

Episode Intro:

The best way to measure if a team is dysfunctional is at the end of a meeting, do you feel invigorated or do you feel depleted?

Welcome to the Art of Accomplishment where we explore how deepening connection with ourselves and others leads to creating the life we want with enjoyment and ease. I am Brett Kistler, here today with my co-host, Joe Hudson.

Brett: Last week we talked about what makes a functional team and how to build a functional team. Today, let's do a little bit of the opposite. Let's talk about how to build the most dysfunctional team you possibly can.

Joe: That sounds fun. Just to start off, there is this great. Maybe we can put in the show notes. I don't know how much we will talk on this, but there is this great thing the CIA put out. I had somebody in the CIA actually verify it, so I know it is apparently true. But I think they put it out in the 40s or the 50s or something like that. It was how to go into an organization and make it dysfunctional because they were trying to plant people inside of key organizations of what was considered an enemy at the time and make it dysfunctional. It is a great document because when you see it, you see so many organizations are run the way they tell you to corrupt an organization. Really cool stuff.

Brett: What were some of the characteristics of how they would do that?

Joe: Defer decision making, defer decision making to groups, make sure the groups that you are deferring the decision making to are over six, always try to get everything in the hands of a committee, take away the autonomy of people who know the work. Stuff like that.

Brett: That sounds about right.

Joe: Exactly. Oftentimes when I am working with an executive for the first time, one of the first questions I will ask them is how many directory ports they have. If they have over five, it is a red flag. If they have over eight, I just know there is no functionality happening or not a great deal of functionality happening in that

organization. To have that many directory ports, you can't make a decision, or it is incredibly hard to make a decision.

Brett: The committee thing sounds like a nonprofits and government.

Joe: Yes, that happens in a lot of governments and nonprofits, but it also happens way more in for profit companies than you can imagine.

Brett: This is how the CIA would make a dysfunctional team. How would Joe make a dysfunctional team?

Joe: Yeah, I might have some things to add there. Before I even begin, I want to tell you a story because I think what happens with people is it is a very binary thought process. I have a functional team, or I have a dysfunctional team. People don't even think about teamwork unless it is like an extreme pain point.

I will give you an example of this. I recently worked with some chapter of the Young Presidents Organization or some form. I don't know all their technical terms. I asked them all before I arrived what this group needs to go to the next level. It was a group of eight, and these guys were CEOs of companies that are probably market cap between \$200-300 million to \$2-3 billion dollars, so it is that size of a company. Almost all of them answered with some version of nothing. We are good. Everything is cool. I can't think of anything we need. If I had asked what their company needs to flourish and to take it to the next level, they would have all had an answer, whether it be better marketing or better people or more capital, whatever. They would all have an answer they would be looking for.

It tells you the mentality behind teamwork that often happens, which is I either have a functional team or I don't. They don't look at it the way one would look at revenue, which is there is always a way to grow the business. There is always a way to get more revenue. There is always a way to increase my mission in the world. In game theory, they call it an endless game, whereas oftentimes when people think about the functionality of teams, it is like a game that has a team. It is functional or not functional. It is very binary.

I think that's the first thing that has to change in a leader's mind to really get the optimal team or get more and more optimal of a team because there is always room for growth, there is always a way to take the team to the next level. There is always a place to get more functional. Even the idea of a functional or a dysfunctional team, I think it is more of a scale. Where are you on the scale? The scale happens to be endless in both directions. Super dysfunction can be killing each other, literally, and super function can endlessly go on.

Brett: I can imagine it can be both/and as well. You can have an extremely functional team that whenever a certain topic comes up suddenly seizes up into dysfunction, and then that dysfunction might persist for a long time under the surface or block the functionality of an otherwise functional team unless it is addressed.

Joe: It is just like the transformational journey or the spiritual journey. There is just no end to it. There are just always ways to refine just like, I would say, any journey but something in our mind, we have some sort of artificial limit on it. When you can blow your mind on that when you can say this highly functional team might be able to get three times more functional, that's when some really creative and cool stuff happens.

Brett: An interesting corollary there that you made to personal transformation. In the transformation process, if you stay the same, you will eventually encounter the reality that breaks your model, breaks your consciousness, your identity and requires growth. This must be true as a team as well, as a company grows or shrinks. How do dysfunctional teams exist and stay in business?

