

Leading Teams #2: Stages of Group Development¹

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Most organizations rely on strong, effective groups and teams to operate. Many theories and models related to teams and team development exist. However, Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model of group development is still the most used (Fritz et al., 2005). In this article, we outline the five stages of small-group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Team members and leaders can use this model to improve their effectiveness (Burns, 1995). In the *Leading Teams* series, we discuss each stage in depth and provide actions leaders can use to guide their teams through each stage.

Five Stages of Small-Group Development

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) provide a foundation for how teams develop consistently through a series of five stages (Figure 1). The five stages of group development are: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). This model is criticized for being linear. Newer models recognize teams as flexible and dynamic (McGrath, 1991; Morgan et al., 1993, Poole, 1983; Wheelan, 2009). In these models, teams often skip phases, moving through them at different rates. These models also show how groups have setbacks and challenges; this publication describes how one can linearly progress through stages, noting when it may be appropriate to backtrack and revisit previous stages.



Figure 1. Stages of small-group development.
Credits: Tuckman and Jensen (1977)

Extension professionals commonly use this model, which is easily applied in other settings (Wilson et al., 2010). When teams and leaders understand these stages, they can help their team move through the stages. Teams who skip stages may end up stuck at a certain stage in the model. For instance, teams who skip the forming stage and never spend time getting to know one another may struggle to move past conflict and out of the storming stage. This model can also be used to identify where a team may be stuck or when a team should adjourn, celebrate their successes, and start again at the forming stage. Below we will outline each of the stages.

Forming

The first stage is the forming stage. In this stage, the team is established, and members are introduced to one another. Team members invest time getting to know one another. While new teams may find this time uncomfortable, spending social time learning more about team members is an important part of team development. This is when team members form initial perceptions of each other. Typically, individuals are polite and positive. Members begin to determine the energy and time they will need to devote to the group. Members do not yet have clearly defined roles or responsibilities (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

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While forming, team leaders should provide a space for introductions and casual social interactions. They can use this time to establish expectations for communication and team membership. The team leader should provide the “big picture” and help members understand why the team was created. While team members might not yet understand their role, they should understand why they are included on the team.

Storming

Storming is the second stage of group development. During storming, disagreements and conflict arise among members. Members feel more comfortable because they know each other better. Personality differences between members become obvious, which can create conflict (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Individuals begin to test boundaries. They also may ask questions about structure, responsibilities, and/or leadership. These questions can increase disagreements. Team members often experience discomfort and stress in this stage.

Working through conflict is normal and even healthy for most teams. Team leaders should not worry if their team experiences conflict; it is a necessary part of the development process and teaches teams how to establish healthy ways of resolving conflict. Conflict is critical since it leads to different and shared ideas. To improve collaboration, leaders should normalize healthy conflict by differentiating between negative and positive conflict, providing feedback, and facilitating group decisions. Though trust begins to develop in the forming stage, it builds in the storming stage thanks to healthy conflict, and team members thus strengthen their relationships.

Norming

The storming stage results in agreement on shared goals and roles. A team thereafter enters the norming stage. In the norming stage, differences among team members are understood and no longer cause discomfort. Instead, group members appreciate the strengths of others. Roles are delegated accordingly. Members find a team flow. They are engaged and committed. Team members have increased confidence and decreased stress. As new tasks are introduced or challenges arise, groups might briefly revert to the storming stage. However, groups practice successful conflict resolution in the norming stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

As a team leader, it is important to acknowledge both team and individual work. Continual feedback is needed to keep up the momentum of the team during this stage. The team

leader should observe team dynamics. They may need to step in to help resolve conflict but should allow members to try to solve disagreement themselves. Team leaders should ensure all members feel they can contribute and are engaged.

Performing

As the name indicates, the performing stage is when a team begins to perform at a high level. Team members continue working on their assigned tasks. The group feels connected and members interact comfortably with one another. Tension between members is minimal. Team members discuss differences of opinion and hold each other accountable. Members work together to achieve team goals (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The focus in this stage is on shared team success. Team members fully trust one another and the team. This results in high commitment and motivation toward assigned tasks.

A team leader in this stage should take a hands-off approach and observe. They may delegate tasks but will oversee completion from afar. They do not often intervene but should monitor forward movement. They should praise individuals for both task success and their efforts at collaboration. Team leaders and members should feel synergy in this stage.

Adjourning

The adjourning stage was added to Tuckman’s 1965 model in 1977. This stage occurs when a team’s work concludes or transitions. This can result in a team disbanding or taking on a new task, focus, or membership. Teams sometimes skip this stage. However, this stage creates space for teams to celebrate accomplishments and reflect on opportunities for improvement. This stage has also been termed the “mourning stage.” It can be difficult for members who have built strong relationships with teammates. It is also an important phase for new teams to emerge for additional projects (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Team leaders should make sure both individual and team achievements are celebrated and formally recognized during this stage.

Conclusions

Extension professionals who understand team processes and their team’s stage of development are better prepared to be team members and leaders. As team members, they can assist in moving through the stages and investing time in each stage to increase team synergy. As a team leader, they can utilize strategies to assist team members and facilitate team collaboration. In the next five publications in this

series, we will study in-depth each stage, offering stage-based strategies for strengthening team dynamics.

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