The Deliberate Creative Podcast with Amy Climer

Transcript for Episode 036:

The Connection Between Leadership Styles and Stages of Group Development

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Amy Climer: Welcome to The Deliberate Creative Podcast Episode 36. In today’s episode, I am going to weave together the content from three previous episodes and explain how it all fits together and how it can impact your leadership, your team and ultimately, of course, your creativity and success as a team.

I am going to talk about the Stages of Group Development which I mentioned months ago in Episode 9. In that episode I talked about how the stages of group development impact creativity. That is going to actually be the foundation of this episode. Then I am going to bring in Episode 34 from two weeks ago where I talked about three elements a team needs to exceed, and those are task, relationship and process. We will talk about those. Third, is the episode from last week, Episode 35 where I talked about the leadership styles continuum and how as a leader you need to be able to shift your style based on a variety of situation, and one of those situations is Stages of Group Development.

Today, I want to weave all that together and explain it – try to explain it – so that you can understand how it all fits together and you want to pay attention to all these things essentially at the same time. This is a bit of a complex topic so I have put together a free handout for you that has a model on it that will help explain how these three different things all fit together. You can download that at climerconsulting.com/036. If you are listening to this in front of a computer, I would suggest downloading it right now and then you can follow along. If you are out walking your dog or driving your car, obviously do not download it right now and it will still be a great reference afterwards.

**Stages of Group Development [2:32]**

Let us start with Stages of Group Development. I am not going to go in a lot of depth on these again because I mentioned them in Episode 9, and I highly recommend going back to listen to
that episode. I actually just re-listened to it myself and I was like, “Oh, this is a good episode!”
Anyway, go back and listen to that and you can get some more depth. But I am just going to do a short review. So the Stages of Group Development, this is from Bruce Tuckman and Mary Ann Jensen. This particular model was refined in 1977 and so on one hand it might feel like, “Oh, this is kind of old and outdated,” but actually it is the foundational research. There have been a number of models that have spurred off of this one, but this is the one that people often go back to and I really like it.

**Forming**

When a group gets together, they start out in the forming stage. This is like the infancy stage. This is where they do not really know each other, they are trying to figure each other out, they are figuring out what are the purposes of our team, what are our goals, what are we supposed to do with each other. That is the forming stage.

**Storming**

From there, hopefully, a group moves into the storming stage, sometimes called the sorting stage -- compliments of Denise Mitten, Professor at Prescott College in Arizona. Like I said, she called it the sorting stage because this is the stage where team members are really sorting out behaviors and figuring out what the norms are going to be in this team. It is also a place where conflict can arise, which is why Tuckman and Jensen called it storming because it can be crazy arguments and disagreements. It can be this really big blow out, but more often it is not. More often it is smaller disagreements, people are trying to get their opinions out there and kind of jockeying for power a little bit. But it is a necessary stage. That is storming.

**Norming**

Then we move into norming. Norming is where the group has figured out how to have those conflicts in a healthy way. There is generally a fairly high level of respect amongst each other, they are understanding each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and they are understanding how they can leverage their different personalities to work well together. This is also a place where people start really developing pride and caring for each other and for the team as a whole. Many teams do not make it past norming, but some do and those move into the performing stage.
Performing

I think of the performing stage as the rock star stage. This is where teams are just absolutely amazing. They are really living up to their highest potential. They are doing really cool, amazing things. And they are working together really well. They still have conflict but they solved it well, they handled it well. It is not that they just push it away, they embrace it. There is a high level of trust amongst the group in this performing stage.

Adjourning

After performing, at some point teams typically have to end and so then we move into the fifth stage which is adjourning. That is the stage that Jensen brought into the model. The first four stages were from Tuckman 1965, and I will put the links to the research in the show notes. Anyway, that is a quick brief overview of the stages of group development.

The reason this matters is – well there is a couple of reasons this matters. One is that for most teams the goal is going to be to get to performing. But the concept behind this development is you cannot just show up and immediately be performing. It takes time to get there. I have certainly seen leaders be pretty impatient about it and they are like, “Well, you know, we did a team building thing last week, why are we not performing well?” It is like, “Well, okay hold on. It does not always happen quite that fast.” Not to say that it cannot happen quickly because it can in some cases. It just depends on what is going on and how long the team is together. Are they together for an hour a day, are they together 24/7?

If they are together 24/7 then they are going to get to that performing stage quicker, seems natural, although it does not always happen that way. Sometimes teams never get past the storming stage even if they are together a lot. In fact, maybe it is because they are together too much. Anyway, if your ideal is to get to performing stage, you also have to understand the elements you need to focus on to help a team succeed that I mentioned in Episode 34, and those are task, relationship and process. You also need to understand leadership style and how leadership style can impact the stage of group development or rather the stage of group development could impact leadership. Well, actually it goes both ways.

