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## Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming & Performing Team Development Model

### Abstract:

This model describes the phases which teams tend to go through from their inception to the successful completion of the project, and highlights the areas which may cause the team and the project to fail:



There has never been a time of greater conflict between members of newly formed teams than in today's world of cyclonic corporate change, where relationships are made and changed through global mergers, demergers, portfolio careers, cost cutting redundancies and a widespread lack of ability in organisations to nurture and retain their home grown talent.

## Background

For some 40 years, Bruce Tuckman's classic model has been delivering comfort and new perspectives to managers either charged with running a team, or trying to function within one, assuring the players that they are not alone and that the discomfort of conflict is a normal part of the journey towards an effective and enjoyable unit.

Dr Tuckman created the model back in 1965 and a decade later added a fifth element, *ADJOURNING*, to describe the break-up of a team after its project is completed. The model was part of a growing awareness, led by the organisational psychologists of the period, of the extent to which the success or otherwise of a business depends upon the relationships between its people. It resonates with Hersey and Blanchard's well known *Situational Leadership* model.

Dr Tuckman first published the FSNP model without any fanfare or presage of how celebrated it would become, in an article for the *Psychological Bulletin* entitled "*Developmental sequence in small groups*". (63, 384-399). His work has gone on to develop many aspects of organisational psychology without much reference to this early model (he currently holds a professorship at The Ohio State University) yet the FSNP model has gained momentum on the strength of its own elegance and usefulness.

The model describes how the team members first come together, welcoming, polite and not a little wary, how they descend into conflict while establishing their positions, how the boundaries are eventually and sometime tortuously established and, if all goes well, how the team reaches a place of stability where it can perform to the best of its combined abilities.

The stages Dr Tuckman identified are as follows:

### 1. Forming

Each member of the team focuses on the leader, accepting only the leader's guidance and authority and maintaining a polite but distant relationship with the others. During this stage the leader must be seen to be open with information and ready to answer the many questions that will come her or his way; boundaries, strengths and weaknesses will be tested, including those of the leader. There is likely to be some baggage regarding the way people have been treated in the past, which might result in some clinging to the old ways, if their experience was positive, or suspicion and apathy if it left scars.

*Tip: time invested by the leader and the team members in listening to and empathising with the others will pay off substantially further down the line. Expectations and job descriptions should be clearly laid out and the leader should role model the behaviour he or she would like to see the team exhibit.*

### 2. Storming

This is a difficult time for all. Team members are more concerned with the impression they are making than the project in hand; wanting to be respected, battling with feelings of inadequacy, wondering who will support or undermine them, and above all proving to the leader their value to the team. This is the time when curt e-mails written in the heat of the moment should be left to cool overnight in the Drafts box before being reviewed and moderated in the morning. There is a

danger of factions forming and some members becoming isolated, particularly in today's era of virtual teams in far flung places.

*Tip: each member should focus on delivering as much sincere positive feedback to the others as they can, working towards stable relationships where suggestions will be viewed as contributions rather than criticisms. Let go of the small stuff; encourage people to do things their way wherever possible.*

### 3. Norming

If the team can reach the Norming stage they are probably home and dry. Sadly, I have sometimes been called in to work with directors who have been storming for as long as 15 years, in businesses which are successful but being slowly undermined by the tension. If the Norming stage can be reached, it is an exciting time for all, when big decisions can be made and implemented, new ideas turned into reality, risks taken and failure seen as simply another step along the pathway to success. Roles and relationships are now established, freeing people up to concentrate on exercising the talents that got them into the team in the first place.

*Tip: leaders should use a coaching style and ask the team for their solutions before giving the leader's own; a team at the Norming stage will have much to offer in terms of experience and ideas which, if accessed, can save leaders time and energy, leaving them free to focus on the wider horizon, for example, broadening the scope through strategic partnerships and succession planning.*

### 4. Performing

The team is now a powerful engine running with all its cogs turning. Plenty of healthy conflict, of the type that does not damage the fabric of the relationships, is interspersed with fun and humour. Successes almost seem to create themselves; the leader and team members have learned to give their very best then get out of the way.

*Tip: The leader and team members should recognise the contributions of others and ensure that credit is awarded where due. This applies as much to team members validating the leader as the other way round. If anyone is left feeling that their contribution is not being recognised, the resentment may be carried through to the next project and storming will be proportionately harder to overcome in the future.*

### 5. Adjourning

The 'adjourning' stage, which was added at a later date, is about bringing a sense of closure to a team whose project is completed. If the team successfully negotiated the first four stages, there may be some bonding between members and a sense of loss at disbanding those relationships. People will also be looking back to the beginning, noticing how far they have come and measuring what their contribution has been to the whole. The way in which this is handled can have a profound effect on the next team each member joins; if an organisation is constantly forming and reforming teams as people move around the international executive circuit or develop new initiatives, a collective cultural memory will come into being, influencing existing team players and absorbed as if by osmosis by newcomers to the organisation.

*Tip: Adjourning is a time for thank-you's, recognition of individual achievements and reflection on how far the team has come, the turning points along the way, and what its members can take forward from the team to the future. Make sure that all the stakeholders outside of the team are aware of collective and individual achievements.*

## About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

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