

Linking  
People  
To Strategy

*How Lencioni and the AEM-Cube®  
support strategic team development.*

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Leaders and management teams are often struggling with the following questions:

“How can we build a strong and cohesive **team culture**?”

“Which **team dynamics** will support my organisation’s strategic challenge of growth?”

“How can we start building **trust** in our team?”

“Our organisation needs to solve problems faster. What causes my team not to reach its **full potential**?”

Senior leaders and team leaders cope with a lot of challenges. A McKinsey’s survey article in 2010 describes how many leaders lack the skills needed to deal with the dynamics which undermine organisational performance and team performance. (1)

In 2011, our business partners Paul Van Geyt and Filip Fiers set up a process-oriented and tailor-made team approach. It combined the insights from the organisational strategy with a practical methodology that made its way at that time in the US.

(1) McKinsey Quarterly, *How centered leaders achieve extraordinary results*, 2010, McKinsey & Company



Patrick Lencioni explains this practical methodology in his *New-York Times* best-seller book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. In his book, the author states that in the age of informational ubiquity and nanosecond change, teamwork remains the one sustainable competitive advantage that has been mostly untapped. Lencioni, an international management consultant, identifies several behaviours that could compromise strong team cohesion. He calls them the five dysfunctions of a team.

### Dysfunction #1: Absence of Trust

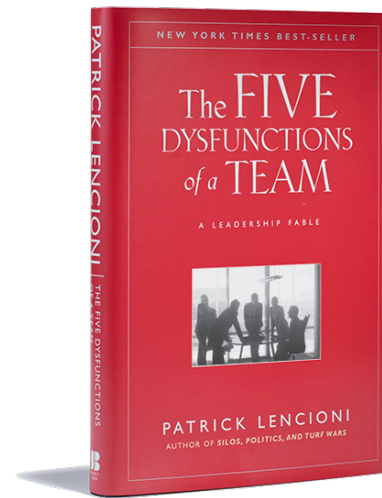
This occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are thus unwilling to admit their mistakes, acknowledge their weaknesses or ask for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible. So teamwork starts with building trust and with a team leader being vulnerable enough to share his challenges and limitations. In her book *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson offers a step-by-step framework for establishing psychological safety within a team and organisation.

### Dysfunction #2: Fear of Conflict

Trust and psychological safety are critical because, without it, teams are unlikely to engage in an unfiltered, passionate debate about critical issues. This creates two problems.

1. Stifling conflict increases the likelihood of negative, backchannel sniping.
2. It leads to sub-optimal decision-making because the team is not benefiting from the original ideas and perspectives of all its members.

Psychological safety allows team members to speak the truth without being afraid to cause embarrassment or excessive personal risk.



### Dysfunction #3: Lack of Commitment

Without conflict, it is extremely difficult for team members to truly commit to decisions because they do not feel that they are part of the decision. The lack of clarity or buy-in often creates an environment of ambiguity and confusion in an organisation and leads to team members not sticking to decisions. And as a consequence, it also leads to frustration among employees, especially top performers.

