

Pitch Perfect and The Stages of Team Development

Why does the movie Pitch Perfect hold up nearly a decade after its initial release in theaters? Not only is the movie funny and entertaining but it's very relatable to our experiences of participating in a team. Pitch Perfect's plot works so well because it demonstrates the highs and lows of a team achieving success.

How do the Barden Bellas go from random students that meet at a student fair and auditions to winning the ICCA (International Championship of Collegiate A Capella)? Although these Bellas don't realize it in the film, their journey meets all the hallmarks of Tuckman's model on team development.

The Tuckman's Model of Team Development has four Stages:

1. Forming
2. Storming
3. Norming
4. Performing

This popular model for team development was developed in 1965 by educational psychologist Bruce Wayne Tuckman. He came up with this model after observing a similar pattern of time, relationships, and behaviors amongst well-performing teams.

A team must make it through stages 1 through 3 in order to be highly successful at stage 4. Throughout the movie, there are a couple of times the Barden Bellas nearly get stuck in a certain stage, therefore, would have been disastrous for their team or at least the conclusion for the movie.

Let's discuss each stage of the Barden Bellas and what these singing members did right and what could have held them back from finals.

Stage 1: Forming



The “forming” stage starts when a group forms - that’s the easiest way to remember it. So, it only makes sense that initiation night for the Barden Bellas is the beginning of the “Forming” stage. This is the first time all the new Bellas meet each other. They’re excited to be chosen for the group and spend the night celebrating and partying with the other campus A Capella groups.

Aubrey is a Strong and Experienced Leader

During their first meeting the next day, Audrey the leader of the Barden Bellas is quick to reinforce rules that were established during the group’s initiation and introduce new rules.

While Audrey seems strict at this stage, she provides a structure with a plan and a goal for the group to accomplish. A leader should strive to be her level of preparedness during the formation of a group. Without her direction, the team would likely not exist or struggle to find their stride as a team.

Just imagine trying if you were a member of this group without Aubrey or Chloe. The group would probably be pretty lost not knowing what to do to prepare for A Capella competitions. Since the members don’t know each other that well, the group might very well just fizzle out after a few meetings.

Structure is Provided

Audrey wants to win the ICCA and based on her past experience she’s concluded that the path to winning includes practicing 2 hours a day 7 days a week and doing cardio. Audrey has a goal, she has a plan, and has a strategy.

On top of this, Audrey has previous experience as a Barden Bella which gives her the knowledge on how to hold meetings and direct group practices. Aubrey and Chloe’s mandatory practices also provide consistency for the team

New Bellas want to be accepted by the team

The group does question Audrey with some even openly rejecting doing cardio, but Audrey's rules are met with little resistance. During the first stage of group development, most members want to feel accepted by the group and fear any type of rejection.

All the members have no experience being on an A Capella team and place their complete trust on Aubrey and Chloe, the leaders and the only Bellas with seniority.

This isn't a bad thing, this is actually a great learning experience for the new Bellas. After the meeting, we see a montage of Aubrey and Chloe training the new Bellas on how to sing and dance better. We know they have a lot of room for improvement because the addition scene showed how rough the new recruits were although they did show potential.

Stage 2: Storming





The second stage is aptly named “storming” because it evokes all the feelings of a storm. It is chaotic, full of hot emotions, and feels like a phase that needs to be endured. This is the stage where members began to challenge authority and one another. Tasks are seen as difficult and challenging, the mission gets muddy, and arguments are abound.

Stages also tend to blur into one another. We see a little bit of “storming” in the first stage. Becca joins the Barden Bellas clearly being intrigued with doing something with her musical background but suspicious that A Capella may not be right for her. She is less concerned than other members of being accepted within the group, therefore, she’s more willing to challenge Aubrey.

Let’s identify some of the other instances that make it prevalent that the Barden Bellas are in the “storming” phase of their team development.

Conflict of values

During the first meeting, Aubrey forces one of the girls to leave the group due to her romantically fraternizing with a guy from the Trebles (“enemy” all-male A Capella group) resulting in her crying while walking out, Becca calls out Aubrey behavior for being unnecessarily rude.

Right after the first rehearsals, Aubrey pulls Becca aside to chat about her attitude, piercing, and possible relationship with Jesse, a member of the Trebles. Becca stands up for herself letting Aubrey know that her relationships are outside the scope of the group and no one else's business.

