

How to stop your team 'Storming' and get them 'Performing'

By Jon Broome, managing consultant, leading edge cc ltd

Have you ever wondered if the classic Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing model of team development can be improved? Jon says that the Storming phase can be substantially 'leapfrogged' through a managed Orientating & Creating stage. The result is that groups can evolve more rapidly into higher performing project teams.

The reality is that the classic phases of team development often evolve into the next, rather than there being clear delineation. It also not unknown for groups to get stuck in a stage, or revert a stage when something changes, eg, a new team member may move the team back into a mini-'Forming' stage. Entering a new phase of the project may push it back into a 'Storming' phase while objectives and how to approach the Task are revisited. The key aspects of the model and this reverting are illustrated in the figure below.

We have presented this to groups of varying sizes, had them reflect on it and gained feedback. A common theme has been that it is still relevant. However, the important thing to emphasise is that this model has stood the test of time for when a team's development is *not* managed.

Under-performing teams

A typical consultant's response, when asked to do 'something' with a team to make them get on better and perform, has been to run team-building events, often involving some sort of psychometrics, eg, Belbin, and/or do team-based games from which teamworking lessons can be drawn and hopefully applied within the team. For the former, there is apparently no evidence that they work² and for the latter, the lessons learnt are often a combination of the 'bleeding obvious' and being too abstract to have any relevance to the team.

Just a reminder...

Tuckman's empirical research in the 1950s¹, showed that teams go through four stages of development:

Forming	In the forming stage, people's Task focus is low. They are more concerned with finding out who is who, seeking to know one another's attitude, background and likely role. Members also are keen to establish their own personal identities in the group and make an impression on others. They are typically being polite, but impersonal, guarded and superficial in their conversation (eg, discussing the weather), whilst feeling some anxiety and dependence and wanting structure and leadership.
Storming	In the storming stage, members are competing for position and personal or organisational goals. They therefore challenge roles, objectives etc. Early relationships established in 'Forming' may be disrupted and new sub-groups formed. As people become uncomfortable and even emotionally stressed, they may regress to self-orientated behaviour: withdrawing or opting out (the flight response) or being noisy, rebellious and confronting (the fight response). In multi-organisational project environments, the most obvious sub-group to revert to is that of your employing organisation with the contract, commercial power, etc, being used as weapons in this 'fight'.
Norming	The group starts to achieve consensus or, at the very least, imposed agreement, on the objectives, roles and responsibilities, processes, norms of behaviour, how the Task is to be achieved etc. These start to bed in as ways of working, ie, a culture starts to develop. Individuals start to be more open and honest and listen better. As a result, issues, as opposed to individuals, are confronted and addressed.
Performing	In the performing stage, the group is now a team with its main focus and energy being on the Task. Words that describe a high-performing team would include: task/achievement focused; energetic, effective and flexible in moving towards those goals; close, supportive and interdependent as a team; and aware and accepting of individuals' strengths and weaknesses. Humour and fun are also likely to be evident and there would be a 'buzz', both from working within the team and for those who come into contact with it.



Solving the problem?

Look back at the description of the Forming stage. What are people trying to do? They are trying to get to know about each other and where they stand in the hierarchy.

Look back at the Storming phase. What is happening? Participants are competing for position and personal or organisational goals, roles and means to an end.

Could it be that if we consciously helped a team *evolve through* these stages, they would get through them faster and into the performing stage not just more quickly, but also be a more effective team once there?

A large part of our business is facilitating workshops for project teams. This includes helping build high-performance teams at the start of a project. Because we primarily work in construction, this often involves bringing together people from diverse organisations (including stakeholder groups



outside the delivery team). They come with diverse organisational cultures and objectives, yet, as one of our clients said: 'We don't know how you do it, but we always seem to work together after we've had a day with you!'

So what do we do? In a lively and engaging way, typically with up to 30 participants (it depends on where the team is in terms of their development) we will do something like the following.

