

The Five Stages of Team Development

Module 8: Groups, Teams, and Teamwork

7–9 minutes

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the five stages of team development.
- Explain how team norms and cohesiveness affect performance.

Introduction

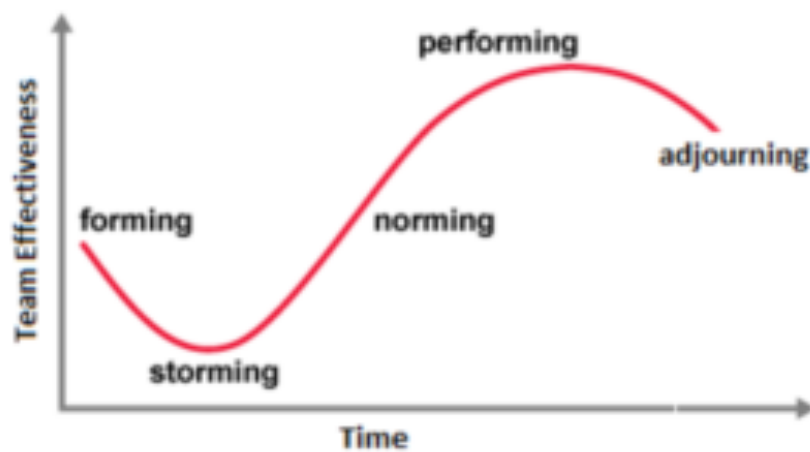
Our discussion so far has focused mostly on a team as an entity, not on the individuals inside the team. This is like describing a car by its model and color without considering what is under the hood. External characteristics are what we see and interact with, but internal characteristics are what make it work. In teams, the internal characteristics are the people in the team and how they interact with each other.

For teams to be effective, the people in the team must be able to work together to contribute collectively to team outcomes. But this does not happen automatically: it develops as the team works together. You have probably had an experience when you have been put on a team to work on a school assignment or project. When your team first gets together, you likely sit around and look at each other, not knowing how to begin. Initially you are not a team; you are just individuals assigned to work together. Over time you get to know each other, to know what to expect from each other, to know how to divide the labor and assign tasks, and to know how you will coordinate your work. Through this process, you begin to operate as a team instead of a collection of individuals.

Stages of Team Development

This process of learning to work together effectively is known as team development. Research has shown that teams go through definitive

stages during development. Bruce Tuckman, an educational psychologist, identified a five-stage development process that most teams follow to become high performing. He called the stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Team progress through the stages is shown in the following diagram.



Most high-performing teams go through five stages of team development.

Forming stage

The forming stage involves a period of orientation and getting acquainted. Uncertainty is high during this stage, and people are looking for leadership and authority. A member who asserts authority or is knowledgeable may be looked to take control. Team members are asking such questions as “What does the team offer me?” “What is expected of me?” “Will I fit in?” Most interactions are social as members get to know each other.

Storming stage

The storming stage is the most difficult and critical stage to pass through. It is a period marked by conflict and competition as individual personalities emerge. Team performance may actually decrease in this stage because energy is put into unproductive activities. Members may disagree on team goals, and subgroups and cliques may form around strong personalities or areas of agreement. To get through this stage, members must work to overcome obstacles, to accept individual differences, and to work through conflicting ideas on team tasks and goals. Teams can get bogged down in this stage. Failure to address conflicts may result in long-term problems.

Norming stage

If teams get through the storming stage, conflict is resolved and some degree of unity emerges. In the norming stage, consensus develops

around who the leader or leaders are, and individual member's roles. Interpersonal differences begin to be resolved, and a sense of cohesion and unity emerges. Team performance increases during this stage as members learn to cooperate and begin to focus on team goals. However, the harmony is precarious, and if disagreements re-emerge the team can slide back into storming.

Performing stage

In the performing stage, consensus and cooperation have been well-established and the team is mature, organized, and well-functioning. There is a clear and stable structure, and members are committed to the team's mission. Problems and conflicts still emerge, but they are dealt with constructively. (We will discuss the role of conflict and conflict resolution in the next section). The team is focused on problem solving and meeting team goals.

Adjourning stage

In the adjourning stage, most of the team's goals have been accomplished. The emphasis is on wrapping up final tasks and documenting the effort and results. As the work load is diminished, individual members may be reassigned to other teams, and the team disbands. There may be regret as the team ends, so a ceremonial acknowledgement of the work and success of the team can be helpful. If the team is a standing committee with ongoing responsibility, members may be replaced by new people and the team can go back to a forming or storming stage and repeat the development process.

Team Norms and Cohesiveness

When you have been on a team, how did you know how to act? How did you know what behaviors were acceptable or what level of performance was required? Teams usually develop **norms** that guide the activities of team members. Team norms set a standard for behavior, attitude, and performance that all team members are expected to follow. Norms are like rules but they are not written down. Instead, all the team members implicitly understand them. Norms are effective because team members want to support the team and preserve relationships in the team, and when norms are violated, there is peer pressure or sanctions to enforce

compliance.

Norms result from the interaction of team members during the development process. Initially, during the forming and storming stages, norms focus on expectations for attendance and commitment. Later, during the norming and performing stages, norms focus on relationships and levels of performance. Performance norms are very important because they define the level of work effort and standards that determine the success of the team. As you might expect, leaders play an important part in establishing productive norms by acting as role models and by rewarding desired behaviors.

Norms are only effective in controlling behaviors when they are accepted by team members. The level of **cohesiveness** on the team primarily determines whether team members accept and conform to norms. Team cohesiveness is the extent that members are attracted to the team and are motivated to remain in the team. Members of highly cohesive teams value their membership, are committed to team activities, and gain satisfaction from team success. They try to conform to norms because they want to maintain their relationships in the team and they want to meet team expectations. Teams with strong performance norms and high cohesiveness are high performing.

For example, the seven-member executive team at Whole Foods spends time together outside of work. Its members frequently socialize and even take group vacations. According to co-CEO John Mackey, they have developed a high degree of trust that results in better communication and a willingness to work out problems and disagreements when they occur.

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