Exploring The Five Stages of Group Formation
Using Adventure-Based and Active-Learning Techniques

| Forming | Storming | Norming | Performing | Transforming |

During a new corporate project, your project team is likely to encounter most if not all of the stages of group formation, commonly referred to as forming, storming, norming, performing and finally, transforming. While entire graduate dissertations, college and management classes and seminars, and numerous journal articles have been written on this subject, this brief article 'opens the door' to explaining and experiencing the stages of group formation, and building some of the skills necessary to successfully navigate each stage. This introduction to the stages of group formation is suitable for a two to three hour staff training program. Additional resources and references are provided at the end of the article for those interested in a more detailed explanation of these stages, and techniques for exploring them with your business community.

The stages of group development come from research by Tuckman and Jenson.
For more information about this work, review the following historical articles:

Tuckman, Bruce, 1965, "Developmental sequence of small groups," Psychological Bulletin, Volume 63, Number 6, p384-399.

Tuckman, Bruce & Jenson, Mary Ann, 1977, "Stages of small group development revisited," Group and Organizational Studies, Number 2, p419-427.

Tuckman, Bruce, 2001, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," Group Facilitation, Number 3, Spring, p66-81. A review of the original work, 35 years later.

You can find additional information related to the stages of group formation and group learning, in the Johnson & Johnson book, Joining Together, on page 469. See references at the end of this article.

A downloadable version of this article is available in PDF format from the Teamwork & Teamplay website at: www.teamworkandteamplay.com and also appeared in the May/June 2003 issue of Camping Magazine (www.acacamps.org) and the Spring 2003 issue of Horizons Magazine (UK) (www.outdoor-learning.org).

Consider the five stages of group formation shown above. The following information details how a typical corporate project team might progress through these stages, and provides activities for exploring each stage of group formation with the members of your team.

The Forming Stage

This is the polite, opening, get acquainted, ice breaking stage of group formation. This process begins at the moment new project team members begin to assemble for the first time. The opening meeting, the general welcome comments from the manager, the facility orientation session, and even the informal discussions after the initial gathering are all part of the forming stage. At this point, members of the group are just trying to identify who's who, and possibly where they fit into that plan. This stage includes forming an atmosphere of safety and acceptance, avoiding controversy, and is filled with guidance and direction from the project team leader or manager.

Activities for the Forming Stage

Get acquainted and community building activities are used here to form the atmosphere of safety and acceptance. There are a few more activities suggested in this stage because it is important to build a strong foundation if the rest of the stages are to be successfully navigated.

Believe it or Knot

Thanks to Mike Anderson of Learning Works for this excellent get acquainted activity. With the entire group holding a Raccoon Circle (a 15 foot long section of tubular climbing webbing tied with a knot, or, if webbing is not available, a 15 foot long rope knotted to form a circle), the knot is used as a pointer to identify the person talking. Begin by passing the knot to the right around the group. Someone in the group says "Stop!" the knot stops, and the person nearest to it has the opportunity to disclose some interesting fact about themselves, such as, "I can write computer programs in 4 different languages!" It is now the discussion and responsibility of the rest of the participants to decide whether they believe that this information is true or false. After some discussion, the group gives their opinion of the validity or falseness of the disclosure, and the person providing the comment can tell the real story. After a person has revealed the true nature of their comments (true or false), they say "left" or "right" and then "Stop!" and a new person has the opportunity to disclose something interesting or unusual to the group.

The level of disclosure to the group is often a measure of the closeness, unity and respect within the group. For example, a disclosure such as, "I have been with this company for 3 years," is a lower level of disclosure than "I need to be better at my job for this project to succeed." Depending on the group setting, and the purpose of this activity for your group, different levels of information or disclosure are appropriate. As the group becomes more unified, this activity can bring out greater disclosure between members of the project team ("I'm not sure if I have enough resources to complete my part of the project on time.")

Commonalities

Begin with partners for this activity. This conversational activity has the goal of identifying unique and sometimes unusual events, activities and life experiences that we have in common with other members of our group. The two partners need to identify three unique items that they have in common. Encourage participants to dig deep for these items. For example, they may discover that they both like dogs, but under closer examination, they may also discover that they like the same breed of dog. Additionally, they may discover that they both enjoy reading, but by digging a bit deeper, they may discover that they have read the same book in the past 6 months or perhaps enjoy the same author.

