

FROM GROUPS TO TEAMS

The Stages of Group Development



Groups develop across time very much as people do. People experience childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age. Childhood is associated with dependency. Adolescence usually contains periods of conflict. Young adulthood requires a lot of time spent developing trusting relationships and preparing for a career. In adulthood people spend a significant amount of time working, and in old age people typically reduce their focus on work.

Research has found that groups also experience periods of dependency, conflict, trust and structuring, work, and disengagement. Group development and human development have much in common.

The concept of group development is well documented in the social science literature. In view of the general consensus that groups develop and change across time, extensive reviews of the literature have been conducted to consolidate previous research and to propose a unified model of group development. These reviews have produced similar results. What follows is a brief description of the integrated model of group development that I use in my own work. This model was initially based on previous research. Since then, a number of studies have been conducted to determine whether these stages actually occur in work groups. These studies have confirmed that the stages of development outlined in the model do occur in groups in the real world.

Stage 1: Dependency and Inclusion

The first stage of group development is characterized by members' dependency on the designated leader, concerns about safety, and concerns about feeling included in the group. This first stage of group development may manifest itself as members' compliance with plans proposed by the group leader or by a powerful member. Group members often engage in what has been called pseudo work, or flight, such as exchanging stories about customers or their families that are irrelevant to the task at hand. Members may also wait for the group leader to make decisions. In fact, members often urge the leader to take charge and tell them what to do. Members seem more concerned about being accepted by others than about the task at hand. They are unlikely to express different points of view as a result.

Identifying a Stage 1 Group

- Members are concerned about personal safety in the group
- Members are concerned about acceptance and inclusion by others in the group
- Members fear rejection
- Members communicate in tentative and very polite ways
- Members express a need for dependable and directive leadership
- Members see the leader as benevolent and competent
- Members expect and encourage the leader to provide them with direction and personal safety
- Members very rarely challenge the leader
- The group's goals are not clear to its members, but members don't try to clarify them
- Members rarely express disagreement with the group's initial goals
- The group assumes that there is consensus about its goals
- Role assignments tend to be based on external status, first impressions, and initial self-presentation rather than on matching member competencies with goals 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
- Cohesion and commitment to the group are based on identification with the leader
- Subgroups and coalitions are rare

Box 3.1 Silence of the Lambs

You know you're in a Stage 1 group when the leader asks a question and no one responds. The leader's words seem to vanish into the Bermuda Triangle.

Stage 2: Counterdependency and Fighting

At Stage 2, the group seeks to free itself from its dependence on the leader, and members fight about group goals and procedures. Task conflict is an inevitable part of this process. The group's task at this stage is to develop a unified set of goals, values, and operational procedures, and this task usually generates conflict. Task conflict also is necessary for the establishment of trust and a climate in which members feel free to disagree with each other.

Some groups become mired in interpersonal conflicts and remain stuck at this developmental stage. Other groups are overwhelmed by the stress of this phase and revert to leader dependence in an attempt to avoid further conflict. Research tells us that task conflict is essential if teams are to become effective and productive. However, interpersonal conflict can stop a work group in its tracks. When disagreements become personal, trust is lost and members do not feel safe in the group. Stay focused on work tasks and avoid conflicts that are based on personality or incompatibility.

Box 3.2 Toxic Waste

You know you're in a Stage 2 group when the thought of going to a team meeting makes you feel ill.

Neither remaining stuck in Stage 2 nor regressing to Stage 1 has positive effects for the group or for the quality of work generated by the group. Only through resolution of task conflicts and the development of a unified view of the group's purpose and procedures can true collaboration be achieved.

Identifying a Stage 2 Group

- Conflicts about values emerge
- Disagreements about goals and tasks emerge
- Increased feelings of safety allow dissent to occur
- Dissatisfaction with roles may surface
- Goal clarification begins
- Role clarification begins
- Members challenge the leader and each other
- Subgroups and coalitions form
- Group intolerance of subgroups, cliques, and coalitions is evident
- Member participation increases
- Conformity decreases
- Deviation from emerging group norms begins to occur
- Attempts at conflict management begin
- If efforts to resolve conflicts are successful, consensus about group goals and culture increases near the end of this stage
- Conflict resolution, if successful, increases trust and cohesion

Stage 3: Trust and Structure

If a group manages to work through the inevitable conflicts of Stage 2, member trust, commitment to the group, and willingness to cooperate increase. Communication becomes more open and task oriented. Professional territoriality decreases as members focus more on the task and less on issues of status, power, or influence. This third stage of group development is characterized by more mature negotiations about roles, organization, and procedures. It is also a time in which members work to solidify positive working relationships with each other.

