

# BETWEEN FORMING AND STORMING: INTERSTAGE AWARENESS IN GROUP FORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Interstage awareness in group formation is a critical skill for leaders attempting to form any group for a specific, if limited, purpose, specifically in primary and secondary educational settings. The gathering storm is a term I have assigned to one such interstage in the process of group formation and team building. Past research combined with contemporary framework models has delved deeply into the stages of group formation and the research to this point has focused on the attributes of a group when they have already been assembled for a prescribed or even indeterminant purpose. This in-between stage is important for those leaders in organizations who seek to build effective teams by using all available data at their disposal. The gathering storm provides measures and suggestions for leaders to minimize the impacts of the destructive effects of the storming phase on group formation and anticipate interventions that will aid in normalizing group dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Community of Practice, Team Building, Leadership, Team Formation.

## INTRODUCTION

The changing ideal of educational institutions in 21<sup>st</sup> century America has moved the profession of education from a system governed by a single, highly effective leader within the organization, to an extremely functional unit of team members working together in shared leadership models to achieve a common mission based on a united vision for success. It is for this reason that the modern American instructional leader must be not only be acquainted with the processes of team formation, but also be dedicated to functioning as part of a team of emerging leaders in any setting. Therefore, it is vitally important that leaders are able to identify barriers to successful group formation and take steps to successfully intervene and remove those barriers.

Instructional leaders are ultimately responsible for student's success, but they rarely, if ever, have a direct impact on student outcomes. Hallinger & Heck (1996) and Leithwood et al. (2008, 2010) examined the relationship between principals' leadership behavior and student learning. Upon becoming the instructional leader of an educational organization, the administrator's only true impact on student learning is the ability to support those who are charged with student achievement. Leaders' primary function in the regard is to foster and maintain collegiality, trust, professionalism, shared leadership and a focus on the organization's mission and vision.

Upon entering office as the new educational leader of a school, the principal or superintendent has many daunting tasks ahead. Some successful leaders have been able to maintain the status quo of a highly functional facility and preserve past successes while still achieving gains through normalcy and balance. Others come into toxic situations laden with mistrustful and even hostile individuals and no sense of common mission or vision. No matter the state of the institution, the most effective leaders are able to discern which environment they

are entering through due diligence, observation, proper planning and professional action in the best interests of the community. In short, it is incumbent upon the leader to create the environmental conditions in which educators can successfully and positively enhance student achievement.

When a leader enters a new organization, in essence, he or she is taking on the task of forming a new group or community. While some may argue that merely maintaining the status quo is not truly forming a new group, it is most certainly what is happening. While these situations may feature a static and veteran team that is highly effective in instructional practice with a strong culture of teaching and learning, there is always going to be at least one new team member - the leader. Therefore, it is paramount that a leader understands the stages of group formation and successfully navigates those stages in order to create and maintain a stable and effective group dynamic.

The stages of group formation as posited by Tuckman (1965) are crucial aspects of forming solid communities of practice in schools. The first of four stages is forming, in which teachers are gathered together for a specific task. When forming a community of practice (CoP) by the framework designed by (Wenger et al., 2002). This is known as the *potential* stage. In both instances, team members are brought together for a specific purpose, the group structure is created and normalized and the vision and mission of the group is designed. In an educational organization, it is necessary for a team to be formed and maintained to carry out the school’s mission and vision for sustainable student growth and staff development.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Table 1**  
**COMPARISON OF TUCKMAN’S STAGES OF GROUP FORMATION AND WENGER, MCDERMOTT AND SNYDER’S COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE-(COP) MODEL**

| <b>Model</b>                      | <b>Membership</b>  | <b>Leadership</b>   | <b>Organizational Culture</b>                         | <b>Knowledge Sharing</b>   |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Tuckman (Group Formation)         | Forming: orientation, testing, dependence  | Storming: resistance to group influence and task requirements; emerging group leadership                                  | Norming: openness to other group members              | Performing: constructive action  |
| Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (CoPs) | Volunteer to participate; membership through self-selection or identified through organization; based on knowledge or interest for a topic | Shared; leadership comes from both formal and informal leaders, both internal and external to the organization; community | Organization values innovation and knowledge sharing; | Occurs mainly within the community; however, exchange across and at community boundaries occurs when appropriate |

Tuckman’s (1965) next stage of group formation is storming Table 1 the resistance to task performance and the influence of the group. Similarly, this storming phase occurs within Wenger, McDermott & Snyder’s (2002) *coalescing* stage of creating a sustainable CoP. This is the phase in which relationships are formed and trust is built. Semantics notwithstanding, the implication is the same - members of the team either show they are resistant to the mission, unwilling to abide by the group norms, or need to be convinced their membership is warranted

(i.e. worth their time). Personalities and individual agendas become apparent and ideas clash as the team struggles to find common focus and attain equilibrium.