Putting It All Together

I am going to talk about both leadership style and the three elements and help you understand how those fit with the stage of group development. We start off in the forming stage. In the forming stage there is a high concern by the group on task. They want to know what is our
purpose, what are we doing together, when is lunch. They want to know some of the logistics, what is going on. They are also curious about what is expected of them. They are interested in getting to know each other, not to say that they are not, but there just tend to be a little bit higher concern about the task. So as a leader, you want to be a little bit more concerned about the task too, not to the exclusion of the relationship though.

This is where let us say you bring a team together and it is the first day that they are together and you want to start off and help them understand what we are doing together. That could just be as simple as a quick three-minute overview of, “Hey, here is the purpose of our team. In a moment we are going do some introductions, but let me just give you a quick overview of why we are here together.” Then you are shifting into relationship focus and you let people introduce themselves. You might have them share a little bit about who they are, their background or something personal about themselves so people start developing that understanding of each other. But then you are going to move back into task and you are going to talk a little bit more depth about, “Okay, let us start looking at what the purpose is in a more depth way. What are some deliverables we have, what is our timeline.” Let us say you are together for a full day, “Let us look at the agenda. When is lunch?” People care about that. They like to eat. So as a leader you are facilitating and you are moving back and forth from task and relationship.

Also in this stage your style is more autocratic. More directive. You are telling the team, “Here is what we are going to do. We are all going to do introductions. Please share these three things about yourself.” You do not walk into a brand new team as a leader and say, “Well, what do you all think we should do together?” You do not immediately move into a democratic or an abdicative leadership style. Some of you may have seen this happen, I have seen it happen before and it is just funny because it is such a disaster. People are all looking at each other like, “What? Who is going to speak? I am not going to say anything.” So as a leader in the beginning you want to be more directive. People are looking for a leader. You want to have that traditional leadership role of, “Hey, here is what is going on.”

Then process, which I did not mention yet, is how you do that. How do you explain the purpose of the team? How do you facilitate the introductions? What do you do after that? Do you give the team an opportunity to get to know each other even more? Perhaps you give them a task where they are working together and the task has a purpose and they need to complete it, but then they also have this opportunity to start developing leaderships and learning each other’s
style. So that is a great way to kind of melt and get both the task and relationship accomplished. And now that is your process. That is how you do it.

From there team moves into the storming stage. This is where as a leader you want to start stepping back and becoming more of a democratic leader. There is a couple of reasons for that. First, by stepping back and being more democratic and letting the team have a little more say and input, you also will help move them into a state of storming or sorting. It gives them a bit of an opportunity to share their styles, to share their strengths. I guess I should also add that in assumption of mind here is that you are wanting to be a collaborative leader. If you are a regular listener you know I am a big fan of collaboration and I think that it is really important and I think that ultimately teams work better when they have the opportunity to be collaborative. I mean, that is the whole point of a team. If there is not a focus on collaboration then it is not actually a team, it is maybe just a working group or a taskforce that is trying to follow some specific steps and get a task done.

Because you have this collaborative goal, you want to step back, be more democratic, let the team have more say. But the challenge is that well potentially brewing up some conflict. So as a leader you want to allow some of that conflict to take place. There may be moments where you step in and you help facilitate, but you do not want to take control every time there is conflict. Because when you do that what happens is team members learn, “Oh, we should always go to the team leader when we have conflict and they will solve the problem for us.” And the team will never move past the storming stage and they will never get into the norming stage.

If you are someone who is really uncomfortable with conflict, I would suggest learning a little bit more about how you can become more comfortable with conflict. In fact, I am doing a full day workshop in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in April. It is for the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, their Continuing Education department and it is about conflict. I led this workshop this last fall and it was incredible, I must say. It was really awesome. It was a really small group of people and we had an amazing day. So if you are interested in learning more about conflict, I will put the link in the show notes so you can check that out.

Anyway, so sorting stage, democratic style. At this stage the team is starting to pay more attention to relationships with each other and so as a leader you want to help them with that. You want to help facilitate their relationship development. Consequently, they also tend to focus a little bit less on task. While that could be a little bit challenging as a leader, because you have tasks that you want them to finish and you want them to move towards their end goal,
giving time for that relationship development will help things be more successful in the long run. So allowing time for that is really important.

One way that you might do that is at the beginning of every meeting have an inclusion activity. This might be as simple as giving people an opportunity at the beginning of every meeting to do some sort of go-round and share something about themselves, ideally related to the topic that the meeting is focused on because that will also help people get into the task, but it helps people learn more about each other’s background and where they are coming from and their perceptions and their point of views, and that can be really beneficial for the team.

Now, it can get a little tedious if at every meeting you go-round and share so mix it up. There is a bunch of different ways to do that. For instance, you might bring Climer cards to a meeting and throw them all out on a table, image side face up and use those cards as a way to generate conversation. You might have a prompt and each person needs to select a card and answer a specific question. Or you might instead of having people share as a group have people share in pairs and then come back together and have a conversation as a whole. So there is a number of ways to do an inclusion activity but an inclusion activity can be a very valuable part of the meeting that can help team members develop relationships with each other, but it also can still be related to the task at hand. And I think that is the difference between an inclusion activity and an icebreaker.

