The Advantage - Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business

The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business

By Patrick Lencioni
Reviewed by David Devine

Patrick Lencioni’s The Advantage (Jossey-Bass 2012) is one of those insightful Business Management books that are readily applicable to Church Leadership. The author is a Christian who draws upon 20 years’ experience of researching and consulting with organizations. The book is readable and practice-focused, supported by a website www.businessadvantage.com.

Lencioni's main thesis is that organizational health is the most crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of an organization. He regards an organization as healthy when it is “whole, consistent and complete; that is, when its management, operations, strategy and culture fit together and make sense.” He notes that healthy organizations have the following qualities: minimal politics, minimal conflict, high morale, high productivity and low turnover. It seems to him that these are qualities church leaders want to see in their churches. However, it takes more than good intentions to create and maintain organizational health. Leaders have the prime responsibility for this and they will find guidance and encouragement in Lencioni’s book.

Lencioni identifies and details four disciplines through which Leaders create and maintain organizational health.

1. **Build a cohesive Leadership Team**: Lencioni defines such a team as “a small group of people who are collectively responsible for achieving a common objective for their organization.” He lists five behaviors that create a healthy Leadership Teams practice.
   - Building trust
   - Managing conflict
   - Achieving commitment
   - Encouraging accountability
   - Focusing on results

2. **Create clarity**: This is about ensuring the leaders and members of the organization are aligned around the answers to six key questions:
   - **Why do we exist?** (Core purpose)
   - **How do we behave?** (Core values)
   - **What do we do?** (Basic activities)
   - **How will we succeed?** (Strategy to be adopted to achieve objectives)
   - **What is most important, right now?** (Priorities leaders need to focus on)
   - **Who must do what?** (Delegating responsibility for action, not just giving titles)

Some books on strategic planning present it with such complexity that it seems almost unapproachable. One of the strengths of Lencioni’s model is its simplicity and accessibility. Any church Leadership Team could benefit from answering the six questions. They may need to help with an external facilitator to help them work together on moving beyond “pat answers” and the BUV’s Church Health and Capacity Team is available to provide such assistance.

3. **Overcommunicate clarity**: One of the key tasks of Leaders is ensuring that the whole organization is reminded of the answers to the six strategic questions on a regular basis. Lencioni makes the helpful observation that such communication is “not so much an intellectual process as an emotional one.” Leaders need to show the message through both the words and the actions they communicate, nothing beats word of mouth. He recommends “conveying communication” — specifically spreading the strategic message like a rumor, with examples, and ideas and feelings of the leaders passing “down the line” in a clear and timely manner.

4. **Reinforce clarity**: This is about ensuring that every person in the organization — every process that involves people — is training and people management to be respected and rewarded. This leads to the six operations that Leaders need to focus on.

In his final chapter, Lencioni offers the observation that “no action, activity or process is more central to a healthy organization than the meeting.” Perhaps surprisingly for those who try to avoid meetings, he advocates for more meetings if we are to achieve organizational health and effectiveness. The crucial point is that they must be effective meetings with clarity of purpose and outcomes. He warns against meetings in which the operational, tactical and strategic are mixed. Instead he offers a model in which the purpose of meetings is clearly delineated. Church Leaders may not adopt the full model, but it is worth considering how we might differentiate between the operational, tactical and strategic and so enhance the effectiveness of our meetings.

Lencioni closes by reflecting that the single biggest factor determining whether an organization is going to get healthier is the commitment of its Leaders. Leaders who want to be true to their responsibility and call will benefit from investing in reading and reflecting on “The Advantage.”