# *The Advantage* - Q&A with Patrick Lencioni

**Question: Your other books have all been fables, but *The Advantage* isn't. Why?**

Unlike my other books, *The Advantage* is not written as a fable because the nature of the subject it covers is just too broad to fit into one story.  In the past, I've taken on slightly more contained issues - teamwork, meetings, employee engagement - but this time I'm taking a much more holistic, comprehensive approach to improving organizations.  Still, I've used stories about real organizations to bring the points to life, and I'm hoping that readers enjoy those stories and find them helpful in learning and applying the principles.

**Question: What is organizational health?**

Organizational health is essentially about making a company function effectively by building a cohesive leadership team, establishing real clarity among those leaders, communicating that clarity to everyone within the organization, and putting in place just enough structure to reinforce that clarity going forward. Simply put, an organization is healthy when it is whole, consistent and complete, when its management, operations and culture are unified. Healthy organizations outperform their counterparts, are free of politics and confusion and provide an environment where star performers never want to leave.

**Question: Why does organizational health offer a company its greatest opportunity for competitive advantage?**

Addressing organizational health provides an incredible advantage to companies because ultimately health becomes the multiplier of intelligence. The healthier an organization is, the more of its intelligence it is able to tap into and actually use. Most organizations only exploit a fraction of the knowledge, experience and intellectual capital available to them. The healthy ones tap into all of it. Addressing health helps companies to make smarter decisions, faster, without politics and confusion.

**Question: What are some examples of particularly healthy companies?**

The best examples of healthy companies are not famous ones.  They are small or medium sized organizations being led by humble leaders who are accomplishing great things quietly, to the delight of customers and employees alike.  However, when it comes to large, well-known organizations, I'd cite Southwest Airlines as a particularly healthy one.  I've had the opportunity to work with Southwest's executive team, and they embody health in just about everything they do, from the executive suite on down.  Another healthy organization I know is Chick-fil-A, a quick-service

restaurant chain headquartered in Atlanta.  Both of these companies have lines of candidates wanting to work there, loyal customers, and extremely humble leaders who know why they are there and what the organization is all about.

**Question: Why are so many of today's smartest companies losing to humbler underdogs?**

I  have found that some of the humbler underdogs are more apt to shed their preconceived notions about running a business and allow themselves to gain advantage around a different set of principles. The key ingredient for improvement and success is not access to knowledge, it is really about the health of the environment.

I have worked with a number of great, healthy companies that were led by men and women who attended relatively modest colleges—people who would admit to being just a little above average in intellectual capacity. When those companies made wise decisions that set them apart from their competition, journalists and industry analysts incorrectly attributed their success to their intellectual prowess. The truth of the matter was that the humbler underdogs weren't smarter than their competitors; they simply tapped into the adequate intelligence they had and didn't allow dysfunction, ego, and politics to get in the way.  Conversely, smart organizations don't seem to have any greater chance of getting healthier by virtue of their intelligence. In fact, the reverse may actually be  true because leaders who pride themselves on expertise and knowledge often struggle to acknowledge their flaws and learn from their peers.  They typically aren't as easily open and transparent with one another, which delays recovery from mistakes and fuels politics and confusion.

**Question: Do you consider your company healthy?**

Yes, I consider my company healthy.  And like any healthy company, we're messy and imperfect.  We argue sometimes, we make mistakes, we try things that don't work.  But we know who we are, what we believe in, and what we're trying to accomplish, so we're able to recover from setbacks quickly and grow stronger through conflict and adversity.  I'm glad to say that we've always believed in living the principles that we espouse.  And though we can sometimes forget and feel like the cobbler's children without shoes, we have certainly worked hard to become a healthy organization, and we continue to do so every day.

**Question:  Having worked with companies for so many years, is there anything that still surprises you?**

Yes, I still get surprised by what I see in companies I work with, even after all these years.  Some of that surprise is just a function of the fact that no two people, and thus, no two organizations are exactly alike.  The nuances are interesting and keep me on my toes.  But ironically, the biggest surprise I get is being reminded again and again that even the most sophisticated companies struggle with the simplest things.  I guess it's hard for me to believe that the concepts I write and speak about are so universal.  I don't know that I'll ever come to terms with that completely.

