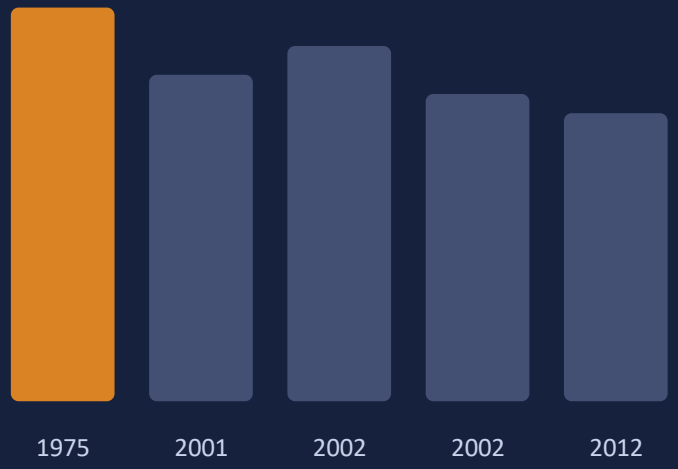
What Five Books Taught Me About Building Things With People

Forty years of the same lesson, learned five different ways



Tree Lindemann-Michael

Five Dysfunctions of a Team · Crucial Conversations · Good to Great · The Mythical Man-Month · The Advantage

The premise of this talk

> **You are being trained to solve the kind of problem that is almost never the reason projects fail.**

THE READING LIST

Five books. Four decades. One conclusion.

1975

The Mythical Man-Month

Fred Brooks

IBM OS/360

2001

Good to Great

Jim Collins

11 companies

2002

The Five Dysfunctions

Patrick Lencioni

A leadership fable

2002

Crucial Conversations

Patterson et al.

Dialogue under stress

2012

The Advantage

Patrick Lencioni

Organizational health

Brooks wrote his in 1975, about punch cards and mainframes. **Nothing about the technology survived. Every observation about people did.**

1

MONTHS 0–12 · YOU JOIN A TEAM

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team + Crucial Conversations — both 2002

Why does my smart team feel dumb?

> *"Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare."*

Lencioni, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

A pyramid, not a list

Read it bottom-up

Each dysfunction ***causes*** the next one up. A team that can't trust each other won't argue honestly. A team that won't argue honestly never truly commits — people leave the room without buying in. Uncommitted people don't hold each other accountable. And a team that avoids accountability defaults to protecting individual status over the shared result.

You cannot fix the top of the pyramid by working on the top of the pyramid.

ACT 1 · THE MOST USEFUL IDEA IN THE BOOK

Trust is an overloaded word

Predictive trust

“I trust you to deliver.”

Cheap and transactional. It's a track record, not a relationship — and it takes months to build.

Vulnerability-based trust

“I can say I don't understand this in front of you.”

Admitting weakness, error, and ignorance without political cost. This is the one that matters.

What this looks like in a design review

Without it

Nobody asks the “dumb” question. Four engineers implement against four different mental models of what the service owns. You find out in integration week.

With it

Someone says “wait — what does this service actually own?” in minute three of the meeting. You save six weeks.

The dysfunction you will personally cause

Layer 2: Fear of Conflict

“I've been here six weeks. They must know something I don't.”

As the newest person on a team, you will be the single most incentivized human in the room to nod.

Sometimes they do know something you don't. Often nobody knows — and everyone else in the room is doing the same math you are.

Artificial harmony is not politeness. It's a delay mechanism. The disagreement doesn't disappear — it gets deferred to a point in the project where resolving it costs ten times more.

ACT 1 · CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS, 2002

Lencioni diagnoses. This book prescribes.

A “CRUCIAL CONVERSATION” HAS ALL THREE

1. **Stakes are high**
2. **Opinions vary**
3. **Emotions run strong**

THE FOOL'S CHOICE

The false dilemma that you must choose between being honest ***or*** keeping the relationship. Nearly every silence you will choose in your first year is justified by this choice — and it isn't real.

Silence

Withholding meaning from the Pool of Shared Meaning.