Identifying a Stage 3 Group

- Goal clarity and consensus increase
- Roles and tasks are adjusted to increase the likelihood of goal achievement

- The leader's role becomes less directive and more consultative
- The communication structure becomes more flexible
- The content of communication becomes more task oriented
- Pressures to conform increase again
- Helpful deviation is tolerated
- Coalitions and subgroups continue to emerge
- Tolerance of subgroups, cliques, and coalitions increases
- Cohesion and trust increase
- Member satisfaction increases
- Cooperation is more evident
- Individual commitment to group goals and tasks is high
- Greater division of labor occurs
- Conflict continues to occur, but it is managed more effectively
- The group works to clarify and build a group structure that will facilitate goal achievement

Stage 4: Work

As its name implies, the fourth stage of group development is a time of intense team productivity and effectiveness. At this stage, the group becomes a high performance team. Having resolved many of the issues of the previous stages, the team can focus more of its energies on goal achievement and task accomplishment. Although some work occurs at every developmental stage, the quality and quantity of work increase significantly during Stage 4.

Whenever I teach or give a talk or presentation, I describe Stage 4 and ask audience members to raise their hand if they have ever been a member of a Stage 4 group. About one in four people raise their hand. That, coupled with the fact that only a small percentage of the groups in my database are Stage 4 groups, as described in Chapter 2, leads me to believe that many readers of this book have never been a member of a Stage 4 group. So read this next section carefully. Working in a Stage 4 group is a wonderful experience.

Identifying a Stage 4 Group

- Members are clear about the team's goals
- Members agree with the team's goals
- Tasks require a team rather than individual effort

- Members are clear about their roles
- Members accept their roles and status in the team
- Role assignments match member abilities
- Delegation or “unleadership” is the prevailing leadership style
- The team’s communication structure matches the demands of the task
- The team has an open communication structure in which all members participate and are heard
- The team has an appropriate ratio of task communications to supportive communications
- The team gets, gives, and uses feedback about its effectiveness and productivity
- The team spends time defining problems it must solve or decisions it must make
- The team spends time planning how it will solve problems and make decisions
- The team spends enough time discussing its problems and decisions
- The team uses participatory decision-making methods
- The team implements and evaluates its decisions and solutions to problems
- Voluntary conformity is high
- Task-related deviance is tolerated
- Team norms encourage high performance and quality
- The team expects to be successful
- The team encourages innovation
- Team members pay attention to the details of their work
- The team accepts coalition and subgroup formation
- Subgroups are integrated into the team as a whole
- Subgroups work on important tasks
- Tasks contain variety and challenge
- Each subgroup works on a total product or project
- The team contains the smallest number of members necessary to accomplish its goals
- Subgroups are recognized and rewarded by the team
- The team is highly cohesive
- Interpersonal attraction between members is high
- Members are cooperative
- Periods of conflict are frequent but brief
- The team has effective conflict management strategies

Box 3.3 Pride in the Work

You know you're in a Stage 4 group when you can't wait to get to the team meeting because it's exhilarating, fun, and important and makes you feel like a grown-up.

Box 3.4 The Stages of Group Development

1. Dependency and Inclusion
2. Counterdependency and Fighting
3. Trust and Structure
4. Work and Productivity

Group development does not always proceed in a positive direction. Groups can get stuck at a particular stage for an extended period of time, resulting in long-term ineffectiveness and low productivity. Also, groups may fluctuate widely based on the circumstances and forces affecting them at a given moment. Changes in membership, external demands, and changes in leadership can all affect the work of a group. Turnover rates, reassignments, and new upper-level managers often produce regression and necessitate the rebuilding of group structures and culture.

Not all work groups, of any type, achieve adequate levels of effectiveness and productivity. In fact, some studies estimate that between 80% and 90% of all groups have difficulties with performance. Although achieving an effective performance level is difficult for any group, it is even more problematic for groups with diverse members. Groups composed of members from different professions, for example, have additional obstacles to productivity. These include the lack of an organizing framework, issues of professional territoriality, and miscommunication. The road to productivity is fraught with difficulties.

