

‡ THREE ‡

NAVIGATING STAGE 1



Goals of Stage 1

Certain behaviors are characteristic of all beginning, or Stage 1, groups. These behaviors can be classified into three categories: concerns about safety and inclusion, member dependency on the designated leader, and a wish for order and structure. Because these categories of behavior happen in all groups during the dependency and inclusion stage, there has to be a reason, or purpose, for their occurrence. If the overall goal of group development is to create an organized unit capable of working effectively to achieve specific ends, then each stage of group development must contribute to that goal in some way. The first step to achieving that overall goal is to create a sense of belonging and the beginnings of predictable patterns of interaction. That is the purpose of Stage 1.

By the end of Stage 1, members should feel a sense of loyalty to the group. They should want to belong to the group, and they should feel safe enough to contribute ideas and suggestions that will, in their opinion, help the group to achieve its overall objectives. If they don't, the group is likely either to disintegrate or to stagnate. Groups disintegrate when members stop attending meetings or participating in group-related activities between meetings. Groups stagnate when the neophyte group system fails to grow and mature.

This chapter describes events that often happen during Stage 1, and what members and leaders can do to make it more likely that group members will emerge from Stage 1 with a sense of belonging and a feeling of safety. Also, through the efforts of members and leaders, the group will have developed rudimentary structures that provide an initial sense of order and predictability.

BOX 3.1 Best Excuse

This group ran the company. The members were the senior vice presidents and the CEO. I was going over the results of a group assessment I had done with them. The group was stuck in Stage 1. While they knew they disagreed about many things, no one was willing to raise controversial issues. In fact, many members didn't talk very much at meetings. I told them things wouldn't change unless they began to discuss these things. The CEO said, "Oh, we forgot to tell you that we took the Myers-Briggs test and all of us scored high on introversion. We're all introverts." I replied, "I don't care if you're aardvarks. You guys run the show. Your cars cost more than people's homes. You have to talk to each other."

Concerns About Safety and Inclusion

The behaviors, feelings, and attitudes that members of new groups express can be summarized as follows:

- Members are concerned about personal safety in the group.
- Members want to be accepted by other members and the leader.
- Members fear rejection.
- Members communicate in tentative and very polite ways.

The following example shows how concerns for safety and inclusion might occur in a new group.

You have been assigned to work in a new group. The first meeting is to be held at 10 o'clock. People begin to arrive a few minutes before 10. You've decided to check things out during this meeting. After all, you know only two people in the room. You smile at a few people and they smile back, but there's not much talking going on. You feel a little awkward, and it's obvious that others do, too. A brave soul asks the person sitting next to him what the purpose of this team is going to be. She shrugs her shoulders. A couple of folks smile and giggle a bit. Someone says, "Adam told me something about it, but I'm not very clear on it. He just said he was putting a group together to work on a new project and he wanted me on the team." Another person says, "That's how it was with me, too." Others nod in agreement and the room falls silent again.

What You Can Do

Now that you know that one of the goals of the first stage of group development is to create a sense of safety and inclusion, there are some things you can do in a situation like this to help the group achieve that goal. You could, for example, introduce yourself to the person next to you and talk about what you do in the organization. If you do this loudly enough, others may introduce themselves as well. If not, ask other people who they are.

When the room falls silent, you could comment on how first meetings are always a little awkward but it usually gets better pretty quickly. Statements like this tend to make others feel more comfortable and stimulate further conversation. The key is to keep the goal in mind (safety and inclusion) and act in ways that increase the likelihood of achieving that goal. Don't wait for others to act. Don't wait for the leader to act. Remember that everyone is responsible for the achievement of group goals. So, just do it.

Dependency on the Designated Leader

- Members express a need for dependable and directive leadership.
- The leader is seen as benevolent and competent.
- The leader is expected and encouraged to provide members with direction and personal safety.
- The leader is very rarely challenged.
- Cohesion and commitment to the group are based on identification with the leader.

The following example shows how these issues might occur in a new group.

After a few minutes, Adam arrives. He stops to greet a few people as he walks into the room. Everyone seems grateful for his arrival. You think to yourself that Adam is the designated leader of this new group and he will get the ball rolling. Just his arrival seems to have made a difference. People seem more relaxed already. They are all looking at Adam, smiling, and waiting for him to speak.

