Leading Teams #4: Storming[1]

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Introduction

Teams are considered an effective way to accomplish more work, but they are often plagued by conflict that impedes productivity and ability to reach synergy. Group development models encourage us to consider conflict as an important stage for every team (Fisher, 1970; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). However, teams need to learn how to effectively navigate interpersonal conflict while also considering the importance of conflict in advancing ideas and making progress. As part of the *Leading Teams* series, this article explains the second stage of group development: the storming stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In this article, we will highlight the importance of conflict and ways that leaders and team members can effectively navigate and learn from team challenges and disruptions.

The Importance of Conflict

When individuals hear the word conflict, they often recall negative, challenging experiences. However, conflict is not necessarily negative and occurs any time concerns or desires differ in a given situation (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Given this definition, conflict happens when we engage in debate, which leads to team learning (Lencioni, 2002) and thus makes it essential in the problem-solving process and achievement of synergy. True synergy is achieved when the outcomes of a team working together are greater than any one member could accomplish alone

(Franz, 2012). To achieve synergy, some conflict will need to occur to create a better, more collaborative outcome that arises from an array of different perspectives. Therefore, teams must recognize that fear of conflict can inhibit their success (Lencioni, 2002) and approach the storming phase as an important foundation for establishing norms and, ultimately, performance.

What is storming?

During the forming stage, team members begin to get to know one another, consider roles they may play, create team goals, lay the foundation for trust, and start working toward their greater purpose (Lencioni, 2002; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). After the forming stage, the storming stage occurs when conflict begins to arise as individuals start to challenge one another and develop interpersonal issues (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). While many team leaders may want to skip or speed through this stage, the storming stage provides an opportunity for team members to create norms for how they approach and deal with conflict, which is a process that can increase trust and overall collaboration.

During storming, teams may experience different causes (Farnsworth et al., 2020) and types of conflict including goal, cognitive, affective, and behavioral.

- Goal conflict occurs when people desire different outcomes or have different goals.

- Cognitive conflict exists when individuals hold ideas, opinions, or values that vary from or contradict others' ideas, opinions, or values.

- Affective conflict happens when individuals are incompatible, and people simply do not like one another.

- Behavioral conflict occurs when someone does something that offends others or is considered unacceptable (Black et al., 2019).

Most teams and organizations typically experience each of these types of conflict to some extent (Black et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to build a foundation of trust and establish norms in the forming stage for navigating these conflicts. During this stage, team members can lean on that foundation to resolve problems and maintain relationships. The team leader and team members play different roles in this process.

What should leaders know?

As the team leader, you should be prepared to help your team members regulate conflict. It is the role of the team leader to identify and anticipate conflict, facilitate discussions, and intervene when needed. Leaders are often criticized by their team members for not holding individuals accountable for their actions. While it is important for leaders to hold team members accountable, it is also important for them to foster team members' ability to hold their peers accountable. As the team leader, it is your role to promote healthy conflict (Zhao et al., 2019). Leaders can encourage members to view conflict as a positive attribute of their team and help them establish team norms for addressing conflict. This begins with recognizing different types of conflict and ways to lessen the negative impact conflict can have on teams.

Goal conflict often exists because team members have their own motivations for joining the team and may desire different outcomes. All team members have personal agendas or goals (Franz, 2012). For instance, as is common with volunteers, someone may be a part of a team because it benefits their professional advancement, or they may have a personal interest based on benefits to friends and family. The first step in navigating goal conflict is to clarify, acknowledge, and share personal goals or agendas of all team members, including the leader. When individuals clarify their personal reasons for being a part of the team, teams can then address how differences in goals and outcomes might impact group discussions. On healthy teams, individuals can even help each other identify personal biases and hold their teammates accountable to make decisions that are beneficial for all. It is also important to ensure that

reward structures promote collective rather than individual recognition (Franz, 2012). If your team is working toward shared goals, but rewards are aligned with individual achievements, competition could be the downfall of your team as team members prioritize individual accomplishment over team success.

Cognitive conflict is essential in the problem-solving process. A healthy level of cognitive conflict can lead to more diverse idea generation, innovation, and creativity (Badke-Schaub et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2008). If teams address cognitive conflict effectively, they can create solutions to problems that are beneficial for the long term, more individuals, and overall advancement of the organization. In an organization, leaders may prefer that personal values (i.e., political, religious, familial) or opinions are left at the door. However, individuals cannot separate themselves from their ideals. These often guide what outcomes or decisions we support. For instance, a team working to advance the community engagement efforts of their 4-H members may be more likely to support community service efforts that benefit the community-based issues they view as important. If trust exists, team leaders should embrace cognitive differences and establish norms related to active listening and open communication to navigate these conflicts.

