A Guiding Model for Agile Peer-Teams*

This model is intended as a practical guide for Agile peer teams in both academic and professional settings, where the same core principles apply even though day-to-day tasks and pressures may differ.

Overview: The Interconnected Chain

Building a high-performing peer-team is a matter of discipline and persistence rather than complex theory. In an Agile environment, the strength of a team depends on the collective discipline of its members rather than the direction of a single manager or leader. To succeed, we must recognize that teamwork is a *cohesive* effort that can be undermined by neglecting five interrelated aspects of successful teams.

It is a common mistake to view these as five distinct aspects that can be addressed in isolation. In reality, they form an interrelated model. Susceptibility to weakness in even one of them is potentially lethal to team success. Like a chain with one broken link, overall effectiveness deteriorates if even a single aspect is allowed to languish.

Trust Through Shared Vulnerability

Trust is the foundation of a cohesive team. In a peer-team, "trust is the confidence that teammates' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group."

- **The Challenge**: Individuals often "learn to be competitive with their peers" in the course of education and career advancement, making vulnerability feel like a risk.

- **The Peer Action**: We must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another. This means being genuinely open about mistakes, weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, and being quick to ask for help.

- **Facilitating It**: A team can accelerate trust through a *"Personal Histories Exercise":* sharing relatively innocuous information (like hometowns or first jobs) to begin seeing one another as human beings with life stories. A subsequent step is a *"Team Effectiveness Exercise", where* team members identify the single most important contribution each peer makes and one area for improvement for the benefit of the team.

Productive Ideological Conflict

Once trust is established, a team becomes capable of engaging in "unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas." This conflict is focused on "concepts and ideas, and avoids personality-focused, mean-spirited attacks."

- **The Challenge**: Many teams avoid conflict to "avoid hurting team members' feelings," which ironically encourages "dangerous tension" and "back-channel personal attacks."

- **The Peer Action**: We must acknowledge that "healthy conflict is actually a time saver." It prevents the team from "revisiting issues again and again without resolution" and promotes surfacing the best ideas.

- **Facilitating It**: Any team member can act as a *"Miner of Conflict":* someone who identifies buried disagreements, and encourages the team to work through them. Also use *"Real-Time Permission,"* reminding one another during a heated debate that the discord is *necessary* and *productive*.

Commitment Through Clarity

In a peer-team context, commitment is a function of clarity and buy-in. While consensus is desired, the priority is ensuring every member is aligned and moves forward with a clear, unified plan to serve the stakeholders.

- **The Challenge**: Two of the greatest obstacles to commitment are an over-reliance on "consensus" and the "need for certainty." Waiting for perfect data or a solution that pleases everyone leads to paralysis and a lack of confidence.

- **The Peer Action**: Reasonable people "do not need to get their way" to support a decision; they only need to know "their opinions have been heard and considered." Buy-in is the collective agreement to support the team's chosen path, even if it wasn't an individual's first choice.

- **Facilitating It**: Use *"Cascading Messaging"* at the end of every meeting: explicitly review key decisions and agree on exactly what must be communicated to the rest of the stakeholders.

Peer-to-Peer Accountability

Accountability refers to the willingness of team members to "call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team."

- **The Challenge**: Members often hesitate to hold one another accountable because they "fear jeopardizing a valuable personal relationship." Ironically, this hesitation often leads to resentment, which damages the relationship far more than a direct conversation would.

- **The Peer Action**: The most efficient means of maintaining high standards is *peer pressure*. There is nothing as motivating as the "fear of letting down respected teammates."

- **Facilitating It**: *"Publish Goals and Standards"* so it is clear who needs to deliver what. Regular progress reviews, whether verbal or written, help teammates communicate how they are doing in relation to those stated standards.

Focus on Collective Results

The ultimate goal is an unrelenting focus on "outcome-based performance." This means the goals of the group must be more important to each individual than their own personal goals.

