

Building a Culture around Exceptional Quality

Tracy Beeson
tbeeson@menloinnovations.com

Abstract

Have you ever said to yourself "I want unhappy people working on my team?" Of course not, but why?

Have you ever said to yourself "I want someone on my team who is not invested in the work we do?" Of course not, but why?

Certainly an unhappy person can work hard. Just because a person is not as invested in the project doesn't mean they can't add value. Yet despite the value, it somehow leaves us with an uneasy feeling. Why?

A person who is neither happy nor invested, is a person unable to deliver quality work at a long term sustainable pace.

This experience report is about how our team built a culture centered around delivering exceptional quality by fostering a culture of trust, respect, and joy in the workplace. It demonstrates how our team has incorporated the teachings of Dr. Deming, Patrick Lencioni's "Five Dysfunctions of a Team", Peter Senge's "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning", and others into everything that we do because we believe that the culture of an organization can have a direct affect on the quality of its deliverables.

Biography

Tracy Beeson is a senior quality advocate at Menlo Innovations in Ann Arbor Michigan. Over the past ten years Tracy has worked in the quality assurance field, the last five of which helping to build and integrate the quality assurance process into the agile process at Menlo. She has written and taught Menlo's "Building Agile Quality" class and presented at several conferences including the Agile 2008 Conference in Toronto and the PMI Global Congress 2009 in Orlando, FL.

Tracy has a bachelor of arts degree from Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont where she majored in Computer Science and earned her secondary teaching license in Math and Computer Science.

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1. Introduction

What does it mean to be happy at work? Is that even possible? Should it be a goal? I once had a boss who thought if his employees showed signs of being happy (e.g. smiling, laughing, etc.), they weren't working hard enough. After all, he believed work should be serious, not fun.

Wrong. If work doesn't tap into your inherent joy of learning, you aren't doing it right. If you aren't happy at work, you probably aren't adding as much value as you could. That's not to say that you are doing bad work but it could mean the difference between creating something that is simply "good enough" and something that is *exceptional*.

Consider what this might mean for your company. What might be accomplished if everyone you work with ceased being content with "good work" and pushed themselves and others around them to do *exceptional* work?

This report explores why teams often fail to be exceptional, what is necessary to build an exceptional team, and why exceptional quality is so important. Using experiences from various teams, the teachings of Dr. Deming, Patrick Lencioni, and Peter Senge show us how to steer clear of the dysfunctional and build a high functioning team able to produce *exceptional* quality products.

2. Problem

I once worked on a team as a quality assurance specialist where the process went as follows: After months of meetings where we listened to everyone go around the room and explain why they were unable to get their part of the project done (usually because someone else hadn't done their part), the developers would finally deliver their code to QA weeks past the development deadline. QA was then expected to work a miracle and get the application tested in a day or two rather than a week or two. Since there was no such thing as integration for this team, it was QA's job to take all the code, put it together, and see if it would work. Inevitably, it would not.

At this point I would usually go hunting. I would walk up to the fourth floor from my basement desk and ask the web developer why it doesn't work. He would then describe to me that the problem lies with the back-end. I would then march over to the back-end developer and ask what the problem is and they would explain it was the web developer's fault. Eventually I would annoy one of the two enough for someone to take the five minutes to fix the problem. I would then march back down to my basement desk and try again until I find the next road-block and the process would start all over. It was exceedingly rare for this team to be able to release a reliably working product, much less a quality one. It was more often the case that, within the first day of release, a severe bug would be found and an emergency patch would need to be released shortly there-after.

In this particular environment, the team was used to getting blamed for its failures. In fact, managers made it clear that mistakes would not be tolerated, thus, no one wanted to admit mistakes or failure. This fear among the team fostered distrust and a CYA attitude, putting a choke hold on team communication. Problems were hidden rather than discovered and solved. Too much time and energy was spent fixing the surface level problems rather than discovering the real ones lying beneath. There was no ability to collaborate much less allow for creativity.

All too often this example resonates with people who have worked on teams that have suffered a similar pain. The culture I have described is a culture of 'me.' It is one of heroes and constant fire fighting, where the team spends all of its time fighting to build a product that simply works rather than building one of quality. Exceptional quality cannot be obtained if the team is unable to communicate, collaborate, and allow for mistakes that lead to creative solutions.