After identifying three attributes that they have in common, these two partners raise their hands, and find another group of two ready to form a group of four. Now the challenge is to identify 2 items that they have in common. Again, look deep, and no fair using any of the attributes already identified.

Finally, after this group of four finds out what they have in common, they raise their hands and join another group of four, for a total of eight. The goal for these eight is to find ONE unusual event, interest or activity that they have in common. Have each of these groups of eight tell the other groups what they have in common. Again, the more unique and unusual, the better (or at least the more interesting!)

Which Side of the Road are You On?

Possibly one of the greatest needs within a group is to identify what unites the members of the group. To this end, the goal here is to identify some commonalities shared by various members of the group. In this case, the more job related, the better.

Which Side of the Road are You On requires a central gathering place, and two boundary lines, which can be made using masking tape, string, rope, a hallway or sidewalk. Have participants begin by 'standing in the middle of the road.' As the first company truck comes barreling down the road, loaded with information for your project, team members must decide which side of the road they should be on. Some of the following decisions are fairly easy and the information content doesn't have severe consequences. Others may make or break the entire project. After choosing sides, give project team members a minute to see who is on the same side of the road with them, and to discuss why they chose this particular side.

PC		Macintosh
Loud		Quiet
Running	the	Walking
Save Money	middle	Spend Money
Fixed Schedule	of the	Flex Time
Sky Diving	road	Deep Sea Diving
Problem Solver		Problem Maker
Hamburgers or Hotdogs		Chicken or Salad

The object here is to find interests, activities, choices and decisions that project team members have in common. Obviously team members can be on 'different sides of the road,' but don't focus on what is different, but rather who is on the same side with you. Alliances can be important. Be careful to choose topics appropriately for the audience that you are serving. This activity can be used with even large project teams, provided the folks in the middle of the road can hear when the truck is coming!

This activity also provides the opportunity for a bit of group discussion throughout the process. For example, were some folks left 'in the middle of the road' and only saved by another person pulling them to safety as the information truck came speeding towards them? Or did they become 'corporate roadkill?' Did some folks change their minds during a particular decision, and then change sides? Is there always a right and wrong side of the road, or more appropriately, two possible choices, both of which have merit? Does the entire project team need to be on the same side of a particular issue for the team to move forward successfully? How would you go about trying to get everyone on the team on the same side of the road for a key project decision?

In the book *Good to Great*, Collins talks about 'getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus,' and then 'getting the right people into the right seats.' This activity be used to explore where some members of your project team choose to be on specific team or management issues, but you might want to wait for the 'storming' stage of group formation to bring this up, rather then here in the safe environment of the 'forming' stage.

The Storming Stage

This second stage of group formation introduces conflict and competition into the formerly safe and pleasant work environment. In many corporate settings, this stage typically is encountered around week two. Why week two? Because that is when most project team members have had the weekend to think about the resources and requirements of the job ahead. Suddenly those things which didn't seem to matter, begin to matter, and conflicts arise. Staff behavior ranges from silence to domination in this environment, and a project leader or manager needs to demonstrate coaching to successfully move through this stage.

Activities for the Storming Stage

While some project team members would rather avoid the conflict of this stage, it is important to build skills and show them how to cope and deal with the storming stage. The activities in this section, therefore, contain just a bit of stress (so that the door may be 'opened' to discuss what is really going on). The following activities are very challenging, and need to have a suitable amount of time after each one for discussion within the group.

Photo Finish

Thanks to Sam Sikes for this seemingly simple but yet complex activity. You can find this and other activities in his book, Executive Marbles (1-888-622-4203).

Photo Finish (or the Finish Line) requires a straight line, made from masking tape or string. The task is for the ALL project team members to cross the line at exactly the same time. You can additionally "stress" the group by minimizing the available space that they have to plan prior to crossing the finish line. For example, if you place the masking tape finish line 3 feet away from a wall or fence, then the project team will have minimal space to work and communicate effectively - which in itself will lead to more mistakes by team members breaking the boundary.

