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Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing

Understanding the Stages of Team Formation

You can't expect a new team to perform well when it first comes together.

Forming a team takes time, and members often go through recognizable stages as they change from being a collection of strangers to a united group with common goals. Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing model describes these stages. When you understand it, you can help your new team become effective more quickly.

In this article, we'll look at how you can use this model to build a highly productive team.

About the Model

Psychologist Bruce Tuckman first came up with the memorable phrase "forming, storming, norming, and performing" in his 1965 article, "**Developmental Sequence in Small Groups**." He used it to describe the path that most teams follow on their way to high performance. Later, he added a fifth stage, "adjourning" (which is sometimes known as "mourning").

Let's look at each stage in more detail.

Forming

In this stage, most team members are positive and polite. Some are anxious, as they haven't fully understood what work the team will do. Others are simply excited about the task ahead.

As leader, you play a dominant role at this stage, because team members' roles and responsibilities aren't clear.

This stage can last for some time, as people start to work together, and as they make an effort to get to know their new colleagues.

Storming

Next, the team moves into the storming phase, where people start to push against the boundaries established in the forming stage. This is the stage where many teams fail.

Storming often starts where there is a conflict between team members' natural working styles. People may work in different ways for all sorts of reasons but, if differing working styles cause unforeseen problems, they may become frustrated.

Storming can also happen in other situations. For example, team members may challenge your authority, or jockey for position as their roles are clarified. 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 worth of the team's goal, and they may resist taking on tasks.

Team members who stick with the task at hand may experience stress, particularly as they don't have the support of established processes, or strong relationships with their colleagues.

Norming

Gradually, the team moves into the norming stage. This is when people start to resolve their differences, appreciate colleagues' strengths, and respect your authority as a leader.

Now that your team members know one another better, they may socialize together, and they are able to ask one another for help and provide constructive feedback. People develop a stronger commitment to the team goal, and you start to see good progress towards it.

There is often a prolonged overlap between storming and norming, because, as new tasks come up, the team may lapse back into behavior from the storming stage.

Performing

The team reaches the performing stage, when hard work leads, without friction, to the achievement of the team's goal. The structures and processes that you have set up support this well.

As leader, you can delegate much of your work, and you can concentrate on developing team members.

It feels easy to be part of the team at this stage, and people who join or leave won't disrupt performance.

Adjourning

Many teams will reach this stage eventually. For example, project teams exist for only a fixed period, and even permanent teams may be disbanded through organizational restructuring.

Team members who like routine, or who have developed close working relationships with colleagues, may find this stage difficult, particularly if their future now looks uncertain.

Using the Tool

As a team leader, your aim is to help your people perform well, as quickly as possible. To do this, you'll need to change your approach at each stage.

Follow the steps below to ensure that you're doing the right thing at the right time:

1. Identify the stage of team development that your team is at from the descriptions above.

2. Now consider what you need to do to move towards the performing stage. Figure 1, below, will help you understand your role, and think about how you can move the

team forward.

3. Schedule regular reviews of where your team is, and adjust your behavior and leadership approach appropriately.

Figure 1: Leadership Activities at Different Group Formation Stages

Stage	Activities
Forming	• Direct the team, and establish clear objectives, both for the **team as a whole** ⊕ and for **individual team members**.
Storming	• Establish processes and structures. • Build **trust** ⊕ and **good relationships** ⊕ between team members. • **Resolve conflicts** ⊕ swiftly if they occur. Provide support, especially to those team members who are less secure. • Remain **positive** ⊕ and firm in the face of challenges to your leadership, or to the team's goal. • Explain the "forming, storming, norming, and performing" idea, so that people understand why problems are occurring, and so that they see that things will get better in the future. **Coach** ⊕ team members in **assertiveness** ⊕ and **conflict resolution skills** ⊕, where this is necessary. • Use psychometric indicators such as **Myers-Briggs** ⊕ and the **Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile** ⊕ to help people learn about different work styles and strengths.
Norming	• Step back and help team members take responsibility for progress towards the goal. (This is a good time to arrange a **team-building** ⊕ event.)
Performing	• **Delegate** ⊕ tasks and projects as far as you can. Once the team is

achieving well, you should aim to have as light a touch as possible. You will now be able to start focusing on other goals and areas of work.

Adjourning	• Take the time to celebrate the team's achievements – you may work with some of your people again, and this will be much easier if people view past experiences positively.

Key Points

Team formation usually follows easily recognizable stages, known as "forming, storming, norming, and performing." Psychologist Bruce Tuckman, who created this memorable phrase, later added a fifth stage, "adjourning" or "mourning."

You can use Tuckman's model to help your team reach the performing stage as quickly as possible.

First you identify the stage of development that your team is at. Then, you use strategies that move your team through to the next stage in the team formation process. With focus and hard work, you'll quickly have a high-performing team.

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