- **The Challenge**: "Individual status" (focusing on one's own academic or career prospects) and "Team status" (satisfaction with just being part of a group) can distract from actual results.

- **The Peer Action**: We must be willing to make our own goals secondary to the goals of the team, prioritizing collective outcomes over individual ones. This shared focus helps the team remain unified in their pursuit of results that matter most to the project's success.

- **Facilitating It**: Make a "*Public Declaration of Results*." Teams that commit publicly to specific outcomes often work with a more "passionate, even desperate desire to achieve those results."

Summary

Success is not a matter of mastering subtle theory, but of embracing common sense with uncommon levels of discipline. By acknowledging the "imperfections of our humanity," we can overcome the natural tendencies that make trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results so elusive.

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Supporting Activities for Putting the Model into Practice

The activities described below are not additional requirements or rigid procedures. They are lightweight practices that peer teams can use to support effective teamwork across the five aspects of the model when those elements do not emerge naturally on their own. Teams should use them selectively and adapt them to fit their context, size, and constraints.

The intent is not to "run exercises," but to create shared experiences that reinforce trust, productive conflict, clarity, accountability, and a focus on results.

Personal Histories Exercise

Supports: *Trust Through Shared Vulnerability*

Purpose: Begin building trust by helping team members see one another as people with individual backgrounds and experiences, rather than as roles or competitors.

Description: Early in the team's formation, members briefly share non-sensitive background information about themselves during a meeting. This might include things such as hometown, number of siblings, favorite hobbies, or other innocuous experiences. By sharing basic personal context, team members begin to relate to one another on a more human level and develop greater empathy and understanding.

Boundaries: This activity does not require sharing personal or sensitive information. Its purpose is familiarity, not emotional exposure.

Team Effectiveness Exercise

Supports: *Trust Through Shared Vulnerability*

Purpose:
To normalize constructive feedback and reinforce the idea that improvement is a shared responsibility.

Description: After the team has been working together, each member identifies one meaningful contribution each peer makes to the team and one specific, work-related behavior that could improve team effectiveness. Feedback is framed in terms of helping the team perform better, not evaluating personal worth.

Boundaries: Feedback should remain task- and behavior-focused. This is not a venue for revisiting resolved conflicts or airing personal grievances.

Miner of Conflict
(Supports: Productive Ideological Conflict)

Purpose:
To prevent artificial harmony by ensuring that important disagreements are surfaced and discussed.

Description: Any team member may temporarily take on the role of "Miner of Conflict" by pointing out when the team appears to be avoiding disagreement or moving forward despite unresolved differences. This role is informal and situational, not assigned permanently.

Boundaries: The goal is to surface differing ideas, not to provoke conflict for its own sake or to challenge individuals personally.

Real-Time Permission
(Supports: Productive Ideological Conflict)

Purpose: To reinforce that healthy debate is expected and valued.

Description: During heated or uncomfortable discussions, team members may explicitly remind one another that disagreement is appropriate and productive. This helps prevent misinterpreting conflict as personal tension and allows discussion to continue without apology.

Boundaries: Real-time permission does not excuse disrespectful behavior or personal attacks. It exists to protect ideas, not poor conduct.

Cascading Messaging
(Supports: Commitment Through Clarity)

Purpose: To ensure alignment and prevent confusion after decisions are made.

Description: At the end of meetings where decisions occur, the team explicitly reviews what was decided, what was not decided, and what information needs to be communicated to others (including instructors, stakeholders, or absent teammates). The team agrees on a shared message before moving on.

Boundaries: This practice emphasizes clarity, not consensus. It does not reopen decisions that have already been made.

Publishing Goals and Standards
(Supports: Peer-to-Peer Accountability)

Purpose: To make expectations visible and reduce ambiguity around performance.

Description: The team documents agreed-upon goals, deadlines, and quality standards in a shared space. This allows team members to assess progress objectively and address issues without relying on personal judgment or memory.

