How Do Effective Teams Work?

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to: identify and discuss the stages associated with Tuckman's Model of Team Development, recognize team dynamics and group conflict, reflect on a past group or teamwork experience, and recognize the importance of teamwork to learning and professional settings

So, you've been assigned your first group project, and you're about to meet your team members. You don't know anyone, but you settle in and introduce yourself. Slowly, everyone else does the same. You read through the assignment as a group and clarify any questions with your instructor.

Now, where should your team go from here?

We know that high-performing teams communicate well, set clear roles and expectations, practice emotional intelligence, care about the process, and share a common sense of purpose.

However, we all bring different experiences and expectations with us when it comes to working in teams, but there are strategies and tools you and your team can use to help you stay organized and achieve your goals.

To achieve effective teamwork, we need to first understand how teams develop and team dynamics.

In 1965, psychologist Bruce Tuckman proposed a model that described the stages of team development, which include forming, storming, norming, and performing. Later, a fifth stage was added known as adjourning.

The process of team development involves team members learning to work together effectively, and communication plays a critical role in allowing teams to successfully move from one stage to another.

Let's look at each stage together.

During the forming stage, most people are polite and typically are trying to leave a good first impression. Team members also generally make an effort to get to know each other at this time but it's important to note that some may be feeling anxious, which is natural, and so we need to be aware of this and be kind.

During the forming stage, the team should establish their shared expectations and create guidelines for the process in which they plan to engage.

A great way to do this is using a Team Charter, where you write down and agree upon the ground rules, expectations, roles, responsibilities, and procedures. By creating this team contract, you can ensure that every member of the team is on the same page and you can refer back to the document at a later stage to help you keep one another on track and accountable.

The storming stage can be challenging. It is often characterized by team conflict, something that happens when working in teams – but this doesn't mean major conflict has to ensue.

Conflict usually arises when preliminary expectations and boundaries are being tested and as team members begin to learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses.

For example, the groundwork you set in the forming stage may be challenged as individuals learn more about each other's motivations, work style and character. If roles are left unclear, or if one person completely takes over the project, this can frustrate and cause tension among teammates.

The storming stage also coincides with the "brainstorming" and ideating stage of the design process, which is an exciting time! Team members share and discuss their ideas and explore different options. Each contributes ideas that could potentially become the focus of the project.

Learning to harness the constructive potential of conflict and compromise in this stage is important to progressing to the next. Early in the storming stage, empathizing, listening, and learning, are incredibly important as diverse ideas and perspectives are shared.

This will help bring out the best ideas and help you navigate team conflict.

Gradually your team will move into the norming stage once conflicts have been resolved and each team member knows their role and works on their part of the project. People start to resolve their differences and appreciate one another's strengths.

Now that your team also knows one another a bit better, your team members will feel more comfortable asking for help and offering constructive feedback.

Sometimes, people work independently in this stage, but check in with teammates frequently to make sure workflow is efficient and effective. Team cohesion ensures that everyone is responsible for the task and to each other. Project management tools, like Gantt Charts, can be very helpful in keeping everyone on track during this stage.

Problems will arise if teammates do not fully understand their role, the team expectations, or the overall goal; revisiting the forming or storming stage may be required.

In the performing stage, teams make considerable progress towards their goals. Commitment to the team's mission is high and the competence of team members is also high.
In this stage of team development, members feel satisfaction in the team's progress. They share insights into personal and group process, know how to prevent conflict and tackle challenges more easily, and are aware of their own (and each other's) strengths and weaknesses. Members feel confident in their individual abilities and those of their teammates.

It's important to note that few first-time teams may reach the performing stage entirely, as this often happens when teams have worked together well on several projects, have established a synergy, and have developed systems that make projects go smoothly and efficiently. Less time is needed to form, storm and learn to norm; performing teams can move quickly and interdependently and tackle the task at hand.

Lastly, many teams reach the adjourning stage naturally. For example, projects come to an end or permanent teams are dismantled.

People who like routine, or who have developed close working relationships with peers, may find this time difficult. Going their separate ways can often be somewhat emotional for these individuals.

This stage can involve different actions too, like debriefing about your team's performance and reflecting on your experiences to gain insights for the future, as well as celebrating achievements.

It's important to note that a team might need to move back to a previous stage or stay in one stage longer, depending on circumstances and the nature of the team.

For example, permanent teams may not move into the adjournment phase for a long time, if at all. Project-specific teams may move through these phases relatively quickly before adjourning. If roles are left unclear or the process you've set isn't working as well as you thought, you might have to revisit your team charter and team guidelines that you set in the forming stage.

In conclusion, Tuckman's model provides a helpful understanding of how teams develop and helps us understand what tools and strategies each stage can entail.