Adam doesn't waste any time. He doesn't even ask people to introduce themselves. Since he knows everyone, he assumes others know each other as

well. Instead, he begins to outline the tasks of the group and the time line in which tasks have to be accomplished. Some people begin to look a little confused, and others seem a bit tense. No one says anything, though.

What You Can Do

At this stage, dependence on the leader is normal. Members expect Adam to take charge. You don't want to undermine Adam's authority or credibility at this point, but you do want to help him do a good job. Adam has forgotten to do a few things. In the best of all possible worlds, Adam would have introduced himself and asked others to do the same. He would have stated the agenda of the meeting and handed out copies of that agenda. He would have stated the goal of the group and launched a discussion about that goal.

If you are the leader of a new group, don't make Adam's mistakes. Come to the meeting prepared. Make sure people are introduced in enough depth that they learn not just one another's names but also what each person does and what each does well. Provide a detailed agenda that includes a written statement of the group's goal. Spend the first meeting discussing that goal.

Since Adam forgot to do those things, you could help him and the group by asking for introductions. It helps to say something like, "Adam, I may be the only one, but I don't know everybody. Can we introduce ourselves before we get started?"

In a similar fashion, you might ask to know the agenda of the meeting and request clarification of the group's goal. Usually you won't have to ask all these questions. Others will chime in once the ice is broken. The key is to keep this goal in mind as well. At this point, the group needs a dependable, directive, and competent leader. Help Adam to meet that group need.

If you are the leader and members ask questions, make suggestions, or point out things you have forgotten to do, thank them for their help. Don't get defensive or embarrassed, even if a member says something in a way that seems rude or challenging. Assume group members are trying to be helpful and encourage them to participate. In the long run, you'll be happy you did.

Some groups don't have designated leaders. This problem can slow group progress. If this is the case in your group, suggest that a group coordinator be chosen. Research suggests that leaderless groups have more difficulty getting organized and more difficulty progressing through the stages of group development.

Desire for Order and Structure

- Goals are not clear to members, but clarification is not sought.
- Members rarely express disagreement with initial group goals.
- Group members assume consensus about goals exists.
- Role assignments tend to be based on external status, first impressions, and initial self-presentation rather than on matching member competencies with goal and task requirements.
- Member compliance is high.
- Communication tends to go through the leader.
- Participation is generally limited to a few vocal members.
- Conflict is minimal.
- Conformity is high.
- A lack of group structure and organization is evident.
- Member deviation from emerging norms is rare.
- Subgroups and coalitions are rare.

The following example shows how these issues might occur in a new group.

Adam responds to your request and states the goal of the group. He asks if people are clear about the goal, and everyone nods. You remain a little confused about the goal but, because everyone seems to understand what's expected, you don't say anything. Adam returns to outlining the tasks of the group and the time line in which tasks have to be accomplished. He asks for volunteers to take on the various tasks.

What You Can Do

From reading this book, you know that if goals are not perfectly clear and accepted by everybody, the chances of group success are limited. You also know that planning how to accomplish tasks and discussing who should do each task are crucial to group success.

Finally, you know that making sure input is sought from all group members increases the chances of group success. So, you ask Adam and the group members to discuss their understanding of the goal in a little more depth. Later you raise the issue of role assignments. It's best to raise this issue by inquiring

about your own role, especially if it doesn't seem appropriate to you based on your skills and abilities. Of course, chances are slim that you will have to raise all these issues. By now, other members will be raising issues as well.

A word of advice for leaders is in order here. You know that discussing goals at length, spending time planning how to accomplish tasks, and assigning tasks based on member skills are important to group success. Make sure these things happen, but don't hog the limelight. Remember that it's good to see members raise issues and not have to raise all those issues yourself. Don't be too perfect, and don't be too dominant. Provide for member safety. Provide initial direction and support members' attempts to participate.

This chapter has provided examples of events that typically occur in Stage 1 groups. It hasn't been meant to cover all possible scenarios. The real intention of this chapter and those that follow is to help members and leaders develop a framework to guide their actions in groups. The framework is pretty simple. Know the goals of each stage of development and act in ways that will help your group achieve those goals. If the members and leaders described in this chapter follow that advice, the group will move forward. People will develop a sense of belonging and safety, members will begin to trust Adam's leadership skills, and the beginnings of order will appear. The group will be ready to move on.