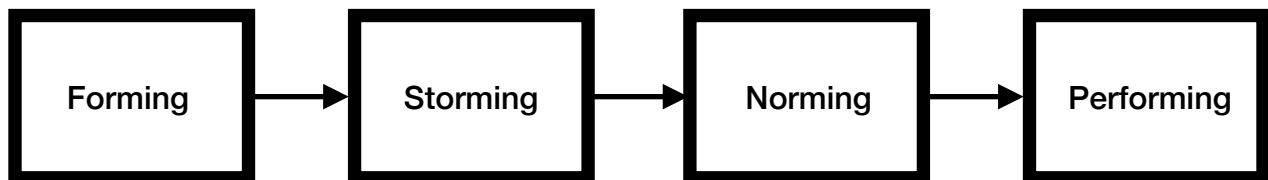


# A leader's guide to the Tuckman Model

## Introduction

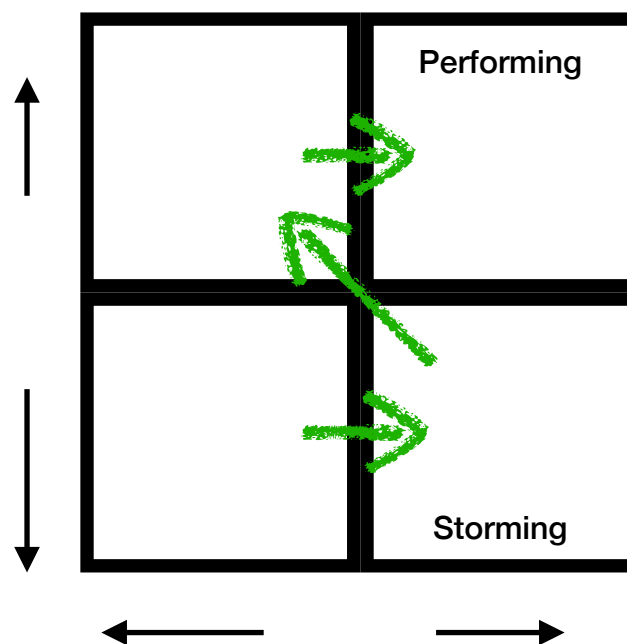
In 1965, Bruce Tuckman proposed a model for how groups develop into teams. This work became known as the *Tuckman Model*. Tuckman said that teams go through numerous stages to grow, confront problems, find solutions, plan their work, and deliver results.

Early in my career, I was first introduced to the Tuckman model, and I've talked about it many times. Often I see the model used as a team observation tool in which people seem to think of the model works like this:



While useful to illustrate a progression, I wasn't sure what to do with the information. For example, I might have found myself saying, "the team is in storming." While a useful observation, what do I do to get them moving into norming? How does the model help me get the team moving along?

A couple of years ago, I started to change how I looked at the model by overlaying it with the two dimensions of collaboration — listening and sharing. When I did this, my mental model for Tuckman grew into this:



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This change to how to look at the Tuckman model starts to provide more useful information. When you see the model this way, you can start to see how to help teams progress through the stages more purposefully. Forming to storming requires an increase in sharing. Storming to norming requires an increase in listening. Performing requires both listen and sharing to be high.

As you go through the rest of this paper, keep in mind, the Tuckman model is not a one-way journey. There is no destination in this work, and as the team experiences change, they may find themselves in an 'earlier' phase of the model. When this happens, apply the same logic to help them progress through the phases again.

Additionally, keep in mind that the value in any model is the insights and ways of thinking it creates. The Tuckman model can help you to think, talk, and advance the development of a team. You may find teams don't seem to exhibit one of the stages or even follow the model at all. Don't get hung up on that and continue to look for more insights into what is true.

The remainder of this paper describes each of the phases of the Tuckman model in more detail.

### Forming

Forming starts happening when a team comes together and starts to learn about each other, their environment, and their objectives. Forming can happen anytime a team is first assembled, team membership changes, or other environmental factors change. In forming, team members are likely to operate independently, and there won't be a lot of spontaneous collaboration happening. During this phase, people are likely cordial with each other with little conflict or heated debates.

Forming starts when teams come together, and collaboration is low. This means team members might not be actively listening or sharing their thoughts. The deep trust of a high-performance team does not exist at this point.

All of this is natural as the team tries to figure out who knows what, what other people know, and their position relative to their team mates. They're likely going to follow social norms pretty closely and behave as you would expect.

### How to get the team forming

The good news is that when you bring a group of people together, they will naturally start forming. As a leader, focus on coordinating for the team, being careful not to become directive, which will cause problems downstream. There are numerous things you can do to help them progress through forming and create a solid foundation for the team to come together:

- Pick team members based on their fit with the other team members. When team members aren't a good fit for each other, they're likely to have trouble in the next stages.

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- Identify and explore the team's reason for existing. Don't assume the team understands their purpose, no matter how obvious it might seem to you. Instead, spend time asking questions and exploring what they believe.
- Start building working agreements with the team. Working agreements are essential for a team as it will help them to see their own behaviours and create a reference for holding each other accountable in future stages.

These and other similar activities will help teams get to know each other and understand why they are a team. The result is that the team will start sharing their thoughts. When they begin sharing their opinions more openly, you'll notice the team will begin moving into the next phase, storming.

### Storming

Storming is the stage in which a team starts to sort itself out and build each other's trust. Every team is unique and will experience and progress through storming differently. Some teams will go through storming somewhat quietly, with only minor disagreements or debates. For other teams storming will be turbulent, uncomfortable, and full of conflict. There is no right or wrong way to go through storming.

