Tuckman's Four Stage Team Development Model from 4 Months to One Day

There is a common problem in many organizations today that is leading to poor team performance. I know my son experienced it personally several years ago when he took over a new management position in an IT department for a state government.   In his first review as a manger he was lauded for his very capable technical skills, but criticized for his lack of managerial capability. At the time I asked him how much training he had in management skills. "None" was his answer. How often are people put into a position to fail due to a lack of training, especially in fields where the people drawn to them may not be blessed with the best people skills? What can be done to assist organizations to provide better management and leadership training so that their people become more proficient and understand the team dynamics that will increase performance?

The Need for High-Performing Teams

A large field of research has proven that teams are crucial to the success of all organizations, from small local businesses, to large global conglomerates. Businesses become more effective when they have high-performing teams. The challenge however is finding ways to better lead and manage teams to reach higher-performance.

Many years ago Bruce Tuckman proposed his four-stage model of group development (now 5 stages). He noted that all groups go through the phases and, while they may go back and forth between the stages, he noted how important each stage was for the team to grow and develop properly. He also noted that when things did not go smoothly in any one of the stages, the team could get stuck and performance would drop.

Since his time, people have continued to do research on how to optimize the development of teams through each of the stages. Some groups have researched the importance of cohesion through each of the stages (Noel, 2006), while other groups have researched the importance of people skills by the leaders and others to manage conflict throughout the stages to develop high-performing teams (Levasseur, 2011).

It often takes a great deal of time to develop high-performing teams and there is a need for leaders to govern those teams to address cohesion and conflict management. The information that follows will cover each of the 5 phases of the Tuckman model and how managers can be taught to use behavior assessments and team training to advance through each phase more thoroughly and more efficiently.

1. **Forming:** Increase personal understanding and reduce negative judgments.

2. **Storming:** Reduce negative relationship conflicts to increase cohesion

3. **Norming**: Comprehend the need for norms that will increase productivity

4. **Performing:** Utilize the strengths of each behavioral style to make sure needed roles are filled

5. **Adjourning:** Identify areas for improvement for future projects

Why do teams fail?

Here are three areas that affect team performance, even to the point of failure (Posted on August 1, 2012 by Dale Perryman).

1. Leadership - Lack of agreement around what is important
2. A lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities
3. Conflict among the team – primarily behavioral

23,000 US residents were surveyed asking questions about their perception of the organization that they work for. Here are the results.

> 37% said they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why.
> 1/5 is enthusiastic about team's and organization's goals.
> 1/5 have a clear "line of sight" between tasks and team and organization's goals.
> Half are satisfied with the work they have accomplished at the end of the week.
> 15% felt organization fully enables them to execute key goals.
> 15% felt they worked in a high-trust environment.
> 17% felt their organization fosters open communication.
> 10% felt that their organization holds people accountable for results.
> 20% fully trusted the organization they work for.
> 13% have high trust, highly-cooperative working relationships with other groups or departments.

Looking at these results you can see a definite correlation with leadership: there is a vision and mission issue, lack of clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why, lack of enthusiasm about goals, and no clear line of sight between tasks and goals. That translates to a trust problem, a communication problem, and work satisfaction problem.   Having good to great team leaders is absolutely critical towards engagement, retention, and growth. As we'll see exploring Tuckman's Five Stages leadership plays a critical part in the first and second stages. After that, if the die has been properly cast, the team needs less attention from the leader as they are attuned to what needs to be done by whom to achieve their goals resulting in a high level of performance.

Tuckman's Five Stages

Forming

In the forming stage of team building, each team member's behavior is driven by a desire to be accepted by the others and avoid controversy or conflict. Serious issues and feelings are avoided and people focus

on being busy with routines, such as team organization, assigning roles and duties, when to meet, etc. But individuals are also gathering information and forming impressions: about each other, about the scope of the task, and about how to approach it. This is a comfortable stage to be in, but the avoidance of conflict and threat means that not much actually gets done. The leader plays a part here in directing the team, and setting out some ground rules such as:

1. We will encourage open and honest discussion.
2. We will show respect for one another and not engage in personal attacks.
3. We will participate actively.
4. We will listen attentively to what others have to say.

