



## STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

In 1965, Bruce Tuckman described four distinct stages that a group can go through as it comes together and starts to operate. Although often subconscious, understanding of the stages can help groups reach effectiveness more quickly and less painfully.

### STAGE 1: FORMING

Individual behavior is driven by a desire to be accepted by the others, and avoid controversy or conflict. Serious issues and feelings are avoided, and people focus on being busy with routines, such as team organization, who does what, when to meet, etc. But individuals are also gathering information and impressions - about each other, and about the scope of the task and how to approach it. This is a comfortable stage to be in, but the avoidance of conflict and threat means that not much actually gets done.

#### **During Forming:**

- Be open about organizational policies & traditions
- Provide ample icebreaker and teambuilding activities
- Guide effective goal setting sessions

### STAGE 2: STORMING

Individuals in the group can only remain nice to each other for so long. Some people's patience will break early, and minor confrontations will arise that are quickly dealt with or glossed over. These may relate to the work of the group itself, or to roles and responsibilities within the group. Some will observe that it's good to be getting into the real issues, while others will wish to remain in the comfort and security of stage 1. Depending on the culture of the organization and individuals, the conflict will be more or less suppressed, but it'll be there, under the surface. To deal with the conflict, individuals may feel they are winning or losing battles, and will look for structural clarity and rules to prevent the conflict persisting.

#### **During Storming:**

- Allow a healthy level of conflict
- Provide effective conflict management and mediation when needed
- Continue teambuilding to encourage positive group interactions
- Review goals & expectations to re-evaluate purpose and roles

### STAGE 3: NORMING

As Stage 2 evolves, the "rules of engagement" for the group become established, and the scope of the group's tasks or responsibilities is clear and agreed. Having had their arguments, they now understand each other better, and can appreciate each other's skills and experience. Individuals listen to each other, appreciate and support each other, and are prepared to change pre-conceived views: they feel they're part of a cohesive, effective group. However, individuals have had to work hard to attain this stage, and may resist any pressure to change - especially from the outside - for fear that the group will break up, or revert to a storm.

#### **During Norming:**

- Encourage group identity by developing t-shirts, cheer or some other emblem
- Assist group in starting a new "group owned" project as beginning projects may be

individually owned

- Maintain relationships with individual group members

#### **STAGE 4: PERFORMING**

Not all groups reach this stage, characterized by a state of interdependence and flexibility. Everyone knows each other well enough to be able to work together, and trusts each other enough to allow independent activity. Roles and responsibilities change according to need in an almost seamless way. Group identity, loyalty and morale are all high, and everyone is equally task-orientated and people-orientated. This high degree of comfort means that all the energy of the group can be directed towards the task(s) in hand

#### **During Performing:**

- Ensure there are adequate channels (projects) for high group energy
- Provide positive feedback to group members as they begin to perform
- Sit back and let the team perform

**Ten years after first describing the four stages, Bruce Tuckman revisited his original work and described another, final, stage:**

#### **STAGE 5: ADJOURNING**

This is about completion and disengagement, both from the tasks and the group members. Individuals will be proud of having achieved much and glad to have been part of such an enjoyable group. They need to recognize what they've done, and consciously move on. Some authors describe stage 5 as "Deforming and Mourning", recognizing the sense of loss felt by group members.

#### **During Adjourning:**

- Plan closure activities (dinners, awards, scrapbooks or gifts)
- Provide opportunities for members to evaluate the group, its processes and goals
- If a similar group will form in the future, a record should be created as an aid in the next group's process

Tuckman's original work simply described the way he had observed groups evolve, whether they were conscious of it or not. But for us the real value is in recognizing where a group is in the process, and helping it to move to the Perform stage. In the real world, groups are often forming and changing, and each time that happens, they can move to a different Tuckman Stage. A group might be happily Norming or Performing, but a new member might force them back into Storming. Seasoned leaders will be ready for this, and will help the group get back to Performing as quickly as possible.

Many work groups live in the comfort of Norming, and are fearful of moving back into Storming, or forward into Performing. This will govern their behavior towards each other, and especially their reaction to change.

*"There is no such thing in anyone's life as an unimportant day." – Alexander Wollcott*