Deliberate Team Development: Developing Teams in 90 Days

Corinne Chalmers
Abstract

Because new leaders often only have a probationary 90 days to prove themselves, they may benefit from coaching and facilitation that will help them expedite team development. Most group development models describe how groups tend to evolve over time. These models typically include an element of relational conflict that impedes performance. Though conflict can erupt at any stage, it is most likely during the early phases of a group’s development when trust and familiarity among members is unknown. A prescriptive approach to team development is proposed that promotes healthy task conflict without sacrificing social cohesion. This is done by deliberately forming a group with both task and relational considerations in mind; executing activities that build social cohesion; explicitly crafting team norms; using conflict-preemptive brainstorming and decision-making strategies; and using accountability processes that leverage social identity theory.
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Introduction

One of the most pivotal times in a leader’s career is the probationary 90-day period in a new role when first impressions and early actions set the foundations for future success. New leaders need to know how to assimilate into their existing teams, make adjustments to them if needed, or build new teams quickly enough to make a positive impact in just a few months. Leadership coaches and facilitators can be invaluable allies in helping with this challenge.

Popular models of group development explain how groups tend to behave and develop over time if left to natural influences. The Tuckman (1965) model, for example, suggests that groups tend to develop using a potentially stressful and time-consuming trial and error approach to finding group norms that will facilitate performance. Such descriptive group development models provide the basis for a proposed normative model that coaches and facilitators can use to help newly appointed leaders form and develop their teams more intentionally. Group development can be proactively accelerated using tools and processes that shift interactional dynamics from relationship to task in a way that preempts interpersonal conflict as the new team deliberately forms, norms, brainstorms, and performs. That is, as the group intentionally selects, crafts norms, uses conflict pre-emptive meeting strategies, and actively produces outcomes.

Several models of group dynamics will be examined as a basis for the proposed development model. The proposed model will then be applied to the new leader situation. Cultural and ethical considerations will be addressed followed by a discussion of limitations and future research requirements.
Group Development Models

Stages Development Models

Bruce Tuckman’s (1965) descriptive model of group development describes a typical five-stage process of group development: forming (orientation), storming (conflict), norming (structure development), performing (work), and adjourning (dissolution). Initially, group members are tentative and politely compliant as they gain familiarity with one another in the orientation phase (Forsyth, 2013; Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). This stage is characterized by a high dependence on the team leader and apprehension about inclusion or rejection. Eventually, the group may move to a stage marked by relational conflicts or task conflict over what to do and how to do it. Prolonged conflict may lead to a breakdown or delay in group development. The norming stage of Tuckman’s model describes the emergence of roles, responsibilities, and standards that guide behavior and communication as the group increases in trust and cohesiveness (Forsyth, 2013). In the performing stage of development, the emphasis shifts from a relational orientation to a task-orientation focused on goals, performance, and production (Forsyth, 2013; Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996). The dissolution stage of group development involves closing the original group and can be accompanied by feelings of loss, uncertainty, anticipation, relief, regret, or stress depending what prompted the transition and how members perceive their future (Bridges, 1986). When a new leader joins a team, some partial dissolution or reformation will occur that may trigger the associated feelings and concerns among the existing members.

The Tuckman model is somewhat simplistic in that it describes a linear and successive progression in clearly demarcated steps. In contrast, cyclical development models suggest that in reality there is much more overlap and groups can move back and forth or skip some stages.
altogether. For example, Bales and Cohen (1979) found that groups oscillate back and forth between norming and performing as needed. Despite the differences, the cyclical models still use Tuckman’s terminology to classify the major processes and characteristics of groups over time (Forsyth, 2013).

These models are descriptive rather than prescriptive in that they describe what groups tend to do through trial and error and not necessarily what they should do to perform optimally. It follows that a new leader should assess the current stage of development of his or her team and implement actions to proactively move the team to high performance. The Group Development Questionnaire can be used to assess the team’s development or the members can review the characteristics of each stage of the development model as described by Wheelan and Hochberger (1996, p. 154) and estimate the group’s developmental maturity. Depending on the results, a new leader may want to minimize the disruption of his or her entrance to a high-performing team but re-form a team that has been stuck in the storming phase for too long.