Joe: That's a great question. A functional team is one component of making a successful company. A great product is another component. What your margins are is another component. Level of the talent in the room is another component. There are so many things that are components of a successful company, and then there is also momentum, meaning oftentimes when companies get dysfunctional, like a big Fortune500 company, it can take years for them to recognize it in business results. Even when you have those business results, they

can last for years before any actions. Poor results can be there for years before an active shareholder comes in or before you get crushed by your competition.

You have the momentum and then you also have the forgiveness of the company based on the other strengths. Both of those can allow for greater levels of dysfunction. For instance, if you are in a low margin business in a highly competitive space where there is a shrinking total addressable market, then if you are dysfunctional, you are going to be dead really, really quickly as a company, whereas if you are in blue space where there is no real competition, where it is a super high margin business and the total addressable market is growing, then you can be dysfunctional and still succeed. If you have a way to keep your competitors at bay, whether that be with patents, which are less useful these days, or trade secrets, or distribution, monopolies, whatever that is, then you can be more dysfunctional and still survive.

Brett: How does scale factor into this? How do scale and dysfunction interact?

Joe: I would say it is harder to have a functional team the bigger the company grows. I think that's one correlation. It is just more difficult because people in functional teams are hard to replicate and structures are hard, just for people to operate in that kind of size. I think it was Gore-Tex for a while that every time they had part of the company with over 150 people, they would do osmosis and break it into two at 75. Then they would grow them to 150 and break it into two to keep the number of people they are interacting with to a pretty limited number.

There have been a lot of people doing tricks like that, but it just gets challenging the bigger the company is, but it is definitely not impossible. Otherwise, the kind of dysfunction that can be allowed or that can exist that doesn't disturb the business is not really based on scale as much as it is based on those other components, like margin, product and what the market is doing, that kind of stuff.

Brett: It is more based on the requirements of the space the company is in, the requirements of the company's business to remain profitable and to exist. The same dysfunction that might plague a family business might plague a large

business all the same or not, depending on the differences in what is required for them to survive in the market.

Joe: Correct. One of the ways of looking at it is creativity. Some companies don't need to be creative to stay in business. Some companies really need to be creative to stay in creative, like if your business is innovation. Dysfunction will kill innovation really, really quickly. It is why very few big businesses innovate effectively, and if they are, they are doing it through acquisition.

You have to be highly functional to continue to iterate successfully and be innovative successfully, comparatively highly functional. That's just an example. If your business requires that, you are going to have to stay functional. If your business doesn't require that at all, then functionality is less important to the maintenance of your business, but to the growth of your business, to the flourishing, to the rapid expansion, functionality is always helpful.

That's the thing that's interesting is, for instance, great marketing is always helpful for a business. Some businesses don't need the marketing. Some businesses do need the marketing, but great marketing is always helpful for the business. It is the same with teams. If you are really looking to optimize your company, teamwork is one of the best levers to pull because it affects everything else. It is like the soil in which everything grows in. It is people's relationships and dynamics. If you have bad soil, it is hard for anything to grow.

Brett: Speaking of the dysfunction within a team and how most of what goes on in a company is some reflection of the consciousness of the leader or in a team, can you relate what we are talking about with teams to the leaders of them? What do you see in dysfunctional leaders?

Joe: There are a couple really big ones, lynchpins. If a leader shows these qualities, it is going to be really, really hard for the team. The easiest one to name is being political or blame. What this does is it makes it so that people don't know how to succeed or how to win because it is really based on the mood of the leader,

and blaming is just a horrible way to motivate people. It also doesn't solve anything. That's the obvious one.

The less obvious ones are indecisive leaders, super, super, super bad for a team. The team loses trust really quickly if somebody is indecisive. Indecisive doesn't mean that you make every decision in a split second. It means that you can make decisions easily or that you don't even notice they are decisions. You are not in that fear-based place of what should I do. You are taking the next iterative step. That's another one.

Conflict avoidant leaders is another huge issue. We are people. We have conflict. Avoid the conflict, and you avoid building trust. You avoid sorting out the problems. You avoid finding the inefficiencies. You avoid seeing the problems you need to fix. All of those things happen if you avoid conflict. On some level, nobody wants the leader to come in and go what the hell is going on here, but they also don't want a leader they can't trust to do that. Oftentimes you see the leaders trade the short-term discomfort for the long-term discomfort. If you are okay with the short-term discomfort, you have a lot less long-term discomfort. That's a critical piece as well.

Another one is they allow defense, or they are defensive themselves. There is a meeting and one of the people is really defensive. If a leader allows that to exist, that dynamic to exist, it will definitely kill a team because what happens there is if somebody is getting defensive, if the team is functional, they will be like you are defensive. What's happening here? If they are not, then people start being scared to say things to that person and communication gets all gummed up. Allowing defensive people is just super toxic for a team.