### Dysfunction #4: Avoidance of Accountability

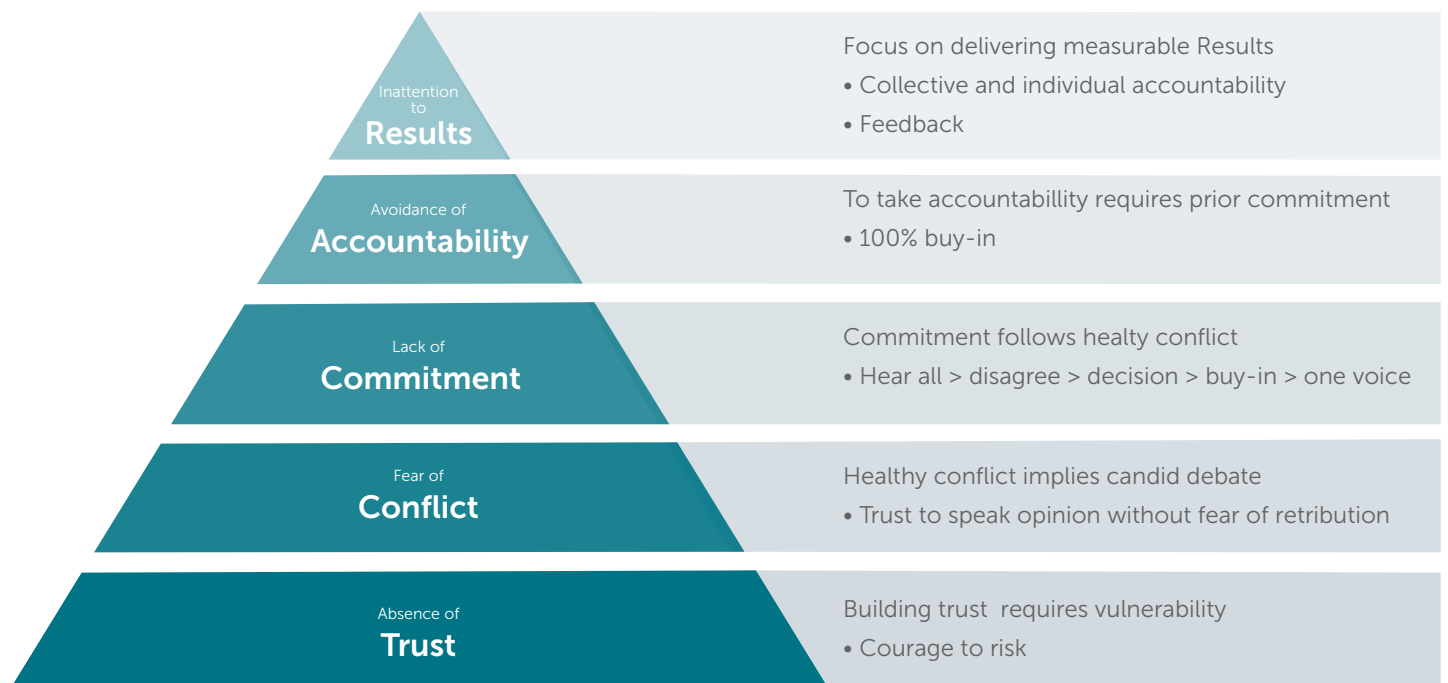
When teams do not commit to a clear plan of action, peer-to-peer accountability suffers greatly. Even the most focused and driven individuals will hesitate to call their peers on counterproductive actions and behaviours if they believe those actions and behaviours were never agreed upon in the first place. Teams need to start having uncomfortable discussions early and consistently. The need to avoid personal discomfort prevents team members from holding each other to account.



## Dysfunction #5: Inattention to Results

When team members are not holding one another accountable, they increase the likelihood that individual ego and recognition will become more important than collective team results. When this occurs, the business suffers, and the team starts to unravel. The drive to achieve individual goals over the team goals diminishes the team's ability to succeed in their strategic challenge.

Lencioni states that working on team cohesion is not difficult. For him, it is a choice the team and the team leader have to make, and it takes discipline and courage to work on.