Masking · Avoiding · Withdrawing

Violence

Forcing meaning into it — compelling others to your view.

Controlling · Labeling · Attacking

You react to your story, not to the facts

1 See & hear

The facts. What a camera would have recorded.

2 Tell a story

You add meaning and motive. Instantly, invisibly.

3 Feel

The emotion follows the story, not the facts.

4 Act

Silence, violence, or dialogue.

Step 2 is the whole ballgame. It takes milliseconds, you don't notice it, and everything downstream is built on it.

Victim

"It's not my fault."

You exaggerate your own innocence and edit out your contribution.

Villain

"It's all your fault."

You assume the worst possible motive and ignore any decent one.

Helpless

"There's nothing else I can do."

You conclude no healthy option exists, so you don't look for one.

The repair: turn victims into actors, villains into humans, and the helpless into the able.

ACT 1 · THE MOST ACTIONABLE SLIDE IN THIS TALK

The actual script

STATE MY PATH — AMBER = WHAT YOU SAY · NAVY = HOW YOU SAY IT

S	**Share your facts**	What a camera saw. Least arguable, most persuasive.
T	**Tell your story**	Your interpretation — labeled as yours.
A	**Ask for others' paths**	Invite their facts and their story.
T	**Talk tentatively**	"I'm wondering if…" not "here's the situation."
E	**Encourage testing**	Mean it when you ask to be contradicted.

AMPP — WHEN THEY GO QUIET

- **A — Ask**
  Be genuinely curious about their view.
- **M — Mirror**
  Name the emotion you're seeing.
- **P — Paraphrase**
  Say their point back in your words.
- **P — Prime**
  Guess out loud, carefully, to get them started.

WHY THIS SHOULD FEEL FAMILIAR

Facts first, interpretation second, clearly separated. That is the same discipline as keeping a stack trace apart from your theory about the bug — and you already know how badly a debugging session goes when someone confuses the two.

ACT 1 TAKEAWAY

> **The best thing a new engineer can do for a team is ask the question everyone is privately confused about.**

Lencioni tells you what the silence is costing. Crucial Conversations tells you what to say. Start with the facts — always the facts first.

2

YEARS 1–3 · YOU SHIP SOMETHING HARD

The Mythical Man-Month — Fred Brooks, 1975

The book that refuses to become obsolete

Brooks managed IBM's OS/360 — one of the largest software projects ever attempted at the time. It was massively, famously late. He wrote down why. Fifty years later it is still right.

The only book on this list whose author's main credential is a famous failure.

The myth is in the title

The unit “man-month” assumes that people and time are interchangeable — that one person for twelve months equals twelve people for one month.

True for picking cotton

Tasks that partition cleanly, with no communication between workers.

False for software

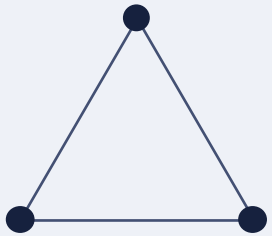
Tasks with sequential constraints and dense communication between the people doing them.

BROOKS'S LAW

“Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.”

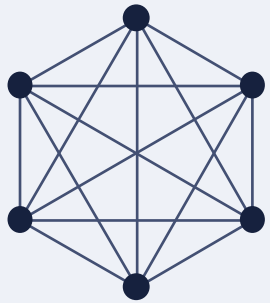
Headcount grows linearly. Coordination is quadratic.

Communication paths among n people = **n(n − 1) / 2**



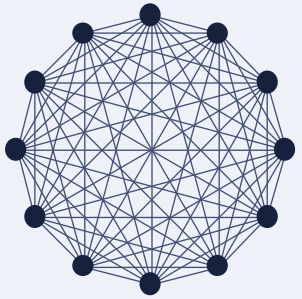
3 people

3 paths



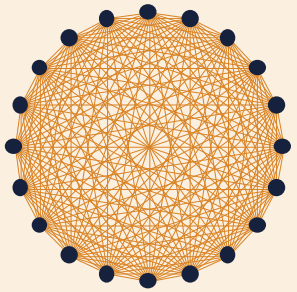
6 people

15 paths



12 people

66 paths



20 people

190 paths

6.7× the people. 63× the coordination.