Task Conflict

A week later, the Bellas performed an out-of-sync out-of-tune cover of Turn the Beat Around by Vicki Sue Robinson at a fraternity Fall mixer. The performance is so bad that the fraternity's president stops them before they can finish the song. Right after the bad performance, Chloe

comes clean with the fact that she has nodes, painful calluses on her vocal cords, that disable her singing abilities.

The Barden Bellas have two new issues they have to overcome, a disastrous first performance and their soloist's newly limited singing abilities.

Discrepancies in goals

After the riff-off Becca is happy about their spontaneous sing-off performance of No-Diggity while Aubrey is deeply unsatisfied by losing against the Trebles. Becca liked that the team was experimenting for the first time and had their first good performance. Aubrey has a deep-seeded hatred of the Trebles (since they do tend to rag on the Barden Bellas) and only wants to win.

Not Living Up to Expectations / Member Challenging Group Leaders

During the next rehearsal, members start to realize the current musical set isn't quite working out for their group. Chloe can no longer do the solo because of her nodes. Amy isn't down with the cardio intense choreography. Becca wants to try a more modern musical arrangement of her creation.

Chloe backs up Becca's idea of trying new things and experimenting with the group. Although members are voicing their opinions, Aubrey shuts down their suggestions without even consideration.

Not Taking Feedback into Consideration

At all performances, the Barden Bellas are getting feedback. During the regionals and the semi-finals, the announcers mock the Bellas musical arrangement as being tired and boring and "sticking to what they know". At both performances, the crowd is noticeably bored and seen staring at their phones, looking utterly emotionless, or teasing from the sidelines.

At regionals, Amy takes creative liberty by adding her own flair to the solo with sassy singing and adlib moves. The crowd instantly takes notice. They react by cheering, hollering, and whistling with excitement.

Although Becca doesn't miss this feedback and she pushes Audrey to consider changing up the musical arrangement, Audrey still doesn't want to consider Becca's proposal. Audrey never considers the feedback their team is receiving from the audience and judges. Since she runs the team strictly based on the traditional strategy of the past Barden Bellas, she refuses to hear any type of feedback.

Deviation from Group Norms

At the semi-finals, while seeing the crowd dozing off, Becca takes it upon herself to sing a different song during the performance to create a spontaneous musical mash-up. From the judges' expressions, they seem to like the change.

The only problem, Becca made a major change on-the-spot without getting approval from the rest of the team. Audrey is furious after the performance, going a little overboard on her anger at Becca due to their intense history of conflict. Sadly, this is the first time Audrey asks the members for their point of view. Amy agrees that they were taken a bit by surprise by Becca's improv.

Chloe tries to defend the performance, but Audrey leaves in frustration before she could finish speaking. The Barden Bellas do get to advance to the ICCA finals due to a team being disqualified by lying about their age.

Members Become Frustrated and an Uprising Emerges

At practice for finals, Audrey is audibly stressed out. The rest of the Bellas are still annoyed by Becca getting reprimanded out of the group. They want to bring back Becca, but Audrey doesn't want to hear about Becca.

Chloe is getting tired of Aubrey's authoritarian style of leadership and makes a snide comment about Aubrey "needing to loosen the reins". Aubrey reacts to the comment with hostility and demands to get back to rehearsing.

This is where the movie reaches its climax. Amy describes the current group status as being "horse shit". She just wanted to join the group to meet some really awesome women to sing and become friends with. Amy also brings up the popular opinion amongst the members which is that they don't want to be like the old Bellas, they want to do things that make sense for them.

Over Aubrey's controlling ways, the Bellas go to grab their things preparing to walk out of rehearsal early. While Aubrey and Chloe fight over the group, Aubrey starts stress vomiting and all hell breaks loose. Half the girls are in a physical brawl while the other half are just trying to get out of the way.

Things that could have helped move the Bellas to Stage 3 faster

Aubrey Needed to Change her Leadership Style

While Aubrey's leadership style was exactly what was needed during the "forming" stage, this style of leadership became the team's demise during the "storming" stage. There were several performances where the Bellas were receiving negative feedback and Audrey rarely attempted to hear or understand the criticisms.

If she did, Aubrey would have realized that her strategy of performing the traditional sets just wasn't cutting it. She didn't need to draft a new strategy alone and shouldn't be. By calling a strategy meeting, Aubrey would have a whole team of brilliant cohorts to bounce ideas off, strategize with, and consolidate tasks.