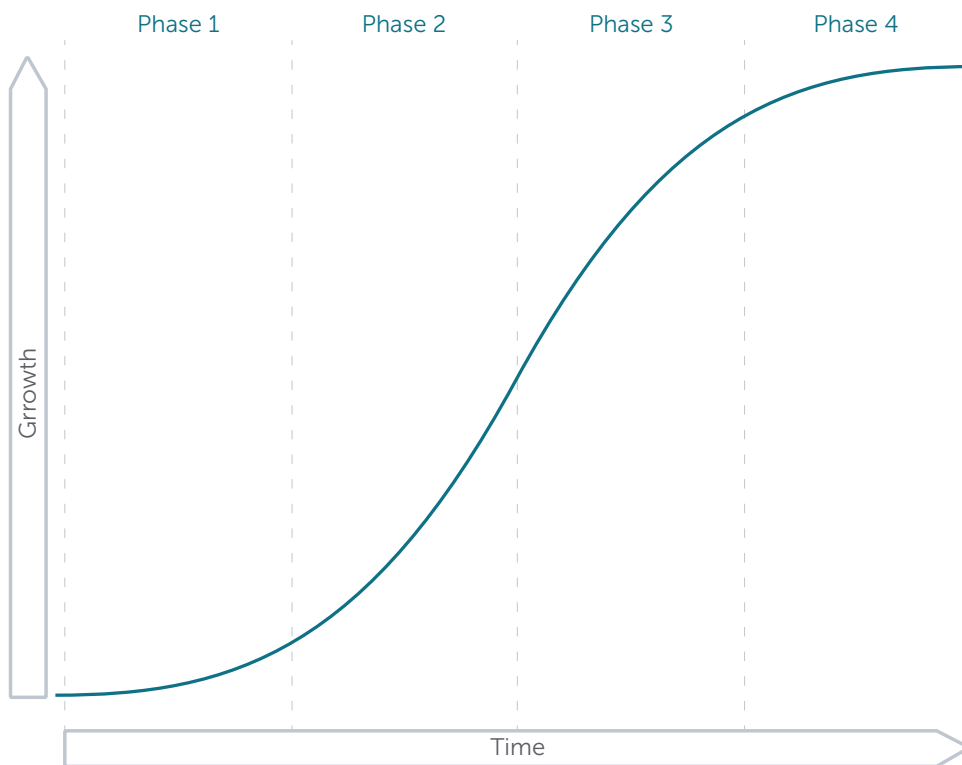


## Jumping the Curve

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As a next step, Paul and Filip combined the practical methodology from the Lencioni framework with insights from organisational strategy. A key component in this is the understanding of the Growth-Curve of an organisation.

The Growth-Curve is a highly simplified model that visualises the life cycle of a complex system, such as any organisation you will ever encounter. For every organisation, that cycle follows a similar pattern.



### 1. First Phase

Any kind of idea can be the initial spark to establish an organisation and kicking off the first phase of its Growth-Curve. At the start, there is always a time of substantial investment. This means slow growth at first, and that a lot of investing in time, energy and money is going into this new initiative.

### 2. Second Phase

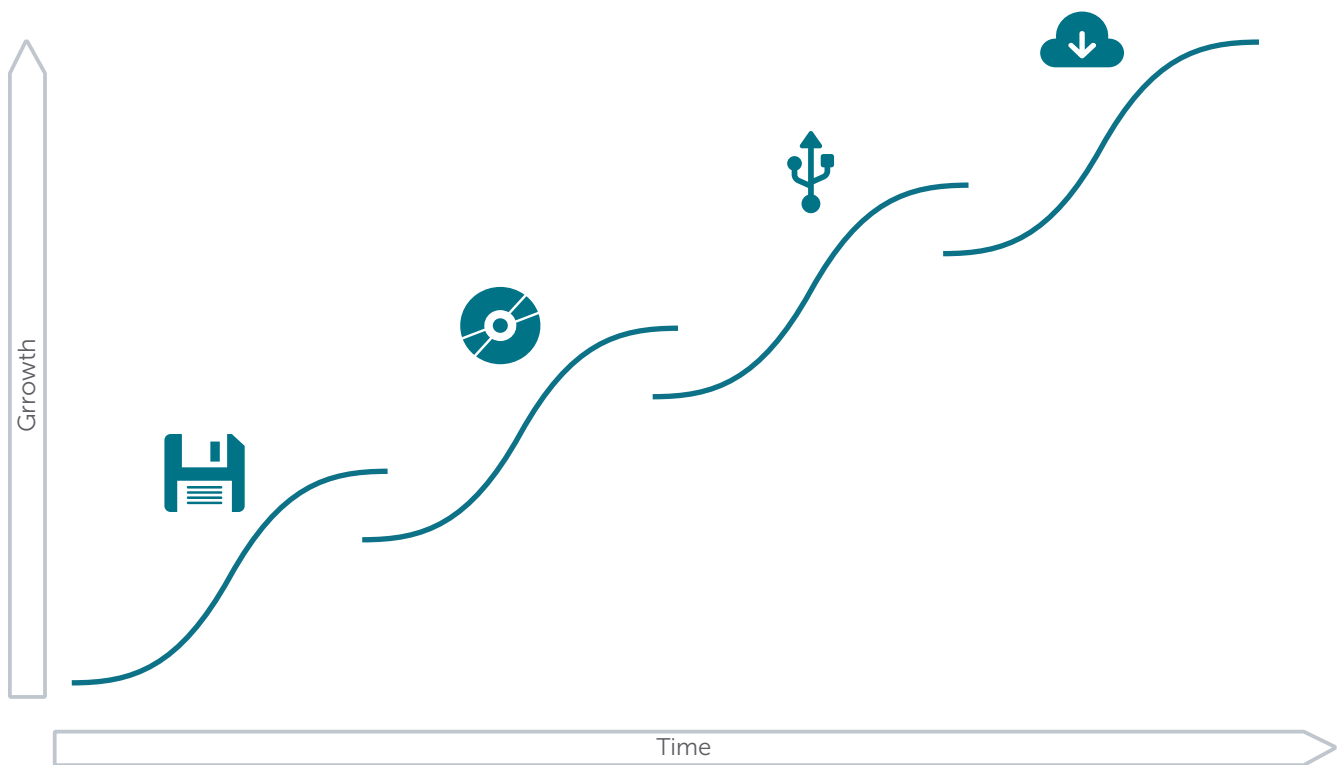
When the initial phase finishes, the organisation will start generating revenue, and it will begin to grow into the second phase. It will have to because the customer base will begin to increase. So more employees will need to be attracted to service all these people for the organisation to grow.

