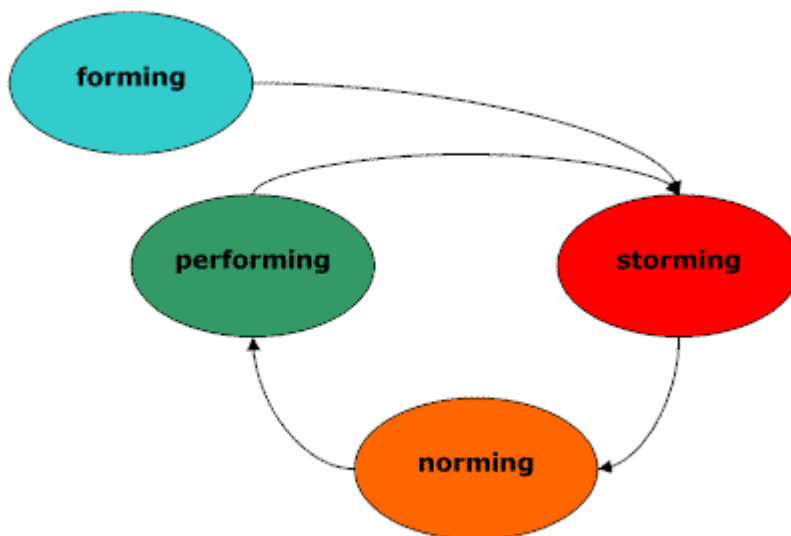


Reflection on team stages

In reflecting on the performance of our team in terms of the Tuckman Model “forming, storming, norming and performing” (Tuckman, 1965), I would first like to clarify that in my observation we did not follow these stages in a linear format. While the ‘forming’ stage certainly only occurred once, the remaining stages were cyclic and repeating throughout the project experience. A good diagram explaining our experience is provided in the Mark Smith 2005 article ‘Bruce W. Tuckman – forming, storming norming and performing in groups’ as reproduced below.



As Smith explains, while the Tuckman model provides a universal or overall view of team development stages, in groups things are rarely that straightforward. “Human processes are frequently characterised by variability and flux...groups are likely to show significant deviations from the path laid out by stage theories” (Smith, 2005).

As in my opinion our team is yet to move on the final Tuckman team stage of ‘adjourning’, I am unable to make comment about this stage.

Forming

The period of forming for our team only occurred once at the beginning of the project and in our case was quiet brief – probably less than a week. As the team members had met in previous semesters and there are only four of us, formalities did not exist from the outset and we were quick to fall into our designated team roles.

On reflection I believe we should have put more effort into recruiting an additional team member to share the workload, and improve our team expertise overall. When we did form we should also have spent some of the ‘forming’ stage in a team orientation session to learn more about each other’s skills and vision for the project.

By not doing this and by also agreeing too quickly to pursue one project idea without fully understanding the scope of this or considering alternatives, we faced some challenges during the latter stages of the project including confusion over deliverables, uneven workloads, unclear understanding of the project scope and unachievable deadlines.

On the positive side, we did each present very thorough evaluations in the team charter of our own personal learning goals and thought these through well in terms of deliverables and measurements. This provided a reference point for me throughout the project to compare expectations to actual achievements, and to track my individual contribution the progress of the project overall.

Summarised below is what I have learned overall from the forming stage of the project and what I would do differently next time

1. Actively recruit members by examining skills and pitching a well thought through project
2. Spend time together discussing skills, limitations, goals and what we each see as the project outcome and use this as the basis for the team charter.
3. Clearly establish the project scope – do not allow this to be vague or something that will be worked out as we go along. This is separate to the team charter.
4. Stress the idea of ‘team’ not just an individual idea or pursuit - it will require compromise and a shared control and responsibility for the successful team output

Storming

If ‘norming’ is maintaining the status quo in terms of group dynamics, ‘storming’ is where “all hell breaks loose” (Blair pg 2). Following our brief period of ‘forming’, we each quickly fell into our roles. Initially there was some holding back in terms of sharing roles and workload, and unrealistic expectations set at this stage in terms of time commitment and deadline deliverables. On reflection I believe it was now clear we had entered the first ‘storming’ stage of the project where we worked primarily as individuals to achieve our set tasks, rather than co-operated and worked together as a team.

This ‘storming’ stage came to a head during the user research period when the tasks designated to the user research team member were not completed by the deadline dates or to the satisfaction of the project manager. After two weeks delay in finalising initial reports, this led to personal conflict between the project manager and team member. I believe this particular issue occurred because as a team we had accepted the project manager as the team leader and designator of tasks and deadlines, rather than reached the more mature team stage of sharing this responsibility.