**Equilibrium models**

Robert Freed Bales’ Systematic Multiple Level Observation of Groups (SYMLOG) model helps identify existing group member’s orientation to various aspects of task and relationship (Bales & Cohen, 1979). The equilibrium model of group development includes the observation that group members seek to balance attention to task-related outcomes with relationship-building activities (1979). Like the stage development theories, these models and findings are more descriptive than normative. Bale’s work does not advise where to place the emphasis or when. Borrowing from similar models in other disciplines however, may provide more insight.
Blake and Mouton’s (1985) management styles model emphasizes the importance of balancing a high concern for results with a high concern for people. Ames and Flynn (2007) found that leaders who balance communications that are designed to achieve instrumental gain with their impact on social relationships are less likely to be perceived as under or over assertive. Finally, most conflict models strive for a collaborative approach that balances a high concern for task with a high concern for relationships (Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992). Yet others have argued that in the case of leaders and individuals, the emphasis on relationship versus task should be situation-dependent (Ames & Flynn, 2007; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982; Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992). Conflict negotiation strategies for example, use a stair-step approach that focuses on developing rapport and respect before problem-solving (Grubb, 2010). By definition, the performing stage of Tuckman’s model is characterized by attention to the task but most often the group has already created a relational foundation during the earlier stages. This indicates that relationship may need to precede task in attentional focus for team development.

Activities that promote trusting relationships may reduce or eliminate the time spent in the storming stage of group development. Simons and Peterson (2000) determined from a correlational study of 79 executive groups that intergroup trust moderates the potential for task conflict to predict relational conflict in groups. In addition, Farh, Lee, and Farh (2010) have provided support for moderate (and not high or low) task conflict in the early stages of group development. Bales and Cohen (1979) advise that a long stretch of performance should be followed by a cohesion-creating, interpersonal activity. These findings suggest that a relational-focus while orienting the group may preempt relational conflict and allow a task focus during the
performing stage of the group’s development. A relational focus is also helpful to recharge the group after a period of high performance.

**A Deliberate Development Model**

During team meetings and over the life-cycle of a team, a new leader is advised to focus on building relationships before attending to the task. Specific tools and techniques should be used to deliberately accelerate group development and preempt relational conflict. Adjusting slightly for a prescriptive approach to Tuckman’s model and overlaying Bale’s Equilibrium model produces the following cyclical approach to developing teams: forming, norming, brainstorming, and performing where attention to relationship is emphasized in the forming stage and attention to task is emphasized in the performing stage. The entire model is recursive such that forming and norming are revisited at regular intervals.

**Tools for Teamwork**

**Form (Month 1 – 2)**

**Communicate informally (Day 1 or before).** New leaders should avoid being directive or relying too much on position power before establishing some level of trust and credibility in these early days (Northouse, 2010). New leaders should initially focus on relationship-oriented interactions that allow informal communication interspersed with some neutral information-seeking questions. Gorse and Emmit (2009) found that construction meetings produced better outcomes when they included social-emotional interactions. These informal conversations emphasized positive and social-emotional comments that either showed support or relieved tension (Gorse & Emmit, 2009). Supporting comments show respect or admiration, encourage friendliness, kindness, and commitment and can allay feelings of apprehension about inclusion or rejection. Tension-relievers are light-hearted comments or jokes. Neutral task-oriented
questions seek additional information and clarification or background information (2009). Lunches, coffee breaks, and first meetings are a perfect opportunity for such informal conversations either on the first day or during the “fuzzy front end” between being hired and actually starting on the job (Watkins, 2013).

One objective of these early meetings with team members is to seek areas of commonality. The similarity principle says that individuals tend to “seek out, affiliate with, or be attracted to an individual who is similar to them in some way” (Forsyth, 2013, p. 124). It is especially helpful when there are similarities in values, beliefs, and interests. Forsyth (2013) uses the similarity principle to explain how cliques formed among groups like the impressionist painters in the mid 1800’s. One way to get at common values in an informal conversation is to discuss pet peeves.

