



Trust, Direction and Support in Group Development

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Bruce Tuckman's model for group development goes a long way in helping to define the evolutionary process of effective workgroups. According to Tuckman, successful workgroups go through the following phases in this order: forming, storming, norming and performing. These four steps are necessary and inevitable for groups to grow, face challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, and deliver results. Group members who understand this model can face the storming phase with a little less stress. Group leaders should also understand how trust, direction and support shift throughout this group development process.

As you might expect, trust is absolutely essential for any group to be effective. In fact, some might argue that trust can often mean the difference between success and failure. Group leaders should be aware that the forming phase of group development is when group members are assessing leadership. This assessment includes whether or not they can trust the leader of their group. Establishing trust is especially important at this time because the next phase is when the leader may very well be the only one who is trusted. Storming is when people are least likely to get along and are looking for someone to hold the group together. A leader who inspires trust can help weather the storm. Once the group successfully passes through this storming phase, they can transition to the norming phase. The norming phase is when group members learn to trust the process and this can happen only if they pass through the storming phase effectively. Finally, the performing phase is when group members learn to trust each other. This shared trust, gained through group experiences in the previous phases, significantly enable optimal group performance.

It can also be especially helpful to look at how a leader's direction and support are applied during each stage of group development. The direction and support I am speaking of here are based on those of the Situational Leadership Model developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey. In this model the direction and support an employee requires from his manager shifts as the employee learns his or her job. In a similar manner, the collective group's need for this direction and support also changes depending on what stage of development the group is in.



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The forming phase of a group is when direction is especially important in order to establish the necessary groundwork so the group can be productive. This is when a leader must lay out clear goals and objectives for the group as well as establish specific roles and responsibilities for each member. As I mentioned earlier, this is an especially important time for the leader to inspire trust. Support is not so important at this time. On the other hand, the storming phase is when a leader is looked to for both direction and support. Storming is when the group is most volatile and vulnerable. This combination of clear direction as well as unwavering support for each member helps the group to continue in the face of such a challenging time. Leaders who are able to balance this dual need for both high levels of direction and support enable the group to move forward to the norming phase. Norming is when the need for direction is low and support is high. This is a time when the group is finding its way and each member needs a high level of support to inspire confidence so he or she can carry out the group's objectives effectively. It is a time when good leaders are able to inspire group members and help them become solid performers. The final stage of performing is when an effective leader's need for both direction and support are low because of the work done previously. In the performing phase, theoretically all members of the group are now competent and confident in their ability to carry out the group's goals and objectives.

Group leaders who understand the importance of trust throughout the four phases of group development can improve overall group performance. Gaining trust must be earned, of course, but the sooner this can be accomplished within a group setting, the smoother the transition through these phases. In the same way, a better understanding of when to apply higher levels of direction and support to group members can also improve the passage through the phases of group development. Trust, direction and support all play a role in engaging employees and the wise leader knows how to apply them in a workgroup setting.

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