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Business guru talks management as ministry

by Monica Clark

San Francisco — Organizational management is a ministry and doing it well is fundamental to success, business guru Patrick Lencioni told the 600 attendees gathered here Sept. 14-16 for the annual meeting of Catholic Charities USA.

Lencioni, who has written 10 books on how to create and maintain effective organizations, outlined the building blocks of organizational health during his keynote address, based on his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Whether the company is on the Fortune 500 list or a small nonprofit, the skills of healthy executive teams, he said, remain the same: building and maintaining trust, dealing with conflict in a spirit of truth, bringing staff to commitment, holding one another accountable and focusing on collective outcomes.

Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, said the annual gathering usually includes some focus on how to improve its local agencies' internal functioning, and that made Lencioni a good choice for keynote speaker. "I've read all his books," Snyder said. "Some academics might not appreciate his populist style, but his ideas work."

In a presentation that drew examples from his experience as a management consultant and as a husband and father of four sons, Lencioni, 48, emphasized trust as the cornerstone of a well-functioning team. Such trust, he said, flows from a willingness to be vulnerable to one another, to say, "I made a mistake," "I don't know," "Can you help me?" and "I'm sorry."

"One person who can't be vulnerable changes the dynamic and weighs down the entire team, Lencioni said.

He urged leaders to listen to the feedback of others and to recognize areas for their own personal

improvement. Without this attitude, he said, credibility is lost.

Once trust is firmly established, staff will feel free to express opinions and to disagree with one another without fear of reprisal, he said. "Conflict without trust is politics." He said that respectful disagreement must focus on ideas.

He told of working with a large organization that had a department member who was so critical and judgmental that other members were wary of speaking during team discussions. Lencioni recommended that the team leader speak to the person about the behavior. Met with strong resistance, the leader ultimately moved the person to another department where collaborative meetings were not required.

Lencioni, who worked as a corporate executive with Sybase, Oracle Corporation and Bain & Company before starting his own consulting firm, The Table Group, in 1997, warned Catholic Charities executives against the urge to avoid conflicts out of a false notion that always being agreeable is a Gospel value. "Jesus did not say, 'Be nice,' " he reminded the group. Rather, "Jesus said to love one another."

Acknowledging and working through a disagreement or conflict in a spirit of truth can be an act of love, said Lencioni, a member of St. Mary Parish in Walnut Creek, Calif., and a teacher in its confirmation program.

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