

Learning & Development

Using the Stages of Team Development

By Judith Stein

Team effectiveness is enhanced by a team's commitment to reflection and on-going evaluation. In addition to evaluating accomplishments in terms of meeting specific goals, for teams to be high-performing it is essential for them to understand their development *as a team*. Most of us are familiar with the concept of "the terrible twos" in early childhood; understanding that developmental stage makes it easier to accept the constant stream of "No No No No No" that we might hear from a two-year old.

Teams go through stages of development. The most commonly used framework for a team's stages of development was developed in the mid-1960s by Bruce W. Tuckman, now a psychology professor at Ohio State University. Although many authors have written variations and enhancements to Tuckman's work, his descriptions of *Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming* and *Performing* provide a useful framework for looking at your own team.

Each stage of team development has its own recognizable feelings and behaviors; understanding *why* things are happening in certain ways on your team can be an important part of the self-evaluation process.

The four stages are a helpful framework for recognizing a team's behavioral patterns; they are most useful as a basis for team conversation, rather than boxing the team into a "diagnosis." And just as human development is not always linear (think of the five-year old child who reverts to thumb-sucking when a new sibling is born), team development is not always a linear process. Having a way to identify and understand causes for changes in the team behaviors can help the team maximize its process and its productivity.

Stage 1: Forming

Feelings

During the Forming stage of team development, team members are usually excited to be part of the team and eager about the work ahead. Members often have high positive expectations for the team experience. At the same time, they may also feel some anxiety, wondering how they will fit in to the team and if their performance will measure up.

Behaviors

Behaviors observed during the Forming stage may include lots of questions from team members, reflecting both their excitement about the new team and the uncertainty or anxiety they might be feeling about their place on the team.

Team Tasks

The principal work for the team during the Forming stage is to create a team with clear structure, goals, direction and roles so that members begin to build trust. A good orientation/kick-off process can help to ground the members in terms of the team's mission and goals, and can establish team expectations about both the team's product and, more importantly, the team's process. During the Forming stage, much of the team's energy is focused on defining the team so task accomplishment may be relatively low.

Stage 2: Storming

Feelings

As the team begins to move towards its goals, members discover that the team can't live up to all of their early excitement and expectations. Their focus may shift from the tasks at hand to feelings of frustration or anger with the team's progress or process. Members may express concerns about being unable to meet the team's goals. During the Storming stage, members are trying to see how the team will respond to differences and how it will handle conflict.

Behaviors

Behaviors during the Storming stage may be less polite than during the Forming stage, with frustration or disagreements about goals, expectations, roles and responsibilities being openly expressed. Members may express frustration about constraints that slow their individual or the team's progress; this frustration might be directed

towards other members of the team, the team leadership or the team's sponsor. During the Storming stage, team members may argue or become critical of the team's original mission or goals.

Team Tasks

Team Tasks during the Storming stage of development call for the team to refocus on its goals, perhaps breaking larger goals down into smaller, achievable steps. The team may need to develop both task-related skills and group process and conflict management skills. A redefinition of the team's goals, roles and tasks can help team members past the frustration or confusion they experience during the Storming stage.

Stage 3: Norming

Feelings

During the Norming stage of team development, team members begin to resolve the discrepancy they felt between their individual expectations and the reality of the team's experience. If the team is successful in setting more flexible and inclusive norms and expectations, members should experience an increased sense of comfort in expressing their "real" ideas and feelings. Team members feel an increasing acceptance of others on the team, recognizing that the variety of opinions and experiences makes the team stronger and its product richer.

Constructive criticism is both possible and welcomed. Members start to feel part of a team and can take pleasure from the increased group cohesion.

Behaviors

Behaviors during the Norming stage may include members making a conscious effort to resolve problems and achieve group harmony. There might be more frequent and more meaningful communication among team members, and an increased willingness to share ideas or ask teammates for help. Team members refocus on established team groundrules and practices and return their focus to the team's tasks. Teams may begin to develop their own language (nicknames) or inside jokes.

Team Tasks

During the Norming stage, members shift their energy to the team's goals and show an increase in productivity, in both individual and collective work. The team may find that this is an appropriate time for an evaluation of team processes and productivity.

Stage 4: Performing

Feelings

In the Performing stage of team development, members feel satisfaction in the team's progress. They share insights into personal and group process and are aware of their own (and each other's) strengths and weaknesses. Members feel attached to the team as something "greater than the sum of its parts" and feel satisfaction in the team's effectiveness. Members feel confident in their individual abilities and those of their teammates.

Behaviors

Team members are able to prevent or solve problems in the team's process or in the team's progress. A "can do" attitude is visible as are offers to assist one another. Roles on the team may have become more fluid, with members taking on various roles and responsibilities as needed. Differences among members are appreciated and used to enhance the team's performance.

Team Tasks

In the Performing stage, the team makes significant progress towards its goals. Commitment to the team's mission is high and the competence of team members is also high. Team members should continue to deepen their knowledge and skills, including working to continuously improving team development. Accomplishments in team process or progress are measured and celebrated.

Is the "Performing" stage the end of the process?

While working on a high-performing team may be a truly pleasurable and growthful experience, it is not the end of team development. There is still a need for the team to focus on both process and product, setting new goals as appropriate. Changes, such as members coming or going or large-scale changes in the external environment, can lead a team to cycle back to an earlier stage. If these changes - and their resulting behaviors - are recognized and addressed directly, teams may successfully remain in the Performing stage indefinitely.

Stage 5: Termination/Ending

Some teams do come to an end, when their work is completed or when the organization's needs change. While not part of Tuckman's original model, it is important for any team to pay attention to the end or termination process.

Feelings

Team members may feel a variety of concerns about the team's impending dissolution. They may be feeling some anxiety because of uncertainty about their individual role or future responsibilities. They may feel sadness or a sense of loss about the changes coming to their team relationships. And at the same time, team members may feel a sense of deep satisfaction at the accomplishments of the team. Individual members might feel all of these things at the same time, or may cycle through feelings of loss followed by feelings of satisfaction. Given these conflicting feelings, individual and team morale may rise or fall throughout the ending stage. It is highly likely that at any given moment individuals on the team will be experiencing different emotions about the team's ending.

Behaviors

During the Ending Stage, some team members may become less focussed on the team's tasks and their productivity may drop. Alternatively, some team members may find focussing on the task at hand is an effective response to their sadness or sense of loss. Their task productivity may increase.

Team Tasks

The team needs to acknowledge the upcoming transition and the variety of ways that individuals and the team may be feeling about the team's impending dissolution. During this stage, the team should focus on three tasks:

1. Completion of any deliverables and closure on any remaining team work
2. Evaluation of the team's process and product, with a particular focus on identifying "lessons learned" and passing these on to the sponsor for future teams to use
3. Creating a closing celebration that acknowledges the contributions of individuals and the accomplishments of the team and that formally ends this particular team's existence.

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