5 stages of team development every leader should know

Marina Paych

7-8 minutes

Illustration by Tatiana Shulgina

Tuckman's model of team development stages is the very basics of team management, and I believe most of you know them. But I don't want to talk about team management, I want to discuss team leadership. Because I believe that a leader strives to realize the potential of his/her team members by achieving the project goal when a manager simply distributes tasks. Nowadays no one wants to be treated as a resource, therefore I believe that leadership is more viable and healthy way to achieve outstanding results. And traditional models should be perceived from this point of view.

> Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.
>
> — Peter Drucker

So, let's examine the Bruce Tuckman's stages of team development and the role of a true leader at each of these stages.

About the Model

Psychologist Bruce Tuckman first came up with the phrase

"forming, storming, norming, and performing" in his 1965 article, "[Developmental Sequence in Small Groups](#)." That was the way he described the path that most teams follow on the way to high performance. Later, he added a fifth stage, "adjourning" (which is sometimes known as "mourning").

Stages of team development by Bruce Tuckman

Let's look at each stage in details and see what involvement is needed from a leader.

Forming

In this stage, most team members are usually positive and polite. Some are anxious because they are in the uncertain environment surrounded by new people. And sometimes without a clear understanding of what the project is about.

This stage lasts for some time, as people start working together, getting to know each other and their responsibilities.

Role of the leader: as the leader, you play a dominant role at this stage, because team members' roles and responsibilities aren't clear. I recommend having personal talks with all the team members to find out their personal goals and interests in the project which is essential information for a leader on further stages.

Storming

After some time, a team moves to a storming phase. Team members start to push against the boundaries established at the forming stage. At this stage where many teams fail.

Storming is an inalienable part of any team experience. It usually

starts if there is a conflict between team members' natural working styles. Everyone has their own working approach, and the success of the team depends on a proper communication and willingness to compromise. However, if different working styles cause unforeseen problems, they may become frustrated. The leader must feel such negative trends within the team and efficiently manage conflicts.

Storming can also happen in other situations. At this stage, they know each other better, as well as their responsibilities. They may feel deceptive overconfidence and therefore challenge your authority or jockey for position. Or, if you haven't defined clearly how the team will work, people may feel overwhelmed by their workload, or they could be uncomfortable with the approach you're using.

Some may question the team's goal and resist taking on tasks because of that.

Team members who keep working hard may be even more stressed without support from other and established processes.

Role of the leader: reduce tension within your team, manage conflicts, stay committed to the team goal and lead by example. If things go worse and conflicts are often, organize a feedback session or hot chair exercise with an external moderator.

This stage requires the maximum of the leader's attention and involvement.

Norming

Gradually, the team moves into the norming stage. Your team members understand your role in the project and start respecting your authority as a leader. They learn how to deal with their

differences and appreciate colleagues' strengths.

Now your team members got to know each other better, they may start socializing together, and even asking for help or providing constructive feedback. Team members develop a stronger commitment to the team purpose, and the first results appear.

The leader should be warned that a prolonged overlap between storming and norming is a usual thing, because, new difficult tasks may lapse the team back into behavior from the storming stage.

Role of the leader: motivate team members with first results, show them that you are on a right track, encourage them to move to the performing stage. It is huge for nutritioning motivation to show the first results. People understand that the painful storming stage was not in vain and start to value each other and the project even more.

Performing

During the norming stage, the team worked well, and you reach the performing stage when hard work is a king, and you move your way to the achievement of the team's goal very fast. The processes that you have set up support this well.

This is the stage of the maximum efficiency and productivity, everyone enjoys working together and see the progress towards the goals.

Role of the leader: as the leader, you can delegate much of your work and can concentrate on developing team members. Here is your time to improve your talent development, mentoring and coaching skills, because your team manages all working process without your direct involvement.

How cool is this—to know what each one of a team is capable of and fully rely on a team. And for the team leader, it is so amazing to see the team running like clockwork.

Adjourning

Many teams will reach this stage eventually. For example, some teams exist only for one project, and even permanent teams may be re-allocated through organizational restructuring.

Team members who are afraid of changes, or who have become close friends with colleagues, may find this stage difficult because their future now looks uncertain.

Role of the leader: facilitate the values reinvention and experience reflection. Also, the work of the team leader is to suggest the ways to stay in touch with other team members even after the project. An intense experience you all got through working together is a great bonding tool, so it is no surprise if you become good friends afterward. I still keep in touch with my previous teammates, we do care about each other and chat a lot, despite it's been more than 3 years since we finished the project.

Me (a girl with red hair) and the greatest team ever

Instead of a conclusion

Finilizing this article, I wanted to say that the main task of a leader is to shorten the storming stage and prolong the performing stage as much as it's possible. This is the key to high team performance.

Has anyone experienced these stages as a team leader? Or maybe as a team member. Share your life hacks about maximizing the team performance in comments.

Being a speaker of international conferences, Marina Paych shares her experience in leadership, organizational development, and marketing. You can read her other articles at [her Medium profile](#) or [join her free mailing list](#).