The first exercises will be to address the factors involved in **Forming**: namely getting people to meet and greet each other, perhaps in terms of involvement so far in the project, interests outside of work, etc, and we try to introduce a bit of humour, getting people to start opening up to each other. In this phase, we will be quite directive, as people want someone to take the lead.

Mid-way between the Forming and Storming phases we have an **Orientating** stage³, where we start orientating people to the Task by ensuring that people have common view of where it is now and where it has come from. Normally this consists of a series of five to ten-minute presentations, plus a question and answer session by key people from the participating organisations outlining why the project is being done, its objectives from the client's perspective, why this solution has been selected, key constraints and main challenges, etc.

Leapfrogging over Storming, sitting somewhere between it and Norming stage, we now have something akin to a **Creating** stage. We ask each organisation about their organisation's objectives for the project and ask them to present them to the whole group. This not only reveals the commonality of objectives but also it also often discloses a few otherwise hidden drivers, which might otherwise not be obvious to others and cause Storming if not revealed.

Research suggests that the number one

characteristic of a high-performing team is clear and focused objectives². So we then get people to work in groups from different organisations to merge the important and frequently occurring objectives to create a statement of clear and specific project objectives for inclusion in a charter. These are supported by OK and Stretch measures. The Stretch measures are aspirational; most people want to do an excellent job and not just an OK one. We also ask individuals to state upfront what it is they want from the project and, if there is a common thread, to include these in the charter.

We will then probably, as a whole team, review any existing risk register and generate and rank (in a quick and dirty way) new threats and opportunities in order to: continue the theme of getting a common view and understanding of the project; and to generate key strategies/critical success factors or important issues for the team to work on as a team in the next stage.

Lastly, as part of this stage, we will ask the team to think about how they want to work together as a team, both in terms of formal and informal communications and in terms of Values and Behaviours. This is similar to more traditional team-building sessions but we do it in an unconventional way! This can tease out additional key strategies or issues to be addressed. For example, if 'honest and early communication of problems' and their rapid resolution is a Value, people ask how, in a diverse team, they will do this in practice.

In the **Norming** stage, we ask the team (for they are now becoming a team) to work together on the key strategies and issues and generate Action Plans to put the responses into place. While some of the key issues identified by the team will be related to the task, eg, a technical or engineering risk, they are also about establishing protocols for working together so that the team are not

consistently 'Storming' over the same points: eg, agreeing the who, what, when and how for the monthly evaluation and programming submission and agreement, etc.

By now, as facilitators we begin to fade into the background with the team now taking charge of the project. Often they ask for known roles and responsibilities in much more detail than their 'headline' job title, plus contact details; this is the second most important attribute of a high-performing team².

The day is then finished off with a report back on the actions, and a quick review of the project charter, which encapsulates the project objectives, the values and key strategies for delivering the project.

Summary

In reality, more Forming, Orientating, Creating and Norming will carry on both outside the workshop and informally. There will also be some Storming as it is a natural part of team development.

What we, as facilitators, are trying to achieve is that 20% exchange of information and resolution of differences that make 80% of the difference in terms of the team's ultimate performance. This enables the team to be open and receptive to covering the remainder. Then they naturally and rapidly evolve into the **Performing** stage of team development and a high-performing one at that.

I would like to leave you, as a project manager, with three questions:

- How much of what we have covered is 'soft' stuff, eg, Belbin team roles and values and behaviours, and how much is towards the 'hard' project management end?
- How much of this can you do yourself without the use of external facilitators such as ourselves?
- How much do you actually do to create high-performing teams?

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1. Tuckman, B. (1965), *Developmental sequence in small groups*. Psychological Bulletin, 63, pp. 384-399.

2. Hackman, J. R. (2002), *Leading Teams: Setting the stage for great team performances*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, USA. ISBN 1-577851-333-2

3. The phrase is taken from Blanchard, K., Carew, D. Et Parise-Carew, E. (1996), *The One Minute Manager builds high performing teams*, Harper Collins Business. ISBN 0 00 710580

A workshop run for Sheffield City Council and Birse Civils for the Inner Relief Road Project on which significant time and cost savings were made.