You can try to coach them out of it, or you can be really direct and say we don't do defensiveness here. Can you please leave the meeting until you can come back in a non-defensive way and show up? There are lots of ways of handling defensiveness, but it is really critical to make it so that everybody feels safe and comfortable sharing whatever it is they need to share.

Brett: I think it might even be interesting to do an entire episode someday on defensiveness, allowing it, coaching it and addressing it in a team because that's a really big one there. I can see how tricky it can be. If somebody is defensive, it is because their nervous system is seizing up. They are detecting threat. It would be interesting to talk about how to approach and work with somebody who is already in threat without making that threat wrong. We don't do defensiveness here. That could be taken as to say you are not allowed to feel afraid right now.

Joe: Correct, or you help them to say I am afraid right now instead of being defensive. This thing is bothering me, or even the ask of: Am I being told I've done something wrong? What's happening? There are all sorts of ways around it to not make it wrong. There is a huge difference between: We don't allow defensiveness here, which is in itself defensiveness. As compared to saying I see you are being defensive, this isn't something that we do here. Take a break. Get back to yourself. Come on back and we will continue the conversation.

Brett: Is there anything else you wanted to touch on with regard to dysfunctional leaders? Then, next, I would love to talk about what you look for in a team and what you observe when you are looking for dysfunction.

Joe: Another thing, this is a more subtle thing, but leaders who don't lead or follow. Either one of those can create super dysfunctional teams. When I mean follow, they are actually listening to the wisdom of their executives or the people they are working with and letting them have authority and autonomy, super important. Also, leading, being the first in taking the responsibility, having the quote unquote buck stop with them, being the person who leads the charge in their own vulnerability, their own wonder, their own not knowing. Without that kind of leadership, it is really hard for a team to be functional. Not owning that role of I am the decision maker on these key components, it is less common, but it happens. That would be the other thing I would really look for. I get called into places often to assess a team. That is kind of the checklist of stuff I look for.

Brett: My next question has shifted a little bit. From the signs of a dysfunctional leader, what do you see in a team that has a dysfunctional relationship with their leader?

Joe: That's a slightly different question. I recall this time a CEO asked me to come in and sit with the executive team. The CEO introduced me for five minutes. I don't know if I have told this story on the podcast. He introduced me for five minutes. Then when he handed it over to me, my first question was: What makes it that you are not listening to the CEO? I just watched all of you guys check out while the CEO was talking, so what's happening there? I asked the CEO what made that acceptable. How is that he is living with that level of not being heard? That's one example of it.

A lot of fear is another example of it. You definitely see a lot of fear reactions, a lot of self-protection in reaction to leaders who are indecisive or not leading or following or are political. You just see a lot of people start protecting themselves because without that trust you don't have people willing to put themselves out there. You don't have people willing to throw in their lot with the team's lot. Instead, they start saying this team is not going to be successful or I don't trust it, and therefore, I am going to throw in my lot with my lot and take care of myself.

Brett: Continuing, when you are walking into a team, you are looking at whether it is the leader communicating with the team or just the team having a meeting? What are the things you look for to find areas of dysfunction that can be improved upon and addressed?

Joe: If I hear people talking without listening to each other, like the one I just described, that's a huge sign. A conversation requires both somebody who wants to talk and somebody who wants to listen. That's a huge sign.

Brett: Generally both in both. Not just one person.

Joe: That's right. Also, I look for who is participating and who is not and how many people are not participating, what's the distribution of participation in the conversation. I look for people doing rabbit holes where everybody gets lost in the

example instead of the higher topic that's being talked about. That level of distraction is sometimes incredibly useful in certain kinds of conversations but in execution conversations really are not useful. I look for unclear roles and responsibilities. Anytime I see something where at the end of the meeting people don't know what they are supposed to do, if it is a meeting about execution, that's another example of it. Either there is no accountability or people don't know what they are supposed to be doing.

I also look for context switching where if one person is talking about this and they are arguing with someone who is talking about that, and they are not even talking about the same thing. They don't even recognize they are not talking about the same thing. It happens all the time. That's another one. Teams that prefer talk to action, especially in big organizations but not only where people like to hear themselves talk but they are not interested in making it all happen. They can get lost in the thought instead of in the doing. Where being right is important, that's a huge one. People are defending themselves because they need to be right. That means they think being right has something to do with their value to the business, and that's a horrible thought process.

