

Creating Successful Vestries and Committees



A look at how groups develop and ways you can lay the foundation for a group to accomplish its purpose

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Talking Points

Groups go through stages of development from “getting to know each other” through saying good-bye when their life or purpose comes to an end. Understanding the outlines of group development theory and the ways in which you, as a leader, can facilitate a group’s growth create the foundation for group success. First of all, how would you define a group?

What is a Group?

“A number of persons or things regarded as forming a unit on account of any kind of mutual or common relation or classified together on account of a common degree of similarity.”

Oxford English Dictionary 1989

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Talking Points

Here is one definition – and it can apply to any size group. There are, however, significant differences between small groups (typically defined as having 12 or fewer members) and larger ones. In most small groups the members interact on a face-to-face basis, are aware of the interdependence necessary to reach mutual goals, feel a sense of belonging, and know who the other members are. Large groups may not have face-to-face interaction but have some common characteristic that places them in that group (e.g., ethnic groups). When we talk about group development we are talking about small groups.

Successful Groups Balance...

Group
maintenance
(harmony within
the group)



Individual Needs

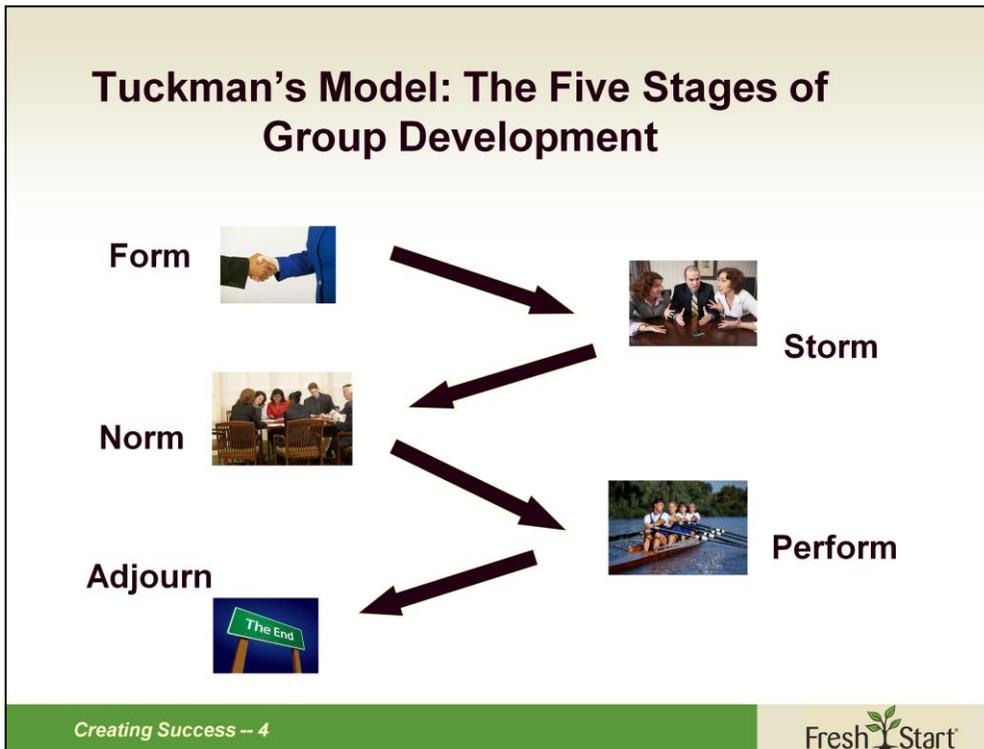
Task (job to be done)

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Talking Points

Any group has a reason or purpose for being and so has a “task” with which it is charged. Many groups focus primarily on task accomplishment, failing to realize that to be successful it is important to also pay attention to how the task is accomplished and the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging and as though they are contributing to the group. So accomplishment of task joins harmony within the group and the extent to which the needs of individual members are met in determining how successful the group is. Like a mobile, all three must be in balance. Success further depends upon the extent that ALL members, and not just the leader, assume responsibility to address these three functions.



Talking Points

Effective groups are not born fully-formed and functional. They require nurturing. Bruce Tuckman, an American educational psychologist, described group development in what has become a standard model. He first identified four stages: form, storm, norm and perform in the 1960's, but later refined his model to include a fifth stage, adjourn. Let's look at each in turn.

Form

- Task: orientation
- Concern: inclusion
- Key characteristics: tentative, cautious, low risk-taking, intellectualizing, play down differences
- Steps to take: introduce members, define and structure group, set goals, build trust by establishing norms and agreeing to roles and responsibilities



Talking Points

In its initial phase, the group is forming. Members are uncertain about their roles, and maybe even about their purpose or task. Trust and risk-taking are both low. To facilitate the group's growth you need to help participants get to know each other (the proverbial "ice-breakers"), be clear about the group's purpose, and establish goals, boundaries and procedures for the group. Orientation of new members, bringing them up-to-speed on what the group has already accomplished and sees as some of its next steps is critical. During this stage the group should establish norms or ground rules, articulating the expectations members have of each other. Typically these include things like people will show up on time, be prepared, and engage in decision-making only after taking time for prayer. In addition now is the time to clarify the roles individual members will play (e.g., who will take the notes and who will preside at meetings). Setting goals and norms and clarifying roles help create the environment of trust needed for task accomplishment and should be done with the full involvement of the group's members. "Form" is the most critical phase of group development and sets the tone for the group's ability to function as a team.

