## Group Development

Tuckman, Schutz, Bion

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Tuckman (1965)

### A Cycle from Birth to Death


During our professional and social lives, we all experience groups. Some jell and work and some do not. How is it that some groups form and develop from a collection of individuals into a cohesive functional unit? Is there any predictability in the process or is it just "fate?"

A "good group" is frequently equated to a mystical experience: something that "just happens," either by divine providence or the match of astrological characteristics, or a blend of individual chemistries. Conversely, a "bad group" is attributed to poor leadership, a lack of compatibility of the members, lack of time, or inattention to process. All of these factors may affect our experiences of groups. Groups are complex living entities, similar in many ways to the individual. Yet few of us think about the development and growth of groups.

All groups go through a developmental process, proceeding through three major stages of development, which can be compared to the infant, adolescent, and adult stages of the person. Each stage is unique in comparison to the other stages and how each group experiences and lives through it. And, each stage is lived by all groups that develop into cohesive, functional units.

As in the development of the person, certain stages may be more or less pleasant for us to experience. Each must be lived through, however, and each can be treasured as our own unique experience in an inevitable cycle of development.

### Stage I: Infancy ("Forming")

Regardless of what events or structure gives birth to a group, it has to form, to come together. The behaviors in Stage 1 are initially polite and superficial as each person seeks out similarities or common needs. While introductions are made, each individual
is testing the amount of compatibility between his or her reasons for being there with the reasons stated by other members. Confusion and anxiety abound as different styles and needs become evident. The goal for the individual is to establish safe patterns for interaction. The group issue is the establishment of basic criteria for membership.

Interpersonally, each individual is working at varying levels of intensity on the issue of inclusion. Some questions raised during Infancy are: "Do I wish to be included, here and with these people? Will they include me, accept me as I am? What will be the price and am I willing to pay it?"

The first stage reflects dependency with regard to leadership. As confusion, ambiguity, and anxiety abound, individuals look to whatever leadership exists in the group or the environment. Whatever direction or information is provided is grasped for guidance. Where there is not response from the designated leadership, written descriptions or charges to the group may become a substitute, e.g., "The training description says…" If this is also lacking, the absence of direction itself may be brought forward as direction and guidance, e.g., "As we are getting no direction, we must be expected to proceed ourselves and take responsibility to…"

Depending on the similarities in style and needs that exist in the group, and depending on the tolerance for ambiguity that exists in the group, this first stage may be smooth and pleasant or intense and frustrating.

**Stage II: Adolescence ("Storming")**

When and if a common level of expectation is developed, the group can then move into the even stormier stage of Adolescence. Possibly the most difficult stage of development to tolerate in either persons or groups, this stage cannot be avoided, as it is a crucial stage dealing with power and decision making—necessary skills for the future functioning of the group.

In Stage II, after a base level of expectations and similarities is established, individuals begin to challenge differences in a bid to regain their individuality, power, and influence. Individuals start to respond to the perceived demands of their task usually with a full range of emotions. Regardless of how clear the task or structure of the group, group members react and will generally attack the designated leadership (facilitators), as well as any emerging leaders within the group. These bids for power and influence may either take the form of direct attacks or covert nonsupport. Interpersonally, members are working through their own control needs, both to be in sufficient control and to have some sense of direction.

The leadership issue is one of counter-dependence, i.e., attempting to resolve the felt dependency of Stage I by reacting negatively to any leadership behavior that is evident. By doing so, members remain dependent in that they are not initiating but reacting. Until individuals break out of this frustrating cycle of reaction and begin initiating independent and interdependent behavior, they will remain in the maze of Stage II.

As group members persevere in their attempts to create acceptable order/process for decision making within the group, they will lead themselves into Stage III. The activity and skills gained in this stage are essential for the group to proceed. If the group tries to escape from the unpleasantness of this stage, it will experience failure and will return to
Stage I and II again until the process is completed and power issues identified, including the mechanics of decision making. The more aware the group is of what it has accomplished in this stage, the faster the group will evolve and develop in the future.

**Stage iii & IV: Adulthood ("Norming & Performing")**

With the frustration of the first two stages behind, the group can finally pull together as a real group, not merely a collection of individuals. Here the group becomes a cohesive unit as it begins to negotiate roles and processes for accomplishing its task. Functional relationships are explored and established in spite of differences. The group is ready to tackle its goals working together collaboratively. With the accomplishment of some goals, group members may gain and share insights into the factors that contribute to or hinder their success.

Interpersonally, members are now working out of affection or a caring about others in a deeper, less superficial manner than before. Meaningful functional relationships develop between members. Leadership issues are resolved through interdependent behavior, or working with others. Tasks are accomplished by recognizing unique talents in the group: leading where appropriate and sanctioned or following where productive and necessary. As this interplay occurs, trust evolves.

The experience of accomplishment, whether it is successfully reaching consensus or solving a group problem, provides a powerful unifying force. A sense of "group-ness," a feeling of the uniqueness of the group with all its strength and faults, occurs. The group now has an identity of its own that is in no way diminished by its having evolved through the same cycle as countless other groups.

**RE-CYCLING THROUGH THE PROCESS**

Groups may proceed through the stages quickly or slowly; they may fixate at a given stage; or they may move quickly through some and slowly through others. If they do indeed complete all three stages, however, and have sufficient time left in their life together, they will again re-cycle through the stages. This additional development will lead to deeper insight, achievement, and closer relationships.

With the accomplishment of each significant task (or lack thereof), the group must again address the issues of inclusion (What does it mean to be a member now?); control (Who will influence now? How?); and affection (How dose and personal can we be? How much can we trust each other?). If the group has learned from its past experience, following cycles will be substantially easier.

As in any human development process, the group development cycle has pitfalls. Inattention to possible traps may result in more frustration and anxiety than is needed in the respective stage. If no learning or insight is gained along the way through the cycle,
groups will ponder, "Why are we doing or going through all of this again?" Groups must be attentive to their process and learn through it.

Groups may also re-cycle back to a previous stage before completing the full cycle, for a number of reasons:

1. Change in composition of the group (additions or deletions) necessitates returning to Stage I.
2. Change in the charge of the group, back to Stage I.
3. Inattention to the needed activities in a stage will eventually require a return to that stage.

**STAGE V: TRANSFORMING (or “Adjourning”)**

When the purpose of the group has been achieved, or if the time for the group has expired, the group is faced with transforming. Transforming can take one of two paths:

1. Redefinition: establishment of a new purpose and/or structure; or
2. Disengagement, Termination, or Death.

The group must decide on its future or it will proceed down a frustrating, unfulfilling path. The natural tendency for any group that has successfully achieved a full cycle is to attempt to remain together in some form in the future. The shared experience—with all of its pain and joy, its meaning and insight—bonds the members of the group together.

When the purpose has changed or the time has elapsed, however, the group must disengage. Not uncommoingly, groups will attempt to define ways of retaining contact after separation through letters or planned reunions in an effort to escape the pain of disengagement. But failure to disengage, to recognize that the life of the group, as its members have experienced it, has come to an end, will only lead to a hollow, unfinished feeling in the future. Even if the members were to remain in contact, or if a reunion were to occur (which seldom happens), the experience will never be the same, as the contexts of each of the members will have changed. So as the person must face the inevitability of leaving this life, members must realize that groups too must die. But if nourished, the spirit or experience can live on.

**References:**