

1.2: Group Life Cycles

Learning Objectives

1. Identify the typical stages in the life cycle of a group

Groups are dynamic systems, in constant change. Groups grow together and eventually come apart. People join groups and others leave. This dynamic changes and transforms the very nature of the group. Group socialization involves how the group members interact with one another and form relationships. Just as you were once born, and changed your family, they changed you. You came to know a language and culture, a value system, and a set of beliefs that influence you to this day. You came to be socialized, to experience the process of learning to associate, communicate, or interact within a group. A group you belong to this year—perhaps a soccer team or the cast of a play—may not be part of your life next year. And those who are in leadership positions may ascend or descend the leadership hierarchy as the needs of the group, and other circumstances, change over time.

Group Life Cycle Patterns

Your life cycle is characterized by several steps, and while it doesn't follow a prescribed path, there are universal stages we can all recognize. You were born. You didn't choose your birth, your parents, your language, or your culture, but you came to know them through communication. You came to know yourself, learned skills, discovered talents, and met other people. You worked, learned, lived, and loved, and as you aged, minor injuries took longer to heal. You competed in ever-increasing age groups in your favorite sport, and while your time for each performance may have increased as you aged, your experience allowed you to excel in other ways. Where you were once the novice, you have now learned something to share. You lived to see some of your friends pass before you, and the moment will arrive when you too must confront death.

In the same way, groups experience similar steps and stages and take on many of the characteristics we associate with life. (Moreland, R., & Levine, J. (1982). Socialization in small groups: temporal changes in individual group relations. (L. Berkowitz, Ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 15, 153). They grow, overcome illness and dysfunction, and transform across time. No group, just as no individual, lives forever.

Your first day on the job may be comparable to the first day you went to school. At home, you may have learned some of the basics, like how to write with a pencil, but knowledge of that skill and its application are two different things. People spoke in different ways at school than at home, and you came to understand the importance of recess, of raising your hand to get the teacher's attention, and how to follow other school rules. At work, you may have trained for your profession, but the academic knowledge only serves as your foundation, much as your socialization at home served to guide you at school. On the job they use jargon terms, have schedules that may include coffee breaks (recess), have a supervisor (teacher), and have their own rules, explicit and understood. On the first day, it was all new, even if many of the elements were familiar.

In order to better understand group development and its life cycle, many researchers have described the universal stages and phases of groups. While there are modern interpretations of these stages, most draw from the model proposed by Tuckman. (Tuckman, B. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384–399). This model, shown in Table 1.2.1, specifies the usual order of the phases of group development, and allows us to predict several stages we can anticipate as we join a new group.

Tuckman begins with the forming stage (also called the orientation stage or orientation phase) as the initiation of group formation. This stage is also called the orientation stage because individual group members come to know each other. Group members who are new to each other and can't predict each other's behavior can be expected to experience the stress of uncertainty. Uncertainty theory states that we choose to know more about others with whom we have interactions in order to reduce or resolve the anxiety associated with the unknown. (Berger, C., & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99–112. Berger, C. (1986). Response uncertain outcome values in predicted relationships: uncertainty reduction theory then and now. *Human Communication Research*, 13, 34–38. Gudykunst, W. (1995). Anxiety/uncertainty management theory. In R. W. Wiseman (Ed.), *Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 8–58). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). The more we know about others, and become accustomed to how they communicate, the better we can predict how they will interact with us in future contexts. If you learn that Monday mornings are never a good time for your supervisor, you quickly learn to schedule meetings later in the week. Individuals are initially tentative and display caution as they begin to learn about the group and its members.

If you don't know someone very well, it is easy to offend. Each group member brings to the group a set of experiences, combined with education and a self-concept. You won't be able to read this information on a name tag, you will only come to know it through time and interaction. Since the possibility of overlapping and competing viewpoints and perspectives exists, the group will experience a storming stage, a time of struggles as the members themselves sort out their differences. There may be more than one way to solve the problem or task at hand, and some group members may prefer one strategy over another. Some members of the group may be senior to the organization in comparison to you, and members may treat them differently. Some group members may be as new as you are and just as uncertain about everyone's talents, skills, roles, and self-perceptions. The wise communicator will anticipate the storming stage and help facilitate opportunities for the members to resolve uncertainty before the work commences. There may be challenges for leadership and conflicting viewpoints. The sociology professor sees the world differently than the physics professor. The sales agent sees things differently than someone from accounting. A manager who understands and anticipates this normal challenge in the group's life cycle can help the group become more productive.