Even though the stage has been set, left on their own to integrate themselves into a new team environment can cause some initial difficulties because of unknowns. Assuming that this team is brand-new, with few if any established relationships, getting to know each other can be fun, but it can also set up some personality clashes. From the brain's perspective, each individual is attempting to determine if the other team members will be potential friends or foes.

When the brain has the ability to organize information it is much easier to reprogram and break from routines and biases. One such language is the language of behavior – it is a readable, logical, and understandable language. All of us have a distinct amalgamation of four behavioral characteristics; Dominance (D) how you handle problems, Influence (I) how you handle people, Steadiness how you handle pace, and Conscientiousness (C) how you handle Procedures/Constraints. By using the language of behavior people are better able to understand behavioral clues that they react to adversely. By understanding those clues and why they affect you negatively can assist in the reprogramming of the brain to accept team members as friends. The closer your behavioral style is to another's the easier it is for you to get along socially. Interestingly, that same relationship may not be as harmonious or productive in a work team environment. Understanding the language of behavior enables people to separate the message from the way it's delivered, moderating the emotional experience, and preventing potentially adverse reactions.

The forming stage is the best place to incorporate an assessment-based behavioral workshop. The language of behavior is a pretty easy language to learn. An assessment that accurately describes your behavioral style including your strengths, ideal work environment, communication do's and don'ts, and more, reinforces what you already know. Taking the next step in understanding how your behavioral style affects people with different behavioral styles is where the opportunity for leaping to the next level of team performance begins. By sharing this information with other team members, and vice versa, all of the team members have the option to modify their behavioral style to better fit the expectations of people with a different behavioral style, as well as having a better understanding of how the differing styles enhance the potential of the team.

That does not mean we expect permanent modifications, only situational modifications deemed effective for enhanced communication and understanding. We are also not suggesting that conflict be avoided. We are saying that conflict can be far less uncomfortable and more productive by removing behavioral misunderstandings. Another clear advantage of having this behavioral insight in team

members is that it gives the team leader the insight into each member's strengths so that tasks and responsibilities can be more effectively assigned.

Obviously doing a workshop to improve interpersonal relationships takes an investment of time for all the team members, not to mention the cost of assessments and the workshop. However, the courage to make this investment will pay off and the returns are well worth it. It always amazes me the relative ease with which we can justify the purchase of equipment that promises productivity increases, but we often have a very hard time employing simple yet extremely effective methods to improve the productivity of people through soft-skills training.

A few years ago I participated in a local leadership program for community involvement; a nine-month program that started with a two-day retreat. At this retreat, the 40 to 50 participants were formed into teams where they would select a community-based project to complete in the nine months. Following my experience with that program I suggested to the program manager that the teams be selected using a behavioral style tool so we could assemble teams with complementary behaviors, insuring the needed behavioral styles were represented in each team. Having behavioral diversity contributes to the performance of teams. We also added a behavioral workshop to the retreat along with their standard team-building activities. That retreat got them through their forming stage with great success and they entered into the storming phase that would progress over the next several weeks to months. What we found was a great enthusiasm for the knowledge of this behavioral language, an elimination of unresolved conflicts that were experienced in years past, absolutely amazing projects, and the enduring friendship experienced in each team that has continued into the future. This one change, understanding behavioral styles, set the groundwork for better team cohesion and had an amazingly positive effect on the program.

Before I leave the forming stage, let's acknowledge the team leaders critical role. Their primary objective is to frame the outcome the team is to accomplish. Call it the team's vision/mission. The team needs high direction at this point, but how that is delivered can be supportive or destructive. In the example above we found it to be surprising how far along the teams progressed towards framing their vision during the retreat. During the early stages of team development the team manager/leader primarily focuses on task directing, focusing the team on what needs to be done to accomplish goals.

