



The Deliberate Creative Podcast with Amy Climer

Transcript for Episode #009: Stages of Group Development

July 23, 2015

In today's episode we're going to talk about how your team stage of development impacts your team's creative performance.

Amy Climer: Welcome to the Deliberate Creative Podcast [episode #009](#). Today, we're going to talk about the developmental stage of your team and how whichever stage they are in impacts your team's creative performance. You might be wondering, what do you mean developmental stage, stage of development? Let's talk about that first. As you already know, groups change over time and there's this progression they go through. There are probably over 100 theories describing these changes and those changes are called group development – the group is developing and evolving over time.

Probably the most famous theory is one developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965 and then he later modified it in 1977 with another researcher named Jensen. Their theory describes a sequential process that a group moves through as they grow and evolve. These five stages are forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. They were quite creative in making them all rhyme which actually is probably one of the reasons why their theory is the most famous. People can remember the theory.

I'm going to describe to you each stage and what it might look like for your team if they are in that stage. I'll talk about how the stage of the team might impact its creative performance and finally, we'll look at how a leader can adjust their behavior based on the team's stage of development.

Forming

Let's start out with Forming. This is the first stage and this is when the group members are all coming together. The members are figuring out what the group is all about, trying to assess how they fit in. Sometimes they think about like the first day of a class in high school or college where everybody comes in and sits down. Maybe they don't know each other. Maybe people





aren't talking that much. It's just that beginning stage but it's also the stage where friendships begin.

The group starts to develop norms - norms meaning what's going to be the normal behavior for this group. Leadership styles of individuals start to emerge and at this stage, the group is expecting some direction from a leader. In some ways, this is the very polite stage. It might even be a bit of an awkward stage, but at this point, people are not necessarily disagreeing with each other. They are getting along for the most part, but it's also a bit more of a surface level stage. That's the forming stage.

Storming

The next stage is called Storming. Sometimes it's referred to as Sorting. I believe it was a researcher, Denise Mitten, who suggested the word sorting instead of storming. The purpose of this stage is where the groups are starting to perhaps disagree. They might be jockeying for positions, or trying to get their ideas accepted. But that term "storming" sometimes implies that there's this huge blowout and this big disagreement. Denise Mitten says, - Maybe they are just sorting through things and it doesn't always have to be this huge moment or big crazy meeting.

The idea is that people are trying to figure out what their roles are and they are kind of jockeying for those roles. They are getting to know each other at a deeper level at this stage and if the team is not focused on their goals, whatever their purpose is, whether it's a soccer team trying to win or a marketing team trying to create the best marketing campaign. If they are not focused on their goals. What can happen is the team can become really distracted by emotional issues in this stage. That is the sorting or storming stage.

Norming

Even though it can, at times, be a bit uncomfortable, it's necessary in order to move into the third stage, which is Norming. In this stage, a sense of order has prevailed. Roles and responsibilities become clearer. There's this stronger sense of unity and purpose amongst everyone and there's a strong focus on the tasks, a focus on the purpose. Norming is when that sense of loyalty and camaraderie is really developing. Usually at this stage, people are enjoying being a part of the team and they look forward to attending the meetings or doing the work together. That's the Norming Stage.



Performing

We have the Performing stage. This is really the top stage that hopefully every team is aiming to get to. This is where the team has this really strong shared vision, high focus on their goals and their results, but at the same time, they are also really looking out for each other and they are taking care of each other. There's this really nice balance of tasks and relationships amongst each other. The team tends to be pretty autonomous and they do the work together really well. They have disagreements, but they are handled well.

I think that's an important point. It doesn't mean that if you're disagreeing, you're in the storming stage. That is a part of the storming stage but the idea is that as you move through and the team develops and evolves, they get to where they have disagreements but they are in a really healthy way. They just have this really great process where we can disagree and be comfortable with that.

The other thing about the Performing stage is that many groups never make it to this stage. If you have ever been a part of a team where it just clicked, it was just awesome. You just felt really good. You feel like you could be yourself. You feel like people cared about you. The team as a whole is performing in a way where you are meeting or exceeding your goals and expectations. If you've had that experience, you probably were in the performing stage with that team.

Adjourning

Finally, there's the Adjourning stage. This is basically when the team is breaking up, so to speak. Perhaps it was a project team that was together for the duration of a project. Maybe they are putting on a conference. The conference happens and then the team basically disbands. What can happen in that stage is that people start to pull away from each other a little bit. They start to become a bit more individual focused rather than team focused. That is just a natural part of that adjourning and moving on.

We're not going to talk a whole lot about adjourning in the rest of the episode. That was a stage that was added later in 1977 and I think it makes great sense but what we're really focused on is getting to that performing stage. We'll be focusing on the first four.

