

# Leading Teams #3: Forming<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Organizations frequently use groups and teams to accomplish work. [Group development models](#) suggest groups and teams progress through a life cycle of stages as they establish and develop interpersonal relationships and processes to accomplish their work (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 2005). Development begins as soon as members are selected and introduced, which initiates the forming stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). As a part of the *Leading Teams* series, this article explains the *forming stage* of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). This article highlights when to use a team and what to expect during this stage and shares practical tips for leaders and team members in the forming stage.

## Deciding to Use a Team

Prior to assembling a team, consider whether a team is necessary for the task. As we indicated in [the introductory publication of this series](#), teams are considered a special type of group (Levi, 2014) and can be distinguished by the type of work they perform. Collective output and shared accountability are key features of teamwork (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005). Consider if the task you have identified is complex enough to require multiple people working interdependently.

We suggest weighing the benefits and drawbacks of working in teams against the intended goals and outputs of the project. Teams must overcome barriers related to trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and details (Lencioni, 2002). Therefore, while teams can create higher-level outputs, they also require greater time investment for true success. This should be considered in your decision to assemble a team. Once you determine what work is needed, and that forming a team would be beneficial, you should identify the knowledge and skills team members will need to accomplish the task. The knowledge and skills required for the task should guide your selection of team members.

## What is forming?

The name of the stage—forming—is quite literal. This is the stage during which the team initially forms or comes together. Group development begins as soon as members are identified and start to form as a team (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Teams can form organically or be assigned. Regardless of how a team comes together, the first interactions are sometimes awkward as members get to know one another.

In the beginning, team members may be somewhat reserved and adhere to social rules and cues. Members will look to leaders or influential team members for signals on how to act and interact. Part of forming includes building a foundation of trust—the essential backbone for team

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success (Lencioni, 2002). Time investment allowing team members to really get to know one another in this initial stage should be viewed as a long-term investment for establishing trust.

In some situations, new members may join the team after the team has been working together for some time. The process of a new member getting to know their team is called socialization (Franz, 2012). During socialization, the new or potential teammate is seeking information that confirms their acceptance in and role within the team. Strong teams revisit the forming stage and invest in getting to know each team member when a new team member joins. Team members must spend enough time becoming familiar with each other and the team's goals to develop trust and to ease their transition through subsequent stages in the group development model, storming and norming.

## What should leaders know?

Effective team leaders begin by investing time in the forming stage and relationship building. While this may not feel task-oriented to some, it establishes trust and leads to greater cohesion in the future. Leaders should include icebreaker activities and reserve social time in each meeting so team members are encouraged and have time allocated to building strong relationships with each other.

During forming, team members are looking for clues about appropriate behavior and clarity on team tasks, goals, and their roles. Leaders should pay attention to these behaviors and the power dynamics (Greer, 2014)—especially which team members may be perceived as high status and influential. It is likely that team members will look to those influential members for direction or may shy away from disagreeing with them. Moreover, initial interactions often set precedent for future interactions and evolve into norms.

Team norms are shared beliefs about appropriate behavior (Franz, 2012). Leaders should be cognizant of potential norms being established. Negative behaviors or those that may inhibit team productivity should be identified and corrected quickly. The team leader may need to intervene and encourage equal participation of all team members. Leaders should facilitate team activities that create positive team norms, such as goal setting, writing ground rules, creating a team contract, etc. Helping teams establish positive norms early in their development can increase their chances of success (Franz, 2012).

Additionally, leaders should be patient and give time, opportunity, and encouragement for team members

to establish and develop positive social relationships. Members will be focused on their individual behavior, not overall team behavior; therefore, leaders should provide information and structure to lay the foundation for teamwork. Some teams will begin with predetermined roles for team members. However, other teams may be assembled without clarity on who will carry out which tasks.

There are tools and tactics to help members find purpose and role direction in the forming stage. For example, role analysis is a process where a facilitator assists team members in articulating and sharing their strengths or role(s) on the team and ways they anticipate working with other team members. Other team members then share their expectations for how that role supports the team goal(s) (Franz, 2012). This helps to reduce ambiguity by clarifying who each team member is and how they contribute to achieving the team's goal. Likewise, task analysis can help a team identify and prioritize subtasks that must be completed. Task analysis can be very effective in identifying how individual strengths may match up with roles so specific tasks can be completed.

