

Teams: Virtual and Face-to-Face

Introduction and detailed description of the process

Team development has been described in terms of five stages, beginning with a simple ‘membership’ group, and working through ‘confrontation’ to a ‘shared-responsibility’ group (Bradford and Cohen, 1998).¹ Bradford and Cohen suggest that the different stages of groups differ in terms of the following characteristics:

- Atmosphere and relationships
- Understanding and acceptance of goals
- Listening and information sharing
- Decision making
- Reaction to leadership
- Attention to the way the group is working

Table 4 below shows how these characteristics vary over the course of the group development process. This can be used to identify where a group is located along these different dimensions, and where it needs to get to in order to operate more effectively.

Table 4: Stages of group development

	Membership	Sub-grouping	Confrontation	Differentiation	Shared responsibility
Atmosphere and relations	Cautious, feelings suppressed, low conflict, few outbursts	Increasing closeness within sub-groups, cross-group criticism, false unanimity	Hostility between sub-groups	Confident, satisfied, open, honest, diverse	Supportive, open, expressive, varied; disagreement resolved promptly
Goal acceptance	Low, fuzzy	Increasing clarity, misperceptions	Up for grabs, fought over	Agreed on by most	Commitment to overarching goal
Information sharing	Intense, but high distortion and low disclosure	Similarities within sub-groups not as great as perceived	Poor	Reasonably good	Excellent, rapid, direct
Decision making	Dominated by active members	Fragmented, deadlocks, to the boss by default	Dominated by most powerful, loudest	Based on individual expertise, often by boss in consultation with subordinates	By consensus, collective when all resources needed, individual when one is expert (not necessarily the boss)
Reaction to leadership	Tested by members, tentative	Resisted, often covertly	Power struggles, jockeying for position	General support, individual differences in influence	Highly supportive, but free to disagree on issues
Attention to way group is working	Ignored	Noticed but avoided, discussed outside meetings in small groups	Used as weapon against opponents	Alternates between uncritical or over-compulsive discussion	Discussed if needed, to aid work accomplishment; anyone can initiate

¹ This is seen by some as a more complete version of the ‘forming, storming, norming, performing’ process that Bruce Tuckman popularised in the 1960s.

Interestingly, the work of Duarte et al (2001) for the CGIAR organisations strongly indicates that face-to-face teams and virtual teams develop through similar processes. Note the comparison between the two types in Table 5 below from Duarte et al (page 6):

Table 5: Face-to-face vs virtual teams

Face-to-face teams	Virtual team
A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.	A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. [Virtual team] members work across at least two of the following boundaries: time, distance, organisation, or culture. They also use electronic communication and collaboration technology as their primary means of interaction.

The same authors suggest that virtual teams have the following aspects:

- Senior leadership recognises that virtual teaming is a preferred and useful way of working.
- Adequate resources exist for some face-to-face interaction, especially in the start-up phase.
- There is a commitment to, and resources available for, training and other ongoing development activities.
- There is a common platform for electronic communication and collaboration technology.
- Team leaders see themselves as critical to facilitating the team’s success.
- Team members share a basic level of competence in use of technology, working across cultures, project management and time management (especially with competing projects), and the ability to network across time, distance, and organisation.

Example: Application to Food Security

Maxwell (2001) applied the team development process to the institutional problems faced by food security efforts. Using a narrative structure, he explained how typical food security planning efforts were hampered by ineffective team working and management approaches that tend towards a more ‘solo hero’ mould. In this situation, managers carry the burden for motivation and decision making, and groups are membership based, with weak leadership, low commitment to goals, and frequent conflict. Using the five stages, it is essential for managers to analyse the state of the development of the group, and help move teams towards the shared responsibility approach. This is a move towards the organizational culture required for the kinds of multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary enterprises that are so common to development and humanitarian efforts.

Key, here, is an understanding that changing the character of groups is not an easy task. There are frequently problems of status, professional pride, cultural background and so on, which underlie conflict. Nonetheless, conscious changes in group dynamics can be seen to have a positive impact on performance of a team.

Sources and further reading

- Bradford, D. and A. Cohen (1998) *Managing for Excellence*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Duarte, D., L. Spink and S. Song (2001) *Strengthening Virtual Collaboration and Teamwork*, Alexandria, VA: The Organizational Change Program for the CGIAR Centers.
- Maxwell, S. (2001) ‘Organizational Issues in Food Security Planning’ in S. Devereux and S. Maxwell (eds) *Food Security in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London: ITDG Publishing.
- Read more about the ‘Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing’ Approach at: www.businessballs.com/tuckmanformingstormingnormingperforming.htm.