Now you understand a little bit better forming, storming, norming, and performing. Let's talk about how each stage impacts the team's creative performance. We're going to start out



talking about brainstorming a little bit. You heard me talk about that briefly in [episode #005](#) and actually that whole episode was about generating ideas. The specific technique of brainstorming was actually developed in 1948 by Alex Osborn, the same person that developed Creative Problem Solving. Since then, there have been a number of research studies looking at brainstorming.

A lot of studies have said brainstorming doesn't work. If you get a group together and try to generate ideas, you're going to develop fewer ideas than you would with people just individually coming up with ideas. But when you actually read the studies, you realize that the success of brainstorming is all about the stage of the team development. Let me explain. The studies that had poor results from team brainstorming were also groups of people who just met. Usually they were college students. Here's an example of one of the studies.

College students get together, which college students are a classic subject especially like psychological type studies because college professors are doing these studies and they have ready access to college students. They invite these college students in to be part of the study and they put some of them in groups of four or five, small groups to do some brainstorming. In the small group, they explain brainstorming, they teach them how to do it, probably 5-10 minutes of instructions and then they give them a particular challenge to generate ideas around. They leave them for 20 minutes and they let them brainstorm and come up with ideas.

Meanwhile in another room, they have a different group of students who are individually sitting at desks or tables and they are asked to generate ideas on the same challenge. What they found is that when people are working individually, they came up with more ideas and better ideas than if they were part of the team. Since then, there have been a lot of other studies looking at basically the same type of study but different dynamics within the team and what you can see is that the team that just got together, they may or may not even know each other's name. They certainly don't necessarily know each other.

They are in that forming stage which is that stage where we're very polite with each other. We don't want to be too outlandish or outrageous. We're thinking about fitting in. We may be more concerned about throwing in an idea that's just completely off the wall whereas if we're with a team that we know really well, we're just going to throw out these crazy ideas. It's unlikely that a group will be good at brainstorming when they first meet unless it happens to be something that individually, they are already highly skilled at, which was not the case in those studies.



Often what happens is when a team is in that earlier stage of team development, the forming or the storming stage, they are not going to be as creative together as when they are in a norming or performing stage. One of those reasons is because team members need to trust each other, at least to a moderate degree in order to be creative together. The reason that trust is so important is because generating ideas such as for something in brainstorming, it can be risky for people for them to put an idea out and know that they may get laughed at or shut down. People are probably not going to take as many risks in that early stage of development as they might in that later stage. I think it's fair to say that a group in forming might be less creative and innovative than a group in the performing stage. Of course there are other factors that can impact their success but I think that's a pretty fair generalization. If you want your team to be more creative, you want to help them move into a higher level of performance. You want to help them develop as a team.

Here are three things you can do to get your team started moving along that continuum. The first is to help team members get to know each other. We don't trust people we don't know but if you think about the people you do trust, they are people that you know well. Of course, not everyone you know well you trust because sometimes you've learned better. The idea is that you want to help team members get to know each other. This can be in the form of sharing in meetings, having people share various things about themselves in meetings. This could be through social gatherings. The actual working together is probably one of the best ways for people to get to know each other. Let me offer a few words of caution about "get to know you" type of things especially if you're working with adults, adult work teams. Avoid dorky ice breakers. Personally in my life, I have probably led hundreds and hundreds of ice breaker type activities but you want to be very intentional about using them, when you use them, and which ones you use because what will happen is people will just start groaning and they are going to resent the entire process.

For example, don't ask your team to go around and share their favorite color unless you happen to be doing something like a marketing campaign, you're focusing on color and you want to get them thinking about color. Otherwise, no one cares. No one cares what my favorite color is. I don't care what anyone else's favorite color is. That doesn't help me get to know someone. If I'm in Kindergarten, that's different. I'm really excited about color at that stage. Instead, you want to think about what are things you really want to know about each other.

One thing you can use and this is actually the second thing is help them understand each other's strengths. If you listen to [episode #008](#), there's an interview there with Blair Miller who is one



of the developers of the FourSight Thinking Profile. FourSight is an excellent tool to help people really start to understand each other and understand each other's strengths particularly related to creativity and innovation. That is a great tool.

There are many other assessment tools out there like that one and there's also many other ways of how you could help team members get to know each other. We'll explore that more in depth in a future episode. We just did the first thing to help people develop more as a team and that's to get to know each other.

The second thing is to lead them through a process like FourSight or another similar tool. The third thing is to really focus on the team's purpose and work together as a team to create a shared understanding of what that purpose and what that vision is of the team. There are gobs of research about how the highest performing teams and most successful teams, they have a high focus on their team purpose. They are passionate about it. They understand it. They talk about it all the time. Everything they do is focused on whatever that goal or purpose is. That is actually one way to really help a team come together and move to a higher level of performance.