So let me further illustrate the importance of establishing the vision with a couple of stories. I attended a practical leadership workshop based on music. Our goal as a team was to score a video. The first time I participated in this workshop it was led by an experienced team leader; let's refer to him as the producer. The very first thing we did as a team under his leadership was develop a clear understanding of what we were trying to achieve and the path we would be taking to achieve it. The process facilitated by the producer with all of the team's involvement yielded a result that was very clear about our end goal. Let's call that our project vision and our path to achieving it our mission. Involving us in the creation of that vision through the skillful leadership of the producer gave us ownership in what we were about to embark upon. The second time I participated in the same workshop there was no producer. The members of this workshop were comprised mostly of an existing team with existing leadership. That same leadership took over the role of managing the process. With the exact same problem to solve as in the first workshop, this leadership team decided that they were the ones to

create the vision and mission and then dictate to us - the worker bees. That did not feel good nor were we very engaged. Their constant meddling, lack of trust, and micromanagement disengaged many team members to an extreme level. Unlike the first experience in this workshop we felt devalued. The difference in results was also amazing. In the first workshop what we accomplished was incredible. The second workshop produced a miserable outcome.

Storming

This stage is generally characterized by significant relationship conflict (i.e., interpersonal). In the storming stage different ideas compete for consideration. The team addresses issues such as what problems they are really supposed to solve, how they will function independently and together, who does what tasks, and what leadership model they will accept. Team members open up to each other and confront each other's ideas and perspectives. In some cases, storming can be resolved quickly. In others, the team never leaves this necessary stage. It can be contentious, unpleasant and even painful to members of the team who are averse to conflict. Here is where the emotional maturity of some team members usually determines whether the team will ever move out of this stage. Some team members will focus on minutiae to evade real issues. 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. Once again, understanding behavioral language and using it can greatly facilitate this process. It will promote tolerance of each team member and their differences. Without tolerance and patience the team will fail.

Remember, the team leader during this phase is still in a directive mode in their guidance of decision-making and professional behavior, but the leader needs to show support so that team members can resolve their differences and all members will be able to participate with one another more comfortably. Part of the problem in this phase is also the battle over status; threats to status will reduce cohesion. A good leader, through understanding behavioral styles, will recognize each styles greatest threat to status and help to make sure that each person respects each other's status. One idea is to promote the feeling that they are not being judged so they will be more comfortable sharing their opinions and views. Keep in mind that a negative judgment is a threat to status. The leaders understanding of behavioral styles, and using that understanding coupled with their emotional intelligence, can be the difference between success and mediocrity. This phase can become destructive to the team and will lower motivation if allowed to get out of control.

During the storming phase the primary conflicts will be centered around task and personalities. During this phase the leader should establish some parameters to develop high-performing teams; the following seven are among those that seem to work the best. (Blake and Mouton (1964) p. 142)
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 this stage.
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.

Once again the ideal management style for the leader is a combination of a "high concern for task" and a "high concern for people".

As noted above, in the storming phase, the two primary types of conflict involve task and relationship. High-performing teams have low levels of task conflict at the beginning and end of a project with moderate levels in the middle. This is primarily due to the high level of agreement on the goal, or vision, at the outset, a healthy disagreement over the pros and cons of various alternatives for achieving the goal in the problem-solving middle