### 3. Third Phase

During the third phase, revenues will grow, and the organisation will scale up rapidly. During this scaling-up phase, profits will keep increasing as efficiency is increasing, investments will go down since most of the investments are made in the earlier stages.

### 4. Fourth Phase

Eventually, the fourth phase will be reached where profits are maximised, where investments are at an absolute minimum and where all the energy and attention is focused on maintaining this successful status quo.



## 5. Jumping the Curve

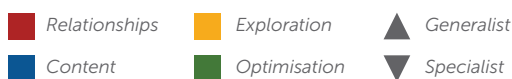
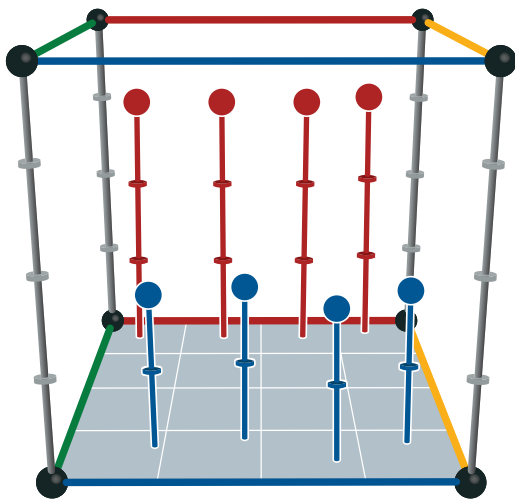
To prevent the dangers inherent to the fourth phase, the organisation will have to be able to reinvent itself. It must be ready to "jump the Growth-Curve", moving from the current Growth-Curve to the next one, where they reinvent themselves, and this entire lifecycle starts anew.



## Strategic and cognitive diversity

Now one thing that the research from Human Insight has pointed out is that we as people have a firm preference and tendency to contribute to a specific area along this Growth-Curve.

So, when leaders want to unlock the organisation's strategic potential, they need to be able to identify the positive and optimal contribution of each team member. Additionally, they need to understand the value of the strategic and cognitive diversity of their team concerning the strategic challenges.

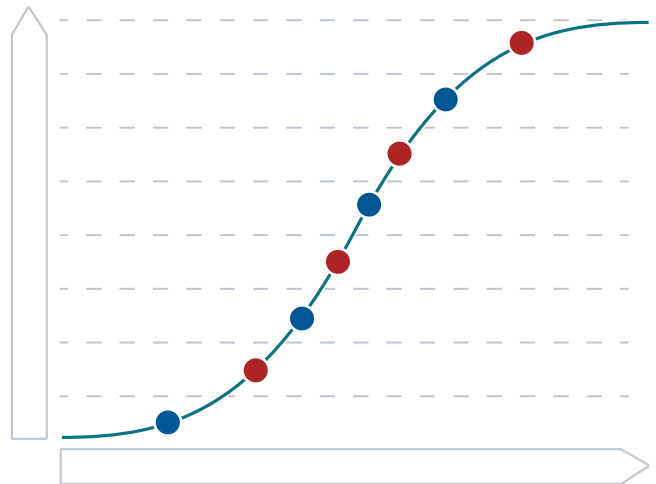


Knowing the concepts of the Growth-Curve provides a fundamental basis for understanding the different strategic phases within teams and organisations and how different individuals can optimally contribute to these different phases.

