

The Team Development Life Cycle

A New Look

Tom Edison

Understanding how teams function and what makes teams more effective can be meaningful in the classroom and in the workplace. Much has been studied and written about the traditional model of team development since Dr. Bruce Tuckman's 1965 study of small groups, which identified the traditional five phases experienced by project work teams: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. These phases help us to understand and interpret the changes and developmental stages that occur within teams, and they facilitate analyses of team behavior and aid in developing what are the necessary traits or behavior patterns for a team to become high-performing. The phases I introduce in this article go beyond Tuckman's traditional phases and will, I hope, help in understanding a team's "complete" developmental life cycle.

The Traditional Tuckman Model

Tuckman's traditional model is very useful for understanding a team's basic functional stages, but his model needs to be expanded for greater understanding of team development, especially during a team's dysfunctional phases. Many people think this model is very useful, but other research has shown it is not applicable to all teams or situations. This article will identify some new characteristics or phases of team development that complement the classic five phases developed by Tuckman.

To save or transform a project team, it is necessary to understand and

review the dysfunctional phases or negative forces that a team encounters so that appropriate corrective actions can be taken to aid a team in becoming high-performing. It is also meaningful to understand other characteristics that can enhance teamwork and team performance. Dr. Pamela Knight, a Defense Acquisition University professor, has conducted a similar study based on Tuckman's model. This research can be found at < www.dau/pubs/misc/Duration_Technical_Team_Dynamics.asp > . Significant data were gathered from over

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300 teams. Knight's results highlighted that Tuckman's model is useful for general understanding of the team development, but teams do not all follow Tuckman's development or growth throughout their life.

To begin understanding how teams become dysfunctional, it is relevant to create an extension to Tuckman's model. The figure below highlights the classical functional stages as introduced and explained by Tuckman and further discussed in "Leading Project Teams" by Dr. Owen Gadeken in *Defense AT&L's* predecessor publication *Program Manager* (July-August 2002). The additional team development phases described in this paper and shown in the figure are informing, conforming, transforming, and deforming. It should be stressed that these team *orm* phases are based on work I conducted during dissertation research at Alliant International University and personal experiences working with teams as a Defense Acquisition University professor, especially in DAU's six-week Program Management Office Course (PMT 352B), which uses a team environment throughout the curriculum to solve problems and facilitate key learning and retention of acquisition and program management concepts. No empirical data currently exist to support these theories, all of which are conceptual.

Functional versus Dysfunctional

The development of this new model with its additional stages beyond the traditional Tuckman model should provide insights into those stages that are positive (functional) and those that are negative (dysfunctional). The following phases of a project team (illustrated in the figure) occur in the dysfunctional stage of a team: conforming and deforming. It's difficult to predict when those stages will occur, but they need to be acknowledged by those who work with or are on teams so they can keep the team focused on the functional track of team development and on becoming high-performing. Additionally, this under-

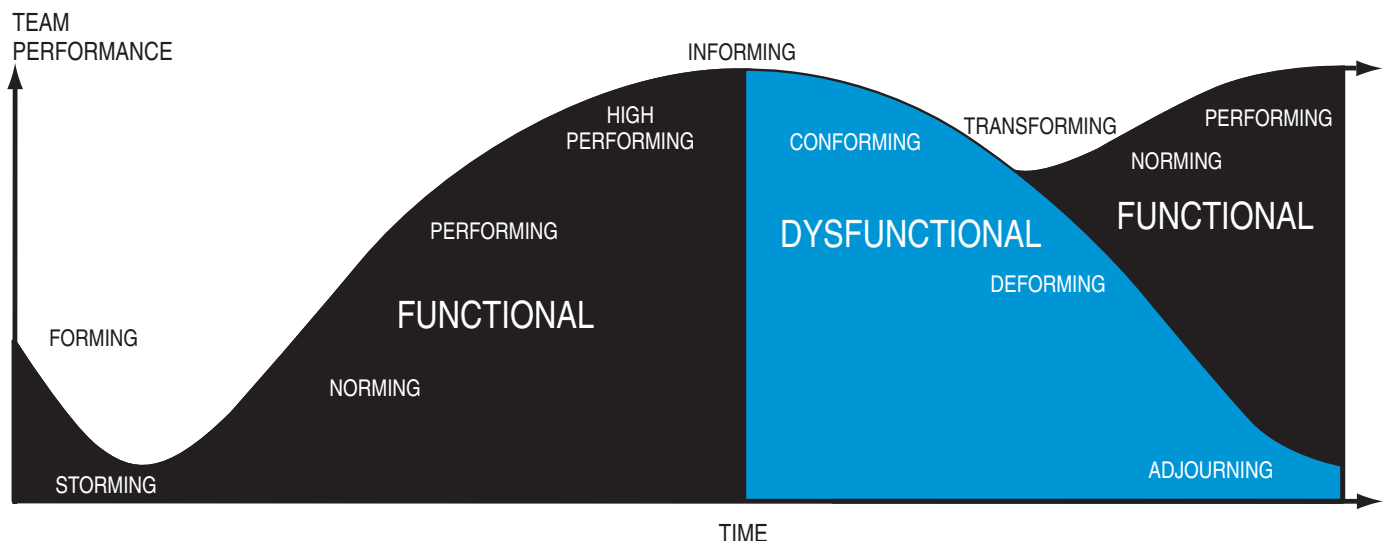
standing is critical so that a dysfunctional team can be placed or "transformed" back into the functional stages of its developmental life, which are norming, performing, informing, and perhaps back again to transforming, if needed.