Relationship Between Storming and Performing
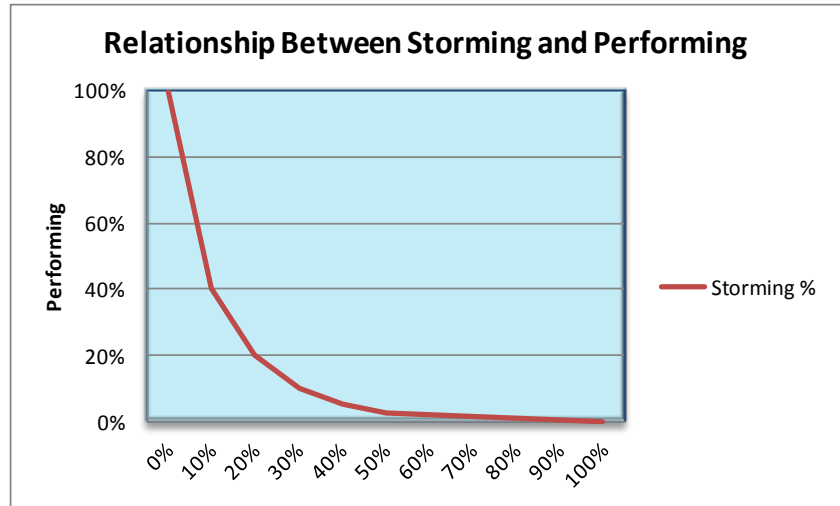
phase, and a high degree of agreement on the team's output and its implementation at the conclusion of the project. (Jehn (1995) and Jehn and Mannix (2000). I might also add that understanding behavioral task preference can assist the leader in assigning tasks. Relationship conflict is similar; "Teams performing well were characterized by ... low levels of relationship conflict, with a rise near project deadlines" (Jehn and Mannix 2001, p. 238).

On the relationship side, you have the extroverts overwhelming the introverts, the directs compromising the in-directs, fast paced pushing the slower, more deliberate, and the task-focused impatient with the people focused. All of these combinations of behavioral styles are operating in the pressurized environment of the team to get its act together causing conflict just because people are different and act differently. But wait, isn't that what we addressed in the forming stage?

Let's take a closer look at behavioral styles. Using the DISC model we have four primary behavioral styles. The way a person deals with problems is referred to as dominance (D). A person that is very high dominant will attack problems aggressively, looking for results, with a relatively high degree of impatience. One way they address problems is through confrontation. When it comes to dealing with people, the behavioral style interpersonal (I) is predominant. People that are high in this style are interactive, enthusiastic, verbally proficient, somewhat exaggerative, have low attention to detail, want to get things done through people, and are creative. Like the high dominant, the high influential person is very fast paced and direct. The behavioral style steadiness (S) deals with pace. High steadiness people have a tendency to be resistant to change. They are very methodical, preferring to finish one task before proceeding to the next. This ability to adhere to a process makes them very effective in getting things done. Good listeners and patient, they make excellent team members. The final primary behavioral style is conscientious (C), the preponderance to adhere to established rules and procedures as well as attention to details. The high conscientious individual will have a tendency to be very critical of ideas as well as themselves. Both the high S and the high C can be considered as indirect and slower paced.

There is much more to this language as few people are strictly one style. We are all a combination. However, those of us very high in one or two styles can easily create difficulty in communication, expectations, and appreciation. For example, the high D, a critical team member because of their desire to lead and get results, can be difficult because their way of addressing a problem is to confront it head-on. That direct confrontational style works well with another very high D, but all of the other styles do not react in a positive manner. The high I will put up with it for a very short period time then turn around and leave. They may then return and inflict damage with a highly destructive verbal barrage. The high S will put up with it, although uncomfortably not say what they think or feel, leaving the high D with the feeling that they achieved agreement when they quite possibly did not. Finally, the high C will do everything to avoid conflict. All of the styles have their preferred means of communication; the positive ways to communicate with them and communication cues you should definitely stay away from. Knowing this can facilitate the transmission of information without the adverse effects of behavioral reaction.