A clear definition of the purpose and mission of the group can help the members focus their energies. Interaction prior to the first meeting can help reduce uncertainty. Coffee and calories can help bring a group together. Providing the group with what they need, and opportunities to know each other, prior to their task can increase efficiency.

Groups that make a successful transition from the storming stage will next experience the norming stage, where the group establishes norms, or informal rules, for behavior and interaction. Who speaks first? Who takes notes? Who is creative and visual, and who is detail-oriented? Sometimes our job titles and functions speak for themselves, but human beings are complex. We are not simply a list of job functions, and in the dynamic marketplace of today's business environment, you will often find that people have talents and skills well beyond their "official" role or task. Drawing on these strengths can make the group more effective.

The norming stage is marked by less division and more collaboration. The level of anxiety associated with interaction is generally reduced, making for a more positive work climate that promotes listening. When people feel less threatened, and their needs are met, they are more likely to focus their complete attention on the purpose of the group. If they are still concerned with who does what, and whether they will speak in error, the interaction framework will stay in the storming stage. Tensions are reduced when the normative expectations are known, and the degree to which a manager can describe these at the outset can reduce the amount of time the group remains in uncertainty. Group members generally express more satisfaction with clear expectations and are more inclined to participate.

Ultimately, the purpose of a workgroup is performance, and the preceding stages lead us to the performing stage, in which the group accomplishes its mandate, fulfills its purpose, and reaches its goals. To facilitate performance, group members can't skip the initiation of getting to know each other, or the sorting out of roles and norms, but they can try to focus on performance with clear expectations from the moment the group is formed. Productivity is often how we measure success in business and industry, and the group has to produce. Outcome assessments may have been built into the system from the beginning and would serve as a benchmark for success. Wise managers know to celebrate success, as it brings more success, social cohesion, group participation, and a sense of job satisfaction. Incremental gains toward a benchmark may also be cause for celebration and support, and failure to reach a goal should be regarded as an opportunity for clarification.

It is generally wiser to focus on the performance of the group rather than individual contributions. Managers and group members will want to offer assistance to underperformers as well as congratulating members for their contributions. If the goal is to create a community where competition pushes each member to perform, individual highlights may serve your needs, but if you want a group to solve a problem or address a challenge as a group, you have to promote group cohesion. Members need to feel a sense of belonging, and praise (or the lack thereof) can be a sword with two edges. One stimulates and motivates, while the other demoralizes and divides.

Groups should be designed to produce and perform in ways and at levels that individuals cannot, or else you should consider compartmentalizing the tasks. The performing stage is where productivity occurs, and it is necessary to make sure the group has what it needs to perform. Missing pieces, parts, or information can stall the group, and reset the cycle to storming all over again. Loss of performance is inefficiency, and that carries a cost. Managers will be measured by the group's productivity and performance, and their success reflects on the manager. Make sure the performing stage is one that is productive and healthy for its members.

Imagine that you are the manager of a group that has produced an award-winning design for an ecologically innovative four-seat car. Their success is your success. Their celebrations are yours, even if you are not the focus of them. A manager manages the process, while group members perform. If you were a member of the group, and you helped design the beltline, you made a fundamental contribution to the style of the car. Individual consumers may never consider the line from the front fender, across the

doors, to the rear taillight as they make a purchase decision, but they will recognize beauty. You will know that you could not have achieved that fundamental part of car design without help from the engineers in the group, and if the number-crunching accountants had not seen the efficiency of the production process that produced it, it may never have survived the transition from prototype to production. The group came together and accomplished its goals with amazing results.

Now, as typically happens eventually with all groups, the time has come to move on to new assignments. In the adjourning stage, group members leave the group. Before you leave the group it may be time for a debriefing, a meeting to go over what worked, what didn't, and ways to improve for next time, or if you are in the US military, to participate in the "After Action Review" or AAR. While it is important to focus on group progress throughout the cycle, closure brings perspective. The completion of any training, mission, task, or journey provides an opportunity to review what occurred with a bit of distance. This stage can provide an important opportunity for managers and group members alike to learn from failure and success.

The group may cease to exist, or it may be transformed with new members and a new set of goals. Your contributions may have caught the attention of management, and you may be assigned to the redesign of the flagship vehicle, the halo car of your marque or brand. It's quite a professional honor, and it's yours because of your successful work in a group. Others will be reassigned to tasks that require their talents and skills, and you may or may not collaborate with them in the future.