3. Exceptional Teams

No individual should have to carry the burden of being exceptional all the time. It is not sustainable and will eventually cause him to be unhappy.

Fortunately, if we build a culture of 'we,' we build a team. A team can produce exceptional work even while its individuals fluctuate between good and exceptional. In a high functioning team, concepts are first discussed with several members, but consensus is not the goal. Instead, each team member is given the chance to voice their opinions without fear of repercussions from others. With all concerns and thoughts heard, the team is able to move forward with an approach, comfortable that new information may re-open the discussion. Only then are team members confident enough to present decisions to others as "We believe..." rather than "I believe..."

In kindergarten, we teach our children that the boring and somewhat daunting task of cleaning up a messy room can be made fun by incorporating a bit of teamwork. It might even get done faster. We help each other figure out where each item belongs, learning as we go. Before we know it the task is complete. In the end, each child feels a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction that they helped get the job done.

Likewise, have you ever noticed that when you exercise with a team you push yourself harder than you would alone? The workout is significantly more effective and yet you barely noticed because you were having fun challenging yourself and your teammates. You worked hard but it was the "good kind" of hard. It felt satisfying. The team pushed you and you pushed them and together you accomplished more than you thought you would.

Dr. Deming once said:

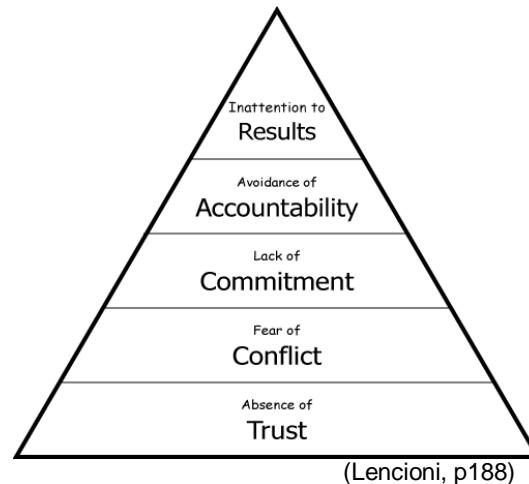
"Our prevailing system of management has destroyed our people. People are born with intrinsic motivation, self-respect, dignity, curiosity to learn, joy in learning. The forces of destruction begin with toddlers- a prize for the best Halloween costume, grades in school, gold stars- and on up through the university. On the job, people, teams, and divisions are ranked, reward for the top, punishment for the bottom. Management by Objectives, quotas, incentive pay, business plans, put together separately, division by division, cause further loss, unknown and unknowable." (Senge, p.xii)

Too many organizations foster a culture of 'me.' To be the best at what you do means to be better than everyone else around you. To prove you are the best is to say to your boss "I did that." To get to the top means someone else didn't. To stay at the top means to continually prove you belong there above anyone else. An organization that fosters a culture of 'me' can never build an *exceptional* team. A team requires a common goal. An exceptional team requires all members to put aside the personal in order to achieve the common goal. In a culture of 'me' team members act on their own personal goals above all else because the incentive for showing their values above all others is too high, even when they might think they are acting for the greater good of the team.

Who do you want at the top of your organization? Someone taught to constantly defend his right to be there or someone who works to bring others up with them?

Beware of the words "I" or "me." They spread like a plague upon a team and will undermine its ability to be *exceptional*.

To build an exceptional team, we must first understand the forces that work against it. Patrick Lencioni describes the core dysfunctions that will render a team ineffective:



Trust rests at the bottom and acts as the foundation of the team. Without trust among team members, a team is incapable of effectively solving problems. Lack of trust leaves the team vulnerable to suffering from the other four dysfunctions and ultimately from an inattention to results. Team members are unable to put aside their personal agendas and work towards the good of the team. Their behavior reflects that of one on the defense. They are in survival mode; desperate to show they add value above the others. They are functioning in a culture of ‘me.’