Nobody budgets for the second number.

And it gets worse. Every new person is trained by the people who were already productive — so you remove capacity exactly when you're most desperate for it.

ACT 2 · CONCEPTUAL INTEGRITY

One clear idea, imperfectly built

> *"It is better to have a system omit certain anomalous features and improvements, but to reflect one set of design ideas, than to have one that contains many good but independent and uncoordinated ideas."*

A system that reflects one coherent idea, imperfectly, beats a system that reflects nine good ideas incoherently. Every codebase you have ever hated was the second kind.

Brooks's word for this is conceptual integrity, and he treats it as the single most important property of a design — worth protecting even at the cost of good features.

FLAG THIS — PAID OFF IN ACT 4

Conceptual integrity in a system and clarity in an organization are the same idea at two different scales.

Two Brooks observations you'll recognize

1

The optimism trap

Programmers assume “all will go well.” Brooks's explanation: your medium is pure thought-stuff, so you believe implementation will be trivial once the idea is clear. Then reality supplies the bugs.

Any single task has a small chance of trouble. Chain a hundred of them and delay stops being a risk and becomes arithmetic.

2

The second-system effect

The most dangerous system anyone designs is their second one. The first was disciplined by inexperience. On the second, they finally get to add every idea they had to leave out.

Watch for this in yourself around year three, when you first feel competent enough to be dangerous.

ACT 2 · NO SILVER BULLET, 1986

Two kinds of difficulty

Accidental complexity

Artifacts of our tools

Slow builds, bad debuggers, memory management, boilerplate. Better languages and tooling attack this — and have won real victories.

Mostly already harvested.

Essential complexity

The difficulty of the problem itself

What should this do? For whom? Interacting with what? Under which constraints that nobody has written down?

Irreducible. No tool touches it.

Brooks's claim: no single tool or method will deliver an order-of-magnitude improvement, because most of what remains is essential.

So — the 2026 question: AI coding assistants are the largest accidental-complexity win in decades. Do they touch the essential half?

ACT 2 TAKEAWAY

You cannot buy your way out of a schedule with headcount. Time is the one input that doesn't scale.

When a project is late you have two honest levers: cut scope or move the date. Adding people is a third option that looks like a lever which is a trap.

3

YEARS 3–7 · YOU START TO LEAD

Good to Great — Jim Collins, 2001

Why do some teams compound?

1,435

companies screened

11

met every criterion

3×

the market, for 15 years

Returns at or below the market for 15 years, a transition point, then at least 3× the market for 15 more — regardless of industry.

ACT 3 · FOUR FINDINGS WORTH KEEPING

Not all seven. These four.

1 Level 5 Leadership

Personal humility plus intense professional will. Ambition aimed at the work, not the self. Contrast: the celebrity CEO who succeeds and leaves behind an organization that cannot function without them.

2 First Who, Then What

Get the right people on the bus before deciding where the bus is going — because with the right people you can adapt when the destination changes. And it always changes.

3 Confront the Brutal Facts

The Stockdale Paradox: unwavering faith that you will prevail, combined with disciplined honesty about your present situation. Both, at the same time.

4 The Flywheel

No single dramatic push. Consistent pushes in a consistent direction until momentum becomes its own force. The alternative is the doom loop — reinvention every eighteen months.

ACT 3 · THIS ONE IS FOR THIS ROOM SPECIFICALLY

Technology accelerates. It does not create.

Collins's finding

None of the eleven companies began their transformation with pioneering technology. Technology accelerated momentum that already existed. It never created it.

The corollary

Applied to a bad plan, technology just gets you to the wrong place faster.

NOTICE WHAT JUST HAPPENED

This is Brooks's essential-versus-accidental split, arriving from a completely different direction fifteen years later — from a business researcher who almost certainly never read him.

