Managing Coalition Dynamics

In a perfect world, every prevention collaboration would come together effortlessly: members would agree right away on goals and processes, then work together harmoniously and efficiently to produce lasting change.

But as anyone who has started or managed a coalition knows, the reality of group functioning is often a whole lot messier. More often than not, groups move forward in fits and starts—often experiencing some degree of conflict along the way. When left unattended, these conflicts can impede group progress and, in some cases, even cause the group to dissolve.

What accounts for these differences in coalition success? Taking a page from the business management world can help us understand why some groups seem to work together flawlessly, while others seem perpetually blocked by personality conflicts and power struggles.

According to the *Stages of Development Team Theory*[1], healthy workgroups move through four stages of development. First posited by Bruce Tuckman in the mid-1960s, this theory, popularly known as Forming/Storming/Norming/Performing, provides a road map for leaders in managing group dynamics at each stage of group development.

This tool offers an overview of these four stages, accompanied by tips for maximizing productivity and cohesion, reducing conflict, and steering group members toward long-term success.

Stage 1: Forming

When new groups first come together, members are likely to feel both excited and anxious: eager to get started but also unsure of what will be expected of them and/or how they might contribute. This anxiety can manifest itself in a variety of ways, with some members asking lots of questions and others quietly assessing the situation until they get the lay of the land.

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[1] https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/teams/articles/stages-development

To support group functioning at this stage, leaders should focus on guiding members toward ownership and investment in the newly formed group. Tips for doing this include the following:

- **Define the group's mission and goals.** The fastest way to give members a voice and reason for participating is to have them help define the direction of the group. Having a clear mission and goals will also help to allay the anxiety of members who are unclear about the group's direction.

- **Focus on creating group identity and a sense of belonging, rather than accomplishments.** Until members develop a sense of shared ownership, any accomplishments will feel false and may be attributed to the leader rather than to the efficacy of the group as a whole.

- **Build trust.** Prevention-focused collaborations often bring the same players to the table: local law enforcement, business owners, schools, universities, health providers, prevention practitioners, and concerned citizens. These groups often hold deeply-held opinions about one another, and may or may not feel comfortable working together. Recognizing potential "turf" issues early on, and then working collaboratively to build an atmosphere of respect and trust, will lay the foundation for open dialogue and productivity over time.

Stage 2: Storming

Groups in the **Storming** stage are figuring out how to meet their goals and define their processes. For some members—especially those who are uncomfortable with ambiguity—this phase can generate some frustration. They may be concerned about the direction the group is heading and/or have doubts that identified goals will be met. Members are likely to be openly critical, and more inclined to voice criticism and doubt during meetings.

For leaders, successfully managing the Storming stage is crucial to the longevity of the collaboration. Members may lose interest or investment if they feel that the group is wasting their time or their voices are not being heard. For these reasons, addressing member concerns is of paramount importance. Some tips for managing dynamics during this stage include the following:

- **Break down larger goals into smaller, achievable steps**. This will help members identify clear opportunities for participation and concrete ways to contribute, and realize immediate, short-term success.

- **Redefine goals with concrete, measureable outcomes.** Members who are uncomfortable with vague processes will rejoice at knowing exactly how success is defined. To this end, it's also helpful to begin developing your evaluation design in this phase—and to involve interested members in this process.

- **Invite members to voice their concerns openly and honestly.** Let members know that their feedback is important, and that the input of all members is valued equally. Work together to develop a process for sharing ideas and concerns (and stay true to these processes even when doing so may prove difficult!)

Stage 3: Norming

In **Norming**, members begin working independently and/or in small, task-oriented groups, clarifying processes and objectives along the way. Groups in this phase welcome constructive criticism: members feel like they can say what they're thinking, have a sense of belonging to the group, and are realistically optimistic about meeting the group's overarching goals. Member communication may also extend beyond the work of the group as members develop inside jokes and/or begin connecting socially.

Entering the Norming phase can feel like a great accomplishment for a coalition leader. It is when the often difficult, early work of defining goals, building trust, and creating project plans gives way to real, tangible progress. Though it may appear that the group is now functioning autonomously, groups in the Norming phase benefit enormously from smart leadership. Tips for success at this stage include the following:

- **Delegate responsibility.** The Norming phase is a great time to identify and build potential leaders. One way to do so (and increase productivity at the same time) is to delegate tasks to subgroups headed by the collaboration's rising stars.

- **Refine processes (as needed).** While leaders may feel good about the swell of productivity that often marks the beginning of the Norming phase, be vigilant about identifying and reviewing processes that may hamper workflow or cause frustration for members.

- **Encourage members to get feedback and support.** Much of the leadership work of Norming is establishing a culture of positive support. Creating a space for sharing and soliciting feedback as members move toward goals is a great way to do this.

Stage 4: Performing

Groups in the **Performing** phase are working steadily toward their long-term goals and have a solid number of "wins" under their belt. Members are engaged and enthusiastic about both their individual and collective work, and feel confident about the group's collective ability to get the job done. Members are able to anticipate potential roadblocks before they occur and handle them without conflict.

During this phase, leaders may be tempted to maintain the status quo and take a more hands-off approach to running the group. Instead, leaders should continue to have a strong presence: to ensure that members remain challenged, focused, and engaged; and to prepare members for potential changes in focus, direction, or leadership. Tips for managing group dynamics in the Performing phase include the following:

- **Allow group members to assume new roles organically—especially those related to leadership.** This will not only help members continue to grow and remain engaged, but is also critical to the group's long-term sustainability.

- **Provide opportunities for professional or personal development.** Share information about relevant conferences and trainings, and invite speakers in to share their expertise. Encouraging professional and personal development not only builds the capacity of your group but also shows members that you are invested in their continued growth and learning.

- **Celebrate coalition successes and wins.** Devote dedicated time to praising hard work and letting members know how much they are valued and appreciated.

- **Identify and tackle new prevention challenges.** Collaborations with a proven track record of success are ideally suited to taking on new projects and shifting their focus to address emerging issues.