**Question: Why are so few companies skilled at overcoming dysfunction?**

Leaders often complain about worker productivity, politics, turnover and other signs of dysfunction but feel addressing the problem is either a hopeless endeavor or too touchy-feely. Even if the leader understands the need to address dysfunction, more often than not, they tend to naturally gravitate right back to the parts of the business they feel most comfortable with (usually areas like strategy, finance, marketing, etc).

**Question: In what ways is overcoming dysfunction in your company similar to overcoming dysfunction in your family?**

All companies - and all families - have some dysfunction. Overcoming dysfunction is really about sticking to a simple set of principles and mastering those principles every day.  Both organizations and families need to have cohesive leaders, a clear plan/focus and constant communication.

**Question: What's "the wuss factor" and how do you overcome it?**

The "wuss factor" happens when a team member or leader constantly balks when it's time to call someone out on their behavior or performance.  Many leaders who struggle with this (again, I'm one of them) will try to convince themselves that their reluctance is a product of their kindness; they just don't want to make their employees feel bad. But an honest reassessment of their motivation will allow them to admit that they are the ones who don't want to feel bad and that failing to hold someone accountable is ultimately an act of selfishness. After all, there is nothing noble about withholding information that can help an employee improve. Eventually that employee's lack of improvement is going to come back to haunt him in a performance review or when he is let go.

**Question: What's the best way to run an effective meeting?**

To answer that question fairly, it is important to be clear about what kind of meeting you are in.  I find that all too often, leaders have one meeting a week where they put all issues into one big discussion, usually called the staff meeting. They combine administrative issues and tactical decisions and creative brain-storming and strategic analysis and personal discussions into one exhausting meeting. The fact is, the human brain isn't meant to process so many disparate topics in one sitting.  This exhausts people. For a meeting to be effective there needs to be greater clarity and focus, which means there needs to be different kinds of meetings for different kinds of focus.  So, being clear about what kind of meeting you are in helps everyone understand the purpose and what they can expect for outcomes.   The four meetings include:

- Daily Check-ins - administrative information exchange
- Weekly Staff - tactical issues and goal related activities
- Adhoc Strategic- strategic meeting that takes on one single big topic
- Quarterly Off-site Review - developmental meeting and review of business fundamentals

**Question: How can someone who's not in the upper levels of their organization make an impact on its health?**

While it's true that no one can influence an organization like the leader, and that without a leader's commitment and involvement, organizational health cannot become a reality, there are many things that employees deeper in an organization can do to make health more likely. First, they have to speak truth upward in the organization. Most leaders, even the struggling ones, want to get better. When an employee is courageous and wise enough to come to them with respect, kindness and honesty, most leaders will be grateful. Without honest upward feedback, a leader cannot get better. Beyond that, people deeper in an organization can focus on making their own departments healthier, and not getting too distracted or discouraged by their inability to change things outside of their "circle of influence", as Stephen Covey says. By focusing on their own departments and their own areas of influence, they provide others in the organization with an example to follow.

**Question: What's something I can do tomorrow morning to get started?**

The first thing anyone can do, immediately, to begin the process of making their organizations healthier, is to begin with themselves and their team. A leader has to understand and embrace the concept of being vulnerable, which inspires trust on the leadership team. That trust is the foundation for teamwork, which is one of the cornerstones of organizational health. If a leader cannot be vulnerable, cannot admit his or her mistakes, shortcomings or weaknesses, others will not be vulnerable and organizational health becomes impossible.

**Question: What's the first step any company can take to start achieving organizational health?**

The first step in becoming healthy is to get the leadership team together, offsite, for a couple days of focused, rigorous, honest discussion. Nothing touchy-feely, but rather a practical session around everything from how the team behaves to how it is going to succeed to what its most important priority needs to be. That first session will provide the momentum a team needs to lead the organization to health.

**About Patrick Lencioni**

Patrick Lencioni is the author of 10 business books including the new release, *The Advantage,* and the national best-seller, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. He is the founder and president of The Table Group, a management consulting firm focused on organizational health.