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Most leaders, at some point in their professional career, learned about the stages of team development. Yet in the course of managing teams, they have somewhat forgotten or ignored what they learned, causing immense frustration for team members. The probability of success for a team rises dramatically if the team is properly developed and guided. If you want your team to work well--or even exist with any degree of success--you will have to contend with team development. Teams go through stages, and these stages put different demands on the members and on leaders. The more you know about how teams develop, the better you can navigate the various stages and keep progressing toward your goals.

In 1965, Bruce Tuckman, a professor of psychology at The Ohio State University, created the popular framework for the stages of team development. He called these stages by neat, rhyming names: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Despite their rhythm, the terms aren't so transparent. Over the years, some stages have been added.

If you have to form and lead a team, adhere to the following sequence of actions:

1) *Creation (Forming)*. There's a big difference between a group in which everyone is new to each other and one in which the people have learned to work together, anticipate what the others will need, and act accordingly. That's the difference between having an assemblage and a team. Any time you start a new team or even see significant changes in an existing one, you face creating the team.

In the creation phase, the members have to come to know each other and each other's roles in the team. If they are new to the team, they must understand its purpose and goals. If they were previously on the team, then they need

to consider how changes may affect pursuing those goals. All members, new or existing, must consider boundaries between themselves and others, making enough room for people to have control over their work without stepping on the toes of colleagues. But really knowing each other takes time because in this stage people are typically on their best behavior.

2) *Emergence (Storming)*. As the team emerges from its creation phase and starts to more seriously pursue its goals, people start to be themselves, and you'll find some team members getting irritated with each other. Certain people will overstep their boundaries. Disagreements will flare up on almost every topic: why the group exists, what it should be doing, how it should be working. This period is one of necessary strife. Team members cannot walk on eggshells forever.

As things get a little ugly, don't hide from the arguments. This process is absolutely necessary if a team is eventually going to become stable and productive. You'll have to re-establish vision and meaning, work hard to listen, and adjust operations as necessary. You might even find that the way things started weren't correct and that this period is good for making necessary changes.

3) *Establishment (Norming)*. People have slugged it out--hopefully, only in a figurative sense. Now the team members should be comfortable with each other or at least resigned to everyone else's presence. Everyone has more or less agreed on what direction to take and on the fundamental issues facing the team. Now they are spending time making decisions and getting work done.

In other words, the basic group dynamics and processes are accepted and working. Now you need to focus more strongly on goals and tasks.

4) *Performing (Self-Direction)*. This is the highest development point for a team. In this state, it is effective in what

it does. People on the team understand their positions and what collectively they are trying to achieve. As issues come up, team members see them--even anticipate them--and take corrective action. The team should start to act from principle and not just wait to be told what to do.

5) *Recycle*. Unfortunately, development is often not linear and never something you can take for granted. There are teams that won't progress past one of the stages. A disruption, such as replacing a team member or dealing with a change in organizational intent or strategy, can even take a well-established team and push it back into an earlier stage of development.

At some point, and possibly more often than once in your leadership experience, you'll have to face rebuilding and redeveloping the team that you already thought was set. All you can do is dust yourself off, determine where you are at that given moment, and then take appropriate actions. Don't take it too hard; it's not generally a sign of poor leadership (though it can be).

6) *Disbanding (Adjourning)*. In 1975, Tuckman added another stage to describe what happens when a team breaks up. This doesn't affect the group's goals because when this happens, the goals are hopefully completed. However, it is important for the team members and their futures. The bonds between people working intently on a single goal can become surprisingly strong.

Help people recollect what they achieved and how they worked together to meet goals. Let them all bring up lessons they learned. Treat disbanding as a form of grief, and give people a chance to get emotions out of their systems.

Understanding and adhering to these stages of team development can be the difference between your team coming up short or accomplishing the mission, and of course you should always want to accomplish the mission!

~ The End ~