We talked a little bit now about the five stages. We looked at how your creativity is impacted by the stage of the team is in. Now let's look at leadership style. If you're a leader of a team, you want to think about adjusting your leadership style based on the stage that your team is in. For instance, if your team is in the forming stage, what they are looking for at that point is a little bit more of an autocratic style. They are looking for more direction from you. They want more clarity. They want a little bit more in the classic sense of leadership. They want you to lead the meetings, lead to the process.

I have seen this happen before where teams are getting together and the leader really wants to empower the team to really own the process. Right there like the first or second meeting, they will ask the team, "Who would like to facilitate this meeting?" There's just crickets or this awkwardness like, "I guess I'll do it." You can get to that level where different people are facilitating and people have rotating roles or perhaps have assigned roles as part of the team. It's more difficult for team members to step up in that very early stage. Having a bit more of a directive leadership style in the beginning can be very helpful.

Then, as the team moves into that sorting or storming stage, as a leader, you want to move into having a bit more of a democratic style. Your purpose at that stage is to help build that group cohesiveness. You're looking at developing that shared commitment and having the group



really accept responsibilities for decisions. This is where it would definitely be more appropriate to bring the group members in to facilitate in sharing those roles. The democratic style tends to produce greater initiative amongst the team members and it's really kind of a shared leadership approach.

Then, as they move into the Norming stage, you can step back even more and go into a bit of an abdicractic leadership style where you're really letting go. Maybe you're facilitating a little bit but you're giving them a lot of autonomy. Again, a lot of times what I see is that leaders want to get to that stage and they do it right from the beginning. The group ends up really floundering. They are not sure of their purpose so they need a bit more direction from the beginning usually and as they move on in the Norming stage, you can step back.

The abdicractic style also is most effective if the team has the skills they need to be at that level. If they have the skills to move through the storming/sorting stage, then that will help you as a leader be able to step back more. That's the Norming stage.

As the group moves into the Performing stage, it actually can be helpful for the leader to come back in and be a bit more in that democratic position. At that point, it's almost as if the leader is floating amongst being a team member. Imagine you're watching a team meeting and the team is in this high performing stage. You're looking at the team through a window. You might not even be able to tell who the designated leader is because it just really feels like everybody is a member of the team. That is sort of what we're aiming for as far as the performing stage.

Being able to adjust your leadership style based on the stage of the group development can be really helpful. Now you may be thinking, "Okay but how do I know what stage my group is in?" Good news for you all, I have a free assessment tool for you and this is complements of Don Clark who owns the Performance Juxtaposition website. He has developed this tool for teams to assess their stage of development and he offers it free. Anybody can use it.

There's a link in the show notes and you can download the tool and you can give it to your team. It's just a 32-item questionnaire and each team member takes the questionnaire and then you aggregate the results, talk about it and try to figure out, "Okay, now that we have some data here, what stage do we think our group is in?" What will happen is you'll have different rankings for each stage. One stage will look really high, one is kind of medium. One is going to be really low. Then you'll know you're not in that stage. You can kind of talk about where do we think we're at.



Part of the value of doing an assessment like that is the conversation that you have afterward with the team to figure out where you're at. The thing I just want to bring up is timing. Often, I get questions of how long does it take to move from one stage to the next? The answer is it depends. There are so many variables. If a team is doing something really intense where they are working together a lot, they can move to those stages very quickly, in a couple of weeks even. I do some work with Outward Bound where I'm leading wilderness trips and courses with students where we're out in the woods for 21 days at a time backpacking, rock climbing, all that kind of things and a lot happens. It is definitely realistic within those 21 days for the group to reach the performing stage. It doesn't always happen though.

On the other hand, I've worked with executive teams and midlevel manager teams where they have been together for years and they are not in the performing stage. It just depends. I think one of the biggest factors of how quickly a group is moving through is their intentionality with the process and if they are really striving to move through that and really looking at their own behaviors and how their behaviors are impacting each other, they are being thoughtful with each other, they can move through really quick, but that intentionality is definitely a piece of it.

Just to summarize, we've talked about the stages of group development – forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. We then looked at which stages are most valuable or which stage do you need to be in for creative performance. Also, how leaders can adjust their style based on their team's stage of development.

Weekly Challenge

Your weekly challenge this week is to download and complete the free assessment tool for your team. Go to the show notes. The web address is ClimerConsulting.com/009. If you go there, you will be able to download the assessment tool. You can also go to Don Clark's website and he has just all sorts of information on there about leadership and team development. I think he's very proud of the fact that his website has been on the internet for 20 years, probably one of the few out there that is still up for that long.

Once you complete your assessment tool, go into the show notes there and at the bottom, just write a comment. Tell us about your team and what stage of development they are in. If you do have any question about anything I've talked about, feel free to go to the show notes and ask those questions. It's a great place to share those and then I'll be able to answer those and everybody can see them. We can even have small discussions in there about the topics.





I hope this is helpful. I hope that you are able to think through what stage your team is in and I hope that helps your team become more innovative and creative. Have a wonderful week. I'll see you next time. Bye!