Tell the group that they have 15 minutes to make 5 attempts to cross the finish line at exactly the same time. This is a great opportunity to use a digital camera for instant feedback. Every time someone breaks the plane of the finish line, the facilitator yells, "Click!" even for the occasionally careless mistake.

This activity involves planning, communication, timing and occasionally the ability to deal with frustration. Discussion topics after the completion of this activity include: What was difficult about the work environment? What could have been done to improve this situation? Who is in charge here that could have made the decision to improve the work environment? How did the group treat the team members that made unplanned mistakes? Could this task have been completed with zero mistakes? What do we as a project team need to do to cut down on the number of mistakes we make in the future on this project? In the end, the task was completed, but how do the members of the team feel about their participation?

Conventional corporate wisdom says that in order for a team to be successful, they need a combination of three components: a worthwhile task, an opportunity for growth and advancement, and a chance to form working relationships with the members of the team. In this activity, would you say that the team completed a worthy task? How about having an opportunity to learn, grow or advanced? How about improving the working relationships between team members? If any of these components was less than satisfactory, what could be done to improve them?
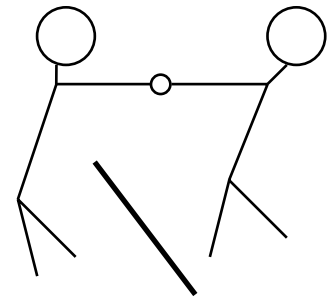
Cross the Line

This activity requires a single straight line. With half of the group on one side of the line and standing about 6 feet (2 meters) behind the line, and the other half of the team on the other side, the scene is set for a moment of conflict (of "us" vs. "them"). Make no mistake, this activity is a bit higher level than most, but it is excellent for setting the stage to talk about conflict, negotiation and win/win, win/lose, and lose/lose scenarios.

Tom Heck calls this activity, "Their Ain't No Flies On Me!", and begins this activity by having one side say, "There ain't no flies on me, there ain't no flies on me, there might be flies on you (point to folks on the other side), but there ain't no flies on me!", and then boldly taking a step towards the line (with just the right amount of attitude). The other side now replies, "there ain't no flies on me, there ain't no flies on me, there might be flies on you (pointing at the other folks), but there ain't no flies on me!", and takes a step towards the line. The first side now repeats with twice the attitude, and moves to the line, followed by the second side repeating their lines, and stepping face to face with the other side.

The facilitator now says, "you have 3 seconds to get the person across the line from you onto your side of the line. GO!"

Typically, this phrasing results in a rather quick tug of war between partners, and usually a physical solution (for one person at least) to the challenge. This provides an excellent opportunity to open the door for discussion on conflict, challenges, attitude, negotiation, and how to resolve differences between people. For example, you can ask, "how many partner teams ended up in a win/lose scenario, where one member obtained what they wanted (getting their partner to their side), but the other member did not?" "What about a lose/lose scenario, where both members struggled, but neither one obtained their goal?" And finally, "were there any teams that achieved a win/win solution, where both partners changed sides?" "What is it about our corporate culture that so many members of our team end up in win/lose or lose/lose scenarios, rather than a win/win solution?" "How can we fix this situation?" The next time you are in a 'cross the line' situation, what is the first thing you will do to avoid a win/lose or lose/lose scenario?

Blind Square

In a safe environment (large open carpeted room with no obstacles, or perhaps a flat grassy outdoor space) blindfold the entire group, and allow them to search as a group and find a nearby piece of rope (about 100 feet long). After finding the rope, instruct the group that their goal, while still blindfolded, is to create a perfect square with the rope. You might continue and remind the group that a square geometrically consists of a closed shape with four equal length sides, and four 90 degree corners. Participants are allowed to slide along the length of the rope, but cannot let go, change sides, or move around another participant.

This simple to explain but extremely difficult and time consuming to complete activity works best with a group of about a 10-15 participants. You can choose to invite one person to 'observe' the group, but not assist them in the completion of their task, and then to share their observations when the group has finished. The storming stage of this activity will be very obvious. Communication breakdowns, leadership abilities, directions, power issues and resource constraints all contribute to team member frustration and often make what appears to be a simple task infinitely more difficult. If establishing realistic scheduling goals is appropriate for this project team, then ask them to estimate a 'time till completion' for creating this rope square. If establishing quality standards, or work performance standards is realistic, then ask them to establish (while blindfolded), the performance criteria on how they will measure the outcome of this rope square project.. If team members are likely to encounter limitations in technology, wrong or misleading information, or confusion during their project work, consider tying one end of the rope permanently to a tree, fence, car or other non-moving object. Or tie a knot or two in the rope (but not at a distance that is likely to correspond with a corner).

