

The Stages of Teamwork

My *ISHN* contributions (October and November) addressed the advantages of using teams to get the best out of behavior-based safety. In October I discussed paradigm shifts needed for successful teamwork, and my November contribution defined the roles of seven different teams in the quest for a Total Safety Culture. Here I want to review the four developmental stages of teams. Work groups on a shared mission progress through four phases on their way to becoming high-performance teams. And the most effective team leaders adjust their style depending upon a team's stage of development. Thus, an awareness of these four stages of teamwork can enable understanding and patience among team members as well as inspire effective team leadership.

Although researchers, scholars, and organizational consultants have used different terms to refer to the four developmental stages of teamwork, there is no disagreement that these four stages exist and call for special kinds of leadership. The most popular labels for these progressive phases are: forming, storming, norming, and performing.

During the early stages of group interaction (forming and storming), work groups need structure and a clear vision and mission statement. At this time, an autocratic or directive leadership style is often most appropriate, although it's advantageous to get input from group members before the first group meeting. After the group members become familiar with each other and start implementing their assignments (the norming and performing stages), a democratic leadership style is usually most effective.

Interpersonal trust (as I addressed in my *ISHN* column last March and April) is lowest during the first stage (forming) and highest during the fourth stage

(performing). Understanding that teams do not really perform efficiently until the fourth stage enables leaders to set realistic expectations. Team members facilitate beneficial teamwork and feel better about their meetings when they recognize the need for certain roles per stage.

Forming

Structure and assertive leadership should be anticipated at the forming stage when group members are getting to know each other, including sizing up each member's role and potential influence in achieving the team's mission. Members begin to evaluate each other with regard to the interpersonal trust factors discussed in my *ISHN* article last April. More precisely, during the forming stage the leader of team meetings should:

- Provide vision, structure, and clear direction.
- Allow for participants to get to know one another.
- Demonstrate active listening skills.
- Promote active and total involvement.
- Establish ground rules for team meetings (see my *ISHN* article last May about getting the most out of group meetings).
- Create a climate of interdependency and optimism.
- Provide education and training when needed to accomplish team goals.

Storming

After a cordial beginning the storming stage takes over. Here's when team members engage in debate, argument, conflict, and basic power struggles. Interpersonal trust is questioned at this stage, as some members attempt to assert personal control or individual superiority. Some participants get frustrated with lack of

team progress and consider the meetings a waste of time. Strong leadership is needed at this stage to keep the group on task. As a facilitator and teacher, the effective leader helps team members weather the storm by:

- Expressing positive expectations and optimism.
- Acknowledging that conflict is normal.
- Reminding members of the team mission and goals.
- Pointing out the value of diversity.
- Guiding discussion toward consensus.
- Getting members to assume mission-related responsibilities.
- Providing mission-related education and training.

Norming

The group members begin productive teamwork during the norming stage. They develop roles for working together, they realize each others talents, and they develop mutual trust and respect. Group cohesion grows as members begin to understand their own roles in the group process, and witness interdependency and synergy. The effective leader in this stage gives up control and serves as a cheerleader and coach by:

- Providing behavior-based feedback and support.
- Encouraging total participation.
- Recognizing individual and group accomplishments.
- Being flexible and allowing for less structure.
- Working to prevent groupthink (which is a type of thinking in which team members share such strong motivation to achieve consensus that they lose the ability to critically evaluate alternative points of view).

- Asking for suggestions on how to improve.
- Promoting interpersonal trust and group cohesion.

Performing

The most synergy is realized in the performing stage. Team thinking, team behavior, and team loyalty are the norm. Individuals identify with the team and take pride in team accomplishments. Interdependency and interpersonal trust peaks during this stage, so much so that team members cover for one another even without request. Social loafing is not a problem, but "burnout" is possible. Now the team leader is inconspicuous, serving as sponsor and consultant by:

- Providing advice and new information as needed.
- Giving supportive and corrective feedback at the team level.
- Planning and sponsoring group celebrations of milestones.
- Allowing the team to manage itself.
- Providing relevant training and education.
- Watching for signs of burnout.
- Keeping communication open, honest, and candid.

Adjourning

Before ending a discussion of the team development process and its relationship to leadership and the cultivation of interpersonal trust, I need to explain one final stage of group dynamics -- adjourning. This occurs when the group achieves its mission, celebrates its achievements, and possibly disbands. It's important for groups to realize when it's time to change its operation or its membership. It's possible group members will enjoy their fellowship so much they will resist breaking up or changing membership.

A team leader can facilitate a healthy transition and renewal to a new team mission, to a new team with the same mission, or to complete termination.

For most, if not all, of the various teams for behavior-based safety, this fifth stage is really transforming rather than adjourning. Circumstances might allow for the combining of teams or team missions. With less need for a formal safety incentive program, for example, an incentive/reward team could combine with the celebration team and/or the preventive active team as described in my *ISHN* column last month. Or an ergonomics team could be combined with an incident analysis team.

My point here is that a change in company policies, priorities, or personnel might call for a re-organization of safety teams. But there will always be a need for teamwork around three critical functions: a) overseeing and reviewing behavior-based safety programs and processes (a Safety Steering Team), b) observing work practices and providing feedback and coaching (an Observation & Feedback Team), and c) holding people accountable for substituting safe for at-risk behavior (an Accountability/Motivation Team). So when it comes to industrial safety, the fifth stage of team development is much more likely to be renewal, reorganization, or transformation than adjournment.

In Conclusion

In this third consecutive column on teamwork I defined four basic stages of team development -- forming, storming, norming, and performing. I also defined a final phase which might be adjourning, but more likely is renewing or transforming when it comes to occupational safety and health. I recommend telling group members up-front about the phases of team development. When team members anticipate the anxieties of forming and the conflicts of storming, they might get less frustrated waiting for a more productive

norming stage. This can also give them reason to patiently look forward to the interpersonal trust, innovation, and synergy of the performing stage of teamwork. Then with the vision of a high-performance team generated by mutual trust, respect, and a desire to achieve the best, people empower themselves to reap the real benefits of teamwork, as reflected in the four letters of TEAM -- **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner,
Safety Performance Solutions

NOTE: Dr. Geller has recently authored a book on "Building Successful Safety Teams" published by J. J. Keller and Associates. For more information on this book and related videotapes, audiotapes, seminars, and industry-based consultation, please call Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).