**Address hopes and fears (week 1).** Social identity theory predicts the reluctance of a group having a strong common identity to accept members (including new team leaders) that might be perceived as deviant from the goals and values of the rest of the group (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006). Whether done directly one-on-one or through a facilitator working with the team members in private, the new leader is advised to proactively address initial team-member hopes and fears as soon as possible. Some companies provide a facilitated meeting popularly called “new leaders assimilation” for this purpose (Watkins, 2013). The new leader can use some of the commonality findings from the informal communications done earlier in his response to the team’s expressed hopes and fears.

**Assess and adjust team membership (month 1).** During the first month, new leaders should look for both the task and relational fit of team players. The degree of emphasis on relational fit is related to the extent that the team’s tasks require interdependence (Gully, Devine
A meta-analysis by Gully et al. (1995) found that when the task demands coordination, communication, and mutual performance monitoring among members, cohesion significantly predicts performance (p. 513). An example of a highly interdependent team might be a team of executives in a matrix organization versus a group of functional leaders in an autocratic, hierarchical organization.

Suitability is affected by many factors including personality traits, ability, types of tasks, organizational culture fit, alignment of values and goals, diversity, and team size (Forsyth, 2013; Kichuk, 1998; Wheelan, 2009). New leaders may use a variety of resources including the Parker Team Player Survey, prior employee performance reviews, 360-degree competency surveys, Values in Action Survey, observation in team meetings, and one-on-one meetings with team members to assess whether the team meets all the needs of the task and is likely to be productively cohesive.

Felps, Mitchell, and Byington (2006) provide guidelines as to “how, when, and why bad apples spoil the whole barrel” (p. 175). Members who consistently withhold effort, demonstrate negative affect, and violate interpersonal norms may habitually provoke negative reciprocity and escalate unnecessary conflict to the detriment of team performance (2006). Care must be taken however, that the deviant member isn’t being scape-goated for upsets with the new leader or labeled as a black sheep due to differences in opinion during task conflict. Extra caution should also be taken to abide by the ethics and laws pertaining to psychological testing and selection methods (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999; EEOC, 2010).

**Build social cohesiveness (month 2).** To further shore up the relational foundation, a new leader can facilitate team members’ orientation to one another and to the group through
intentional team-building activities that include a strengths summary exercise, team-branding exercise, and training in team dynamics. Klein et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis using 60 correlations that supports the efficacy of team-building activities in improving interpersonal attraction and cognitive, process, and performance outcomes. Interpersonal attraction is one of three components that drive social cohesion in groups (Forsyth, 2013). The other types of social cohesion are group-level attraction (extent to which an individual is attracted to the group entity itself) and social attraction which is the extent to which members identify with and like being part of the group. Forsyth uses the example of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team who won the gold medal against all odds as a model of social cohesiveness.

An off-site team-building workshop could open with informal conversation over breakfast and then a hopes-and-fears discussion to set the relational foundation for the day. The objective of the workshop would be to increase group efficacy and collective cohesion by celebrating the complementary strengths of team members and linking them to social identity. Collective cohesion increases when team members relate to the group through a shared identity and sense of belonging (Forsyth, 2013). Collective efficacy, which is also related to improved performance, occurs when team members believe they can accomplish the task effectively (Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beauien, 2002). For example, a facilitator could guide the group through a strengths or styles workshop such as Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) or Parker Team Player Survey (PTPS) to bring out how each team member’s strengths and styles benefits the team. Then collective cohesion can be enhanced by building social identity through a team branding exercise to create a team motto, team logo, color scheme, and/or choosing a mascot. A similar process used by psychologists with two groups of boys, The Eagles and the Rattlers, at Robber’s Cave summer camp in 1954 was so successful that the boys identified with
the group and “accepted the groups’ characteristics as their own” (Forsyth, 2013, p. 491). To prevent intergroup competition, branding criteria should seek to link team strengths with organizational goals. Trust-building activities can then be used to reinforce social cohesiveness periodically throughout the life of the team.