After the group has reached the end (notice, I didn't say 'completed' the activity), here are a few ideas to discuss: Was the time estimate reasonable given the task? What was most of the time spent doing? What was the 'breakthrough' point in this activity? Were all members of the group equally engaged in the activity? Did some members of the group have more 'power' than others? If the group was asked to create another shape blindfolded, do you think you could be more efficient? Quicker? Accurate? This stage of group formation is called the Storming stage. What types of team behaviors did you notice during this activity that tells you the group was storming? What skills do you have now that you can use in the workplace when tasks become frustrating or difficult?

The Norming Stage

This third stage of group formation is typically a welcome breath of fresh air after the storming stage. Although the project team is not yet at the high performing stage, some of the bugs are beginning to be worked out within the group, and good things are beginning to happen. This stage of group formation includes cohesion, sharing and trust building, creativity and skill acquisition. The project leader or program manager demonstrates support during this stage.

Activities for the Norming Stage

Sharing, trust building, and skill building activities are used in the Norming stage. In addition to those shown here, check out additional activities in the '52 Staff Meetings' section of this book.
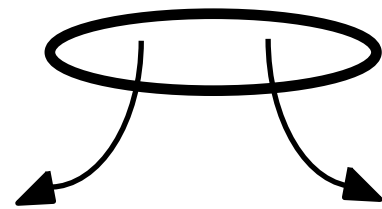
Inside Out

This is a great initial problem solving activity. Begin with a Raccoon Circle (15 foot long rope, tied into a circle) on the floor. Have the entire group step inside the circle. The task now is for the entire group to go from the inside of the circle to the outside, by going underneath the Raccoon Circle, without anyone in the group using their arms, shoulders, or hands.

What is important in this activity, is to stress the group problem solving process. In order for other members of the group to assist in the completion of the task, they need to know the plan, and what their part is in the solution.

To this end, encourage the group to "plan their work" and then "work their plan." This means that prior to ANY action, the group will need to plan their approach to solving this problem, and making sure that everyone in the group knows their part of the plan.

After completing the task, debriefing questions include asking the group if they had a plan, and did they change the plan during the completion of the activity, and if so, why? As a second part to this activity, you can also ask the group to go Outside In, again without using their hands, arms or shoulders.... and see if they "plan their work" before "working their plan."
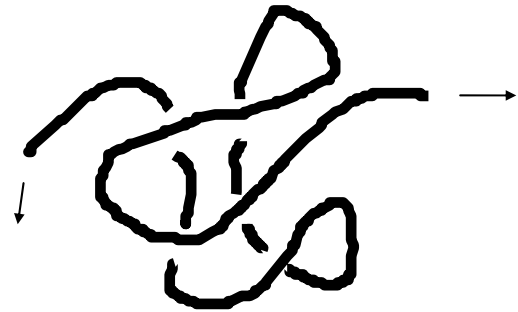

Finally, Inside Out can be used to explore ethical behavior in the workplace. At a time when corporate responsibility and financial accounting irregularities both make the business headlines, ethical behavior is certainly important. Once the group has returned into the circle, ask if they 'followed the rules." Most will likely nod their heads yes. Then ask if anyone used their arms, shoulders or hands to complete the task. For example, to crawl on their hands and knees (see picture). Or to assist another member of their group, by holding them up. Suddenly some folks will realize that they interpreted the rules to mean, "not to touch the Raccoon Circle with our arms, shoulders or hands." This is an excellent opportunity to discuss the publics perception of this groups ability to follow rules, corporate guidelines, policies, civil ordinances or federate mandates.

Not Knots

In this activity, which can be accomplished with only a single piece of webbing (in a straight line, without a water knot), a "doodle" is constructed (see example below) and the group is given the choice of whether this doodle will create a KNOT or NOT A KNOT, when the ends of the webbing are pulled.