Surviving Group Development

There are a few things people can do, and a few attitudes people can take on, that make the process of group development easier. Like human beings, groups

have some rocky times on the road to maturity. Here are a few suggestions to help group members survive, and even enjoy, the process of group development.

Learn About Group Development

It helps to know what's in store for you as you move through the various stages of individual human development. For example, when social scientists determined that adults experience developmental stages, some of which are not so pleasant, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Once we started talking about adolescent insecurities, midlife crises, menopause, and the like, many people stopped feeling alone and out of control. Instead of feeling scared or depressed, people felt normal. Other people were experiencing the same things, and that made individuals feel better. Knowledge of developmental stages also makes an individual's experiences at a particular age seem more manageable. Finally, this knowledge usually leads to better, happier individual development.

The same is true of group development. When group members know that all groups go through predictable stages of development, they can relax and enjoy the ride. When groups don't know about group development, their members might think that their fellow group members are strange or that their particular group is extremely dysfunctional or unusual. Clearly, people with knowledge of group behavior make better group members and leaders. Such knowledgeable people are less likely to misinterpret what they see and more likely to be constructive in what they say and do.

Be Patient

Although human development and group development have a lot in common, group development doesn't take as long. However, it does take some time. My colleagues and I have been monitoring the progress of hundreds of groups over the years, and we have yet to see a high performance team that had been meeting for less than six months. For the first two or three months, groups are dealing with the issues characteristic of Stages 1 and 2. Groups generally enter Stage 3 in the fourth or fifth month, and Stage 4, or high performance, typically begins during the sixth or seventh month. Of course, this is assuming that a group does not run into any snags.

Most people in upper management and in groups don't understand that groups develop over time. They want groups to function at high levels from the beginning. That simply doesn't happen. It takes time to figure out what the

goals really mean. It takes time to figure out how to accomplish those goals and who should do what. It takes time to resolve problems and disagreements that come up. It's important to be patient.

Unfortunately, some groups, like some people, never mature. They stay stuck in dependency or conflict for as long as the group exists. Other groups manage to become high performance teams only to regress to earlier stages later on. This is usually due to some internal crisis or a change in the level of organizational support.

Fortunately, no group has to stay stuck or regressed. If members are willing to work to turn things around, it can be done.

Expect Things to Be Murky at the Beginning of a Group

Things are never clear at the beginning of a group. Often, after an early meeting, you'll hear people asking each other questions about what went on during the meeting. Of course, no one asked those questions during the meeting. This is normal, and as time goes on people will begin to feel free to ask for clarification during group meetings. A person who expects a new group to have a perfectly organized meeting with clear outcomes will be disappointed. This person might even get angry, and that will do no one any good.

Expect Conflict and Treat It as a Positive Sign of Progress

Most of us avoid conflict as much as we can. The problem in groups, as in life, is that conflict is inevitable. Each group has to define its goals, clarify how it will function, and determine the various roles that members will play. Group members should expect disagreements about the content of the group's goal and how to solve specific problems related to that goal. Task conflict is a necessary part of this process because, from divergent points of view, a more unified direction must be agreed upon if group members are to work together in a productive way.

On a more psychological level, task conflict is necessary for the establishment of a safe environment. Although at first glance this may seem paradoxical, task conflict promotes the development of trust. We all know from our own experience that it is easier to develop trust in another person or in a group if we believe that we can disagree and we won't be abandoned or hurt because we have a different perspective. It is difficult to trust those who deny us the right to hold different views. To engage in a task conflict with others and to work it out is an exhilarating experience. It provides energy, a shared experience, and a sense of safety and authenticity and allows deeper trust levels and collaboration.

From the task perspective, if people are not free to express their points of view, the group's product is likely to be inferior. If everyone just goes along with the first idea that's expressed, the outcome is unlikely to be of high quality. Task conflict is a normal, natural, and necessary part of group life. Keeping that in mind will make things much easier.

