

# Group Life Cycle

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the different stages of group activity. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Groups as Dynamic Systems

Groups are dynamic systems in constant change. People join groups and others leave. This dynamic changes and transforms the very nature of the group. Group socialization, then, involves how the group members interact with one another and form relationships.

### IN CONTEXT

Just as you were once born and changed your family, they changed you. You came to know a language and culture, a value system, and a set of beliefs that influence you to this day. You came to be socialized, to experience the process of learning to associate, communicate, or interact within a group.

A group you belong to this year - perhaps a soccer team or the cast of a play - may not be part of your life next year. And those who are in leadership positions may ascend or descend the leadership hierarchy as the needs of the group, and other circumstances, change over time.

Your life cycle is characterized with several steps, and while it doesn't follow a prescribed path, there are universal stages we can all recognize. In the same way, groups experience steps and stages, taking on many of the characteristics we associate with life. They grow, overcome illness and dysfunction, and transform across time. No group, just as no individual, lives forever.

---

## 2. The Life of a Group

Groups, particularly those in the workplace, tend to go through five main stages of life:

1. Forming, where the group first comes together
2. Storming, where the group works through discomfort and challenges

3. Norming, where the group establishes rules and guidelines for behavior
4. Performing, where the group is productive and accomplishes its goals
5. Adjourning, where the group disbands to form new groups for other projects

We will now look at each step in turn.

## 2a. Forming



### THINK ABOUT IT

Your first day on the job, or on a new team, may be comparable to your first day of class. You may have had academic training for your profession, but the knowledge you learned in school only serves as your foundation, just as much as your socialization at home served to guide you at school.

On the job, people on different teams may use different jargon, maintain different schedules, report to different supervisors, and have different rules, explicit and understood. On the first day with a new team, all of these specifics are new, even if many of the broader elements are familiar.

During this first stage of group life, team members come together for the first time and begin to learn these specifics about each other, and the habits each member may bring from previous teams.

## 2b. Storming

If you don't know someone very well, it is easy to offend. Each group member brings to the group a set of experiences, combined with education and a self-concept. You won't be able to read this information on a name-tag, but instead you will only come to know it through time and interaction.

Since the possibility of overlapping and competing viewpoints and perspectives exists, the group will experience a storming stage, or a time of struggles as the members themselves sort out their differences.

➔ **EXAMPLE** There may be more than one way to solve the problem or task at hand, and some group members may prefer one strategy over another. Some members of the group may be more senior to the organization than you, and other members may treat them differently. Some group members may be as new as you are and just as uncertain about everyone's talents, skills, roles, and self-perceptions.

The wise business communicator will anticipate the storming stage and help facilitate opportunities for the members to resolve uncertainty before the work commences. If there are challenges for leadership or conflicting viewpoints, a manager who understands and anticipates this normal challenge in the group's life cycle can help the group become more productive.

A clear definition of the purpose and mission of the group can also help the members focus their energies. Interaction prior to the first meeting can help reduce uncertainty, and providing the group with what they need and opportunities to get to know each other prior to their task can increase efficiency.

## 2c. Norming

Groups that make a successful transition from the storming stage will next experience the norming stage, where the group establishes norms, or informal rules, for behavior and interaction.

Sometimes our job titles and functions speak for themselves, but human beings are complex. We are not simply a list of job functions, and in the dynamic marketplace of today's business environment, you will often find that people have talents and skills well beyond their "official" role or task.

Drawing on these strengths can make the group more effective. The norming stage is marked by less division and more collaboration. The level of anxiety associated with interaction is generally reduced, making for a more positive work climate that promotes listening. When people feel less threatened and their needs are met, they are more likely to focus their complete attention on the purpose of the group.

If members are still concerned with who does what, and whether they will speak in error, the interaction framework will stay in the storming stage. Tensions are reduced when the normative expectations are known, and the degree to which a manager can describe these at the outset can reduce the amount of time the group remains in uncertainty. Group members generally express more satisfaction with clear expectations and are more inclined to participate.