Upon entering an institution, the observant leader will be able to ascertain which members of the current team may be prone to aversions to participation and which will adhere to divergent and antithetical ideals. With proper planning, leaders will be able to identify possible dissenters and those who will add an element of toxicity to the group. Such a leader will realize there is a heretofore, unidentified stage of group development and organization that lies in between the formation of a group and the storming, or coalescing phase. This interstage is the gathering storm (Lail, 2018). The gathering storm is a middle stage of group formation, after the members have been selected for participation or volunteer to join, but before the group is aware of the expectations and before members begin to find their own roles within the community. In essence, the communities members know they are formed, have yet to meet, but begin to imagine and discuss probabilities and possibilities before the first official group meeting. It is the responsibility of the leader to recognize the gathering storm and put proper structures in place to allay any damage that may come as a result.

In this in-between stage, leaders, especially those in an educational organization, must prepare to identify and address situations that may influence the group effectiveness before said group ever meets. Meteorologists have tools and instruments on which to rely to identify a gathering storm and help the general populace take precautionary measures to prevent disaster. Similarly, instructional leaders have the ability to predict gathering personnel storms that can threaten the structural wellbeing of a CoP, or any other attempt at successful team formation.

| <b>Model</b>              | <b>Membership</b>                         | <b>Interstage</b>  | <b>Leadership</b>  | <b>Organizational Culture</b>            | <b>Knowledge Sharing</b>        |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|--|---------------------------------|
| Tuckman (Group Formation) | Forming: orientation, testing, dependence | The Gathering Storm: Observation, identification of barrier to success | Storming: resistance to group influence and task requirements; emerging group leadership | Norming: openness to other group members | Performing: constructive action |

Leaders can take distinctive action to preserve the culture and climate of the organization, or to create the conditions under which a successful team can be formed to direct and achieve the mission and vision of the school system. Incoming and veteran leaders must utilize institutional barometric tools to track a gathering storm and put structures in place to minimize destructive impact within an organization Table 2.

## **LEADERSHIP ACTIONS**

### **First Contact**

The first tool new building or district leaders have at their disposal is the small-group meeting. It is ill advised to meet with an entire population, or intended group, together before meeting with small groups in any instance. Doing so would give public audience to those who may have a venomous influence, especially if rumor, conjecture, or observation indicates such emergent personalities can threaten productive struggle during the group formation process. Meeting in smaller groups will allow the leader to ascertain how potential members function

interpersonally with fewer colleagues and determine whether individuals possess the potential to initiate and drive the mission of the school, or district.

For example, imagine a new principal enters a high school and wants to form an assessment committee to create common assessments. These assessments will rely on the idea of backward design, meaning the assessments will be written first, based on a standard, or collection of interrelated standards. Lessons assuring students will be able to master assessed standards will then be reverse-engineered to teach the specific concepts students on which students will be assessed. Some teachers will assume this process removes autonomy because it presupposes all teachers agree on which standards should be taught. Others will be uncomfortable with said practice because they have written their own assessments they have used in the past and have grown accustomed to the content. While it may be a best practice, there will still be resistance. Instances such as these make it necessary for a school leader to meet first with teachers departmentally, or with the chairperson of a specific department, before announcing the formation of such a team. Meeting with individual departments will allow an instructional leader to listen to ideas and instructional practices of the smaller group and ascertain which individual(s) would be most open to participating in assessment creation and potential revision of curricula that may come about as a result. Moreover, it would become obvious which teachers would need extra support in realizing and supporting the mission of creating common assessments. If the school leader meets with the entire faculty and makes an announcement before identifying potential members, dissenters would be vocal and likely dampen any excitement by those who would be productive members of such a committee.

### **Performance Review**

After interactions in small groups and forming initial impressions of potential community members and possible dissenters, leaders should review personnel records of all faculty members. Any individuals who raised concerns noted by the principal, superintendent, or other leader in these first communications should be reviewed for any notes, complaints filed, negative performance evaluations, and so forth. Based on initial impressions by the leader and a review of staff records, it will be necessary to meet with individuals who pose a likely threat to group formation before the community has an opportunity to coalesce. Again, these meetings should take place before the announcement of a community formation and before selection of community members. Often times, these transparent discussions may shed light on any seemingly dispassionate display, or caustic commentary against the organization and the conversations may reveal that these outspoken parties have untapped potential that needs to be redirected to work for the betterment of the organization and the community, rather than appearing as a threat against it. Moreover, having a personal discussion with these individuals may bring him or her back from the precipice of becoming a destructive force within the organization and inspire some heretofore-untapped leadership potential. In short, the human interaction and personal observation are critical indicators of likely performance in any group setting. The informed leader will always review notes, commentary and background of all staff members and potential group members and couple that review with personal observation during individual meetings and interactions.

## Physical Placement

Physical factors also become vitally important in determining the potential energy of any gathering storm. The physical location of members in the building (i.e. classroom or office locations) and their relative location to non-members, or dissenters, who may have acerbic influences is worth noting and addressing when forming a new learning community, group, or team.

