

Group Dynamics - Process Dynamics of Groups

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INTRODUCTION:

Here the focus is on conscious and subconscious processes of groups and teams. According to most group theory state that teams and groups go through various growth phases during their 'life-span'. Specifically, three group development processes are discussed in this article. The first of these indicate dependency processes that every group has to go through. These stages are dependency, independency and interdependency. Second, is the well-known five-stage model of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. Lastly we discuss an

integrative model that attempts to integrate the above two via the phases of dependency and inclusion, counter dependency and fight, trust and structure, work and lastly termination.

THE DEPENDENCY PROCESS:

Credits: *This section is based on extracts from "Group Processes: A developmental Perspective" (Wheelan, Alan & Bacon: 1994).*

DEPENDANCY:

This phase occurs in the beginning of a newly formed group and members look to a leader for guidance. The anxiety of being in an unstructured situation seems to precipitate needs for certainty, direction and safety. Members often think of the leader as omnipotent and benevolent.

They try all kinds of strategies to gain his / her approval and direction. Simultaneously, while the group knows its task, the members avoid working on it. Interactions are not group-oriented. Rather, members are more concerned with issues of psychological safety, leadership and inclusion.

COUNTERDEPENDENCY:

Where the leader does not succumb to the groups wish to have a traditional directive leader, they become frustrated and the group could to split into subgroups that battle this issue. One group might be angry and reject the leader's perceived lack of responsible leadership behaviour. Often such subgroup might even disregard the leader's comments and denigrate his or her competence.

The other subgroup remains loyal to the leader and continues to seek his or her approval and direction. Where members attempt to organize and develop norms or set direction and goals, other members might even block such efforts.

INTERDEPENDENCY:

Finally, the group begins to realize that the fight between the dependent, loyal subgroup and the counter-dependent, anti-leader subgroup is inhibiting goal achievement. This realisation is aided by the emergence of another subgroup called the independents.

These individuals often take on the role of mediating the fight between counter dependents and dependents. The independents tend to view the leaders comments as useful but not directive or devious. Discussions of goals,

structure and norms occur during this stage. The leadership role becomes less controversial and members begin to take responsibility for organising and directing their own processes.

THE FIVE-STAGE GROUP DEVELOPMENT MODEL:

Credits: *This section is based on extracts from "Introduction to Group Behaviour and Processes" (Cilliers: 1999).*

FORMING:

Forming is characterised by a great deal of uncertainty as emotional undertone about the group's purpose, structure and leadership. Group members are becoming aware of a vacuum and dependency manifests. Members are 'testing the waters' to determine what types of behaviour are acceptable.

The group defends against discomfort by making use of defence mechanisms such as suppression, denial and projection – especially on the leader who is not helping to take away the discomfort. This stage is complete when members start to think of themselves as part of a group.

STORMING:

This is a phase of intra-group conflict. Members accept the existence of the group, but there is conflict over who will control the group. Aggression also manifests in the form of fight (against authority and peers) or flight (leaving the group or talking about irrelevant issues to escape from a difficult here and now situation). Another way to cope with the ambiguity is for the group to split (such as management vs. others, males vs. females, blacks vs. whites, or members with long vs. short tenure). When this stage is complete, there will be a relatively clear hierarchy of leadership within the group.

NORMING:

Here close relationships develop and the group demonstrates cohesiveness. There is strong sense of group camaraderie and identity. Rules are laid down in implicit or explicit ways. The stage is complete when a group structure solidifies and the group has assimilated a common set of expectations of what defines correct member behaviour.

PERFORMING:

Performing manifests in a fully functioning and accepting group. Group energy has moved from getting to know and understand each other to performing the task at hand. For a permanent working group this is the last stage of development.

