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People Skills: Optimizing Team Development and Performance

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This is another in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), also known as change management, a discipline that offers much to professionals intent on solving real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions. This article examines the stages of group development, the role that conflict plays in the process, and the importance of conflict management in group development and team performance. It also provides ideas for developing high-performing teams based on the application of established change management principles and practices.

Key words: team development; team performance; change management; organization development.

How do you develop a high-performing team? Is it all about selecting the right team members, or does leadership style play a role? If both are important, whom do you select and what do you do to motivate them to achieve the desired optimal performance? Given the ubiquitous nature of teams and their importance to organizational success, knowing the answers to these questions is vital. Hence, the focus in this article is on what it takes for groups to develop into teams and how to optimize the process (i.e., how to develop high-performing teams).

The Nature of Group Development

In a groundbreaking study, Tuckman (1965, p. 396) studied the process by which groups develop and categorized this process into four stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the forming (*F*) stage, a group of individuals comes together for a specific purpose and spends an initial period adjusting to one another and the stated group goal. Fueled by resistance to group influence and to task requirements for achieving the group goal, the storming (*S*) stage is generally characterized by significant relationship (i.e., interpersonal) conflict. To develop into a high-performing team, a group cannot remain in this stage because storming behaviors seriously impede, and in many cases prevent, a group from making progress

toward its stated goal. If the group members can figure out how to do it, “resistance is overcome in the third stage in which ingroup (sic) feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards (for group behavior) evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed” (p. 396). This pivotal point in a group’s development is the norming (*N*) stage. In the final performing (*P*) stage of group development, task work and teamwork (e.g., norms, roles, and processes) mesh to enable the group to function as a high-performing team.

The Role of Conflict in Group Development

It is evident from Tuckman’s model of the stages of group development that conflict, particularly in the storming phase, plays an important part in the process. Jehn (1995) and Jehn and Mannix (2001) examined the two primary types of conflict involved in group development—task and relationship. With regard to task conflict, they discovered that most high-performing teams have low levels of task conflict at the beginning and end of a project, and moderate levels in the middle. This corresponds to a high degree of agreement on the group goal at the outset, a healthy disagreement over the pros and cons

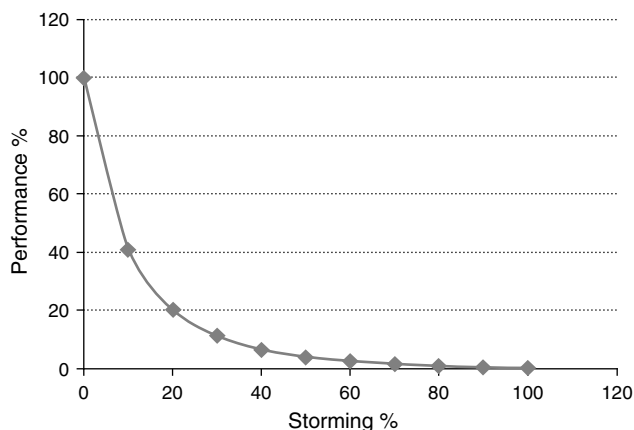


Figure 1: This graph shows the relationship between storming (*S*) and group performance (*P*).

of various alternatives for achieving the goal in the problem-solving middle phase, and a high degree of agreement on the team’s output and its implementation at the conclusion of the project. Their finding about relationship conflict made just as much sense: “Teams performing well were characterized by . . . low levels of relationship conflict, with a rise near project deadlines” (Jehn and Mannix 2001, p. 238).

Figure 1 depicts the connection between storming (*S*) and performing (*P*) discovered by Jehn and Mannix, which is that *P* is moderate or high only if *S* is low. Note that the shape of the curve follows the 80–20 rule, as my experience in working with groups as an organization development (OD) consultant suggests, thus showing that even relatively moderate levels of conflict (storming) prevent a group from performing effectively. Tuckman’s model of group development acknowledges the critical role of norming as an intervening variable between storming and performing:

$$F \rightarrow S \rightarrow N \rightarrow P. \quad (1)$$

In effect, if a group continues to storm (i.e., experience moderate to high levels of relationship conflict), it will not develop norms that support teamwork. As a result of this low level of teamwork, the group will continue to perform at a low level and probably not achieve its stated goal.

With this basic knowledge of how groups develop, and of the relationship of each stage of the process to performance, what can a group leader do

to improve the chances of a group developing into a high-performing team and achieving its goal? We examine a number of ways in the remainder of the article.

Optimizing Group Performance

Of the many things that a group leader might do to develop high-performing teams, the following seven are among those that seem to work the best.