You may miss the interactions with the members, even the more cantankerous ones, and will experience both relief and a sense of loss. Like life, the group process is normal, and mixed emotions are to be expected. A wise manager anticipates this stage and facilitates the separation with skill and ease. We often close this process with a ritual marking its passing, though the ritual may be as formal as an award or as informal as a "thank you" or a verbal acknowledgment of a job well done over coffee and calories.

On a more sober note, it is important not to forget that groups can reach the adjourning stage without having achieved success. Some businesses go bankrupt, some departments are closed, and some individuals lose their positions after a group fails to perform. Adjournment can come suddenly and unexpectedly, or gradually and piece by piece. Either way, a skilled business communicator will be prepared and recognize it as part of the classic group life cycle.

Table 1.2.1 Tuckman's Linear Model of Group Development. Tuckman, B. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384–399.

Stages	Activities
Forming	Members come together, learn about each other, and determine the purpose of the group.
Storming	Members engage in more direct communication and get to know each other. Conflicts between group members will often arise during this stage.
Norming	Members establish spoken or unspoken rules about how they communicate and work. Status, rank, and roles in the group are established.
Performing	Members fulfill their purpose and reach their goal.
Adjourning	Members leave the group.

Let's now turn our attention to two other model's group lifecycles. While Tuckman's model is familiar, both Tubbs and Fisher offer two distinct, though similar views. Each model provides an area of emphasis, and all follow a similar progression.

In Tubb's Small Group Communication Theory (1995), the emphasis is on conflict vs. groupthink. As we've discussed, conflict is present in all groups, and we see the danger of groupthink raised in its absence. When the emphasis is on conformity, the group lacks diversity of viewpoints and the tendency to go along with the flow can produce disastrous results.

First Tubb's (Tubbs, Stewart. (1995). *A systems approach to small group interaction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995) asserts that we are involved in an orientation phase. We get to know each other, focus on limitations, opportunities, strengths, and weaknesses, and begin to discuss the task at hand. This stage is followed by the conflict stage, characterized by different viewpoints, disagreements, competing agendas, and debate. This stage is natural and in this model is viewed as necessary to inhibit conformity or groupthink. The consensus stage follows conflict, where group members select some ideas or actions over others and the group proceeds to get the task done. It is characterized by agreement and teamwork. Individual differences are not as apparent, having

been sorted out during the previous conflict stage. All groups end, and once the task has been completed as a result of consensus and action, the group dissolves in the closure stage. This stage often features statements of agreement and support for the result, action, or outcome.

We can compare and contrast Tubb's model of group development to Fisher's (Fisher, B. Aubrey. (1970). Decision emergence: Phases in group decision making. *Speech Monographs*, 37, 53–66) and view both overlap and divergence. Here the emphasis is on the group process of individuals becoming a functioning group that emerges successfully from conflict. The first stage is familiar: Orientation. It is characterized by awkward moments as individuals get to know each other, their backgrounds or special skill areas, and people size each other up. The group turns the corner to conflict where divergent points of view are presented, often characterized by struggles for power or a speech turn. As the group descends into conflict there can emerge allies and challengers, as members persuade each other and present alternatives. This process continues until one viewpoint, course of action, or path becomes the generally-agreed upon course for the group, and they emerge together in the emergence stage. Dissension and argument are no longer features of the conversation, and the emphasis is on action. The team acts and then progresses to the reinforcement stage, characterized by affirmations and statements of agreement or support for the task or actions. Group members often look to each other for support at this stage, and it sharply contrasts with the preceding conflict stage, where opposing viewpoints were aired. The emphasis is on group members to reinforce each other and the decision or outcome.

Finally, we can consider Poole's (Poole, Marshall Scott, & Roth, Jonelle. (1989). Decision development in small groups V: Test of a contingency model. *Human Communication Research*, 15, 549–589) approach to group development, itself a distinct and divergent model that provides additional insight into group dynamics. In the case of Tuckman, Tubbs, and Fisher, we can observe a step-by-step process from start to finish. Poole asserts group development is far more complex but offers three distinct, interdependent tracks or patterns of communication that overlap, start and stop, and go back and forth as the group wrestles with the challenges. Here the emphasis is on the transitions between the two main tracks: Topic and Relation. In the topic track, group members discuss the topic and all the relevant issues as they explore how to approach it, get a handle on it, or resolve it. In the relation track, group members also discuss themselves, self-disclosure information, and ask questions to learn more about each other. It relates to reducing uncertainty between group members, and sometimes the group shifts from the topic track to the relationship track as members sort out personal issues or work on relationships. In this moment where the group shifts between the two main tracks emerges a third track: breakpoints. The breakpoint stage is characterized by turns in the conversation that regulate interaction, from an actual break in the discussion like a coffee break to a shift in the conversation to something they all have in common, like participation in a softball league. Breakpoints can also include postponement, where decisions are delayed to allow for further research or consideration, regression in the conversation, where topics once considered and addressed are raised yet again, or even adjournment, where the group closes for a time, for the day, or disbands to address new tasks as members of new groups.