One such example can be taken from a group of international interns I once worked with who were asked to build an iPad® application. While the team was made up of competent individuals in varying stages of their schooling, the team suffered from a lack of trust among its members. As a result, the team members each aimed towards pushing their own personal solutions rather than working together. Despite the team’s efforts to come together and decide upon a solution, each task was tackled individually. When the parts came together, they did not make a whole and a total solution was not accomplished. Upon showing the product to the client, it became clear that the solution was not satisfactory and the team resorted to bickering over who’s solution would have been better in an effort to one-up each other. Both client and team were frustrated and the project came to a standstill.

Lack of trust will make moving a project forward feel like pushing a boulder uphill by hand. A foundation of trust is a necessary ingredient when making an *exceptional team* (the basis for building a strong team and avoiding the five dysfunctions), along with a shared joy in learning, and a desire to find problems in need of solutions (as opposed to solutions in search of a problem). With those in hand, an *exceptional team* will not only move mountains, they will make doing so look effortless.

3.1 Building Trust

Tom and Birgit Hanson provide a model for acting “*in integrity*” thereby building trust and accountability with the people with whom you interact. They define integrity as honoring your word and doing what you said you would do. By not doing so, you pay the price twofold: First, what you said you would get done didn’t get done. Second, the person you promised will be less likely to trust that your next promise will be honored, causing any future interactions to be strained. (Hanson, p 48)

It sounds so simple. You might even think you are already “*in integrity.*” How often are you late to a meeting without letting others know? How many times have you blown an estimate and avoided telling your manager? How many times have you promised to get that report done only to not have it ready when asked? Will your co-workers trust those promises the next time? The model shows how easy it is to fall out of integrity and opens our eyes to the effect we, as individuals, have on a team.

If trust is the building block towards avoiding a dysfunctional team, then we must consider our individual affect on trust within the team. We must act with integrity and earn the respect of our teammates.

In the example of the international interns, we applied two strategies for building trust. The first was to have a very open and constructive conversation about the behaviors each intern was exhibiting and to discuss why those behaviors were working against the success of the team. It was not an easy conversation, but a necessary one. The second was to bring other members of the greater team in to model a collaborative approach to solving problems, including acting with integrity. Not all of the interns were able to internalize the feedback they were given and reflect on the consequences of their actions. Collaborative thinking is not for everyone. It is important to respect that people are different and excel in different environments.

Trust is not something we cannot force upon our teammates. It must be earned. Earning someone's trust requires looking inward at why you might have lost their trust in the first place. This can be an unpleasant exercise that should not be taken lightly. Those who are able and willing to partake in the exercise, no matter how unpleasant, will make excellent members of an *exceptional* team.

To build an exceptional team, we must also foster learning. "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs." (Senge, p.129) An *exceptional* team is a learning team.

3.2 Joy in Learning

As Deming points out, we are all born with an inherent joy in learning. Yet along the way the prevailing system of management builds a culture of "me" thereby suppressing our natural eagerness to learn. We become stagnant in our roles, "putting in our time" until we can be in charge.

An acquaintance of mine worked for a small company of designers. Management had set forth the goal of moving into a new part of the field. It just so happened that this new sector was his specialty. Being the avid reader that he is, he began forwarding interesting articles on the topic to the team in an effort to share the knowledge. His manager pulled him aside and requested that he no longer send such articles, noting that doing so was a bother to his co-workers. His immediate response to the request was to stop sending articles and stop investing his time and energy into the company. Needless to say, as soon as he was able, he found a new job.

On the other hand, my current place of work, Menlo Innovations LLC, encourages all members of the team to not only learn but to be aware of the many different learning styles other team members may have. This allows us to teach each other more effectively. Whether you are new to the job or a seasoned veteran, young or old, if you are not learning, you are teaching. Sharing of knowledge and appreciating the different perspective people bring towards understanding the same topics enables the team to gain more clarity on the problems we need to solve. We rely on the constant cycle of learning, making mistakes, gaining perspective, understanding, and re-learning to push a project forward. It is a vital part of our process and has been crucial in gaining widespread adoption for the products we build.

To work is to learn.

If we are not learning, we are not working. To be clear, I am not referring to the kind of learning that goes on in most schools. It is the difference between learning a skill and the art of learning itself. Peter Senge teaches us that learning is an art and we must regard it as a continual process, ever changing our perspective on the world around us.

