

Work in Progress

BY NICHOLAS OWCHAR '90



JIM FIDELIBUS PHOTOGRAPHY

At professional football training camps, Pat Lencioni '87 has applied time-honored corporate lessons to managing successful athletic teams. In the process, he has learned something surprising about some fresh new recruits preparing to be tomorrow's gridiron heroes.

They're unhappy.

Despite the taste of fame, money, and attention of fans and media, they feel unfulfilled.

"I never expected that, and then I realized something," he explains. "A playing field is no different from a business office. Everyone needs connections. You can work for the best company, but if you don't think your manager cares about you as a person, you're going to feel unsatisfied. That's what these kids wanted from their coaches."

So take heart, rank and file members of corporate America, for even those with the most interesting jobs probably share your disappointments and frustrations.

Turning 43 in July, Lencioni has found a mission—a crusade, even—in alleviating such problems in businesses across a broad spectrum of industries: whether at McKesson and Barnes & Noble, Southwest Airlines or with the 49ers and the Chargers. In a May article in the *Wall Street Journal* about business gurus, Lencioni was mentioned as one of the "most in-demand" speakers today, in the company of *Good to Great* author Jim Collins and *Our Iceberg is Melting* author John Kotter. He created a consulting company, The Table Group, and has authored a string of business bestsellers that are candid and frank—not to mention often humorous—about what's wrong with the American office. Just consider these titles:

Death by Meeting

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team

The Three Signs of a Miserable Job

"Have you ever sat in a meeting and just looked around?" Lencioni says. "Everybody looks miserable. They're

probably all thinking, 'What are we doing here? When is this going to be over?' I felt there had to be a better way."

That desire to find better solutions is what has driven his career since graduating from CMC in 1987: to improve the effectiveness of companies by focusing on their most precious asset — their employees.

"It doesn't matter who we're talking about, a sports star or a business person," he says.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of his first book, *The Five Temptations of a CEO*, and Lencioni's new book, coming in the fall, takes him into uncharted waters outside of the business environment to a place in as much need of help as an executive boardroom. The title says it all: *The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family*. With close to 3 million copies of his books now in print (they lead the list for his publisher, Jossey-Bass) and with a thriving business that companies seek for help, Lencioni credits his success to something he recognized early in his career—there are some rules that never change and that people often forget.

He has been only too happy to fashion a career out of reminding them.

Lencioni must be one of the more unusual econ majors that CMC has ever had—he was the guy who took as much coursework outside his major as the registrar would allow.

"I think I was really a liberal arts major by another name," he said. "I loved studying whatever was interesting for me, and that was the nice thing about the college: I never felt like



“Have you ever sat in a meeting and just looked around? Everybody looks miserable. They’re probably all thinking, *What are we doing here? When is this going to be over?* I felt there had to be a better way.”

– Patrick Lencioni, on an inspiring thought for *Death By Meeting: A Leadership Fable... About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business* (Jossey-Bass, 2004, not pictured). Lencioni’s recent books, *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job* and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, are part of the author’s long string of business bestsellers.

I needed to limit myself.”

So, he didn’t. With a double major in Economics and Spanish, Lencioni studied journalism, screenwriting, psychology—wherever his interests took him. And he’s brave enough to admit now that he had no idea who Peter Drucker was, even though at the time Lencioni attended CMC the management guru was settled a few streets away, at Claremont Graduate School.

Lencioni describes his humble middle class beginnings in Bakersfield, the son of loving parents who, though they never attended college, wanted this experience for him. Growing up in this community in California’s Central Valley, Lencioni said he felt very far away from the buzzing, cosmopolitan energy of the big cities.

“I was very naive about what was available in the world of work,” he says. Still, Lencioni explains that he recognized early that “I had a gut feel for organizations and managing people, and I liked writing.”

At CMC, Lencioni was inspired by Ralph Juhnke, a former psychology professor (“I’d have to say he was my favorite,” he says), as well as by Nick Warner’s class on the Russian novel (“an incredible teacher”) and by Rod Smith’s qualitative approach to economics (“it was invaluable to me”). He felt energized and eager, as graduation approached, to make a difference.

His first job out of CMC was with the prestigious management consulting firm, Bain and Company. Lencioni surveyed a management landscape that was not what he expected. He was disappointed.

“I spent long, arduous days in number-crunching and analysis,” he said. “For me, it was miserable, it wasn’t tapping

into my liberal arts. I knew that the human side of helping organizations was lacking for clients.”

Early on, Lencioni realized he would need to change the management consulting model himself. A turning point occurred for him while working with Bain and Company senior executive Meg Whitman (the former CEO of eBay) on a case involving a company suffering from staff conflicts and interdepartmental competition. It was an ugly case of pure politics that no amount of stats and numbers would solve.

“We gave them all kinds of analyses and, most of the time, they weren’t using them because no one wanted to cooperate or share with other departments,” he said. “When I approached my bosses and said, ‘This makes no sense. We need to try something else,’ I was told, ‘There isn’t something else. This is what we do.’”

