STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Often quoted, often misunderstood. Bruce Tuckman’s classic description of the stages of group development is easy to understand and remember, but it helps to go back and look at what’s behind each stage.

Bruce W. Tuckman is a respected educational psychologist who first described the (then) four stages of group development in 1965, soon after leaving Princeton. Looking at the behavior of small groups in a variety of environments, he recognized the distinct phases they go through, and suggested they need to experience all four stages before they achieve maximum effectiveness. He refined and developed the model in 1977 (in conjunction with Mary Ann Jensen) with the addition of a fifth stage. Since then, others have attempted to adapt and extend the model - although sometimes with more of an eye on rhyme than reason.

FOUR STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Tuckman described the four distinct stages that a group can as it comes together and starts to operate. This process can be subconscious, although an understanding of the stages can help group 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.

Stage 2: Storming

Individuals in the group can only remain nice to each other for so long, as important issues start to be addressed. 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, whilst 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.
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.

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.

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.

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 Performing 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.