Boundaries: Published standards are tools for coordination, not instruments for policing or blame.

Regular Progress Reviews
(Supports: Peer-to-Peer Accountability)

Purpose: To normalize accountability through routine check-ins rather than corrective confrontations.

Description: At regular intervals, the team briefly reviews progress against stated goals and standards. Team members share updates, raise concerns, and identify obstacles while there is still time to adjust.

Boundaries: These reviews focus on progress and obstacles, not on assigning fault.

Public Declaration of Results

(Supports: Focus on Collective Results)

Purpose: To strengthen commitment by making outcomes visible and shared.

Description: The team explicitly states its intended outcomes—such as deliverables, quality targets, or milestones—to an audience outside the team (for example, another team, an instructor, or a stakeholder). This public commitment reinforces collective responsibility for results.

Boundaries: Declarations should be realistic and team-owned. The intent is motivation and alignment, not pressure or performative accountability.

Closing Note

These activities are most effective when used sparingly and intentionally. Teams that rely solely on structure without discipline will struggle, just as teams that rely solely on goodwill without shared practices will falter. The purpose of these activities is to support disciplined teamwork—not to replace it.

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*Primary source: *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by P. M. Lencioni (Jossey-Bass, 2002). Quotation marks indicate direct excerpts from the original text.

Meeting Health Check

Use these three questions to audit the meeting you just had:

1. **Conflict:** Did we avoid any "elephants in the room" or difficult topics today just to keep the peace?

2. **Commitment:** Can every person here articulate the *top priority* we agreed on and the specific tasks they own before our next meeting?

3. **Accountability:** Did we address any missed commitments or subpar work today, or did we let it slide to avoid awkwardness?

Retrospective Health Check

Use these questions to check in on team health at each retrospective.

Aspect	Team Health Check Questions
Trust	☐ Do we admit when we are wrong or when we don't know the answer? ☐ Are we comfortable asking one another for help without feeling "weak"? ☐ Do we each other well enough to assume good intentions?
Conflict	☐ Are our meetings "boring" or "off-task" because we are avoiding the real issues? ☐ Do we call out "artificial harmony" when we feel people are holding back? ☐ Is our debate focused strictly on concepts rather than personalities?
Commitment	☐ At the end of every meeting, do we explicitly state decisions and next steps? ☐ Does everyone support the final decision, even those who initially disagreed? ☐ Are we moving forward despite having less-than-perfect data?
Accountability	☐ Do we call each other out immediately when performance or behavior slips? ☐ Are we relying on peer pressure rather than waiting for external intervention? ☐ Do we regularly review progress against our "Published Standards"?
Results	☐ If the team fails, does anyone feel like they "won" individually? ☐ Are we willing to shift personal tasks to help a teammate reach a collective goal? ☐ Are our goals publicly displayed so we can see exactly where we stand?

Team Working Agreement: Our Commitment to Collective Success

Purpose

This agreement outlines the behaviors we commit to as a peer team. We recognize that our success depends on the strength of our interconnections and our collective discipline in overcoming natural team pitfalls within our continuous delivery flow.

1. Trust: Foundation of Openness

We define trust as the ability to be vulnerable with one another without fear of judgment or reprisal.

- We will proactively share our mistakes and "skill deficiencies" so the team can adapt.

- We will ask for help early when a work item is blocked or proving more difficult than expected, rather than "protective" hiding of status.

- We will accept one another's weaknesses as opportunities for the team to provide support rather than as points of criticism.

2. Conflict: Passionate Debate of Ideas

We engage in "unfiltered and passionate debate" to ensure we find the best technical and process solutions.

- We will challenge ideas, not people. We commit to avoiding "personality-focused, mean-spirited attacks."

- We will actively "mine for conflict" during replenishment or design sessions when a discussion feels too comfortable or a potential risk is being ignored.

- We will grant one another "real-time permission" to push through uncomfortable debates, knowing that healthy discord is a "time saver" for the project.