Lencioni started developing his own theory about why companies struggled, and as he moved on to work for Oracle and Sybase, he refined his ideas. He scribbled them with a squeaky black marker countless times on the familiar white boards found in most every conference room. Then, a client surprised him with a comment he hadn’t expected: You should write a book.

“You think so?” he said, and soon he realized that he should. He began writing what would become *The Five Temptations of a CEO* at night, after his family went to bed. He drew on his screenwriting and dialogue classes at CMC to craft a novel about characters facing corporate dilemmas and struggling to find a way out. Although he only planned to make copies at a copying store to distribute in the office, he found publishers eager to help his vision of the workplace reach a wider audience.

Business books are a reliable profit area for publishers. Customer demands are perennial, which is why publishers have a nickname for them: “evergreens.” Every company, especially in difficult economic times, needs guidance. Some of the most successful of these evergreens, which routinely reappear on bestsellers lists, include Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Spencer Johnson’s *Who Moved My Cheese?* and Jim Collins’ *Good to Great*—all delivering advice in a sermon-like tone with plenty of anecdotes and bulletpoints.

Open one of Lencioni’s books, however, and you immediately notice how he is different. Take, for example, this moment from *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*:

When his employees were all seated...the new manager began. He admitted to his wife, Leslie, later that he was a little nervous, not knowing how these people would respond. He hadn’t feared a revolt or anything like that. It was the prospect of complete indifference that somehow frightened him the most.

Deciding not to be clever or subtle, Brian got right to the point. “Show of hands. How many of you like your jobs?”

Nothing.

People just looked at one another as though Brian had asked the question in Russian....

“Okay, let me be clearer.... How many people here get excited about coming to work? How many of you are in a really good mood when you’re driving here?”

Brian might as well have asked them if they liked being beaten with a stick. No one raised their hand, and more than a few of them actually laughed out loud.

Where are the bullets? Where are the pithy, fortune cookie-sized sayings? Writing about management, Lencioni realized, didn’t need to stay in the realm of nonfiction. Telling a story, in the form of a fable, was what he decided would work best; that’s the approach he took from the very beginning with *The Five Temptations of a CEO*.

“I bought too many business books that I never finished because they weren’t compelling enough,” he says. “I thought, if I really want people to understand my points, shouldn’t I portray them in a way that’s memorable?”

In the course of the book on miserable jobs, for instance, the main character, Brian Bailey, a retired business executive, uncovers the reasons why there is so much frustration and dissatisfaction in most workplaces. It boils down to people not feeling that they’re having a tangible impact on the world. The person in any company who is crucial to conveying (or failing to convey) this message to employees is a manager.

“People don’t leave companies,” Lencioni explains. “Generally what I’ve found is that they leave bad managers.”

His books are a distillation of a strategy developed by his company, The Table Group, to help clients develop sound business practices even as they study how human dynamics affect the bottom line. The human factor mustn’t be overlooked, which is why Lencioni feels that straight financial analyses of business problems fail to create effective long-term results. On the other hand, Lencioni says that the opposite extreme among consultants—retreats involving plenty of group hugs and drumbeating around a bonfire—fall short as well.

“There are plenty of touchy-feely consultants who want everyone to hold hands and talk about love and study auras,” he says. “No, thank you! I’m not interested in that.”

Nor are most executives, although Lencioni points out that some are driven by desperation to try just about anything to rally their management teams.

Lencioni saw an enormous opportunity waiting for him.

The Lencionis have a very busy household. He and his wife, CMC alumna Laura Gilmore ’89, have their hands full with four boys: twins who just turned 10, a 5-year-old, and a two-year-old. He thinks about their future a great deal, about the kind of work environment they’re going to face one day.

“I don’t want them to ever have a career where they hate what they do or feel helpless to do anything about a poor situation,” he said.

He and Laura want their sons to have well-rounded interests and educations and to understand that the best way to work with people is to inspire them with one’s integrity, not with punishments and rewards.

It seems a little inevitable, then, that Lencioni’s forthcoming book leaves the corporate environment to address *The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family*. And yet, he says, business principles are just as applicable here as in an office. Perhaps, he says, they’re even more applicable.

“Families are under-managed,” he says. “If businesses ran like many of us run our families, they’d go out of business.”

Priorities are out of whack, expectations are skewed, time management is abysmal—Lencioni has observed it all. But before offering solutions to other parents, Lencioni knew that he needed to first apply them to his own family.

That is why, though he says that his company has potential clients all over the world (in Asia, for instance), Lencioni has preferred to keep operations firmly grounded in the Bay Area, where he and his family live. It isn’t that he minds air travel. His reason is simple.

“If I were traveling more, I wouldn’t be able to coach my boys’ soccer and baseball teams,” he said. “I couldn’t imagine not being there with them.”