1. Acknowledge the importance of task work and teamwork from the outset.
 2. Create ground rules for group behavior in the first meeting and follow them.
 3. Develop a shared vision of the group goal.
 4. Use collaborative processes throughout the process.
 5. Use the action/research cycle to guide data collection and decision making.
 6. Manage conflict when it arises.
 7. Involve users in the process from the outset.
- Let us examine each in turn.

Task Work and Teamwork. Blake and Mouton (1964) were among the first to identify the importance of task work and teamwork to group success. They defined the ideal management style as a combination of a “high concern for production” and a “high concern for people” (p. 142). This ideal style, characterized as highly collaborative, is a team-oriented style. The connection to Tuckman’s final performing stage of group development seems clear. Hence, the message for a group leader who wishes to develop a high-performing team is to approach the group development process with the attitude that a continuous focus on both task work and teamwork is essential to the development of a high-performing team.

Ground Rules. One of the best ways to minimize the storming phase on the way to high performance is to establish ground rules for group behavior during the group’s initial meeting in the forming stage, and to apply and revise them as necessary throughout the life of the group. A list of typical ground rules might include items like the next four (Levasseur 2000, p. 44):

- We will encourage open and honest discussion.
- We will show respect for one another and not engage in personal attacks.

- We will participate actively.
- We will listen attentively to what others have to say.

Other ground rules that groups typically establish include:

- We will start and stop on time.
- We will take frequent, short breaks.
- We will manage group conflicts openly and actively.

Ground rules, although not norms, become norms when the group accepts and uses them to guide the interpersonal actions of its members. Much like an agenda, which focuses a group on the tasks it must accomplish, ground rules focus attention on how group members want to behave.

If you refer back to Tuckman's description of what happens in the norming phase, you will recognize that ground rules like the ones listed above correspond to the norms that develop in groups in the third stage of group development and signify the group's readiness to perform as a team. They also correspond to the team behaviors described by Blake and Mouton (i.e., exhibiting a simultaneous, high level of concern for production and people). Does it not stand to reason that developing what amounts to a group code of conduct that fits the requirements for a high-performing team at the very outset of a group's life, and applying and revising it whenever necessary throughout the group's life, can reap enormous benefits over the life of the group? Believe me, it does! In fact, this little gem of advice—develop ground rules on day one—is probably the best-kept secret for successful group development that I know about.

Shared Vision. Senge (1990) wrote a book about system thinking, based on system dynamics modeling, as the critical fifth discipline required of modern leaders. One of the other four disciplines he identified was the ability to create a powerful shared vision that empowers followers and engages them in a collaborative effort to achieve an exciting, challenging, and rewarding future state. Working with a group to transform a stated group goal into a shared vision of a desired future is another excellent way to accelerate a group's development into a high-performing team. As such, it is a discipline that every leader who wants to develop a high-performing team should master.

Collaborative Processes. The work of Johnson and Johnson (1989), which summarized in a meta-analysis the empirical findings of over 500 research studies on the role of conflict versus cooperation in group settings, strongly supports the findings of Blake and Mouton about the importance of collaborative processes to leadership and team performance. Johnson and Johnson (1989) found that

On the basis of the research to date (which is considerable), it may be concluded that generally achievement and productivity were higher in cooperative situations than in competitive or individualistic ones, and that cooperative efforts resulted in more frequent use of higher-level reasoning strategies, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions (i.e., process gains), and greater transfer of learning (i.e., greater productivity on subsequent similar tasks done individually) than did competitive and individualistic efforts. (p. 171)

Arguably, as organizations become more lateral and distributed in response to changes in the modern world, the importance of collaborative processes to group development and performance will continue to increase. The message for group leaders wishing to accelerate a group's progress towards becoming a high-performing team is to employ such processes in each stage of the group development process.

Action Research. Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in the field of OD, developed the action research process and applied it in his work. "Although Lewin was an academician...he was just as eminent a man of action...Moreover, he pulled it together when he stated that there is 'no action without research, and no research without action'" (Burke 1987, p. 54). Lewin advocated basing group decisions to take action to change a system on solid research (in the form of group analysis of data on system issues collected for that purpose from the people in the system affected by the potential decision) and collecting new data after implementation to determine if further action is necessary (Cummings and Worley 2008, pp. 24–27). Essentially, the action research process is the scientific method (Lewin was trained initially as a physicist) applied to social systems, with one notable difference. Instead of one individual making the decisions in a detached fashion based on hard data only, action research is a democratic process that also utilizes the subjective opinions of those potentially affected by the

decisions and involves them in the problem-solving and decision-making process directly to the extent possible (Gold 1999). The impact on group development of using the action research process comes from its egalitarian, collaborative nature, which of necessity involves the group members from the outset in a team effort with people in the organization affected by the change. This focus on teamwork, as you will recall, is a hallmark of high-performing teams.