ADJOURNING:

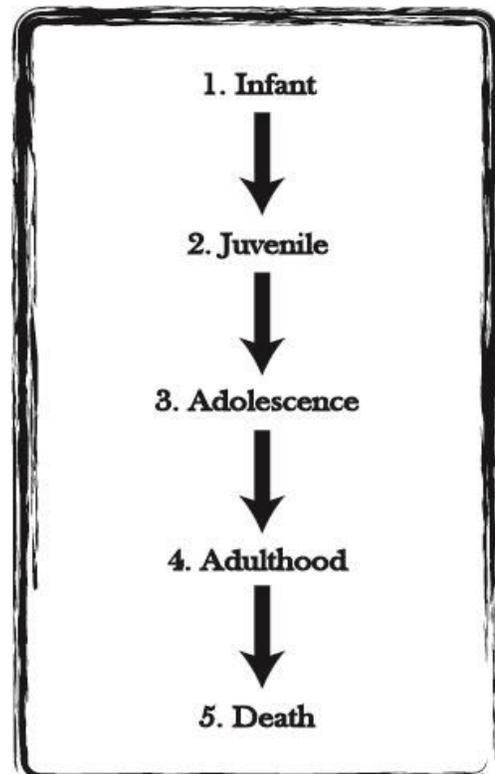
This happens when the task is completed, e.g. in a temporary group such as a committee. The group prepares for its disbandment. There is a sense of leaving, dying and preparing for what follows. High task performance is no longer the group's top priority. Instead, attention is directed towards wrapping up activities. Responses of group members vary at this stage. Some are optimistic, basking in the groups accomplishments. Others may be depressed over the loss of camaraderie and friendships gained during the work-groups life.

THE-INTEGRATED MODEL OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT:

This section will show how the different stages of group development will provide containment for total group functioning. The stages of group development discussed here are:

1. The Infant Phase,
2. The Juvenile Phase,
3. The Adolescence Phase,
4. The Adulthood Phase, and
5. Death.

I use metaphorical phases to describe group growth and its accompanying dynamics. Unlike the growth of individuals, group's growth does not follow a progressive path. It could jump certain phases, or get stuck in another. In terms of death, groups are very much like individuals. It could happen at any time. Very few groups make it to an adulthood phase.



Internationally, most start-up organizations do not make it over the first five-year line. It would therefore be a reasonable deduction to say that organizations have an extremely high infant mortality rate. The different stages of group development require different forms of containment. You should understand where your team is within its development phase, so that you can contain its growth and functioning effectively. Metaphorically, it is similar to a parent knowing how to manage your children as they go through their different developmental phases.

The Infant Phase:

Here the manager has to contain the growing team. Just as a parent has to feed and dress its infant, so must the manager look after and nurture its team. The infant phase occurs when a team starts to develop. This could be a newly formed group, a new department or even a task group. It could also be an organization, which is in the midst of a transformation process. At this stage, there is a lot of tension, anxiety and lack of trust within the group. Lack of norms and boundaries make the group extremely vulnerable. Employees need to relieve their tensions, fears and anxieties through a feeling of safeness. A number of rituals usually accompany this phase, almost serving as a type of glue that binds the group together.

These rituals could take the form of meetings, procedures, tearoom gatherings, dress code and other activities where the group creates culture through similar behaviour. The behaviour is usually similar within the team, but different to behaviour in other teams. Strong direction is imperative here. If the group or department is new, the manager will have to develop a safe, inclusive and accepting environment. Two dynamics that has dominance in this phase is employee dependency and the need for inclusion. Survival anxiety is usually high. As with an infant, employees base their survival on dependency. The group or organization is dependent on some form of authority to take responsibility for them, be it their growth, their boundaries or anything else. The group or organization needs instructions and rules. They want someone to manage them through command and control. This dynamic has the effect that employees are not mature enough to deal with their own boundaries, and fear of exclusion and rejection is cultivated.

Projection, where groups or departments take those things inside themselves with which they are uncomfortable with and place them somewhere outside themselves where they can be dealt with, becomes a primary method of creating a feeling of safety. An example of projection will be the marketing department, for instance, blaming the sales department for marketing problems. One department thus projects their own incompetence onto another department, and in doing this, the projecting department does not have to take responsibility for their own dysfunctions. If projection is not contained and managed properly, it could become a breeding ground for 'silo' functioning and diversity problems. In this phase, employees will need a manager who

provides them with structure and guidance. A parent-child relationship, where management represents the parents and employees the children, is often cultivated in this phase. Employees need someone who tells them what to do, how to do it, where to do it and how long it should take.

