



Bruce Tuckman's Team Development Model

(Tuckman, 1965)

Summary

Bruce Tuckman, a psychology professor, identified four stages of development – forming, storming, norming and performing - that every team experiences, and suggested that all teams go through a relatively unproductive initial stage before becoming a self-reliant unit. The 'team growth model' also suggests that unless the issues of processes and feelings have been satisfactorily addressed, it is unlikely that the team will reach the most productive final stage.

Introduction

Any team that stays together over a period of time will change and develop. Tuckman noted that there are three issues which determine how well teams perform:

- content
- process
- feelings

In short, content relates to what the team does, process relates to how the team works towards its objectives and feelings applies to how team members relate to one another.

Tuckman's research suggests that most teams concentrate almost exclusively on content, to the detriment of process and feelings, which explains why teams which are strong on paper can under-perform.

The four stages

Tuckman suggested that the life cycle of a team involves four stages. At each stage, the dynamics of the team change dramatically from periods of inefficiency and uneasiness through to a period of high performance.

These changes are summarised in the following table, and elaborated in the diagram on page 3.

	Forming	Storming	Norming	Performing
General Observations	Uncertainty about roles, looking outside for guidance.	Growing confidence in team, rejecting outside authority.	Concern about being different, wanting to be part of team.	Concern with getting the job done.
Content Issues	Some attempt to define the job to be done.	Team members resist the task demands.	There is an open exchange of views about the team's problems.	Resources are allocated efficiently; processes are in place to ensure that the final objective is achieved.
Process Issues	Team members look outside for guidance and direction.	Team members deny the task and look for the reasons not to do it.	The team starts to set up the procedures to deal with the task.	The team is able to solve problems.
Feelings Issues	People feel anxious and are unsure of their roles. Most look to a leader or coordinator for guidance.	People still feel uncertain and try to express their individuality. Concerns arise about the team hierarchy.	People ignore individual differences and team members are more accepting of one another.	People share a common focus, communicate effectively and become more efficient and flexible as a result.

A fifth stage

Following another period of research, Tuckman developed a fifth stage called 'adjourning'. This final stage involves the disengagement of relationships between team members and a short period of recognition for the team's achievements. Sometimes, concluding the operations of a team is disturbing for members, especially if they have worked together for long periods of time.



Implications

Tuckman highlighted a number of important observations from his research on teams and teamwork which still have resonance today:

- A team will not be fully effective unless it reaches the stage of performing/interdependence.
- Many teams accept storming as a normal way of operating, while a number of teams may never get beyond forming.
- Unless the process of norming is fully completed, teams may degenerate into storming.
- The amount of time taken to complete the cycle will vary tremendously between teams.

Many factors determine how quickly a team will evolve towards effectiveness including: its size, geographical spread, frequency and duration of meetings, synergy of team types, stability of team membership, external influences and time pressures and the nature of its activities. The leader's role is also important: some examples of leader interventions are given in Gina Abudi's description of project team development (Abudi, 2010).

Virtual teams

The flexibility of the model is underlined when applied to virtual teams. Virtual teams are increasingly used in today's business environment and they can be defined as teams that use technology to function across time and cultural boundaries. Lipnack and Stamps (1997) have modified the Tuckman model to demonstrate the efficiency of virtual teamwork compared to traditional teamwork. Lipnack and Stamps' virtual team model maintains the same structure as Tuckman's model, but the team endures a significantly shorter awkward first stage before reaching the performance stage. The model also includes two extra stages, which are comparable to Tuckman's adjourning stage, to allow for a testing and delivery of the team's final product.

Although other influential team development thinkers (e.g. Manz and Sims, 1993) have suggested alternative modifications, Tuckman's theoretical foundation remains an influential foundation for modern thinking on teams and teamwork.

References

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Stages of group development