An effective team must be able to transform from dysfunctional to functional stages by accomplishing self-assessment or transformational activities that help identify the reasons and potential causes for the team's dysfunction.

Informing: The Tipping Point

The stage of informing at the top of the life cycle curve (or the tipping point of team development) highlights that one of the positive roles of the high-performing team is to inform others about positive team results and conclusions. As Gadeken explained in his article, many teams get hung up in the storming and norming stages and never make it to the high-performing stage. He also highlighted that John R. Katzenback and Douglas K. Smith, in their 1993 book *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, explained that many teams deteriorate during storming and norming and do not progress to performing and especially not to the high-performing stage. Gadeken stressed that it is the exception rather than the rule for most teams to make it to high-performing. But if they do, then it becomes paramount that they "inform" or communicate their accomplishments to others so that both the challenges and successes resulting from their efforts can be used by the organization they were chartered by to determine the capability of other similar teams to accomplish similar successes or identify the need to adjust the team.

More resources may be needed to ensure continued "survival" or functioning of the team. Informing is still part of the functional phases and should continue throughout a



Project Team Performance Curve

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Transformation of a Team in a Classroom Environment

An example of a team that transformed occurred during week three of a six-week program management course (PTM 352B). The team had performed adequately together for the first two weeks of the course, developing innovative solutions to complex acquisition challenges presented by the instructors. During week three, the team members began to conform; they started to think alike and, in particular, to agree consistently with the ideas and solutions of the senior member of the team, who dominated team conversations. The other members had lost their originality and innovation. They needed to be transformed into a more creative, innovative team, generating new or different ideas independent of their "leader."

Transforming meant the team needed to change its ways of thinking. The event that triggered that change was the illness and absence of the dominant member for two days of class. The team had to transform its normal process of decision making. It could not disband—the course had three more weeks to run and the team would stay together for the remaining time. So the team members challenged each other to fill the void of their absent leader. They had to think and create on their own. They began to discuss ideas and debate solutions and to realize the value of thinking and challenging each other. This modus operandi continued when the leader returned. The team had transformed itself.

team's life. It is relevant that this additional *orm* development function be considered a critical or positive phase of the developmental life of a functioning, high-performing project work team.

Conforming: The Danger of Groupthink

One dysfunctional characteristic a team may develop is becoming too conforming in how members think or behave. Conforming is a phase in which the thinking or decision making of the team is lacking original, creative, and/or innovative ideas. The members have begun to think alike, and any of the unique yet appropriate ideas and solutions that originated from the team are lost or decreased because the team members are beginning to develop the characteristics of groupthink (a term coined by psychologist Irving Janis in 1973). Groupthink, or conforming, is a phase that reduces the creativity and innovation of the team because the individual members have become uninspired to think independently or to consider ideas or solutions that run counter to those supported by the majority of the team. While there is

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it has become dysfunctional. The objective of any team is to identify not only the positive functional phases as they progress so as to achieve high-performing stature, but also to identify the negative or dysfunctional phases early in the life cycle so they can be detected, studied, and corrected and reversed before they become too serious. Transforming is necessary if a team is to avoid disbanding or deforming

The transformation stage involves adding more activation energy by overcoming the conformity of the team members or their ideas. Transforming a team is a challenge and calls for unique skills. The team leader needs to bring in new members; energize the current members with new, innovative, or creative techniques; or even bring in an outside facilitator. Transformation of a team is necessary if the team has not accomplished its overall goals and/or objectives and still has a useful life.

Transformation enables a team to get back on track and again begin following the traditional Tuckman stages of norming and performing (and even storming if needed). It can even eventually become a high-performing team if properly resourced and motivated.

Transforming a team from dysfunctional to functional can occur at any time during the downward slope of the curve highlighted in the figure. The concern, however, is that the team not spend too much time in a deforming or disbanding phase to the point of no return or recovery.

On Track to High Performance

Teams need to realize that they should be able to inform (a positive function), especially if they are high-performing. Informing is a natural transition phase for teams. They can also find themselves transitioning to the conforming phase (a negative function). They begin to experience groupthink, and their effectiveness is reduced.

The insights in transforming project work teams allows team members, team leaders, and management/leadership in general to understand the need to overcome conforming and—even more serious—negative thinking so that teams can more effectively evolve or transform themselves and better transition into Tuckman's norming stage, after which—ideally—they will evolve into high-performing teams, back on track to being functioning, positive, and productive influences on the organizations they support. No empirical data have been collected on these theories, and I encourage others to investigate further and try to empirically prove them.

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a sense of cohesiveness that can be reassuring to the individual team members (especially if they are looking for uniformity and stability of thinking), the creative juices have stopped flowing and the team is stagnant. Conforming will have a negative impact if it continues, and it can contribute to team's deforming (disbanding) and eventually adjourning.

Deforming: The Team in Danger

Once the team has become entrenched in the conforming stage, it has become dysfunctional. It will start to disband or deform. Deforming manifests itself in members starting to miss team meetings, not contributing to the required activation energy needed to sustain the team's effective performance, and not focusing on vital team goals or objectives. A deforming team begins to lose its members, and those who stay are no longer effective. No new ideas are being created, and the team has outlived its useful life. The team needs to be transformed or realigned to become a normal functioning—or better yet, a high-performing—team.

Transforming: Turning the Team Around

Transforming is considered a transitional stage between a functional and dysfunctional team. It is critical that a team understand the need to transform once it recognizes