Addressing the behavioral style language in the forming stage prevents these very tense and stressful conflicts. Keeping the language alive is another responsibility of the leader. Reinforcing what the team has learned about each other and using the language is a continuing exercise. The better the expertise the better the outcome. Remember that we are emotional beings and one negative emotional event brought on by insensitive behavior can take 4 hours to recover from. Two negative emotional events and you are done for the day. (Dr. Izzy Justice)

Let's integrate this idea with how the brain works. In the storming stage, contentious outbreaks between team members can cause the brain to consider other team members as foes. As David Rock points out in his book, Your Brain at Work, "When you think someone is a foe, you don't just miss out on feeling his emotions; you also inhibit yourself from considering his ideas, even if they are right. When you decide someone is a foe, you tend to discard his ideas, sometimes to your detriment." The trick here is to minimize an adversarial environment so that team members are not seen as foes but as friends.

Going back to my first music video workshop for a minute, let's see how this environment was created after the first session when you can say we were in a storming stage. In this first stage, each team was experiencing frustration because of their lack of experience with various tasks and feeling of being inadequate. The producer pulled everybody together for a debrief. In my experience that can be a session when everything that went wrong gets magnified and what good that happened is ignored. The leader may also provide the solution of the problem dictating remedial steps. Not a good feeling and one that you'd rather not experience again. But in this case we were immediately disarmed by the producer saying, "Let's talk about what went right." That was positive reinforcement that enabled us to look at what went right. Then the producer asked "What can we do better?" This was also a positive approach that invoked a lot of discussion in the team members and gave us a new direction and a new enthusiasm towards the second session. In an emotionally charged situation when people feel vulnerable the leader must set an environment where threats are minimized and the focus is toward solutions.

In the second music video workshop the leadership did a typical top-down debrief using their self-assigned brilliance to tell us all the problems and map out a way to resolve them; neither a good feeling nor a good outcome.

Norming

At this point, having survived the storming stage, and having figured out a way to resolve differences, the norming stage puts it all together and the team slips into a routine that maximizes their individual talents. Here is where the leader can reinforce actions by complementing or giving recognition to individual members. The leader is also on the lookout for individuals that are showing initiative and extra effort that might be rewarded with projects on their own or a leadership position. The leader also needs to be noticing those that are slacking off and unengaged to spend some effort understanding what may be causing it and possibly coaching to remedy the situation. A last resort might be to remove those actively unengaged underperformers.

Back to the workshop. As illustrated in the storming stage above, our producer skillfully led us through that stage giving us a positive feeling towards our objectives. Now let's take a look at the second workshop. In the debrief portion the management team, seemingly relying on their history, took to dictating what they saw and what should be done. Once again, individual team members felt devalued, de-motivated, uninterested, and basically checked out. Remember the objective of this workshop was to put a music score to a video. It just so happened that one of the team members had experience as a musician and the management team focused all their attention on that one individual so that their created content would be higher, thus maximizing the incentive bonus. The downside was that all this attention on one person left the rest of the team out of the picture. This team never got to a norming phase or a performing phase because all the emphasis was based on one star and the outcome was a disaster.

Performing

It is possible for some teams to reach the performing stage. These high-performing teams are able to function as a unit as they find ways to get the job done smoothly and effectively without inappropriate conflict or the need for external supervision. By this time, they are motivated and knowledgeable. The team members are now competent, autonomous and able to handle the decision-making process without supervision. Dissent is expected and allowed as long as it is channeled through means acceptable to the team.

The team leader during this phase is just maintaining and should not push too hard causing potential burn out and resentment. An injection of fun is important and using the DISC language the leader seeks out those individuals who have as their highest style element influential for their ideas regarding fun activities. They are very people oriented and creative.

Having successfully led the team through the preceding three stages the team leader can effectively delegate most of the necessary decisions, only acting when asked. Keep in mind that even the most high-performing teams can revert to earlier stages in certain circumstances. Many long-standing teams

go through these cycles many times as they react to changing circumstances. For example, a change in leadership may cause the team to revert to storming as the new people challenge the existing norms and dynamics of the team. New members replacing exiting members can cause a the team to revert. Once again the leader is the glue that holds it together and guides it back to the performing stage.

