

## 2.3: Group Life Cycles and Member Roles

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify the typical stages in the life cycle of a group
2. Describe different types of group members and group member roles

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, and 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 2.3.1, 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 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. 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 2.3.1 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.

## The Life Cycle of Member Roles

Just as groups go through a life cycle when they form and eventually adjourn, so the members of groups fulfill different roles during this life cycle. These roles, proposed by Moreland and Levine, (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) are summarized in Table 2.3.2

Suppose you are about to graduate from school, and you are in the midst of an employment search. You've gathered extensive information on a couple of local businesses and are aware that they will be participating in the university job fair. You've explored their websites, talked to people currently employed at each company, and learned what you can from the public information available. At this stage, you are considered a potential member. You may have an electrical, chemical, or mechanical engineering degree soon, but you are not a member of an engineering team.

You show up at the job fair in professional attire and completely prepared. The representatives of each company are respectful, cordial, and give you contact information. One of them even calls a member of the organization on the spot and arranges an interview for you next week. You are excited at the prospect and want to learn more. You are still a potential member.

The interview goes well the following week. The day after the meeting you receive a call for a follow-up interview, which leads to a committee interview. A few weeks later, the company calls you with a job offer. However, in the meantime, you have also been

interviewing with other potential employers, and you are waiting to hear back from two of them. You are still a potential member.

After careful consideration, you decide to take the job offer and start the next week. The projects look interesting, you'll be gaining valuable experience, and the commute to work is reasonable. Your first day on the job is positive, and they've assigned you a mentor. The conversations are positive, but at times you feel lost, as if they are speaking a language you can't quite grasp. As a new group member, your level of acceptance will increase as you begin learning the groups' rules, spoken and unspoken. (Fisher, B. A. (1970). Decision emergence: phases in group decision making. *Speech Monographs*, 37, 56–66). You will gradually move from the potential member role to the role of a new group member as you learn to fit into the group.



Figure 2.3.1: As a member of a new group, you will learn new customs and traditions © Jupiter Images

Over time and projects, you gradually increase your responsibilities. You are no longer looked at as the new person, and you can follow almost every conversation. You can't quite say "I remember when" because your tenure hasn't been that long, but you are a known quantity and know your way around. You are a full member of the group. Full members enjoy knowing the rules and customs, and can even create new rules. New group members look to full members for leadership and guidance. Full group members can control the agenda and have considerable influence on the agenda and activities.

Full members of a group, however, can and do come into conflict. When you were a new member, you may have remained silent when you felt you had something to say, but now you state your case. There is more than one way to get the job done. You may suggest new ways that emphasize efficiency over existing methods. Co-workers who have been working in the department for several years may be unwilling to adapt and change, and tension may result. Expressing different views can cause conflict and may even interfere with communication.

When this type of tension arises, divergent group members pull back, contribute less, and start to see themselves as separate from the group. Divergent group members have less eye contact, seek out each other's opinions less frequently, and listen defensively. At the beginning of the process, you felt a sense of belonging, but now you don't. Marginal group members start to look outside the group for their interpersonal needs.

After several months of trying to cope with these adjustments, you decide that you never really investigated the other two companies; that your job search process was incomplete. Perhaps you should take a second look at the options. You will report to work on Monday but will start the process of becoming an ex-member, one who no longer belongs. You may experience a sense of relief upon making this decision, given that you haven't felt like you belonged to the group for a while. When you line up your next job and submit your resignation, you make it official.

Table 2.3.2 The Life Cycle of Member Roles. (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).

1	Potential Member	Curiosity and Interest
2	New Member	Joined the group but still an outsider, and unknown
3	Full Member	Knows the "rules" and is looked to for leadership
4	Divergent Member	Focuses on differences
5	Marginal Member	No longer involved
6	Ex-Member	No longer considered a member

This process has no set timetable. Some people overcome differences and stay in the group for years. Others get promoted and leave the group only when they get transferred to regional headquarters. As a skilled communicator, you will recognize the signs of divergence, just like you anticipate the storming stage, and do your best to facilitate success.

## Positive and Negative Member Roles

If someone in your group always makes everyone laugh, that can be a distinct asset when the news is less than positive. At times when you have to get work done, however, the class clown may become a distraction. Notions of positive and negative will often depend on the context when discussing groups. Table 2.3.3 and Table 2.3.4 list both positive and negative roles people sometimes play in a group setting. (Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 41–49; McLean, S. (2005). *The Basics of Interpersonal Communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon).

Table 2.3.3 Positive Roles. (Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 41–49; McLean, S. (2005). *The Basics Of Interpersonal Communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon).

Initiator-Coordinator	Suggests new ideas or new ways of looking at the problem
Elaborator	Builds on ideas and provides examples
Coordinator	Brings ideas, information, and suggestions together
Evaluator-Critic	Evaluates ideas and provides constructive criticism
Recorder	Records ideas, examples, suggestions, and critiques

Table 2.3.4 Negative Roles (Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 41–49; McLean, S. (2005). *The Basics of Interpersonal Communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon).

Dominator	Dominates discussion, not allowing others to take their turn
Recognition Seeker	Relates discussion to their accomplishments, seeks attention
Special-Interest Pleader	Relates discussion to special interest or personal agenda
Blocker	Blocks attempts at consensus consistently
Joker or Clown	Seeks attention through humor and distracts group members

Now that we've examined a classical view of positive and negative group member roles, let's examine another perspective. While some personality traits and behaviors may negatively influence groups, some are positive or negative depending on the context.

Just as the class clown can have a positive effect in lifting spirits or a negative effect in distracting members, so a dominator may be exactly what is needed for quick action. An emergency physician doesn't have time to ask all the group members in the emergency unit how they feel about a course of action; instead, a self-directed approach based on training and experience may be necessary. In contrast, the pastor of a church may have ample opportunity to ask members of the congregation their opinions about a change in the format of Sunday services; in this situation, the role of coordinator or elaborator is more appropriate than that of dominator.

The group is together because they have a purpose or goal, and normally they are capable of more than any one individual member could be on their own, so it would be inefficient to hinder that progress. But a blocker, who cuts off collaboration, does just that. If a group member interrupts another and presents a viewpoint or information that suggests a different course of action, the point may be well taken and serve the collaborative process. If that same group member repeatedly engages in blocking behavior, then the behavior becomes a problem. A skilled communicator will learn to recognize the difference, even when positive and negative aren't completely clear.

## Key Takeaway

Groups and their individual members come together and grow apart in predictable patterns.

### Exercise 2.3.1

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?
4. Think of a group you no longer belong to. At what point did you become an ex-member? Were you ever a marginal group member or a full member? Write a 2–3 paragraph description of the group, how and why you became a member, and how and why you left. Share your description with a classmate.

This page titled [2.3: Group Life Cycles and Member Roles](#) 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.

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