No One Ever Asks the Members for their Opinions

Aubrey rarely asks for the members' feedback about the team and their strategy to win finals. The one time Aubrey does ask the members for their opinion about a team issue, it's when Becca changes the musical arrangement live while at the semi-finals by saying, "Why don't we ask the rest of the group how they felt about your little improvisation." Aubrey doesn't ask for the member's opinions because she values feedback, she does because she hopes the team will back her up on her own point that Becca ruined their performance.

Aubrey is not the only Bella to forget that the members should have the authority to help make decisions for the team. Becca proposes the opposing views to Aubrey's multiple times giving Becca a chance to invite the other members to the discussion, but she never does.

Members don't make a case for themselves.

Part of the reason Aubrey says she doesn't take Becca's proposal for a new musical arrangement seriously is that she has a false perception of Becca. Becca doesn't make it known that she is an inspiring DJ/producer with thousands of hours spent dedicated to her craft. It's not until after Regionals that Becca slightly alludes to this expertise of why she would be qualified to develop a new set.

All Aubrey knows of Becca before this is that Becca has been challenging to work with and that Becca wants to change a tried and true arrangement with a completely new experimental one.

It's clear that Aubrey is motivated to win finals to repair her self-image to herself after a disastrous performance last year where she let the team down by vomiting on stage. Becca knows this from watching the performance video during the first meeting. Aubrey also seems to fear losing her authority over the team.

With a little critical thinking, it's easy to read Aubrey's motivations. Also, with Aubrey reacting with hostility every time someone talks about deviating from the original plan, it could be assumed that Aubrey takes these comments personally.

Becca could have tried to appeal to these motivations, by saying something like, "Aubrey, I'm dedicated to our team and our coach and I care about winning just as you do. Based on the feedback and my research [provide x,y, and z examples] we need to change our musical arrangement. I may not know how to lead an aCapella team, but I absolutely know how to

produce a musical arrangement since I've been DJ/producer [for however many years]. You don't have to agree to it now, but please consider listening to my new set."

This is an excellent pitch that Becca could say to Aubrey since it conveys to Aubrey that:

1. Becca isn't trying to challenge her position on the team as a leader
2. her proposal aligned with the overarching goal of winning finals
3. she has taken feedback and research into consideration
4. Becca has expertise in the task she is volunteering to do
5. Giving Aubrey the final decision

Stage 3: Norming

Stage 3 is the calm after the storm. Storms typically leave wreckage and the wildier the storm the more wreckage there is. Team members have to start picking up the pieces that are left and rebuild. They're rebuilding their communication style, their group dynamic, their relationships with one another, and their mission.

A good way to remember what the "Norming" stage represents is that a group creates new and more appropriate norms. Intra-group behaviors change as the group works through their problems.

From watching Pitch Perfect, we can see that other characteristics of the "Norming stage" includes...

Resolving Discrepancies

Becca has had time to think things over during her departure from the Bellas. She arrives at the rehearsal in time to see vomit all over the floor and her fellow teammates physically fighting.

Becca overcomes her ego and apologizes to the group for changing the set without asking them and quitting the group after the semi-finals. She asks the team and Aubrey if they'll let her back into the group.

Aubrey changes her leadership stance finally by being vulnerable with the team. She says something that aligns with an extreme fear of failure. The other members begin to open up and talk about their own problems and their feelings. One member, Ester, has a gambling addiction, Amy isn't comfortable with her real name which is Patricia, Becca likes being friends with the

Bellas despite her rebellious attitude, and Chloe just had surgeries to remove her vocal nodules rendering her incapable of singing high notes.

Transition in Leadership

After the members open up about their experience and feelings, Aubrey realizes she needs to let go of some of her power as a leader to the members. Aubrey finally decides to go with Becca's plan of changing up the Musical Arrangement to a modern-day musical mashup.

Communication Increases & Members are More Willing to Share New Ideas

The Bellas figuratively and literally have reached a state of harmony. We see the Bellas singing a wonderful rendition of *Just the Way You Are* by Bruno Mars and *Just a Dream* by Nelly

Everyone feels comfortable with the new direction of the Barden Bellas and are happy with their progress before the finals. The Bellas also find an exciting discovery. Chloe's vocal surgery turned out to be a blessing in disguise and she can now hit the low notes that no one can!

This gives the quietest/shyest member, Lilly, a moment of inspiration and she speaks aloud for the first time. Although the film skips ahead to the finals before Lilly mentions what she has that can help the time, it is heavily alluded to throughout the film that Lily is an exceptional beatboxer.