For a team to avoid becoming stagnant it must be composed of individuals that share in the joy of learning and see value in mastering the art of it.

3.3 A Problem in Need of a Solution

At Menlo Innovations LLC we give tours of our factory daily. Our CEO, Rich Sheridan, proudly and patiently walks inquisitive business folk around giving just a taste of what it is that we do and how we do it. Some are eager to soak in every detail and some are not. Those who are not, usually look at the photocopied note cards we methodically post on the walls in swim lanes with thinly veiled skepticism. Upon occasion they are bold enough to attempt to poke holes in the value of posting these project boards all over the walls in the factory only to be thwarted by our team's openly honest responses. About ten times a year one such question is "Why don't you put the story cards in a software tracking program so you can track them electronically?" To this we emphatically reply "because no one would look at it."

A solution in search of a problem is one that solves a problem that, to the users, never existed. Sure, to the average passerby it looks a bit crazy to manage multi-million dollar projects using paper, note cards, colored dots, and thumb tacks but to us, it makes total sense.

It is this key ingredient that requires the team to broaden the definition of quality. When we define quality as "the product performs to the specification" we lose sight of what problem we were trying to solve for the user in the first place and neglect our responsibility as team members to build a product that meets the user's needs.

In order to keep a project focused on meeting the quality needs of the user it is the team's collective responsibility to beg three questions:

"What problem are we trying to solve?" Since it is quite common that people describe a problem by its solution, it is important to constantly remind ourselves of the problem itself. This is why, at Menlo Innovations LLC, one of the first things we do when we begin a project is to help our clients articulate the problem they believe their product will solve.

"Whose problem is it?" A solution for me may not work as a solution for you. There is no such thing as one size fits all. However we can strive for one size fits most by strategically choosing whose problem we solve.

"Will that solution work for the user?" We must shed our preconceived notions of what might work and remind ourselves that the solution does not need to make sense to me. It needs to make sense to the user.

A high functioning team that shares in the joy of learning and is centered on a problem to solve *is* an *exceptional* team.

4. Producing Exceptional Quality

In one of my past jobs as a quality assurance professional, I was quietly working at my desk in the basement of the building when my phone rang. It was my friend, a developer from the fourth floor. She asked if it would be okay for her to get a copy of the document QA keeps that lists how certain functions work in the application. She wanted to update it with the information the developers were keeping. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable request to me. This is when I came to find out that she had made the same request from one of my QA team members only to be told no, she could not have the document. After opening the discussion with my QA team, it was clear that my QA companion really just didn't want to share. This being just one example of dysfunction among the team, it was no wonder why the software we worked on was plagued with bugs. After a bit of debate it was determined that sharing the document would benefit us all (QA and developers). As for my QA companion, he continued to build animosity between himself and the developers ultimately hurting the projects he worked on and making his job more difficult.

Only an *exceptional* team can produce exceptional quality. Consider the iPhone®. It epitomizes exceptional quality. Sure they have had a few technological glitches along the way but they managed to roll out a world changing technology and did it without leaving one stone unturned. From the buyer's experience, to the packaging, to the phone itself, to the app store, to development of new applications, they thought of it all. From what you always wished for in a phone to what you couldn't even imagine was possible, they thought of it and implemented it. Quality is not just about whether your phone works. It is about the total experience. You can't accomplish this kind of quality with a dysfunctional team.

Sure it is possible to have success without quality. It is not possible, however, to sustain the success without it. It wouldn't take long for each of us to think of a wildly successful software application that would not pass our test of quality as users. Do you think that application will exist 10 years from now? Will the iPhone®? No matter what industry, to survive in today's fast paced world of technology widespread adoption is not just a goal. It is essential.

5. Conclusion

As Dr. Deming teaches us, you cannot build quality after the fact. You must build a system that fosters it. To build a culture around exceptional quality is to change our system of thought around what quality means and how we achieve it. Users expect more than a product to simply work. There is no longer room for "good enough."

Build an *exceptional* team, and see how effortless it can be to build *exceptional* quality products.

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