In Elliot’s (1998) between-subjects experiment involving 45 teams, the outcomes produced by teams trained in various elements of effective teamwork were comparatively superior to those who were trained in an unrelated topic or not at. Other researchers have found a correlation between team member’s understanding of team dynamics and their team’s effectiveness (Hirshfeld, Jordan, Field, Giles, & Armenakis, 2006). Trainers can educate the new leader and his or her team on team dynamics while the new leader models the desired behaviors and explains how they link to the team’s goals and functions. Explicit training in team dynamics will also provide a foundation for the next step: establishing team norms.

Norm (Month 2)

By now the relational foundation should pave the way for new leaders to collaboratively craft group norms. Spich and Keleman (1985) recommend an explicit norm structuring process to increase task-group effectiveness. Behfar et al. (2008) contend that expressed formal norms and formal decision-making processes are associated with reduced conflict. The new leader should engage a facilitator to conduct a proactive norming exercise that would include identifying and recording acceptable expectations for rules of engagement, standard meeting protocols, decision-making processes, communication processes, and team player behaviors.

This norming workshop should be followed by a team-charter exercise to gain clarity and buy-in to group-level mission, vision, goals, roles, responsibilities, etc. A meta-analytic study on the influence of group goals supports that goal-setting facilitates group performance (O'Leary-
Kelly, Martocchio, & Frink, 1994). Roles and responsibilities should align with individual attitudes, values, and skills, and be congruent with team and organizational level goals (Forsyth, 2013).

**Brainstorm (Month 2 – 3)**

The brainstorming phase of the deliberate development model represents the need for new leaders to instill a habit of planning how to decide before diving into task implementation. That is, pre-task activities should include planning processes that optimize creativity and decision-making performance and preempt relational conflict. Sometimes as cohesiveness increases, groupthink occurs in which individuals feel pressured to conform to the group (Forsyth, 2013). In the Asch experiment for example, individuals felt compelled to conform to confederates when they gave obviously wrong answers to questions about the comparative length of printed lines (2013). Fortunately, members who identify strongly with the group, are more, rather than less, likely to accept the interpersonal cost of dissent when it really matters but this may take some time (Forsyth, 2013; Packer, 2008). One technique a new leader can use to avoid groupthink and maximize creativity is the use of the nominal brainstorming technique (Roth, Schleifer, & Switzer, 1995). Team members are asked to generate as many ideas as possible independently before collecting and synthesizing the group’s ideas. People produce fewer ideas in a group than alone possibly due to production blocking, social loafing, and groupthink effects (Forsyth, 2013).

New leaders will likely need to rely heavily on the expertise of others in the first 90 days while they are moving up the learning curve. Some suggested decision-making processes new leaders can teach team members include formal deliberate debate, structured thinking-modes processes, non-positional bargaining processes, or private voting techniques (Forsyth,
2013). The objective is to use processes that allow adequate information exchange and that match the level of consensus needed for the situation without promoting relational conflict or requiring excessive time and effort. Trained meeting facilitators can help provide that expertise to newly formed groups.

**Perform (Month 2 - 3)**

A high concern for the task in the perform stage of the model can be supported by posting and regularly updating a dashboard of team performance and by conducting group status meetings. Meeting protocol should include publishing minutes with written commitments including names and dates. If new leaders have followed the recommendations so far and are measuring and reporting on clearly-defined goals and commitments, team members will help hold one another accountable (Lencioni, 2003). New leaders can leverage the peer pressure that comes from the social identity and collective cohesion of the group so that members are more likely to hold themselves accountable as well.