Finally, let's turn our attention to assessing whether the group is working together, pulling apart, and ways to improve group interactions. An effective group can be recognized in several ways including:

- Group members are active, interested, and involved.
- Group members are comfortable; no obvious tensions.
- Group members understand and accept the task, goal, or activity.
- Disagreement is resolved amicably.
- Active listening behaviors can be frequently observed.
- Group members interact freely; no one member is in control.
- Group members openly discuss their progress.
- Criticism is present, accepted, and discussed openly.

These signs allow us insight into the group dynamics, and we can observe how they contribute to task completion as well as group health. Conversely, there are also several ways we can recognize when a group is ineffective:

- Some group members are not active, interested, or involved.
- Group member interactions include obvious tensions.
- Group members do not understand or accept the task, goal, or activity; passive/aggressive behaviors may be present.
- Disagreement is not resolved.
- Active listening behaviors cannot be frequently observed.
- Group members do not interact freely; one member is in control.
- Group members do not discuss their progress.
- Criticism is not present; groupthink is a significant risk.

With these telltale signs in mind, we can take an active part in promoting an active, effective, and healthy group:

- Encourage every member to contribute, speak, or share their thoughts.
- Encourage every member to understand their role, and everyone's roles, and how they complement each other.
- Encourage interdependence and interaction.
- Encourage the group to build on their common strengths and skills, celebrating incremental success.
- Encourage active listening and refrain from interruptions.
- Encourage group members to assess their collective progress frequently.

In this section we have examined group development and several theories on how groups come together, complete their task, goal, or activity, and grow apart. Just like interpersonal relationships include signs of health and prosperity, so do groups. The effective group leader understands both group process and ways to make a positive difference.

- Individual members demonstrate interest and involvement.
- There are no obvious tensions.
- It is clear the group understands and accepts the task.
- Listen behaviors are clearly demonstrated.
- Difference of opinion or viewpoint doesn't upset the group. Humor is a common characteristic, and tensions that may arise are quickly and amicably resolved.
- People feel free to express their viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings. Criticism is considered by group members and not considered as a personal attack.
- Consensus in decision-making is apparent.
- No one individual dominates the group.
- The group self-regulates, evaluating progress, regrouping, or advancing towards a common goal.
- Group member roles are clear and accepted.

An ineffective group can also be recognized in several ways:

- Some topics are not discussed and understood as off-limits.
- There is a sense of urgency, preferring advancement and task completion before consideration or consensus.
- One or more group members dominate the discussion.
- Individual members demonstrate a lack of interest and involvement.
- There are obvious tensions.
- It is clear the group does not understand or accept the task. Group members are arguing in cycles, returning again and again to themes with no resolution.
- Listen behaviors are not clearly demonstrated.
- Difference of opinion or viewpoint upsets the group. Tensions rise with the expression of criticism.
- Criticism is not considered by group members and often interpreted as a personal attack.
- Consensus in decision-making is not apparent.
- The group does not self-regulate, and little discussion on group progress is present.
- Group member roles are not clear or accepted.

As we close our discussion on group development, let's consider five action steps members can encourage to help a group become more effective:

- Group members take turns speaking and listening and do not interrupt.
- Group members acknowledge and combine their strengths.
- Group members separate the issues from personalities, the message from the messenger.
- Group members outline action steps and discuss progress periodically.
- Group members clearly understand their roles and responsibilities.

Key Takeaway

Groups come together and grow apart in predictable patterns.

Exercise 1.2.1

1. Is it possible for an outsider (a non-group member) to help a group move from the storming stage to the norming stage? Explain your answer and present it to the class.
2. Think of a group of which you are a member and identify some roles played by group members, including yourself. Have your roles, and those of others, changed over time? Are some roles more positive than others? Discuss your answers with your classmates.
3. In the course where you are using this book, think of yourself and your classmates as a group. At what stage of group formation are you currently? What stage will you be at when the school year ends?

This page titled [1.2: Group Life Cycles](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Michael Brown](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.

- **3.1: Group Life Cycles** by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/an-introduction-to-group-communication>.