Brett: That's an interesting one to zoom in on a little bit more, too, because being right is a personality characteristic that people can bring to a team. It can also become the culture of the team.

Joe: Correct, that's right. It is the same way if you look at a soccer team. If somebody has to be the guy getting the goal or the woman has to be the woman getting the goal on the soccer team instead of making sure the soccer team gets the goals, that's pretty much the same thing as being right in a business where it is about ideas and relationships. Also, having to be right really hurts relationships because it is a zero sum, win, lose. It means one person gets it, and one person doesn't. It is also just super ineffective in the fact that nobody is hundred percent right. Nobody is hundred percent right.

If two people disagree on something, there is some sliver of wisdom in both things at least. If you can combine those two, you have got a better solution than either

one of them alone. Needing to be right totally prevents those greater solutions from coming to the surface.

Brett: You are hundred percent right on that.

Joe: No, I am not.

Brett: What else do we have here then?

Joe: The defensive discussions we talked about with the leader and the blame we talked about with the leader. I think the other thing that's a more subtle thing you can see is people don't feel accountable for the team. They feel oppressed by or controlled by the team dynamic. Super functional teams, you will hear somebody say on occasion this meeting is really not working for me. How do we make this meeting work better? You will hear people say the way this conversation is going doesn't feel optimal.

They are all taking responsibility for the dynamic in which the team interacts rather than thinking the leader is responsible for it. You will also see this in accountability where the team holds themselves accountable instead of the leader being the only person to hold people accountable. The team takes responsibility for their dynamics instead of just the leader taking responsibility for the team dynamics. If I don't see that, then there are lots of very easy room for growth.

Brett: I can see there being dynamics where a number of members within a team identify some dysfunction within the team and then they decide I am on a dysfunctional team. There is nothing I can do. That contributes to the dysfunction further.

Joe: The more accurate thing is I am participating in a dysfunction, and the idea that I can't do anything about it is a great part of the dysfunction. You never blame people for that because nobody has given us the toolbox. You are in a dysfunctional organization, and you are the administrative assistant. You are low level on this team. Nobody has told us here are the five moves you can make to help that team become more functional.

When they find out what those five moves are, let's use a couple of examples there. Say out loud this meeting doesn't feel productive, or to say out loud wow, I notice people seem to be interested in getting it right instead of getting it to the best solution or to say who are the people in the meeting that should be here or who are the people that shouldn't be here, it is not a good use of their time. Or to say is this meeting a decision-making meeting or is it an execution meeting or is it a discovery meeting? What is our intention? What is the goal of the meeting? Those kinds of things, some less, some more scary, are scary and most people don't know that will make a huge difference.

Once they have done it a couple of times, it is a lot less scary because it is like that works and now everybody respects me even more, but most people are scared to say it or just don't know how to say it.

Brett: Often when you are in that space where you are scared to say something and then you get yourself to say it anyway, it often comes out a little sideways and then triggers people into defense. It proves it wasn't a good idea to say and then proves that this is a dysfunctional team I can't do anything about. There you are again.

Joe: There you are again. That's right. If you have built it up so much and then you say it with harshness or you say it with a lack of confidence, you have a good chance of getting suboptimal results.

Brett: You could actually see a lot of these characteristics, like the rabbit hole where somebody wants to be seen in a certain feeling and maybe they are going down a rabbit hole into an example, to hide in that example, and hope that the example can prove what they want to say without them having to fully own it or the blame, which is really saying that I am seeing something going on in this team that's not working for me or that I see as dysfunction. Maybe there is a dynamic in the team that I am not allowed to be the one that wears that, so it has got to be someone else's fault. A lot of these things that are dysfunctions, at their core, they are attempts if partially occluded attempts at actually bringing the team into function.

Joe: Some of them are for sure. I would say the other thing that's happening is I can watch a team and the way I see a team operate, it is like what emotions are they avoiding and what emotions are they embracing. What are the strategies that people are using to embrace or avoid the emotion or to bring team work together or create conflict? Those strategies really will tell you a tremendous amount about where the dysfunction lies and what the root cause of the dysfunction is.

Brett: Which points back to our emotion series where the impulse in the emotion, which is the room in a dysfunctional team in a dysfunctional meeting will be dripping with emotion that is unowned.

Joe: Usually suppressed.

Brett: Somewhere in that emotion are all the ingredients to bring the team into functionality. To the extent that they are suppressed, that's how you see this dysfunctional dynamic show up.