Help the Group Limit Conflicts to Those About Tasks, Roles, Structures, and the Like; Don't Get Involved in Personal Feuds or Personality Conflicts

Although conflict may be normal and necessary, some kinds of conflict can be very detrimental to group development. Personal feuds and personality conflicts that erupt in groups can cause group progress to cease, sometimes permanently. The problem with personal conflicts is that they usually can't be resolved. If one person doesn't like another's personality, the rest of the group can't really do anything about it. However, what appear to be personality conflicts are often really the results of other factors in the group that can be addressed, such as goal confusion and role assignments. The group can deal with these things more successfully. In general, it's good to disagree about goals, tasks, roles, and so on. It's not good for group members to personalize these things and see other members as bad or incompetent because they have a different opinion or a different way of doing things.

Compromise on Issues When Possible and Help Others Resolve Differences

In the course of my research, I have attended or listened to tapes of many group meetings. Sometimes members are disagreeing and no one is willing to compromise. Although I would not advocate compromise on an issue that is really important to group success or that has ethical consequences, compromise is essential to group productivity.

One example of unwillingness to compromise stands out in my mind. A certain group was working on a very important new product for the company. The company had had a recent layoff, and more layoffs were anticipated. The group was over budget and had missed several deadlines. During my observation, a conflict unrelated to the goal of the group kept emerging. Members had taken sides on this issue, and neither side was willing to give in. This story has a happy ending. I worked with the group and helped them to see that this

conflict about who was right and who was wrong would ultimately result in group failure. Most stories like this don't have happy endings.

**Don't Sit on the Sidelines; Take Responsibility
for What Is Going On, Even If It Doesn't
Involve You Directly**

Every group member is responsible for the group's outcomes. Group members shouldn't wait for other members or the leader to solve a problem or save the day. Members should make suggestions and share their ideas, concerns, and reservations. Of course, it helps if they can do this in a diplomatic way.

Be Supportive of Other Members and the Leader

Some of the research that my colleagues and I have conducted over the years has required us to put each verbal statement made by group members into one of a number of categories. Here are examples of supportive statements:

"Thanks for that suggestion, Joe."

"I appreciate your saying that, Mary."

"I agree with you, Abe."

In groups that are doing well, out of every 100 statements made by group members, between 15 and 20 are supportive statements. That sounds like a lot, but we see this over and over again. There's nothing like a little support to encourage people to work to capacity.

Complete Your Tasks in a Timely Fashion

Groups are not groups just during meetings. Group members work together and separately outside the group to complete work related to the group's goals. Nothing slows down group progress more than failure to accomplish those tasks in a timely fashion. Trust is built between members not by words but by actions. If group members can trust each other to do what they say, things will go very smoothly.

Don't Be Upset When Subgroups or Coalitions Emerge

Sometimes subgroups are formed when they are needed to get a group's work done. At other times, group members will form a coalition with others to

emphasize a point they're trying to make. These are natural and good things, but the existence of subgroups and coalitions upsets some people. These people may feel left out or believe that the presence of smaller units within the group will interfere with the group's success. Some group members call these subgroups "cliques," which has negative connotations. However, the presence of subgroups generally is not negative. It is a sign that the group is getting organized and will be able to get its work done during the inevitable crunch time. Coalitions can help the group to see another point of view, which often turns out to be the right one.

Of course, subgroups and coalitions can have negative effects sometimes. When coalitions are unwilling to compromise, for example, things can go awry. When subgroups take action without checking with or informing the whole group, the results can be negative. Most of the time, however, the appearance of subgroups and coalitions is a healthy sign of group progress.

Encourage Your Group to Regularly Assess How It Is Functioning

People at work these days are very busy. They want the meeting to end quickly so that they can deal with the piles of work on their desks. The last thing people want to do is take five minutes out of the meeting to discuss how they are working together. The very last thing they want to do is spend an entire meeting every two months or so discussing how the group is functioning. That seems like a big waste of time. I encourage groups to do it anyway. In the long run, it will save time and aggravation. More on how to assess group progress regularly can be found in Chapter 10.

Show Up

I once worked with a group in which the membership changed almost weekly. There were 20 people in this planning group. Each week about 10 people showed up, and those 10 were different almost every time. There is nothing like unstable membership to slow group development or to stop it altogether. Each meeting becomes a repeat of the last, and the focus becomes catching people up on what happened at the last meeting.

In later chapters, I will offer more suggestions to members and leaders about what they can do to help their groups be successful.