Tuckman's Team Development Model

Idea In Short

Leaders often expect new teams to perform effectively from day one, ignoring the conflict that must precede real cohesion. Executives should apply Tuckman's model, recognizing that teams move through forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning, often non-linearly. Regression to earlier stages during disruption is normal, not a sign of failure. The immediate decision is this: before judging a struggling team as dysfunctional, diagnose which Tuckman stage it currently occupies and lead accordingly rather than demanding performing-stage output prematurely.

Bruce Tuckman, an American psychologist, introduced his model of group development in a 1965 paper titled "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups."1 Tuckman's original model consisted of four stages: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing, developed from his observations of group behavior across a range of settings combined with his review of existing group dynamics literature at the time.

In 1977, Tuckman collaborated with Mary Ann Jensen to add a fifth stage, Adjourning, sometimes also called Mourning, extending the model to cover a group's dissolution as well as its formation and development.2 This extension reflected a recognition that a team's story does not end once it reaches peak performance; teams eventually disband, and that ending carries its own psychological dynamics worth understanding rather than ignoring.

The model gained an unusual path to prominence, finding initial popularity among human resource development practitioners in workplace settings well before it became a standard reference within academic literature.3 This trajectory reflected the model's practical usefulness to people actually managing teams day to day, at a time when organizations increasingly recognized groups as a central unit of workplace productivity but lacked much applicable research to guide how those groups actually developed over time.

The Forming Stage

In the forming stage, team members typically behave politely and cautiously, focused on understanding their role within the group and testing how others will react to them. Leadership tends to remain centralized during this stage, with members looking to a designated leader for direction rather than asserting independent judgment. A guarded optimism about the tasks ahead often exists during this stage.

This stage carries a notable irony: teams typically start in a highly harmonious state even though actual performance remains low. That harmony, however, tends to be superficial, resting on general politeness rather than any genuine, tested mutual understanding. Leaders should recognize this distinction, since mistaking early-stage politeness for real cohesion sets unrealistic expectations for how quickly a team can produce meaningful output.

Team members during forming are also actively orienting themselves within the group, watching how others behave and calibrating their own contributions accordingly. This observation period matters, since impressions established during forming often shape how comfortable individual members feel raising disagreement once the group moves into its next, more conflict-prone stage.

The Storming Stage

The storming stage follows forming, frequently characterized by open or hidden conflict as team members begin asserting themselves more directly. Members may become competitive, defensive or critical of the leader and one another as they push back against roles or working styles they find uncomfortable. This represents a necessary adjustment period rather than a sign of failure, since genuine differences in perspective rarely surface fully during the more cautious forming stage.

Leaders navigating storming effectively should address emerging conflict early, encourage open dialogue rather than suppressing disagreement, and clarify ambiguous roles. Creating a psychologically safe environment matters considerably here, since members who fear consequences for voicing disagreement will suppress it outwardly while underlying tension continues undermining the team beneath the surface.

Leaders should resist viewing storming as purely destructive, since the stage performs work a team cannot skip successfully. A team that never experiences meaningful storming has often avoided real differences rather than resolved them, producing fragile stability that

collapses the first time genuine pressure arises later.

The Norming Stage

Norming follows once a team successfully works through the conflicts that surfaced during storming. Team members establish clearer roles, resolve prior friction, and develop a genuine sense of belonging rather than the guarded politeness that characterized forming. Collaboration and productivity both tend to improve noticeably, since members now operate from tested trust rather than untested assumption.

The norming stage derives its name from the shared norms the group develops collectively during this period, covering communication style, meeting behavior, and how the team handles future disagreements. These norms function as a working agreement the team has earned through storming, rather than rules imposed externally before the team had real experience working together.

Leaders should recognize norming as still requiring active attention, even though visible conflict has typically subsided. A team settling into productive collaboration can still benefit from reinforcement and continued clarity about goals, since norming represents consolidation rather than completion of development.

The Performing Stage

The performing stage represents the team's peak functional state, where the group operates efficiently, recognizes individual members' distinct strengths, and maintains strong commitment toward shared goals. Teams here typically require minimal supervision, since trust has developed sufficiently that members operate with autonomy while remaining aligned around common objectives. Supervisors often participate as collaborative team members rather than directive authority figures, and the team makes most necessary operational decisions itself.

A team functioning at this stage demonstrates high trust, adapts fluidly to new challenges without descending back into unresolved conflict, and consistently meets or exceeds its goals. This adaptability distinguishes genuine performing-stage function from a team that merely appears productive while actually operating with brittle, untested cohesion that would crack under real pressure.

Executives should recognize that reaching performing does not guarantee a team remains there permanently. Even highly effective, long-established teams can revert to earlier stages under certain circumstances, and this regression represents a normal feature of team dynamics rather than evidence something has gone wrong.

The Adjourning Stage

Adjourning, the fifth stage Tuckman and Jensen added in 1977, addresses what happens once a team's work concludes and the group disbands, ideally in a positive manner reflecting genuinely completed work. This stage often produces a genuine mixture of emotions, combining satisfaction over what the group accomplished with a sense of loss connected to leaving behind relationships and a working rhythm built collectively over time.

Team members during adjourning frequently reflect on the leader and fellow members with a mixture of anxiety about the transition ahead and appreciation for what the experience provided them individually. Leaders should treat this stage as deserving genuine attention rather than simply moving on once a project concludes, since acknowledging accomplishments supports members as they transition toward whatever comes next.

Adjourning also functions as a starting point rather than merely an ending. Team members who move on from a disbanding group carry working habits, trust patterns and lessons learned into whatever team they join next, meaning a well-handled adjourning stage can meaningfully shape how successfully those individuals navigate their next team's early stages.

Non-Linear Progression and Regression

One of the most persistent misconceptions about Tuckman's model treats it as a strictly linear sequence, where a team simply progresses from forming through performing in fixed, one-directional order. In practice, teams move back and forth between stages considerably more often than this simplified reading suggests, and even the most high-performing teams commonly revert to earlier stages under specific circumstances rather than maintaining permanent, uninterrupted forward progress.

A team can regress from norming or even performing back toward storming when a new member joins the group, when a significant disagreement resurfaces, or when the team's

composition or priorities shift substantially. Long-standing teams frequently cycle through these stages repeatedly across their lifespan as they respond to changing circumstances, rather than experiencing the sequence only once at the very beginning of the team's existence.

Executives should build this expectation of regression into how they lead teams over time, rather than treating any reversion to storming as evidence of a fundamentally broken team. Regular reflection on which stage a team currently occupies, combined with adaptive leadership calibrated to that specific stage, helps teams regain lost momentum more quickly than leaders who simply demand renewed performing-stage output without addressing whatever triggered the regression in the first place.

- 1Forming, Storming, Norming, And Performing, Mindtools
- 2Tuckman's Stages Of Group Development, Wikipedia
- 340 Years Of Storming: A Historical Review Of Tuckman's Model, ResearchGate

Summary

Tuckman's model traces team development through forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning, with regression to earlier stages a normal, recurring feature rather than a failure. Leaders who diagnose a team's current stage accurately can guide it forward more effectively than those expecting linear, uninterrupted progress.