The object here is to provide the group with some tools to use when they cannot easily form a consensus. Typically, upon analysis, about half of the group thinks the doodle will form a knot, and the other half a straight line. If this is the case, ask participants to partner with another person that has a different viewpoint (i.e. one partner from the KNOT side, and one partner from the NOT A KNOT side). By learning how to listen to a person with a different viewpoint, group members learn how to cooperate. After this discussion, ask participants to choose sides, with the KNOT decision folks on one side of the knot doodle, and the NOT A KNOT folks on the other side.

At this point, it is likely that there will still not be a complete consensus within the group. Prior to slowly pulling the ends of the knot doodle, let the members of the group know that you will pull the knot doodle slowly, and that they can change sides at any time during the unraveling of the knot doodle (this illustrates the ability to make an initial decision, but still be flexible as more information becomes available). This is also a good time to discuss 'risk taking' on the job, and what the risk is of choosing what might be the wrong side.

The Blind Trust Drive

Participants are asked to choose a partner for this activity that is approximately the same height. This activity should be conducted in a flat open space with no obstacles. One person stands in front, arms extended like they are holding onto the steering wheel of a car (the driver). Their partner stands behind them, with their hands on the shoulders of the person in front (the backseat driver). The 'blind' driver now closes their eyes, while the sighted 'backseat' driver safely steers them around the playing area. Remember, this is not a demolition derby or bumper cars, and a facilitator may act as the local law enforcement officer if necessary! Halfway through the activity, partners switch roles, and continue. At the completion of the activity, partners can provide feedback to their backseat drivers, and tell them what they liked about working with their partner, or what they would change about the guidance offered during the activity.

The Performing Stage

The fourth stage of group formation provides a feeling of unity, group identity, interdependence and independence. It is the most highly productive stage. Leadership from the project leader or program manager comes in the form of delegation. The team has all the skills, resources and talent needed to complete the task.

Activities for the Performing Stage

This stage is best explored using challenging activities that require advanced skills, but which can be successfully accomplished by the group. Activities that build enthusiasm are also helpful here. Large group projects such as tower building (using Tinkertoys©, uncooked spaghetti and marshmallows, newspaper and masking tape, or even PVC tubing), and challenge courses (low and high ropes activities) are useful. In the photograph, a group is completing a PVC tubing network which has plenty of connections, but no holes for anything to 'leak' out of the network. These Teamplay Tubes and other teambuilding props are available from Training Wheels Inc. at 1-888-553-0147 or www.training-wheels.com.

Grand Prix Racing

Turn the Raccoon Circle into a complete circle or loop using a water knot, and you are ready for the ultimate in sport racing. Thanks to Tom Heck for not only the idea for this activity, but also the enthusiasm to lead it effectively. This activity will boost the enthusiasm of your audience, and provide some moderate competition in the process.

Begin by spreading several Raccoon Circles around the available space, in close proximity to each other. Ask participants to join one of the "racing teams", picking their favorite color team in the process. Approximately 5 to 10 participants per Raccoon Circle. Have participants hold the Raccoon Circle with both hands in front of them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! It is summertime, and that means one thing in this part of the world - Grand Prix Racing ! Now I know that you are such die-hard race fans that just the thought of a race makes your heart beat faster. So this race comes in three parts. First, when I say that "we're going to have a race", your response is loud, "Yahoo!!!!!" Next I'll say, start your engines! and I want to hear your best race car sounds (audience practices making race car revving engine, shifting gears and braking sounds).

Finally, with so many cars on the track today, it will be difficult to see just which group finishes their race first, so we'll need a sign indicating when your group is finished. That sign is to raise your hands (and the Raccoon Circle) above your heads and yell "Yesssssssssss!""

Logistically, Grand Prix involves having the group transfer the knot around the group as quickly as possible, using only their hands. This activity can even be performed for a seated audience. To begin, you'll need a "start / finish" line, which can be the person that was born the farthest distance away from the present location. The race begins at this location, and ends when the knot is passed around the circle, and returns to this same location (Yessssssss!)

Typically in Raccoon Circle Grand Prix racing, there are three qualifying rounds or races. The first race is a single lap race to the right, with the knot traveling once around the inside of the circle to the right (counterclockwise). The second race is a multi-lap race (two or three laps) to the left (clockwise) around the circle. And the final race of the series, is a "winner take all" championship race, with one lap to the right (counterclockwise) followed by one lap to the left (clockwise).