## What should team members know?

Team members should recognize the importance of the forming stage. As busy individuals, we typically want to skip ahead to task assignment and problem-solving. However, spending time getting to know your team members, identifying individual strengths, creating shared goals, setting ground rules, and/or creating a team contract can build trust among team members. While these may seem unnecessary and time consuming, teams who invest time and effort in the forming stage tend to reap trust and increased cohesion throughout the team's life span.

It is important to acknowledge that as humans, we want to “fit in.” Therefore, feeling unsure and uncomfortable is very typical at this stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Gaining a clear understanding of how you can contribute to team goals can help increase comfort and is important for your motivation. Be aware of initial team norms being established and behave in a way that encourages collaboration and open communication.

Power dynamics exist in any group. Team members perceived as having high status will likely influence the behavior of other team members whether it is intentional or not. As a team member, it is important to recognize and overcome these dynamics. If you have power, listen more, and encourage others to speak up. If you feel others are

more influential, identify ways to encourage more equal contributions and inclusive decision-making. If a team is truly a team, individuals should be interdependent and not rely more heavily on some over others.

Group development models assume that all team members are starting together at the same time, but in reality, new team members are often being socialized into existing groups (Franz, 2012). Teams should revert to the forming stage when any new member joins the team. This takes extra effort on the part of existing team members who must continue to perform while integrating a new member and helping them learn team norms and expectations. Intentional socialization also requires recognizing that new members might alter team dynamics. Teams should expect norms and culture to adjust based on new membership.

## Support your team through successful forming

The following are a few practical tips for supporting a team through this stage.

- Provide time and opportunity for team members to get to know one another and build relationships.
- Initiate forming well in advance of any task deadlines you have for the team's work. Engage in icebreakers and leave time on the agenda for socialization at the beginning of the meeting. [MindTools \(n.d.\)](#) provides insight on how to design your icebreakers.
- Provide structure and guidance during initial interactions. Establish positive norms, such as open communication and the use of structured decision-making techniques. We recommend co-creating team goals, ground rules, and a team contract for participation.
- Reduce the guesswork by providing as much information as possible about why individuals were selected or asked to be a part of the team.
  - This may include outlining or having participants share their expertise, strengths, and the reasons they believe they are on the team.
  - If predetermined roles exist, give each team member descriptions of all team members' roles and responsibilities.
  - If possible, facilitate role and task analysis to create shared understanding and expectations.
  - Help team members visualize how each team member will contribute to the accomplishment of collective team goals.

- Be present. Team members rely on the leader in this beginning stage for guidance.
- Provide resources that support positive team development, including time and technology.

## Conclusion

Teams should be created when the problem is complex enough that it requires a group of individuals to work interdependently on the solution and outputs. When bringing a team together, both leaders and members should understand the importance of investing in getting to know one another to establish trust. This time investment in setting teams up for success early will aid teams as they move through the storming, norming, and performing stages.

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# Appendix A: *Leading Teams Series* Overview

## Leading Teams #1: Introduction

A description of teams that discusses the benefits of and challenges faced by teams, ways that teams are different from groups, and a brief review of models and concepts to be expanded on through the series.

## Leading Teams #2: Stages of Development

An in-depth description of the stages of group development model by Tuckman & Jensen (1977).

## Leading Teams #3: Forming

An explanation of the forming stage of group development, accompanied by strategies to effectively lead teams through the forming stage. This publication provides tactics to help clarify team purpose, establish team culture, and guide team member socialization.

## Leading Teams #4: Storming

A description of the storming stage of group development. This publication supplies strategies for conflict management, communication, and decision-making approaches.

## Leading Teams #5: Norming

An outline of the norming stage of group development. This publication discusses approaches to defining roles and responsibilities, establishing an ideal team climate, and building organizational culture.

## Leading Teams #6: Performing

An explanation of team performance and the performing stage of group development. This publication provides tips for leading effective meetings, supporting collaboration, enhancing team cohesion, and using proper evaluation and feedback procedures.

## Leading Teams #7: Other Considerations for Leading Teams

This publication concludes the series with a short overview of adjourning and other suggestions and considerations for leading teams, including working with virtual teams, encouraging motivation, and managing team adjournment and team member termination.