Affective conflict may be the most difficult to traverse, as it occurs when individuals are incompatible and simply do not like one another. While this can be the most difficult to manage, it is rarely the true source of the issue––rather, other types of conflict lead to affective conflict. Affective conflict can also be caused by differences in personality and conflict management styles (Schaubhut, 2007; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). As a team leader, you may want your team to complete a personality or conflict management style assessment to learn more about each other and how to work better together. The Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument (TKI) provides insight into different styles of conflict management. The TKI characterizes behavior in two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness (Schaubhut, 2007; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Based on where individuals fall on these continuums, they exhibit preferred methods of dealing with conflict including competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory is another tool that Extension professionals may find useful (Chiarelli et al., 2024). Having your team complete one of these instruments can help them develop language to discuss and recognize differences in each other, which can help with affective conflict management.

Behavioral conflict may also require intervention from the team leader to establish shared behavioral expectations. If a team member's actions are offending others, then those actions should be addressed (Lencioni, 2002). Types of offensive behaviors could include the language they use, lack of commitment to the group, etc. The team leader should weigh whether the action should be addressed in front of the whole group or through an individual conversation. If individuals are highly offended and group discussion of the issue could be harmful to a member, the team leader should have a one-on-one conversation. However, if the behavior is identified in the team's ground rules, both team leaders and members should hold each other accountable for upholding those ground rules. Team leaders should encourage this accountability. Additionally, if the action is not included in the team ground rules, then the rules should be revisited. Team leaders should review ground rules regularly to allow for discussion related to acceptable team behavior (Franz, 2012).

The team leader has the difficult role of listening to team member concerns, addressing those concerns, providing feedback to team members, facilitating difficult conversations, and encouraging peer accountability. This can be difficult because the different types of conflict are not exclusive. They can overlap, leading to larger issues where individuals are experiencing multiple types of conflict with specific members or the group overall. The leader then needs to work with team members to unpack these issues and resolve conflict. While this may feel like a lot of responsibility, it is important to remember that the best thing a team leader can do to help their team manage conflict is to build trust and understanding among team members. If teams have clarified ground rules, discussed their expectations and biases, understood how each team member works, and developed norms for navigating conflict, members can take a more proactive role in addressing conflict on their own. This is why spending time in the forming stage to build a foundation of trust is crucial.

What should team members know?

Team members should first value conflict and the positive role it can play in developing synergy. Team members should then recognize the importance of peer accountability and take ownership of their role in identifying, resolving, and participating in positive conflict. If a team has established trust during the forming stage, then team members can foster that trust and encourage transparency to uncover actual or potential goal, cognitive, affective, and

behavioral conflicts. If the team has established trust, they should attempt to set ground rules, create a team contract, and build interpersonal relationships as suggested in the Ask IFAS publication, "Leading Teams #3: Forming."

Above all, as a team member, you need to invest in the process and actively participate in the co-creation of shared goals, ground rules, and a team contract. When asked to share, be honest about your personal motivations and goals, and reflect upon your biases. If you complete a personality or conflict management assessment, consider how your style may benefit and/or impede the team process and be vulnerable enough to share that if the opportunity arises. Refrain from competing with other team members, but instead encourage and celebrate team success. Try to proactively manage conflict by holding peers accountable or engaging in difficult conversations before asking your leader to intervene. While the team leader is there to support you through conflict management, successfully navigating the storming phase requires buy-in from team members.

Support your team through successful storming

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

- Spend time discussing the importance of team conflict and ways that disagreements, when managed effectively, can lead to greater successes and synergy.
- Clarify personal motivations and agendas or different goals team members may have.
- Ensure reward structures are not solely based on individual achievement, but also on team accomplishments.
- Establish team norms related to open sharing and active listening.
- Complete a personality or conflict-management assessment—such as the TKI—to develop understanding of how individuals work differently. Help team members recognize how their approaches benefit and impede team progress.
- Regularly revisit team goals, ground rules, and contracts for any needed updates.

Conclusion

It is natural to assume conflict is inherently bad and to feel uncomfortable navigating challenges. Because of this, teams often want to speed through or avoid the storming phase altogether. However, establishing team norms for

promoting healthy conflict and addressing disagreements is fundamental to teamwork and can help lead to true synergy. Therefore, it is important for team leaders and members to lean into conflict and invest time in the storming phase to reach shared goals and achieve the most beneficial outcomes.

References

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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, how 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 for 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.