Stage 4: Performing

It's only fitting that the Barden Bellas reach the final stage of group development while they are quite literally performing at the Finals. Although the Bellas have performed in the past, they always had hiccups during these performances that they needed to overcome.

Members Depend on Each Other and All Issues Have Been Resolved

As the Bellas are about to go on stage, they gather together to reflect before their show. They've already worked out all their issues during the norming stage. These ladies are confident in themselves and confident in their team and are proud at how far they've come together.

The Bellas lean on each other for emotional support with Amy gleefully exclaiming "Let's just smash this!" as the announcer introduces the Barden Bellas to the stage.

Leadership is a Function of the Group

During the performance, we see the whole act has been changed. This is a major accomplishment for the Barden Bellas to pull off with just weeks before finals. They have new

outfits, new dance moves, new solos, new lighting effects, and new bass and beat boxing sound effects.

While Becca stepped up during the norming stage to test out her musical arrangement abilities, I highly doubt Becca is knowledgeable about all the other aspects that this successful A Cappella group pulls off.

Lilly and Chloe probably helped Becca create the bass and beatboxing effects with their voices for the musical arrangement. Someone had to be in charge of creating the new choreography and work with the team to discover everyone's dancing abilities. Another member must be knowledgeable in stagecraft in order to achieve lighting effects that coordinate perfectly to the songs they sing on stage. And lastly, someone had to be in charge of stage outfits, coordinating fashions that allowed members to move easily, and creating backups in case of an outfit malfunction.

Aubrey didn't lose her leadership status of the Barden Bellas, she just consolidated her power of decision-making to the members. She recognized what she was doing wasn't working and that her fellow members were just as or even more than capable than her in several aspects of a Capella. Her role transitions to a side-line character, one that's meant to be more consultative and less directive. This is a healthy function of a well-performing team.

Great Results

Watching the performance, it's obvious that the Barden Bellas took some inspiration from the TrebleMakers. It's a smart choice to gain inspiration from the team that has won consistently over the years. Just like the TrebleMakers, their new musical arrangement uses modern songs, an upbeat tempo, quick song changes, and utilizes rap and beatboxing.

Where the Barden Bellas expand on the formula of the TrebleMakers is that they differentiate themselves with a more personalized approach. This can be seen visually with how the Bellas wear different outfits from one another. They've retailored their original flight attendant uniforms to fit their individual style, but still look like a team.

Every member has their specialized abilities and personality and this is all highlighted by their performance. Throughout the production, we see Aubrey's sweet, bubbly, and traditional sound and choreography, Becca's movie homage to "The Breakfast Club", Lily's BeatBoxing, Ester's rapping, Stacie's unique dancing, and Amy's theatrical and comedic solo.

The musical arrangement also had several song mash-ups (a thing that was extremely popular from 2012-2014).

Lastly, the Barden Bellas performance was cinematic. The beginning started off slow and similar to their past performances and abruptly disrupts expectations into the second verse of "Price Tag" by changing up the pace. The pace of the performance gradually increased, upping up the

hype with each song change and solo. There is even a redemption arc in the middle. By the end of the performance, the audience is so hyped they're literally standing on their chairs cheering.

Gail announces "I think we've seen some a capella history being made". The Barden Bellas take home the gold trophy for first place, truly establishing themselves as a successful team.

Stage 5: Adjourning

Okay, I've tricked you. There are actually five stages to team development and that 5th stage is about saying goodbye. By the end of the movie, it's the next school year and they're at the auditions looking for some new members.

It looks like a few of the members are missing and they've most likely graduated college pursuing careers. When good teams end, it can be emotional and sad. Although we don't see the graduating Bellas' departure on screen, I'm sure they would have had all the feels. The memories, friends, and their sense of accomplishment will always be remembered.

For the remaining Barden Bellas looking for new members, this is where the cycle repeats itself. Once the new members join the team, they'll be back to the "forming" stage.

Fortunately, since they have the experience of team development, they probably can get back to the performing stage in just a fraction of the time.

Join the Conversation!

Did reviewing the stages of team development through the movie of Pitch Perfect help you reflect on your own team experiences. Do you think knowing the team development model prepares you for the next group you'll be working with? Rather you think it doesn't or does, I'd love for you to tell us why and join the conversation below!

Sources

<https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/teams/articles/stages-development>