Feedback and reward systems should be considered to increase team members’ mindfulness of their behaviors which can reduce unnecessary conflict (Nan, 2011). Haines and Taggar (2006) warn however, that team members must believe in the effectiveness and value of teamwork and the desired behaviors for such behavioral incentives to work. Mindfulness of team behaviors may also be encouraged by including a standing agenda item (“what went well and what to change”) at the end of status meetings for evaluation and feedback on desirable team behaviors. Such an assessment can also be incorporated into post-mortem reviews of team initiatives.
Culture and Ethics

Some modifications to the deliberate group development model may be needed for culturally diverse teams (Appelbaum, 1998). Hofstede (1980) describes four pairs of opposing cultural differences: high versus low distance power (unequal distribution of power), high versus low uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity (concern for material goods versus people). Understanding the differences in culture may be important when developing social cohesiveness just as understanding and appreciating different thinking styles is important. For culturally diverse groups, the Norms/Values Worksheet can be used along with the MBTI and PTPS for the cohesiveness offsite workshop in month two (Gardenswarlz & Rowe, 1993, p.133). The new leader could explain the stereotype content model to describe all-or-nothing, black-and-white categorization of others based on culture, thinking styles, or team player styles. This model points out that people tend to evaluate others based on an assessment of warmth and competence (Forsyth, 2013). This evaluation is associated with feelings of pity, contempt, admiration, or envy toward those being assessed. Biases could be reduced by having the group think about times when each team member was both friendly and competent. Blair, Ma, and Lenton (2001) substantially reduced implicit stereotyping as measured by the implicit association test (IAT) by engaging participants in such counter stereotypic mental imagery.

During the norm stage of deliberate development, a new leader must keep in mind that team members also bring with them unique practices and procedures from past employers. Discussion will bring out what some members may assume to be common practice. The processes used in the form, norm, and brainstorm phases of the deliberate model are crucial in reducing conflict especially when cultures having individualistic orientations, high
uncertainty avoidance and masculine members are involved (Appelbaum, 1998). On the other hand, new leaders may need to dig for healthy task conflict using processes such as deliberate debate when cultures of conformity are involved in order to avoid group think (Forsyth, 2013).

The use psychological assessments such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator or Parker Team Player Survey triggers several ethical considerations. First, assessments should never be the sole basis for making employment decisions such as whether or not to be on the new team without statistical evidence that ensure the tests do not negatively impact identifiable subgroups especially those subject to discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) enforces “Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) which prohibit the use of discriminatory employment tests and selection procedures” (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2010, p.1).

Team members should not be required to participate in psychological tests or to divulge their results without their willing consent (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999). In addition, the standards for psychological testing demand the use of trained and experienced professionals commensurate with the qualifications specified by the manual for the test being administered (1999). Finally, the actual testing documents and results of the test should be kept confidential by those who have been privy to that information (1999). Coaches and facilitators are generally bound by the ethics of confidentiality for all private information shared by clients about themselves, their team members, or their organizations (APA, 2002).

Deliberately facilitating social and emotional cohesion may increase the risk for inappropriate relationships developing among team members just as some coaching approaches
may increase the risk of inappropriate relationships between a coach and client (Allcorn, 2008). Codes 3.05 to 3.08 of the American Psychological Association’s code of ethics advises coaches about the importance of vigilance to creating relationships free from harm or exploitation such as harassment, coercion due to power differences, or conflict of interest. In the same way, new leaders should be mindful of their position of authority and influence when participating in team-building activities.

**Conclusion**

Several descriptive models of group development were compared and contrasted as a basis for the application of the proposed deliberate development model. The proposed model was applied to the scenario of a new leader’s challenge of developing a team in 90 days. Several behavioral models and processes of group dynamics were presented and examples were provided for application to the new leader challenge. Cultural and ethical considerations were discussed and adjustments to the model were proposed.

The resulting conclusion is that group development can be proactively accelerated in at least two ways: by shifting attention from relationship to task over time thereby preempting interpersonal conflict; and by using tools and processes that deliberately facilitate the development of the team’s cohesiveness, group norms, brainstorming and decision-making processes, and performance accountability (form, norm, brainstorm, and perform).

The deliberate development model is pieced together from existing theory using deductive reasoning and from empirical evidence using inductive reasoning. It is limited by a lack of empirical support for the model as a whole. It is also unknown if other similar models have already been proposed and tested. Future Research opportunities include such empirical
support to measure the effectiveness of teams developed using the model after 90 days and then again periodically over the life of the group in a longitudinal study.

**References**