3. Commitment: Buy-in and Clarity

We commit to decisions once all voices have been "heard and considered," even when total consensus is not reached.

- We will practice "disagree and commit": once we decide on a path or a change, we support it as if it were our own.

- We will conclude every planning or ad-hoc meeting with a "Cascading Messaging" review to ensure everyone is clear on the decisions and next steps.

- We will prioritize "clarity and buy-in" over the "need for certainty," moving forward decisively even in the face of ambiguity.

4. Accountability: Peer-to-Peer Standards

We accept that the primary responsibility for maintaining high standards rests with us as peers, not with an outside facilitator.

- We will call out peers on behaviors that violate our published goals and standards, such as ignoring WIP limits or bypassing our "Definition of Done."

- We will enter the "interpersonal discomfort" of providing direct feedback when we see a teammate's work affecting the team's flow or quality.

- We will use our in-person meetings as a primary venue for peer accountability, focusing on why work is stalled rather than simply giving status updates.

5. Results: Our Collective Goal

We prioritize the "collective goals of the group" over our individual status, egos, or specialized roles.

- We will "subjugate our own interests" to ensure the team's throughput remains high. This means "swarming" on a teammate's blocked task even if it's outside our primary specialty.

- We will make "public declarations of results" by maintaining a transparent, up-to-date Kanban board that reflects our real-time progress toward our delivery milestones.

- We will evaluate our success based on the team's ability to deliver value to the customer, not on how many individual tickets a person completes.

Agreement Review

This is a living document. We will review this agreement during each **Retrospective** to ensure it remains relevant to our team's growth and flow.

Signed by the Team Members:

Agile Peer-Teams
Reading & Social Annotation *(Canvas Hypothesis Assignment)*

Purpose

Software development teams fail far more often due to **breakdowns in collaboration and decision-making** than due to gaps in technical skills.

This activity focuses on the **human systems that allow Agile practices to function**, regardless of whether work is organized into sprints, continuous flow, or other Agile development models.

You will read and annotate *A Guiding Model for Agile Peer-Teams,* which adapts Patrick Lencioni's team effectiveness model to Agile peer-teams. The behaviors described here show up directly in everyday Agile team work, influencing:

- how design and implementation choices are discussed,
- how work is prioritized and re-prioritized,
- how responsibilities are coordinated within the team,
- how uncertainty and disagreement are surfaced and resolved, and
- how feedback is exchanged among peers.

What You'll Do

Using Hypothesis, you will collaboratively annotate the attached reading creating primary annotations and threaded responses to annotations of others.

Your annotations should:

- connect the model to your past or current team experiences,
- identify behaviors you've observed in academic or professional contexts, and
- anticipate challenges you want to address proactively in team-based development work.

This assignment is designed to support effective team collaboration, not to test recall of concepts. Thoughtful engagement here will directly help both you and your teams throughout the semester.

Annotation Expectations

You are expected to make at least *five substantive annotations* and *three responses* distributed across the document. You are also expected to add a brief *page note*.

Required coverage

You must annotate passages related to each of the following:

1. Vulnerability-Based Trust
2. Productive Conflict
3. Commitment / Buy-In
4. Peer Accountability
5. Collective Results

You must *reply* to at least three annotations made by others.

You must add a brief *page note* reflecting on how the article connects to you individually.

What counts as a "substantive" annotation

A strong annotation does one or more of the following:

- Connects a concept to a concrete team behavior or situation
- Identifies a potential risk or challenge in team work
- Raises a thoughtful question or disagreement
- Applies the idea to a student software development team context

"Agree," "Interesting," or purely summary comments do **not** count.

Guiding Prompts (use these as anchors)

You do **not** need to answer all of these, but your annotations should reflect this level of thinking.

- What observable behaviors indicate *trust* in a peer team? What behaviors "fake it"?
- How do teams surface and work through disagreement constructively?
- How do teams reach commitment when complete certainty is not possible?
- What behaviors support or undermine peer accountability?
- How do teams demonstrate a focus on *collective results* when grades/rewards are individual?