Manage Conflict. It should be clear at this point that minimizing interpersonal conflict is critical to team development and performance. The previous five strategies focus on creating a group culture that supports shared purpose and collaborative effort, thereby minimizing relationship conflict. However, even in groups that apply these methods, conflicts are inevitable. What do you as the leader do when they arise?

First, and most importantly, you do not try to avoid dealing with the conflict. Low-performing teams are notorious for conflict avoidance, which has numerous undesirable by-products, such as passive-aggressive behavior and high degrees of emotional task conflict (which often masks high degrees of unresolved relationship conflict). As we have seen, storming is not conducive to team development and performance. Hence, dismissing conflicts with such statements as “Let’s stick to the agenda” is not an appropriate response to conflict if the goal is to develop a high-performing team.

The key to resolving group conflicts is to identify the root cause prior to taking action. Three primary sources of relationship conflict in groups are (Levasseur 2000, p. 76):

- the natural evolution of the group;
- differences in people’s personality types;
- disruptive people.

As we have seen, all groups go through phases in their development (if successful) into a high-performing team. Initially, a group is dependent on its leader, generally resulting in a low level of task and relationship conflict and reasonable performance. However, at some point the group needs to assume responsibility for its own work and process if it is to develop into a high-performing, self-directed team. It is at this point that the potential for storming is greatest. Leadership behaviors that help to mitigate

this crucial transition include (1) reminding the group members that they must work through this stage to achieve their goal of high performance, (2) pointing out that the longer they spend in the storming stage, the less likely they are to achieve that goal, and (3) insisting that they decide on any changes in tasks or ground rules by consensus, i.e., in a collaborative fashion.

If interpersonal (i.e., relationship) conflict arises during other stages of a group’s development, look for another potential cause—namely, a personality conflict between two (or more) of the group’s members. This type of conflict most often occurs in one of two ways: either between extroverted and introverted members, or between quick or deliberate decision makers. The former conflict arises because extroverts tend to dominate the discussion, if permitted. As a result, introverts do not feel as if they have a say, and extroverts feel like the introverts do not contribute. The solution is to develop and enforce a ground rule that provides air time for all group members to voice their opinions if they wish.

The latter conflict arises because some group members want to focus exclusively on the task work and decide on necessary actions quickly, whereas others prefer to go through a more structured process that allows time for all to contribute, reflect, and then make a joint decision. The solution is to point out (1) the value of processes (such as ground-rule development and maintenance) to teamwork (one of the two essential elements of a high-performing team) and the importance of taking time to develop them early on when they are most needed, i.e., to minimize storming; and (2) that if the group members focus on developing necessary processes early on, it will free them up to perform at peak effectiveness when the group develops into a team.

One final source of group conflict, and one that occurs all too frequently, involves a disruptive person. Individuals who fit into this category include people with preconceived ideas, who are unwilling to discuss alternatives, and people who are highly competitive and, therefore, averse to any kind of collaborative (i.e., team) effort. The key to handling disruptive group members is to use peer pressure to keep them aligned with group goals and processes. To do this, (1) do not allow the disruptive person to provoke you into

a one-on-one confrontation. Instead, (2) ask the group members if they agree with the individual's criticism. If they do, then lead a group discussion aimed at resolving the issue(s) raised by the disruptive person. If they do not, then urge them to discuss the impact of the disruptive behavior and to develop a ground rule that they can use to deal with it should that prove necessary. If the disruptive behavior recurs despite the presence of a ground rule aimed at prohibiting it, then (3) ask the group to decide on the individual's fate, which may include expulsion from the group if necessary.

These are, of course, just some of the methods you as a group leader might employ to manage relationship conflict. Nevertheless, they are among the most useful ways I have found to help groups manage conflict and develop as rapidly as possible into high-performing teams.

Involve Users. No list of ways to create successful, high-performing teams would be complete without this last piece of advice: "People support what they help to create" (Levasseur 2007, p. 383), which I learned from a very wise professor when I was in business school, and which gets to the heart of what it takes to be successful in implementing any new method for supposedly doing things better. When a group involves users of its anticipated group product in the process of developing the product, it does two things. First, it engages group members in a collaborative dynamic that, as described earlier, catalyzes the group's development as a high-performing team and improves the chances of achieving the group's goal. Second, it engages and empowers the users, thus reducing resistance to change and increasing the odds of ultimate project success (Levasseur 2010).

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the stages of group development, illustrated the role of conflict and the importance of conflict management in group development and team performance, and provided ideas for developing high-performing teams based on the application of established change management principles and practices. Hopefully, as a result, more group leaders will apply these proven methods to facilitate the development of their groups into high-performing teams, thus enabling greater levels of group and organizational effectiveness in the future.

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