ACT 3 · DO NOT SKIP THIS SLIDE

Now let me undermine the book I just recommended

Collins picked winners, then looked backward for shared traits. Several of the eleven “great” companies subsequently struggled badly or failed outright.

Circuit City

Bankrupt, 2008

Fannie Mae

Federal conservatorship, 2008

Wells Fargo

Major scandal, 2016

The methodological problem, named plainly

Selecting on the dependent variable, plus survivorship bias. If you only study winners, you cannot know whether the traits you found caused the winning — or whether they're common everywhere and only got noticed here. The mediocre companies with humble, disciplined leaders aren't in the sample, because nobody writes books about them.

THE HONEST POSITION

The observations are sharp and worth internalizing. The causal claim — do these things and you will become great — is not supported by the method. Read it as good hypotheses, not a recipe.

ACT 3 TAKEAWAY

Compounding beats intensity. And be suspicious of anyone who only studied the winners.

4

YEARS 7+ · YOU SET DIRECTION

The Advantage — Patrick Lencioni, 2012

Smart is not the constraint

SMART

Strategy, marketing, finance, technology.

Where nearly all executive attention, consulting spend, and MBA hours go.

HEALTHY

Minimal politics, minimal confusion, high morale, low unwanted turnover.

Almost universally neglected — because it looks soft and unmeasurable.

ACT 4 · THE ADVANTAGE

Four disciplines, in order

1

Build a cohesive leadership team

The Act 1 pyramid, ten years later, aimed at the top of the org.

2

Create clarity

Alignment on the answers to six questions — not just on the questions.

3

Overcommunicate clarity

Roughly seven repetitions before a message actually lands.

4

Reinforce clarity

Embedded in hiring, onboarding, reviews, and firing.

THE ACT 2 PAYOFF

Brooks's conceptual integrity and Lencioni's clarity are the same idea — one coherent set of ideas, imperfectly executed, beating nine good uncoordinated ones.

AND THE ACT 2 ECHO

Keep the leadership team small — three to ten people. Beyond that, honest conflict stops and people shift from engaging to reporting. Compare Brooks: $n(n-1)/2$.

ACT 4 · THE MOST PORTABLE THING IN THIS TALK

Six questions every group should be able to answer

1. Why do we exist?
2. How do we behave?
3. What do we do?
4. How will we succeed?
5. **What is most important, right now?**
6. Who must do what?

QUESTION 5 — THE THEMATIC GOAL

Singular, qualitative, temporary, shared. One thing that matters most for the next three to twelve months, owned by the whole team rather than one department. Singular is the hard part — six priorities is zero priorities.

TRY IT ON YOUR OWN TEAM

Ask these six about your senior project, your club, your last internship team. Most groups cannot answer 5 or 6 — and every member assumed everyone else could.

THE CLOSE

What all five books are actually saying

1

Clarity beats cleverness

Brooks calls it conceptual integrity in a system. Lencioni calls it clarity in an organization. One coherent idea, imperfectly executed, beats nine good uncoordinated ones.

2

You cannot buy time

Brooks: not with headcount. Collins: not with a dramatic push. Both arrive at patient, consistent, directed effort as the only mechanism that works.

3

Information has to move

Brooks measured the cost of moving it. Lencioni named what blocks it. Crucial Conversations is the technique for unblocking it, one conversation at a time.

4

The hard part is never the technology

A computer scientist, a business researcher, a management consultant twice, and four trainers. All five went looking for the bottleneck. All five found people.

> **Your degree makes you competent. These books are about the other thing — and nobody is going to assign them to you.**

REFLECTION · SUBMIT FOR ATTENDANCE

Three questions. Short answers.

1. Describe a team you've been on class project, job, club, or sports where something went wrong. Using one of the frameworks from today, name what was happening. Be specific about which idea applies, and why.

2. Brooks argued in 1986 that the remaining difficulty in software is essential, not accidental, that better tools can't remove the hard part, which is figuring out what to build. Do AI coding assistants change that? Take a position and defend it.

3. Pick the one idea from today you're most skeptical of. Say why.

Thank you.