This cycle of ‘storming’ continued throughout the project, and was not restricted to one or two team members but involved, to varying degrees, conflict or disagreement between all team members at different stages involving different tasks. As Johnson and Johnson explain in their definition of effective teams “Controversy and conflict are seen as a positive key to members involvement, the quality and originality of decisions, and the continuation of the group in good working condition” (Johnson & Johnson, 1987 pg 11).

I believe this did apply in our team as once conflicts were resolved we did move on to find solutions as a team and progress the project. What we failed to do however was to fully address the underlying issues causing the 'storming', which meant we continued to return to periods of conflict and controversy, detrimental to the project and overall team dynamics.

Much of our 'storming' behaviour would have been prevented or diluted if we had spent more time in the 'forming' stage clearly establishing what our app would be and do, and documenting the format of our final project plan document – which was not fully defined until week 11/12.

Summarised below is what I have learned overall from the storming stage of the project and what I would do differently next time

1. To avoid or minimise 'storming' stages in a project, be certain everyone is on the same page from the outset with clear expectations and deliverables
2. Resolve 'storming' events as a team and de-brief afterwards to move forward.
3. When a team member appears to be struggling with deadlines, or is producing sub-standard work be quick to assist not quick to criticise
4. Do not be drawn into individual arguments or take sides. Stay neutral for team interests.

Norming

After our very brief 'forming', and initial 'storming' we began the 'norming' stage of the project. This was facilitated by reorganising Trello, our project management tool, into columns clearly identifying the deliverable of each role/project stage, standardising communication methods, and maintaining the routine of our schedule of bi-weekly meetings.

There were instances during 'norming' where following initiatives from individuals, the team stepped up to participate and complete tasks as a team. This in turn led to stages of 'performing' and satisfaction among team members. The competitor analysis is a good example of this – I initiated the research but then discussed and allocated work and as a team we completed the detail.

A second example would be user surveys and interviews where once it was discovered the delivery expectations were beyond the capabilities of the team member in the user research role, the entire team stepped in to assist. As cooperative efforts these gave the team confidence that we could trust and work well together as a team, however the distinction between this stage and the 'performing' stage is that we were reacting to situations rather than being pro-active to prevent them.

As the project progressed, we returned to this 'norming' stage several times after subsequent periods of 'storming'. In each case my observation as noted in diary entries, is that we then moved on to 'performing' to complete tasks and move the project forward.

Summarised below is what I have learned overall from the norming stage of the project and what I would do differently next time

1. Where 'norming' follows a period of 'storming' a debrief of what just happened allows a quicker return to 'performing'

2. Individual effort should be applauded – but focus on team collaborative decisions & output must be maintained
3. Norming is about ‘ticking the boxes’ in terms of achieving objectives, not about excelling in achievement. This only happens when the team are ‘performing’
4. Good planning and communication provide a steady reference point to allow group ‘norming’ to occur

Performing

The development of a structured timeline, tasks, deadlines and individual input into moving deadlines to suit availabilities led to the ‘performing’ stage in our project. This allowed clearer responsibility for tasks to be assumed by each member. As stated by Blair, our team “settled on a system which allows free and frank exchange of views and a high degree of support by the group for each other and its own decisions” (Blair pg 2).

While performance management issues did continue to arise, at least there were now clear instructions and deadlines communicated well in advance and each person had the opportunity to discuss their individual deliverables against the plan and the timing of these. An example of this was during week 8 when I found my workload was high in comparison to others and I asked for additional help. This was accommodated without any issues as with clear lists of our individual deliverables we could now see which team members had the ability in terms of current deadlines to assist.

Being pro-active in terms of recognising potential issues and subverting these before they take detrimental effect is an essential component of the ‘performing’ stage. An example of this was during week 11 when it was recognised we had fallen behind in the development of the technical and digital strategies, and team roles were co-operatively re-assigned to assist the team member in this role. By comparison to how a similar issue around user research was handled early in the project, we had certainly moved on to a more mature team stage.

Summarised below is that I have learned overall from the performing stage of the project and what I would do differently next time:

1. To ensure team performance, there must be a detailed project management system in place with realistic deadlines and workloads
2. Flexibility in roles and sharing of tasks is essential for team performance
3. The project manager must step back and team members must step up to maintain shared responsibility for performance management
4. Communication, an open attitude to others opinions and at times compromise in terms of the overall vision are essential to maintain the performing stage

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