Containment of survival anxiety takes place through facilitating a feeling of safety and inclusion amongst employees. The creation of a decentralized, non-hierarchical and open communications system will assist in breaking employee dependency. It will also provide the basis for growth and innovation. In order to stimulate growth to the juvenile level, the manager will have to establish norms that support individual disclosure and experimentation.

A sound organizational value system and well-defined common purpose will provide the frame and direction within which growth can take place. The infant phase should be very short. Groups that are stuck here could face movement into a regressive spiral that could lead to an early death. Once a group has moved on to other phases, it will be very rare to fall back into this phase, but it is possible, especially if the group went through dramatic and quick transformation; was part of a merger or acquisition or where the group has changed its purpose.

The Juvenile Phase:

The team is growing up and now replaces infant anxiety with a quest for independence. Employees seek a better understanding of team purpose and individual roles. In this phase, the group will start clarifying their boundaries. These boundaries do not necessarily take the form of written rules, but could be a clear understanding of what employees can and cannot do.

Although inclusion is still an important team dynamic, trust becomes more important. Especially trust between employees and management. Employees need to believe that the team cares for them and has an interest in them as people. The manager contains this phase by focusing on individual thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Including all employees in organizational planning will secure smooth transition to the adolescence phase. Management and employees need to work closely in the design of organizational strategy and transformation. Cross-assistance, in terms of helping each other achieve organizational goals will assist the organization in its growth process. This is very much a norming stage and employees work very hard at relationships and cohesiveness. In this stage, there is usually a feeling of oneness within the team.

Employees view themselves as part of a team and a perception of belonging and safety is cultivated. Rules and common expectations start emerging. The manager contains these processes by providing clear team structure.

The main boundary that the group needs to establish during this stage is identity. The company logo and other team symbols play an important role during this phase. Trust, structure and relationships are important during this phase and employees will be open to developing and accepting an organizational value system. It is rare for teams to be stuck in this phase, or to fall back into this phase, but as with the infant phase, it is possible. Mostly the juvenile phase will always follow the infant phase.

The Adolescence Phase:

An independent paradigm signifies the adolescence phase. This phase occurs when a team or group is ready to grow and expand. Growth always has strong elements of conflict and challenge of the status quo. During the adolescence phase, employees are finding their own authority by challenging team authority. This is a time of independence. The group or team starts setting their own boundaries, and rejects any source of authority that might have an influence on them. It is therefore very much a rebel phase, where employees and departments rely on their own independence, believing that they do not need anybody else to help them in functioning, especially not any source of authority.

The situation is similar to a teenager working through adolescence. The main dynamics here are counter-dependency and fight. This is a time of strong individuals practicing their independency and behaving in a counter dependant fashion. Just as a difficult teenager, organizational employees do not buy into anything, and will not blindly follow managerial initiatives without questioning the action.

This phase usually goes with power struggles in various forms. During this phase, leadership emerges throughout the group, often within people who do not have formal authority. There is a struggle for leadership and struggles for favourable positions with the leadership. Employees will project conflict indirectly or subconsciously. This causes team anxiety within the ranks of employees and management. This is where coalitions begin, splits occur and leaders are alternately attacked by some coalitions and defended by others for perceived transgressions or positive actions.

During this stage, management should view conflict as a growth phase or growing pains, which employees have to go through. Such conflict could have positive effects and tension could be a good opportunity to clarify boundaries. Unlike the infant and juvenile phases, teams can repeatedly fall back into adolescence. There is also the danger of being stuck in this phase. My experience is that management mostly tries to contain this phase through excessive rules, regulations and policy statements. This is more an act of fear than it is an act of effectiveness.

