

Basic Stages of Group Development

Putting Ambassadors into groups – Family Groups – creates tremendous opportunities for learning, growth, and the satisfaction of basic developmental needs like belonging.

It also sets in motion a process that all groups are known to go through. While there are many variants on this basic pattern, knowing it – and knowing what stage your group is at – will help you determine the questions and activities you'll use to help your Family Group accomplish its purposes.

This group or team development model is based on the pioneering work of Bruce W. Tuckman, conducted in the 1950s, and first published as "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups" in *Psychological Bulletin*, 1955. Tuckman identified four predictable stages of group development.

1) **Forming** – when a group is first formed, members make a transition from status as individuals to being group members also. They are figuring out if they really want to belong, and how the group can serve them. They cautiously explore the boundaries of acceptable group behavior and test the leader's guidance formally and informally.

Members might feel:

- excitement, anticipation, and optimism
- pride in being chosen to participate in the program
- tentative attachment to the group
- anxiety and fear about what's ahead

Leaders can: encourage members to be more honest and “real,” to get to know each other better and go deeper.

2) **Storming** – when the initial "honeymoon" period ends and reality sets in, power struggles and conflicts may arise. Greater trust leads to greater honesty, and disagreement; members then need to learn how to work through these disagreements without breaking the group apart. In this stage, members tend to rely on the more familiar – i.e., their own personal expertise and experience – and resist the need to work with other group members. This is the hardest stage, and the one with the greatest potential for individual and collective growth.

Members might feel:

- resistance to the program, the leader, and the ideas of group members
- sharp fluctuations in attitude toward the group
- tension
- jealousy
- a sense of competition with other members, and a desire to "choose sides" or allies

Leaders can: remind members that conflict is normal and healthy; remind members about why they are here; remind them about Working Agreements; help them work through their differences by using good communication skills.

3) **Norming** – during this stage, group members reconcile competing loyalties and "buy in" to the group and the program on a deeper level. They accept the common ground rules, their role in the group, and the individuality of fellow members. It is as if they realize that they are not going to drown and thus stop thrashing about and start helping each other stay afloat!

Members might feel:

- acceptance of their own role, and accepted by others
- relief that everything seems like it will work out
- greater willingness to take risks and confide in each other and the group
- able to express feelings and ideas (e.g., criticism) in non-antagonistic ways
- a greater sense of belonging and loyalty to the group
- a greater sense of cohesion, common spirit, and goals

Leaders can: help members name and describe these norms and patterns and notice their progress.

4) **Performing** – in this stage, members can truly "work the program model" and begin supporting each other with limited prompting from the facilitator/leader. They have accepted each other's strengths and weaknesses and learned how to work together.

Members might feel:

- satisfaction with their personal progress, and that of the group
- co-ownership of the group identity
- close attachment to other group members

Groups begin to cycle through these stages when they are first brought together, and they go at their own unique pace. While the leader / facilitator can help the group and its members learn what they need to learn at each stage, it is not possible for anyone to get the group to "jump over" any stage.

Note also that when a new member is brought in, or when a new task (e.g., a meeting) is faced, the group goes through these cycles again, but on a different and less dramatic level (because the change or new task is itself less dramatic).