Back to our workshop. As we went through the second and third stage of producing our part of the music team members became very comfortable with their roles and the objective. During each of these stages we all played different roles, one of which was manager of the team. During the third session I had the role of manager. Using my experience as a manager, I felt the necessity of inserting myself in the process. I needed to be part of the experience, adding my expertise and knowledge to make the process go smoother. Unfortunately, for me anyway, as I tried to do this the team collectively said "we understand our roles, we clearly see the objective, and right now we don't need you." Imagine how I felt. I was rejected! I slunk back to a corner sat down and looked around to see if anybody was watching me and reflected on the moment. Once I got past the rejected portion I realized this was a gift. I did not have to expend energy trying to herd the team members towards the objective because that had already been accomplished earlier. This left me free to focus on other areas of importance.

Adjourning and Transforming

In 1977, Tuckman, jointly with Mary Ann Jensen, added a fifth stage to the 4 stages. This covers the end of a project and the breakup of the team. This can also be the time when a member leaves and a new member joins which may revert the team back to a very short episode in the forming stage. This stage was the reason behind the Music Video workshop used in my examples. Some folks at a very large electronics company, who coincidentally played together in a band, noticed the extreme dissatisfaction when teams got to this phase. A common remark was, "We did a great job in achieving our goal but I never want to do that again with this team." As a result of studying that outcome they developed their "Practical Leadership" music-based workshop. The idea was to show how inspirational leadership shaped the experience into a positive result. We had fun and produced a great outcome in the first workshop, not so much in the second.

Observations

The four stages of Tuckman's group development are widely accepted in businesses today. How teams traversals four stages will determine their ultimate success as a team. Without good leadership encompassing emotional competency, good judgment, and balanced behavioral styles a team can take an inordinate amount of time getting through the four stages and might not ever get to a performing level.

Understanding how the brain works, especially at the leadership level but also at the individual level can increase performance through each of the stages. Add to that tools that promote understanding and communication both from a behavioral style and judgment capability allows for heightened discussion of ideas without contentious disagreements.

As illustrated in my two workshop examples, in the first we step through the four stages in one day. The second workshop we barely got out of the first stage and the end result was a disaster. Of course, the workshops are not real world, but they do illustrate some important points. First, the importance of clearly understanding what the team is about, what their vision is. Second, establishing the rules and guidelines of the team and the function of the leader, greatly reduces the task conflict that could otherwise erupt in the absence of such structure. In the storming stage conflict is a very necessary part of arriving at the best ideas. How that conflict is managed will chart the way towards performance or keep the team mired in mediocrity. Avoiding conflict results in less successful outcomes, ignoring conflict quite often leads to a dead end, but applying established tools such as the language of behavior to encourage understanding and effective communication can greatly reduce the interpersonal strife often experienced in the storming stage. One thought I have not touched on is the importance of having fun. It has been show that injection of fun into a workplace unleashes more creativity. Setting that environment is once again the responsibility of the leader. In the local leadership program mentioned earlier one of the goals set out by the program manager and his team was to have fun. Informal conversations with various team members firmly established that was accomplished. Did that element add to the amazing projects completed? I'd like to think so.

Finally

A couple of closing notes. The designers of the Practical Leadership workshop want to include a DISC element to the workshop because they recognize the value. Having been champions of the language of DISC in both leadership programs and team development in their company they see the benefits of including it into any team development program. In this chapter we have focused on leadership and the language of DISC as ways to shorten and smooth the journey through Tuckman's 5 stages. As advances in technology levels the field in access to advance technology based productivity enhancers the last frontier for getting a competitive edge lies in how you lead and manage people. As Robert S. Hartman once said "Treating your employees first as people then as employees can unleash up to 40% more productivity." Selecting leaders that have this embedded into their personality and making it part of your culture can pay amazing dividends. You only have to look at Zappos to see the results. There are other complementary tools to DISC that can help you realize this goal. With that in mind do not miss the chapter by Pam Brooks *Human Performance From the Inside Out* for a look at putting together the strongest and most appropriate team possible.