A lot of times we have these icebreakers at the beginning of meetings with the intent to have people understand each other and develop relationships but at least for adults sometimes they backfire because the icebreakers tend to be so unrelated to what we are talking about that people get frustrated. Because they feel like we have an hour, we have a lot to do, I got a lot of other things to do back at my desk, why are we spending ten minutes on a stupid activity that has nothing to do with our tasks? Doing an inclusion activity where it is also focused on the topic or task that you have to accomplish can be really valuable for both that relationship and task development.

Once the team has moved through sorting they are going to go into the norming stage. In the norming stage as a leader, you want to step back even further and you want to become abdicratic. This is where you are really delegating leadership to the team. Now, it does not mean you are stepping away completely, you are still there, you are still responsible for the team, but you are less and less involved. And actually involved is not the right word, maybe you are less
and less vocal. You are letting the team take the lead but you are still there, you are a coach, you are a support, you are still attending meetings, you are there.

At this stage there is a high level of focus on relationship and sometimes even a lower level focus on task. And as a leader you want to let that evolve and develop without letting the team go completely off topic. I mean, not off topic, but if they go completely off task and they are not getting anything done, they actually can start really wallowing and become pretty dysfunctional. So you want to help the team stay focused but at the same time you want to really allow some relationships to develop, you want to allow that conflict to develop. At this stage they should be comfortable having conflict with each other and they are resolving it really well.

Once the team moves from norming they go into performing. The performing stage as a leader you move back into a more democratic style. At this stage there is a pretty even focus on task and relationship. As a leader, like I said, you are more democratic and it looks as if and it might feel to the team members that you are just another member of the team. But of course there will be moments where you will be stepping into a more leadership role because – I know I should not say more leadership role because all the while you are still a leader and you are still in a leadership role – but you might be stepping up and providing a little bit more direction or a little more parameters around what they are doing, but in that performing stage the leader tends to be more democratic.

So it is essentially the leadership style we say it is a continuum but when you lay it over the stages of group development it is a bit of cycle. Finally, when you get to that adjourning stage, the leader should become even more autocratic again, back to the beginning. Team members are looking to a leader to help them figure out how do we depart, how do we move on, how do we do this in a graceful way, what are the logistics we need to take care of in order to do this well? As the stage moves through their development, leaders you also want to adjust your style. Again, I have this hand out available for you that explains everything and it talks about the different leadership styles and it lays it over the stages of group development. You can download that at climerconsulting.com/036.

The only thing I want to mention is that if you have not listened to Episode 9 which talks about stages of group development, well first you can go listen to that, but the other thing is there is a free download on those show notes which is an assessment tool that you can give to your team to help your team decide what stage of development are we in. So you can go to climerconsulting.com/009 and download that. And there are some more directions in that
episode if you want to listen to that and learn about that. But that can be really helpful and it can help the team have a conversation about where we are at, especially if you might be in that storming and norming stage. Especially that storming stage because that can be a really confusing stage for team members if they do not understand what is going on and why there is conflict, and really why conflict can be helpful.

I hope this helps you understand how the stages of group development and the leadership styles and even the task relationship and process, how those all intertwine. As a leader I feel like you are paying attention constantly to task and relationship and you are thinking about what process is best for the team at this stage. And in some ways it is really an art more than a science. What I am sharing with you is a bit of the science behind it and then I think your job is to think about how do you bring the science in and melt this all together and bring in this art of judgment, essentially. Is what decisions do you make and how do you decide what activity, or how am I going to facilitate this process, or do I turn this over to the team and let them facilitate it? All those things can be really helpful depending on where your group is at.

The Weekly Challenge [21:23]

Every episode I give a weekly challenge and your weekly challenge is download the cheat sheet, take a look at it. If you have not already, I would also suggest go back to episode 9, download that assessment tool, give that to you team. Teach them about the stages of group development and teach them about leadership style. If you really want to go out on a lam, get some feedback from your team about where they see your leadership style. Once you see the stages of group development, you can even ask them, “Do I need to adjust my style a little bit? Am I too autocratic, am I too abdicratic, what would be most helpful?” And see if you can get some feedback from the team. That is really making yourself a little bit vulnerable, but my experience has been that when leaders do that, team members respond really well.

If leaders are sincere -- do not do this if you are going to ignore their feedback, that is actually a real insult I think -- but if you are sincere and you want that feedback and you really want to improve your leadership, put it to the team and get some feedback from them. If you feel like there is not the trust yet within the team for them to give you that honest feedback verbally, then set it up in a Google forum or a SurveyMonkey document where they can more anonymously share that feedback with you. Hopefully you can accept it graciously and openly and then use that to adjust your style to best fit your team. So talk with your team about this and I would love to hear how it goes. Shoot me an email or put a comment in the show notes.
By the way, if you guys have questions about any episode, you can always put a question in the comment section of the show notes. I read all of those and I will respond to your comments. Sometimes the comments will lead to other episodes and I will answer the question in another episode. And if I cannot, I will give you a shout out if you put your name in there. Anyway, go add some comments, go to the website, download the sheet. If you have any questions, let me know.

Have a wonderful week and I will see you next time. Bye.