Individual Analysis of Group 3's Process

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Introduction

It is a common occurrence to ask individuals to work in groups or teams to accomplish tasks and projects in corporate America. Per Coutu (2009), the pervasive belief is that "working in teams makes us more creative and productive….leaders are quick to assume that teams are the best way to get the job done" (p. 1). The article by Coutu is actually an interview with Richard Hackman, an expert on teams, who unveils the nasty truth – teams very frequently just don't work. He shared many reasons for this, starting with "most of the time, team members don't even agree on what the team is supposed to be doing" (p. 1).

Educators are also very fond of assigning group work; collaborative work is frequently recognized as a constructivist approach to learning. However, students greet the notion of group work with a level of enthusiasm generally reserved for invasive dental work. Maryellen Weimer, a highly respected educator, authored "Why Students Hate Groups" in Faculty Focus (2008), citing three reasons for this dislike. First, many students don't learn well in social contexts. Second, faculty usually do a poor job designing the learning activity (e.g., everyone gets the same grade, no individual accountability, slackers get to slide, etc.). Last, Weimer claims students hate groups because it makes them feel vulnerable individually; they feel pressured to "perform." Interestingly, Weimer mentioned Tuckman's work (1965) on small-group dynamics and the need to understand norms!

Recently one of the assigned activities in the course "Leadership in Distance Education and E-Learning" offered by UMUC used group work to complete a project. The assignment was to interview, as a group, a leader in distance education, lead an online discussion with classmates, and develop a paper summarizing the experience. The purpose of this paper is to

comment and analyze observations from a team member perspective, the emergence of and presence of "leadership" in the group (if applicable), and the effectiveness of this leader and the group. Four individuals were in Group 3 (HM, MLM, SSm, SSe). To do this, we will consider the concepts of leadership, followership, and Tuckman's developmental sequence in small groups (2001).

Leadership and Followership

Sims, Faraj & Yun (2009) define leadership broadly as "influencing others" (p. 150). Burns expands by defining leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers" (2010, p. 68). Burns further explained that leadership can be transactional (you do this for me, and I'll do this for you), transformative (leader seeks to satisfy higher needs of the follower), or moral (shared aspirations and values) (p. 67).

In Group 3, an interesting dynamic developed immediately; one group member (SSe) immediately assumed a leadership role, without explicit discussion by the group. Two group members (HM and SSm) were frankly relieved by this turn of events. The remaining group member (MLM, this author) had mixed feelings about this development. Probably kindred spirits, SSe and MLM likely both subscribed to the "join the group but be the leader" theory. MLM decided, after a moment's hesitation, to acquiesce and see how this played out. If SSe proved to accept the responsibility of leadership seriously, and would enter into a transactional relationship that was equitable, MLM was agreeable.

Interestingly, this group quickly moved into a model that was not the typical leader-follower model. Barbara Kellerman (HarvardCPL, 2009) provided insight on followership,

stating followership has largely been ignored in the leadership literature, which she perceives as a big mistake. She defined five types of followers – isolaters, bystanders, participants, activists and diehards. Group 3's dynamics rapidly evolved into less of a leader-follower relationship, into one more of equality. Perhaps SSe relaxed a bit when he saw that the group was committed to this equal partnership. I prefer to believe that Barbara Kellerman is correct, that followers have responsibility for outcomes as well, and shouldn't let everything fall to the leader. That's not to say all the group members were the same type of follower. Two of the group members (HM and SSm) were very clear that they wanted to be good foot soldiers and not take on tasks that were high stakes, such as the actual interview of the distance education expert. Fortunately this open and honest communication laid the groundwork for a very smooth working relationship.

<p align="center">**Forming – Storming – Norming – Performing – Adjourning**</p>

Bruce Tuckman was a social psychologist who was hired by the US Navy to consult on a project with several peers to study small group behavior (Tuckman, 2001). After reviewing 50 published articles on group development, he published his original findings on group functioning, describing four separate stages (Tuckman, 1965). In 1977 Tuckman (and Mary Ann Jensen) reviewed an additional 22 studies published since his original meta-analysis, and added a fifth stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The five stages are described below (Tuckman, 2001, p. 66):

	Group Structure – The pattern of interpersonal relationships; the way members act and relate to one another.	**Task Activity** – The content of interaction as related to the task at hand.
Forming: orientation, testing and dependence	Testing and dependence	Orientation to the task

Storming: Resistance to group influence and task requirements	Intragroup conflict	Emotional response to task demands
Norming: Openness to other group members	In group feeling and cohesiveness develop; new standards evolve and new roles are adopted	Open exchanges of relevant interpretations; intimate, personal opinions are expressed
Performing: Constructive action	Roles become flexible and functional; structural issues have been resolved; structure can support task performance	Interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities; group energy is channeled into the task; solutions can emerge
Adjourning: Disengagement	Anxiety about separation and termination; sadness; feelings toward leader and group members	Self-evaluation

Reflecting on Group 3's experiences, I can see where we did (more or less) experience most of these phases. The group held an initial conference call, which always has the feel of "the first date" – everyone is quite polite and careful not to step on any toes! This was our "forming" phase. We didn't really experience a "storming" phase, save my questioning one group member taking the lead of his own accord. That goes against my grain (emotional response to task demands) but my decision to see how it played out for the good of the group was a good one. (In retrospect, I think this group member is a dedicated student who had a major life event scheduled in the middle of this, so he badly wanted to stay on task). As we posted to our discussion board, emailed each other, had an additional conference call, and worked on our project we absolutely moved into norming. At this point we became equals, and group members gravitated to their own personal strengths. SSe asked to be able to do the presentation and first draft of the paper. HM and SSm did NOT want to do the interview. Luckily, MLM was very comfortable interviewing Dr. Alan Tait, and crafting the executive summary. This phase flowed right into performing

where our roles were quite flexible and functional. The group's energy absolutely channeled into the task and our final product was quite good (at least in our opinion!). I suppose this paper is the fifth phase – adjourning (disengagement). I don't believe I'm particularly anxious about separating from my group, but I will say that this was probably the best group experience I've had while taking two master's degrees online. It was collegial, respectful, and highly productive. Sadly, many groups I've been assigned to never quite make it past the storming phase!

Conclusion

I believe a smoothly-working, functional group has its roots in trust. Measom (2016) explores this concept and emphasizes that trust is cultivated through actions and words. Indeed in our group, one of our "norming" principles was to check the group website every 2 days at a minimum to remain current on progress. Measom states "Each member also needs to be able to trust his team members to make a commitment to the team and its goals, work competently with those goals in mind, and communicate consistently about any issues that affect the team" (para 1). I believe Group 3 was successful because we all embraced the ideals of commitment, competence, communication and collaboration, leading to a successful outcome.

This was a well-thought out assignment. It was basically an assignment within an assignment. We got to learn about an expert in distance education, but the larger lesson was experiencing this "mini-soliloquy" effect – observing and reflecting on the process itself, particularly retrospectively. It's actually getting a little Zen!

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