Joe: Great example of this, let's say you have a leader who yells at their team, which is I guess another sign of dysfunction. People don't usually do that in front of me. Let's say you have that. The emotion that is usually being suppressed is fear or hurt and aloneness, as an example, and they feel that way because there is a stagnation happening they know will hurt the company. The suppression of that emotion creates the frustration, and the frustration often drives some sort of movement. The anger drives some sort of movement, which is a surrogate for the best kind of movement, but at least it is movement.

That's a great example of how the unfelt emotion turns into a strategy that is less functional, whereas the more functional approach is I notice that I have very little confidence we are going to succeed. That scares me. The reason I have no confidence we are going to succeed is because I don't see movement happening, and I don't want to be part of a team where there is no movement happening. How do we get to movement? How do we all take responsibility and ownership for that? Because I don't want to be the only person driving this team. That's a completely

ineffective use of my time, and it disempowers you guys. That would be a more effective approach if you could be in the emotion, see what's happening with you and speak to it.

Brett: That brings me to one final question for this episode. What's the most poignant example of when you saw a team in utter dysfunction begin a transformation into function?

Joe: That happens every day, not every day but every day I am in a team. That's what happens. Maybe Ant on his episode, which is coming up, I think he might have told the story, but I can't remember exactly. It is a good, poignant one. We are on an off site doing something. I was supposed to trigger him on something. I said your anxiety is going to kill the company and everybody in this room knows it. That's a poignant moment. I am doing it with a tremendous amount of love and just a deep truth that allows everybody to go ah, relieve, including Ant in that moment. There is a sense of relief because the thing has been called out. Now we can actually address it and look at it. It is not being considered wrong. It is not being blamed. It is not something that makes anybody more or less than one another.

That would be an example. Another example where I have seen that, there is this great little thing that I do with executives where I say within a month your goal is to have two weeks in a row where every meeting you attend, you consider it a five-star meeting. You rank your meetings one to five stars, and every one is a five-star meeting. That means you feel inspired, invigorated and energized by the meeting. You have to do whatever it takes to do that, whatever you need to do whether it is telling the chairman of the board you are not coming to a meeting or whether it means walking out of meetings or saying this meeting sucks. How do we fix it? Whatever you need to do to get to that place?

If a CEO or a leader commits to that, within a month, that organization is completely different. It is a beautiful little hack to totally transform that thing. It is basically saying I am not going to put up with dysfunction. That's the best way to measure it. The best way to measure if a team is dysfunctional is at the end of a

meeting, do you feel invigorated or do you feel depleted? How invigorated do you feel? How depleted do you feel? It is a great mark of the dysfunction. It just hits it right where it lives.

Brett: I guess my question from that example is if you have a leader in that situation who is avoiding a certain set of emotions, what stops them from avoiding those particular meetings and having a lot of other meetings and saying I got my five-star meetings? We are now not paying attention to a significant issue in the business.

Joe: That's why I do it for two weeks because eventually the thing they are avoiding is going to be put on to their lap and they are going to have to deal with it. That's exactly why.

Brett: With the goal of a five-star meeting.

Joe: You can't have all happy meetings and avoid. You can't have all happy meetings and blame. You can't have all productive, invigorating meetings if you are political. It just doesn't allow for it. The avoidance is the last thing that gets caught, but it definitely gets caught. The other thing that happens is when they realize the techniques of creating a five-star meeting for themselves, they are less likely to avoid because they realize it is not the issue they are avoiding, it is the conflict that arises around the issue they are avoiding.

Brett: I think this is excellent foreshadowing for a future episode in this series on five-star meetings and meeting culture.

Joe: A pleasure as always. I do want to make a call out. There is a book called Five Dysfunctions of a Team, which I think is an excellent book. There are five dysfunctions, but I encourage you to see all are the first dysfunction, which is a lack of trust. They talk about things like accountability, not paying attention to results, and avoiding conflict, but all of that are ways to deteriorate trust. It is told in a very beautiful way. It is a story, and it is easy to read. I highly recommend that book if you want to dig deeper in this topic.

Brett: Thanks for listening to the Art of Accomplishment. If you enjoyed what you heard today, please subscribe and rate us on your podcast app. We would love your feedback, so feel free to send us questions or comments. You can reach out to us, join our newsletter or check out our courses at artofaccomplishment.com.

Resources:

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable, by Patrick Lencioni,
<https://www.tablegroup.com/product/dysfunctions/>

The Simple Sabotage Field Manual, United States Office of Strategic Services,
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26184>