Contrary to popular believe, the adolescence phase is extremely important for team growth, since growth and innovation is more a product of chaos than it is a product of order. The adolescence phase indicates growth and movement towards interdependency. By falling back into this phase every now and again, we must inevitably challenge the relevance of organizational behaviour and outputs. This causes the organization to rethink its strategy and direction. Unfortunately, the adolescence phase reduces the speed at which we execute organizational task, ultimately having a negative effect on production or service delivery.

Groups and organizations should not stay in this phase for too long. Being stuck here could cause continuous resistance to authority, which could also move the team into a regressive spiral. Ultimately, this could lead to self-destruction. As mentioned, there needs to be a balance between chaos and order within any system. This creates harmony between the need to transform and the need to produce. It is important for teams to be in this phase every now and again, but staying here for too long could become destructive. To contain the adolescence phase is difficult. Following are some guidelines:

- Establish a strong organizational value system and norms.
- Allow the expression of individual beliefs and values.
- Allow employees to explore and challenge their relationships to organizational authority.
- Work hard to stimulate positive relationships between employees and departments.
- Accept employee independence and their challenging of formal authority as a constructive phase in the organizational growth process.
- Encourage employees to express their views and accept criticism as an extremely valuable tool in keeping organizational purpose relevant.
- Assist the organization to develop a unified culture, without sacrificing employee individuality.
- Accept that this is an important phase in the process of organizational growth and transformation, but that interdepartmental and interpersonal conflict will be rife.
- Resolve conflict with win-win solutions and tolerance.
- Constantly stimulate and reinforce employee / management trust.

The Adulthood Phase:

The team is mature and task focused. This phase occurs when management has managed to contain the adolescence phase effectively. As mentioned, the purpose of leadership is to stimulate growth and expansion of the team and that the purpose of management is to focus, empower and contain the organizational task.

Unlike the first three stages of team development, leadership does not rank high in importance with the adulthood phase. In fact, leadership could even become dysfunctional in this phase. During the birth of my second child, my wife had to go for a caesarean section. I was present during the operation, and was amazed at the amount of task focus present. There was an anaesthetist, whose primary task was to safely sedate my wife, and then to ensure her safe recovery. Then there was the gynaecologist, who focused on making incisions through the mother's abdomen and uterus, taking the baby out, and closing the wound. Lastly, there was the paediatrician. His concern was the baby, ensuring that the child has no problems or dysfunctions. There was no person in charge of this operation room; rather the task was in charge. If any individual had to take leadership, and regulate the actions of these doctors, it would probably cause more chaos and conflict than anything else would.

The adulthood phase needs effective management of organizational tasks. During this phase, employees have internalized their role functions and do not rely as much on the manager or leader for guidance, support or encouragement. During the adulthood phase, the manager should become less directive regarding the actions of the group or individual. Instead of being directive, the manager should rather encourage interdependence and confidence within employees. They know what to do and how to do it.

It is not possible for organizations to stay within the adulthood phase consecutively. In fact, it is not healthy, since growth takes place during the adolescence phase. Well-functioning organizations know that there is a time for chaos and a time for order. Meaningful work usually begins as an idea and ends as a functional product. When delivering outputs to our clients we need to be in the adulthood phase, and when strategizing, planning, and innovating we move to the adolescence phase. A 60/40 principle is advisable where the organization spends 60% within the adulthood phase and 40% within the adolescence phase.

Death:

No organization will live forever. At some stage or another, your organization will die. This could be 3-months or two-hundred years, but organizations have a life span. In our current fast pace world, it is more likely to be sooner than later. Organizational death can take many forms; it could be a merger, change of organizational purpose, inability to make it in the business world or acquisition by another company.

The most logic and obvious reason for a group reaching this adjournment phase will be when they have fulfilled or outlived their purpose. At the end, the most common reason for organizational death is irrelevance.

This is why fluctuation between the adolescence phase and the adulthood phase is so important – it keeps the organization alive and relevant. It is important to note that groups will not necessarily go through all the phases before they die. A group could even reach this phase during infancy or adolescence. Managers must assist the

organization in this final stage by containing employee anxiety, and facilitating a graceful end. Managers should assist employees to work through the pain of organizational death by enhancing a valuable growth experience.

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