it seems soft and unquantifiable.

"At its core, organizational health is about integrity." "An organization has *integrity* --- is healthy --- when it is whole, consistent, and complete, that is, when its management, operations, strategy, and culture fit together and make sense" (p. 5). "Healthy" is not just about being smart or skilled but about high morale, minimal politics, minimal confusion, and low turnover. Healthy organizations will bring out the best in their employees; unhealthy organizations will suppress, distract, and undermine talent. Lencioni believes the path to organizational health requires four disciplines.

The first discipline is to "Build a Cohesive Leadership Team" --- a group of three to twelve people who proactively build trust and open, honest communication. They learn how to advocate vigorously but also to critique and be critiqued by others. Out of no-holds-barred discussions they emerge as a unified team, committed to a clear agenda and results, and embracing mutual accountability and responsibility. Having a culture of openness, diversity, conflict, and trust is critical to a strong leadership team. Hidden agendas and fear of confrontation or disagreement with each other are recipes for distrust and ill health.

The second discipline is to "Create Clarity." Lencioni identifies six questions that must be clearly answered: (1) Why do we exist? (mission and purpose), (2) How do we behave (our core values), (3) What do we do? (our business practices), (4) How will we succeed?, (5) What is top priority right now?, and (6) Who does what? (roles and responsibilities). It's about clarity and *alignment*. I think Lencioni has the six questions right and has some good insights on all six topics. These do get to the heart of organizational health. But I don't think his approaches to the first two topics (purpose/mission and core values) --- in themselves and in the relationship between the two --- are as sharp or strong as they could be. I can't take the space for a point by point analysis here but would point to my own alternatives described in my *It's About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations* (2011).

For Lencioni, the third discipline is to "Overcommunicate Clarity" and the fourth is to "Reinforce Clarity." These sections are about effectively educating the organization on the answers to the six questions of the "Create Clarity" chapter. Lencioni's points about constant, creative, effective communication and having policies and structures (eg compensation) that exhibit and reinforce the core values are all good. But these latter chapters lack practical suggestions and read as though the author ran out of gas after presenting the vigorous discussions of the first two disciplines. The closing pages on having great meetings brought me back awake fully. Excellent advice.

I find it personally encouraging that author Lencioni always expresses gratitude to God and shows his active Catholic Christian piety with a few humble words. He is a force for good and a wise counselor. But for the reasons indicated, this best-seller only gets a grade of "B."