Incidentally, after this activity, the group will not only be energized, but perhaps in a slightly competitive mood. From a sequencing standpoint, you can either continue this atmosphere (with more competitive challenges - such as a volleyball game, or corporate olympics) or introduce a bit of counterpoint, by following this activity with one that requires the group working together in a collaborative manner.

The Transforming Stage

The final stage of group formation is the other bookend to the initial forming stage. The Transforming stage allows the group to regroup, thank the participants and move on at the completion of the project or task. This stage is marked by recognition by the project leader, conclusion and disengagement by the team members.

Activities for the Transforming Stage

Allow for the completion and conclusion of the group process. Feelings of celebration and affirmation are suitable. Different team members may experience this final stage at different rates. Don't rush for closure. For some team members, this project may have been the highlight of their career to date. The first activity, A Circle of Kindness, involves appropriate contact between team members, and for many teams (nurses, primary care givers, teachers and other 'hands-on' professionals) this style is fine. The second activity, Virtual Slideshow, has no contact between team members, is largely verbal, and may be used in settings where less contact is desired.

A Circle of Kindness

Form a double circle with all group members, with one partner facing the center of the circle, and their partner behind them (also facing the center, with their hands on the shoulders of the inner circle person). The inner circle is asked to close their eyes, and only reply 'thank you' or keep silent. The outer circle is asked to quietly talk into the ear of the inner circle participants, mentioning something important that they learned from them or appreciated about them during the project, or a pleasant memory, or any other positive comment. The outer group then moves one person to the right, and continues. When the outer group has completed the circle, they are asked to become the center group, and the process begins again for a second round.

Virtual Slideshow

With all participants seated in a close space, an imaginary slide projector 'clicker' is passed around the group. Group members are asked to 'show' an imaginary slide or photograph from the project, illustrating a perfect moment, or perhaps a moment from the future, that will be different because that person had the opportunity to work as part of this team. If you would like a non-imaginary virtual slideshow clicker, you can order one from Training Wheels at 888-553-0147 or www.training-wheels.com. This company carries a variety of conversation, group discussion & debriefing aids that help bring all the voices to your corporate discussions.

References and Resources

Teamwork & Teamplay, by Jim Cain and Barry Jolliff, 1998, Kendall Hunt Publishers, Dubuque, IA Phone (800) 228-0810 ISBN 0-7872-4532-1 417 pages of activities, like those shown in this article.

The Book on Raccoon Circles, by Jim Cain and Tom Smith, 2002, Learning Unlimited, Tulsa, OK, USA Phone (888) 622-4203 www.learningunlimited.com ISBN 0-9646541-6-4 Hundreds of activities for creating community, that you can present with minimal props. 272 pages of ideas.

A Teachable Moment – A Facilitator's Guide to Activities for Processing, Debriefing, Reviewing and Reflection, by Jim Cain, Michelle Cummings and Jennifer Stanchfield, Kendall Hunt Publishers, Dubuque, IA Phone (800) 228-0810 ISBN 0-7575-1782-X Over 130 different ways to review with a group.

Teambuilding Puzzles by Jim Cain, Mike Anderson, Chris Cavet and Tom Heck. FUNDoing Publications. ISBN 0-9746442-0-X Over 100 puzzles and challenges for teams. Available from ACA, 1-800-428-CAMP.

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Stages of Small Group Development Revisited, B. Tuckman and M. Jensen, 1977, Group and Organizational Studies, Number 2, pages 419-427. The revised and updated article.

Good to Great - Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't, Jim Collins, 2001, Harper Collins, New York, NY USA ISBN 0-0666-2099-6

Exploring the Five Stages of Group Formation Using Adventure-Based Activities, by Jim Cain, 2003, from the Teamwork & Teamplay website at: www.teamworkandteamplay.com

Joining Together - Group Theory and Group Skills by David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson, 1994, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA ISBN 0-205-15846-3. Although set in the business world, this book is applicable to academic fields, social organizations and camping programs as well.

You can download a collection of adventure-based team building activities using simple props at:
www.teamworkandteamplay.com/raccooncircles.html