How This Will Be Assessed

This assignment is graded on *quality of engagement,* not on holding particular viewpoints.

Evaluation focuses on on:

- Evidence of careful reading
- Specificity and clarity of examples
- Thoughtful engagement with ideas and peer
- Constructive participation in shared annotation

There are *no* "right answers." There *are* shallow responses.

Why This Matters

The team dynamics described in this reading commonly influence how group work unfolds over time. They often surface in peer evaluations at the end of the semester, when too late to fix.

Engaging with these ideas early helps teams:

- develop shared language for discussing collaboration,
- clarify expectations for peer interaction, and
- address issues before they become difficult to resolve.

This reading is intended to support intentional, reflective team practices throughout the course.

Peer Evaluation Rubric

(Provided for transparency and alignment. Not all items may be scored directly)

This rubric reflects the same five dimensions from the reading. It emphasizes **observable behaviors**, not personality or popularity.

Rating Scale

4 – Consistently

3 – Usually

2 – Inconsistently

1 – Rarely / Not at all

1. Vulnerability-Based Trust

Guiding question

To what extent does this person's behavior make it safer for others to be honest?

Observable indicators

- Admits mistakes or gaps in understanding
- Asks for help early rather than hiding issues
- Responds constructively to others' mistakes

2. Productive Conflict

Guiding question

To what extent does this person's behavior help the team surface real issues rather than avoid them?

Observable indicators

- Raises concerns or alternative ideas when appropriate
- Challenges ideas without attacking people
- Engages directly rather than complaining privately

3. Commitment / Buy-In

Guiding question

After a decision, to what extent does this person's behavior demonstrate follow-through or alignment?

Observable indicators

- Supports team decisions once made
- Seeks clarity rather than stalling for certainty
- Aligns work with agreed-upon priorities

4. Peer Accountability

Guiding question

To what extent does this person's behavior help maintain standards?

Observable indicators

- Meets agreed-upon responsibilities
- Addresses missed commitments directly
- Accepts feedback without defensiveness

5. Focus on Collective Results

Guiding question

To what extent does this person's behavior optimize team success over personal success?

Observable indicators

- Prioritizes team success over individual credit
- Helps unblock teammates when needed
- Keeps attention on deliverables and outcomes

6. Open-Response Prompts

- What is this teammate's **greatest strength** for the team?
- What is one **specific behavior** that would improve team effectiveness?
- Is there anything this teammate does that **quietly undermines** the team?

Note to Students

Peer evaluation is not about punishment.

It is about **making invisible work visible** and giving teams a chance to improve before problems harden into resentment.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team Model

Introduction for participants of *Student Teams Event* at SIGCSE-TS 2026

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable (P. M. Lencioni, Jossey-Bass, 2002)*,* presents a guide for leaders/managers to help them build effective teams. The body of the work uses story-telling (thus, the subtitle) to help readers connect with the underlying model.

The model defined by Patrick Lencioni defines these five dysfunctions *(annotations in parentheses added for clarity):*

- **Absence of Trust** *(specifically a lack of vulnerability-based openness)*
- **Fear of Conflict** *(avoiding productive, ideological debate)*
- **Lack of Commitment** *(failing to achieve genuine buy-in)*
- **Avoidance of Accountability** *(hesitation to call-out peer behavior)*
- **Inattention to Results** *(prioritizing personal status over team goals)*

The overwhelmingly positive reception of the book and its model has spawned many supporting products, including assessments, workshops, and field guides. It also serves as a foundation for Lencioni's subsequent works, such as *The Ideal Team Player,* which focuses on helping leaders hire and cultivate effective team members.

[https://www.tablegroup.com/topics-and-resources/teamwork-5-dysfunctions/]

Inattention to Results

Avoidance of Accountability

Lack of Commitment

Fear of Conflict

Absence of Trust