The AEM-Cube is a strategic assessment tool which consists of three different dimensions: the Attachment dimension ranging from content to relationships, the Exploration dimension, ranging from exploratory to optimising and the Managing Complexity dimension ranging from specialist to generalist

The AEM-Cube looks at team diversity and dynamics. As such, it is invaluable to develop a cohesive team able to cope with the strategic challenges.

Paul refers here to the article from Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, "Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse" which appeared in 2017 in the Harvard Business Review. What did their research reveal? Teams with little strategic and cognitive diversity when faced with new uncertain and complex situations, will have limited ability to see things differently, engage in different ways (e.g., experiment versus analysing), or create new options.



This lack of diversity has two impacts:

1. First, it reduces the opportunity to strengthen the proposition with input from people who think differently.
2. Second, it fails to represent the cognitive diversity of the employee population, reducing the impact of the initiatives.



## The right people in the right seats

When Paul and Filip start a new project with a team, their first step is to have several intensive conversations with the team leader. When a team leader is not able to be vulnerable or has not yet created psychological safety within the team, the process is not going to be a success.

The next step will be a series of successive team encounters. At the beginning of the team development process, we start using both the Lencioni questionnaire and the AEM-Cube.

The results from the Lencioni questionnaire give a good insight in the areas of team development that the team needs to address first. And the AEM-Cube shows the team's cognitive and strategic diversity. It highlights all the critical team dynamics that contribute to or impede the accomplishment of the strategic goals.

Insight into each team member's optimal contribution to strategy and to change is an essential part of building trust. The Human Insight book *'Team Dynamics'* builds on the knowledge of the AEM-Cube. The book highlights themes like working together, communication, delivering results, and managing conflicts. And this matches with the first two dysfunctions of Lencioni.

After the first two off-site meetings, the team can start to find answers to the following questions:

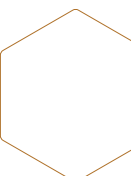
- What are the contributions of each team member to strategy and to change?
- What kind of behaviours are involved?
- And how does the team contribute to the organisation's strategic goals?

When answering these questions with the insights from the AEM-Cube, the team is given the opportunity to show understanding for each other's contributions, and start a discussion of what the next strategic step will be, and if the team has the right people on board?

People are pleasantly surprised to recognise themselves in an AEM-Cube profile, and they specifically like to see how they contribute optimally to the growth of the company:

- It is an eye-opener for people to know how they contribute optimally;
- How important strategic diversity is;
- And how to connect people to the strategic challenges.

In Paul's experience, the AEM-Cube highly facilitates the process of team cohesion.



## 85% success rate

Paul and Filip have coached over 120 teams. More than 85% of those teams scored better results on the Lencioni follow-up questionnaire after nine months.

Paul emphasises that the added value of using the AEM-Cube alongside Lencioni is linking people to strategy. Linking people to strategy is one of the key performance indicators that management teams look for in their dialogue of executing strategy. Framing the soft side of leadership and people in a strategic context is what makes the combination of Lencioni with AEM-Cube so powerful.

Would you like to know how to do this as well? Contact Paul and plan in a virtual cup of coffee to see how he might help your leadership team move forward.



### Paul Van Geyt

Paul Van Geyt is a business partner for Human Insight. He is an ICF Master Certified Coach with +3000 hours of experience coaching leaders and high potential individuals, helping them to unlock their true potential and develop strong leadership skills. "Making a positive difference" is his mission statement. While coaching leaders and high potential individuals, Paul uses Lencioni's framework about team cohesion in combination with Human Insights AEM-Cube®.

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### Filip Fiers

Filip Fiers is a business partner for Human Insight. He is an ICF Professional Certified Coach. Over the past ten years, Filip focused on coaching managers with the primary objective to further shape their leadership skills, and on team coaching. Creating a culture of openness and collaboration in teams is his passion. While coaching leaders and high potential individuals, Filip uses Lencioni's framework about team cohesion in combination with Human Insights AEM-Cube®.

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