Storm



- Task: Organization
- Concern: Control
- Key characteristics: expressed differences, defensiveness, hostility, low tolerance, impatience, bickering, self-interests
- Steps to take: enforce agreed-upon norms, encourage trusting & trustworthy behaviors

Talking Points

The second stage is all about control – and making sure that one’s individual needs are met. You need to expect this behavior and not take it personally or get defensive! You can help the group by reinforcing adherence to norms, eliciting concerns and addressing them if they are within the group’s control, and encouraging interdependence and trust-building behaviors. If goals, norms for behavior, and roles have been well established in the first stage of development it is relatively easy to navigate through the “storm” stage. However if individual members consistently fail to live up to the group’s expectations it is time to step back and revisit the first stage to get the group back on track. (Or, if the disruption is caused by only one or two people to take them aside and try and find out what their issues are – they may be feeling overwhelmed or have had a change of circumstances that makes it difficult for them to continue with the group.)

Norm

- Task: Communication
- Concern: Openness
- Key characteristics: patching up conflicts, confiding in each other, sharing problems, recognizing differences, sense of cohesiveness
- Steps to take: help members "own" the group's goals and procedures, maintain safety to encourage openness



Talking Points

At some point, the group settles down and begins to refocus on what brought them together in the first place. If the tasks or goals are clear, members begin to open up to each other, learn to live with their differences, and express caring and concern for the others. Increasingly individual members begin to enforce the group's ground rules, and the leader needs to intervene less often. Groups at this stage are well positioned for success and routinely accomplish the tasks they set out to do.

Perform



- Task: Collaboration
- Concern: Success
- Key characteristics: mature, flexible, high trust, candor, value differences, full exploration of ideas
- Steps to take: Provide resources, step in when needed to keep group together

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Talking Points

Groups must be together for an extended period of time, with no changes in membership, to develop the level of trust and candor that characterizes this stage. Many groups never move beyond the “norm” stage, though you may see long-standing groups or groups called to work intensively on a task (e.g., search committees or a committee established to help guide a congregation through a traumatic event such as a fire) get to this level.

In the “perform” stage roles and responsibilities change fluidly to meet changing circumstances, and there is a high level of interdependence. Individuals can act independently because the group is confident that everyone is working in the best interest of the whole. Rather than simply acknowledging differences, members actually value the different perspectives people bring to the table. To keep the group functioning you do not need to focus so much on group harmony and individual needs as on providing the resources needed for the group to function and not slip back into an earlier phase of development.

Adjourn

- Task: Letting go
- Concern: Future
- Key characteristics: sense of accomplishment, celebration, affection, tying up loose ends, recognition, sense of loss
- Steps to take: help group celebrate and mark the ending, assist members in moving on to other groups



Talking Points

All groups, including vestries and committees, come to an end at some point. It is important to help the group say “good-bye” and to recognize both the group’s accomplishments and individual member’s contributions. Public recognition may be important, especially for groups like vestries which have provided leadership to the congregation as a whole.

Another aspect of “adjourn” is helping out-going members let go of their responsibilities and roles. Try to find new opportunities for them to participate in the life of the congregation so that new leadership can be raised up and the new vestry or committee gets a chance to succeed on its own. For some vestry or committee members the group may have provided strong and consistent personal support which they will miss. You need to help them think through how they will get that support in the future.

One More Thing. . .

Every time someone new enters a group or a member leaves, the group changes. In effect it becomes a new group -- the development cycle starts all over again.

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Talking Points

The addition of a new member or loss of an existing member creates a whole new dynamic. In effect you now have a new group which will start the development cycle all over again. The cycle may not be as lengthy if the change in membership is small, but many vestries turn over a third to a half of their membership each year.

In addition to paying attention to the group as a whole, however, the leader needs to pay attention to the needs of the individual members.

Needs of the Individual

- Checking out
- Checking in
- Eliciting feedback
- Addressing concerns
- Situational or personal causes



Talking Points

If a group is not meeting an individual's needs, that person will check out in any variety of ways – by failing to show up, being late, not participating – and then it is time to check in to see what is going on and address any valid concerns. Start from the assumption that the person means well but that something needs to be adjusted for him/her to participate fully. Perhaps the person does not feel his/her contributions are being valued or isn't up to the task assigned. Finding ways to adjust assignments may be the answer. At other times a change of circumstances may make meeting his/her obligations difficult. For example a change in a work schedule may prevent him/her from getting to meetings on time. A change in meeting time may be warranted – or the group can simply acknowledge the need and agree to the person's coming late. Changes in group norms should be made with the consent of the group.

There may also be more serious issues. For example, a member may become ill or suffer a family tragedy that effects his/her ability to fulfill the group's expectations. Others may need to step in temporarily to fill the gap. If the situation is severe enough the person may need to resign. Remember that vestries and church committees are made up of volunteers who have other priorities. Be flexible and understanding, while still keeping the group on track.

Openness and honesty help the group meet the needs of the individual, as well as those of the group as a whole.

It's All a Matter of Balance

Group
maintenance
(harmony within
the group)



Individual Needs

Task (job to be done)

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Talking Points

In the end your vestry or committee will be as successful as its ability to keep the balance among task, group maintenance and individual needs – and to do so during all phases of the group's development.

Resources

- Johnson, David W. and Johnson, Frank P. Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills, 10th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2009: the classic book on group theory, frequently up-dated.
- www.community4me.com: look under "Resources" to find articles and team-building exercises
- www.infed.org/groupwork/what_is_a_group.htm: a good summary of group theory
- www.managementhelp.org/groups/dynamics-theory.htm: a free on-line library for managers on all kinds of management theory, including about groups.

Talking Points

If you would like to know more about group development here are some resources. Most are geared to the private sector, but the discussions of group theory and development are still relevant. The community4me website is maintained by an active church-goer who specifically cites church groups as one of his target audiences. The Johnson and Johnson book, the definitive resource on group theory, is lengthy and fairly expensive so look for older editions or borrow from a library.