Storming results from the team coming together in the forming stage and getting to know each other, their context, and starting to agree on how they will work together. The efforts from everyone in forming is that the team will start sharing more openly. However, given the team hasn't had sufficient time to build trust, they're unlikely to listen to what everyone is sharing fully. The lack of sufficient trust is what puts the team into storming.

### How to get the team storming

When the team is forming, your job as a leader is to get the team into storming. I know that might be uncomfortable or counter-intuitive, but it's the easiest way to progress the team's development. They may skip over storming straight into norming but don't make that your focus. Create the conditions for storming to be safe for the team, whether they spend much time there.

To get the team into storming, shift your leadership stance from co-ordinating to supporting and coaching them. For example:

- Be present and calm for the team. Often, when a team is deep in conflict, I'll start by interrupting then asking everyone to take a deep breath. I'll pause and let them be present with each other in silence. Then, I'll ask a powerful question like, "What's true for you (individually) right now?" Or, "What's happening in this team space now?" Nothing is right or wrong, but it allows the team to voice what is true for them.
- Act as a resource person for the team. Through your actions, make it clear you want them to work together, but stay close enough to act as a resource. When they need you, be sure

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to take a stance as a mentor or coach, rather than telling them what to do. If you get directive, you're not a resource person and will only keep them storming longer.

- Use their working agreement as a reference in times of conflict or disagreement. Point to it and ask a powerful question like, "What are you doing to honour your working agreement right now?" Be open and curious about whatever is true for them. Help them see that the working agreement might be wrong and in need of some adjustment if that's truly the case. The more they honour or make the working agreement theirs, the more trust they will build between them.

When you bring a group of people together, you can count on there being differences. If you avoid the storming phase, the team will not work through their differences and learn how to thrive together. By trying to avoid storming, you will in fact keep them storming longer. When you use activities such as I've identified above, you can help the team move through forming into the storming phase.

Remember, storming is to get them sharing more openly as it will reveal the differences and work through them together. This is the birthplace of the trust you want the team to share.

### Norming

Norming is the result of the team having worked through their differences and learning how to work together. The result of norming is a greater degree of intimacy and trust between the team. In this phase of their development, it's possible team members are trying to avoid conflict as they just went through storming. While it might feel as if the team is starting to make progress, at times, you may find them slipping back into storming.

In storming, the team was sharing but not actively listening to each other, which is the source of the conflict you were experiencing. In norming, the two parts of collaboration might inverse as team members are holding back from actively sharing, but listening will increase.

When the team gets past storming, things will start settling down, and meetings won't be as difficult. This shift is a sign they've started to listen to each other more. This shift happens because the people have grown to know and trust each other more. The team is accepting the value in what the others can contribute. Often, along with moving into norming, I will see a drop in sharing at this point. This drop is normal as the individuals are learning to honour each other's differences and give other team members space to contribute.

### How to get them norming

Continue in your supportive role to get the team past storming and into norming. Your continued support will help them continue to develop their ability to lead themselves. There are many ways to do help a team through norming, such as:

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- Involve them in planning their team's future development steps. You will find a lot of knowledge in the team, and by letting them chart their course, they're going to feel a greater sense of responsibility for it.
- Teach them how to coach and mentor each other. When they work through problems, they can use more effective stances with each other.
- Celebrate and acknowledge the differences that exist between team members. Look for ways to increase the inclusion of everything people have to offer to the team. Remember that's diversity is about more than visible differences such as skin colour, religion, or ethnicity.

Throughout norming, continue doing things that will have them listening and sharing. Make it safe to disagree and teach them the skills to help them work through their differences more easily. Through this, you will set them on the path to performing. You will also make it easier for them to recover when they next find themselves back in forming or storming (yes, it will happen).

### Performing

Leaders frequently talk about performing as a destination: "I'm trying to get my team into performing." However, like all states, performing is temporary. Performing happens when the team has grown to know and embrace their differences, and has a sufficient degree of trust between them so they can have unfiltered dialogue .

The defining characteristic of performing is their ability to have unfiltered dialogue, which is a sign that both listening and sharing are high. When this happens, the team may engage in debates (sometimes heated), but unlike earlier phases this is about the issue and not their positions. You might know this is what's happening when they have a heated debate and go back to work as if nothing happened.

### How to get them Performing

The line between norming and performing is often grey as performing is an amplification of norming. What the team needs from you is to continue in your supportive role as coach and mentor. Help them increasingly take responsibility for their leadership, work, and growth. Through this, you will find they may require less of your time as they are leading themselves. To support and help maintain this state as long as possible:

- Give them an increased level of autonomy, allowing them to break from the processes for the sake of experimenting and finding new improvements.
- Take a coaching stance to help them find their own way through whatever challenges and problems they might encounter
- Leave them alone. Ensure expectations, goals, and boundaries are understood and let them manage themselves.

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Performing won't last forever, but with the right support from you they will get back here when they find themselves in one of the other stages.

### Let's talk

I've helped hundreds of teams find better ways of working together. Through this, I've come to know that great teams don't happen by accident. There's a science to teamwork and a specific set of conversations that will help them advance.

Models such as Tuckman's are useful as they can help you gain insights into what a team might need. As a leader, these insights can help you help shorten the time it takes for the team to become high-performing.

Feeling stuck? Don't know how to get your team beyond their current reality? Or, perhaps your team is mired in conflict. Then let's talk! The first hour's always free.

To book time with Mike: <https://leadingforchange.ca/bookmike>