Perhaps three new teachers are selected to be part of a group and their classrooms are located in close proximity to an abovementioned acerbic personality. It would certainly be prudent to move the physical location of the unwanted influence so that person is not able to influence others in a negative manner frequently. Initially, such a move may be chaotic and met with resistance; however, approaching the action professionally, even when the party to be moved may be acting unprofessionally, is always necessary. Being firm and honest in the discussion may be uncomfortable, but it is in the best interest of the group and the organization as a whole and, therefore, it is the lot of the leader to ensure it is done. The implication is not that the leader must bluntly proclaim a faculty member is cancerous and must be excised like so much malignant tissue; rather the move is being made in the interests of changing group dynamics within the organization and it is handled discreetly.

Relocating a staff member with a tendency to create a culture of negativity closer to the principal's office for extra support is but one example of how administrators can monitor and support progress of a teacher in transition. This move, in and of itself, will result in rumblings of dissent, but if this faculty member is determined to be part of the gathering storm and is, therefore, determined to be an unfit participant for the group, he can be monitored and supported by the leadership team while being retaught the expectations of the institution.

## New Teacher Institutes

Finally, leaders may want to consider a pre-conference to be held with members who are new to the organization and, in the interest of transparency and preparedness, give them insight into the organizational climate. New teacher institute meetings can serve a number of purposes. They can act as an introduction to the community and occur in a smaller venue to provide an environment less likely to create anxiety. The meetings will better prepare new members for behaviors they may witness and encounter throughout the developmental stages of group formation. Perhaps most importantly, the meetings can acclimate new staff to the expectations of the organization and the expected norms of the group, especially if they are to be part of newly formed CoP (Senge, 2012).

This is not to say leaders should verbally bash other members of the organization to new members. New group participants must be appropriately introduced to the stages of group formation and given insight into possible variant personalities and viewpoints of individuals within the organization. Informing new staff members that they will likely encounter all personality types within the organization and preparing them for challenges of group formation will be critical in their successful integration into the CoP, staff and organization. Preparing new members of the organization and outlining organizational norms and expectations allows for an open-minded approach to entering the community (Sagor, 2011).

## DISCUSSION

The first level of action for school administrators will be a critical first contact with staff members. Upon entering the organization, rumor and conjecture surface and circulate quickly, whether founded in fact or not. Failing to do so will allow these perceptions to become truth. Often times, these individualized meetings will afford staff members the opportunity to have the full attention of the incoming instructional leader and foster a feeling of importance and real attention and concern on behalf of the leader. Many times, staff members feeling they have not only a voice, but also that voice being heard can eliminate toxicity and begin the formation of a positive relationship. These meetings, coupled with the performance review (level 2 actions) will be a leader's most valuable insight into his or her new team members and give an initial impression of their abilities and willingness to support and drive a mutual vision and mission.

It is worth noting that changing the physical location of a staff member's location in the building will more often than not result in feelings of embarrassment, hostility, disfavor and mistrust in administration. These moves should be used sparingly and only when verbal intervention and coaching yield no positive results in the staff member's views of the team, organization, or mission. These last-resort moves should never be approached as a punishment, but will invariably be seen as such. If it becomes necessary to move an individual, the action should be, as always, kept confidential and made at times of the school year to cause the least amount of disruption in delivery of instruction. Ideally, changing a staff member's location will happen over summer break after intensive observations and the leader has conducted interventions. This may be an unfortunate, yet necessary step. There is often an equilibrium that can only be found on the other side of conflict.

New teacher institute meetings should be held early and often regardless of the culture and climate of the school system. These meetings will need to be protected time and new teachers should feel safe in expressing their feelings about the team's mission. These times will allow new teachers who have similar concerns to discuss those concerns in a controlled environment with the individual(s) in the organization with the ability to help them adapt to the environment and overcome obstacles (i.e. the leaders). The leader will be able to intervene in situations that may be inhibiting newer members' full participation in achieving the mission of the team. These institutes need not always focus on negative aspects of teaching and learning. The topics of discussion may not be negative in an organization that has a highly functioning staff, but the potential always exists and leaders must be aware and observant of their climate constantly. At times, the new teacher meetings may turn to the toxic or negative aspects of the organization or profession as a whole. The attentive leader will be able to anticipate these issues before the institutes through diligent observation of teachers in practice and be preparing to address any of these concerns before a member announces them in an open meeting. Best practice is to exercise an open-door policy and address any issues individually before they come to the group as a whole and, perhaps, use specific issues or incidents to create teachable moments for staff members.

## CONCLUSION

It might be simpler to exclude tornadic personalities from a potential group. Doing so should only be a last resort as it could further deepen resentment and possibly eliminate a personality with latent leadership qualities and budding abilities for ideation and enactment of resources and practices beneficial to all within the group. There are situations in which

eliminating one from group formation is not possible. In environments that are small (e.g. a school with fewer than twenty teachers), every member must be included in driving the mission of the school. The processes outlined above must still be adhered to for successful team formation and identification of potential organizational issues.

The difference will lie in the amount of time and support necessary for thy. There may be cases in which it is not possible to eliminate such influences, such as a teacher who has tenure in a small school, which is why identification by administration will be even more important in these environments. Leaders must use every organizational barometer at their disposal to monitor the climate of the organization and accurately forecast the proverbial gathering storm to avert potential organizational disasters.

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