Give Your Team a Boost!
Simple Strategies for Team Building

By Kate Schuit
Carroll Community College (MD)

Team-building catch phrases are endless. We all know that “two heads are better than one,” “there’s no ‘I’ in team,” and that “Together Everyone Achieves More.” Few would question the value of having groups work together effectively—you come up with better solutions to problems, you learn to relate to all kinds of people and you gain new experiences through fulfilling different group roles. Team-building skills are not only important for you as a student programmer, but also as you enter into a work world where “working as a team player” is ranked top in importance among business organizations. While many of us understand the value of team building, sometimes it can be difficult to bring about in our student organizations.

Perhaps some of you have wished for a “how-to” list of instructions that could simply explain the procedure of transforming any group of people into a successful team. Although building a team is not like building a shelf, there are some key steps that you, as a group leader or group member, can encourage your team to take.
There's a Difference Between a Group and a Team

We all belong to groups, sometimes by choice and sometimes by necessity. The goal of team-building is to take a group of individuals who rely primarily on their own efforts and contributions and change them into a team working toward a common goal, relying primarily on the team's effort and contributions. These group members may or may not have similar skills, backgrounds, interests and goals. Whether the initial group is formed as a result of self-selection or is put together at random, the same goal applies. In any case, the group will hopefully go through a series of stages, taking them from the initial assemblage of individuals and forming what we know as a team.

Team-building is not a scientific process and high-performance teams do not just happen. They take great amounts of time, which is often something we do not have.

Team-building Roadmap: Tuckman's Model

A very practical model for looking at these sequential stages is Tuckman's Stages of Group Development (Johnson and Johnson, 2000), which identifies five stages of the team-building process.

**Forming** is the very first stage, where the group has been created and members are trying to figure out how they fit in. This is the stage where you size up the group, make your first impressions and often stick to being polite until you are a little more comfortable.

**Storming** is the next stage and it's where things can start to get uncomfortable. The honeymoon is over, and now group members begin to let their true colors show. Some will step up into leadership roles or challenge the established leader, cliques may begin to form as people get to know each other, and clashing personalities, interests and goals may cause conflict. Sometimes the conflict is more subtle, with some members choosing to check out of the group or not sharing their ideas. At this stage, groups can either resolve these conflicts and clashes or get stuck and remain on this level.

**Norming**, the third stage, is representative of a functional team. The “norms” of the team have been established and people understand the purpose of the team as well as their individual responsibilities. In this stage, there is good communication and a higher level of trust, which leads to the team actually accomplishing the goals they set out to do.

**Performing** is the fourth stage, where teams have gone beyond functional to exceptional. In this stage, productivity is high and teams are also willing to experiment, try new ideas and adjust their path accordingly. A significant characteristic of this stage is a shift in focus from individual successes to group successes. This results in high morale and team unity, but it is also a stage that can be difficult for some groups to reach. Just the student turnover that takes place on programming boards and in other student groups is enough to prevent the group from arriving at the performing stage.

**Adjourning** is the final stage, which occurs when the goals of the group have been completed. At this point, the team has finished what it started and there is no longer a need for the group to exist.

Strategies for Success: Putting It into Practice

While it is helpful to understand the different stages of Tuckman’s model, it is even more important to understand how you, as a student programmer, can help to advance your group to the next stage. Here are some strategies to try in each step of the journey:
1. The Forming Stage:
- Make sure you get to know each other first.
- Write a team mission statement.

2. The Storming Stage:
- Be flexible.
- Encourage the team mentality.
- Cultivate an atmosphere of trust.
3. The Norming Stage:

- Continue to build relationships.

- Discuss decision-making style. Who is the leader? Are there a few dominant leaders, or do contributions from all members need to be considered?

- Group issues can be solved. Involvement level of group participants is critical.

- Leaders need to be patient. Departments with diverse backgrounds may take time to understand the new norms.

- Avoid the temptation to "group think."

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Final Thoughts

Team-building is not a scientific process and high-performance teams do not just happen. They take great amounts of time, which is often something we do not have. Organizations change from semester to semester, leaders emerge and then graduate, constitutions are redefined, and sometimes members lose interest and withdraw from the group. It is unrealistic to assume that each and every team you belong to will arrive at the performing stage. In fact, many teams go back to earlier stages when changes occur. However, you can pull strategies from each of the different stages and focus on moving your team forward. In the process, you will gain a greater sense of your own identity as well as a greater understanding of others.

References


About the Author

Kate Schult is the coordinator of Student Life at Carroll Community College (MD), where she also advises the Campus Activities Board. She earned a bachelor’s degree in human resource management from Messiah College (PA) and a master’s degree in higher education administration from Western Maryland College.

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