## 2d. Performing

Ultimately, the purpose of a work group is performance, and the preceding stages lead us to the performing stage, in which the group accomplishes its mandate, fulfills its purpose, and reaches its goals. To facilitate performance, group members can't skip the initiation of getting to know each other or the sorting out of roles and norms, but they can try to focus on performance with clear expectations from the moment the group is formed.

Productivity is often how we measure success in business and industry, and the group has to produce. Outcome assessments may have been built into the system from the beginning to serve as a benchmark for success. Wise managers know how to celebrate success, as it brings more success, social cohesion, group participation, and a sense of job satisfaction. Incremental gains toward a benchmark may also be cause for celebration and support, and failure to reach a goal should be regarded as an opportunity for clarification.

It is generally wiser to focus on the performance of the group rather than individual contributions. Managers and group members will want to offer assistance to under-performers as well as congratulate members for their contributions. If the goal is to create a community where competition pushes each member to perform, individual highlights may serve your needs, but if you want a group to solve a problem or address a challenge as a group, you have to promote group cohesion. Members need to feel a sense of belonging, and praise (or lack thereof) can be a sword with two edges: One stimulates and motivates while the other demoralizes and divides.

Groups should be designed to produce and perform in ways and at levels that individuals cannot, or else you should consider compartmentalizing the tasks. The performing stage is where the productivity occurs, and it is necessary to make sure the group has what it needs to perform. Missing pieces, parts, or information can stall the group, and reset the cycle to storming all over again. Loss of performance is inefficiency, which carries a cost. Managers will be measured by the group's productivity and performance. Make sure the performing stage is one that is productive and healthy for its members.

### IN CONTEXT

Imagine that you are the manager of a group that has produced an award-winning design for an ecologically innovative four-seat car. Their success is your success. Their celebrations are yours even if the success is not focused on you. A manager manages the process while group members perform. If you were a member of the group that helped design the belt line, you made a fundamental contribution to the style of the car.

Individual consumers may never consider the line from the front fender, across the doors, to the rear taillight as they make a purchase decision, but they will recognize beauty. You will know that you

could not have achieved that fundamental part of car design without help from the engineers in the group, and if the number-crunching accountants had not seen the efficiency of the production process that produced it, it may never have survived the transition from prototype to production. The group came together and accomplished its goals with amazing results.

## 2e. Adjourning

All groups will eventually have to move on to new assignments. In the adjourning stage, members leave the group. The group may cease to exist or it may be transformed with new members and a new set of goals.

### IN CONTEXT

Your contributions in the past may have caught the attention of management, and you may be assigned to redesign the flagship vehicle, the halo car of your marque or brand. It's quite a professional honor, and it's yours because of your successful work in a group.

Other members of the group will be reassigned to tasks that require their talents and skills, and you may or may not collaborate with them in the future. You may miss the interactions with the members, even the more cantankerous ones, and will experience both relief and a sense of loss.

Like life, the group process is normal, and mixed emotions are to be expected. A wise manager anticipates this stage and facilitates the separation with skill and ease. We often close this process with a ritual marking its passing, though the ritual may be as formal as an award or as informal as a "thank you" or a verbal acknowledgement of a job well done over coffee and donuts.

On a more sober note, it is important not to forget that groups can reach the adjourning stage without having achieved success. Some businesses go bankrupt, some departments are closed, and some individuals lose their positions after a group fails to perform. Adjournment can come suddenly and unexpectedly, or gradually and piece-by-piece. Either way, a skilled business communicator will be prepared and recognize it as part of the classic group life cycle.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **groups are dynamic systems** that are continually changing. Still, the **life of a group** typically cycles through five main stages: **forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning**. Understanding where a group is in its life cycle is important for managing group communication and productivity.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This tutorial has been adapted from "Business Communication for Success" Version 1.0 by Scott McLean. Copyright 2010. ISBN 978-1-4533-2742-5 (Licensee Product: Workplace Communication), reprinted with permission from FlatWorld.