

# PEER-LED TEAM LEARNING LEADER TRAINING

## THE “STORMING” STAGE: CONFLICT AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING

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They were arguing as loud as a thunderstorm. Two of the students in my Chemistry workshop got up from their seats, one after the other; standing closer and closer with their fingers pointing at the board while their heads were facing each other. They turned their discussion of the chemistry problem into a quarrel. Suddenly, here was an illustration of conflict, the storming stage, the second stage of Tuckman's (1965) four stages of group development. Yet the outcome of this incident indicated something that is not mentioned in Tuckman's theory, and that is the potential for achieving learning.

Originally, Tuckman's model examined groups for small group military training purposes. The initial names for the four stages were: Orientation/testing/dependence, conflict, group cohesion, and functional role-relatedness. Tuckman renamed these into the better-known terms: “forming, storming, norming, and performing,” as he said the changes were easier to understand and more convenient to use. In addition, the fifth stage called “adjourning” was added later, but because it had much less empirical and practical observations than the other four stages it is often not mentioned (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). After the theory had been published, it became popular and frequently used around the world. Moreover, it was adopted to a great extent for use in educational research and educational psychology such as studying the development of a small group of students (Smith, 2005).

The educational version has a slightly different focus in small group development. Unlike Tuckman's original model, which focused only on describing group members' behaviors, the educational model is more concentrated in describing students' emotional reaction, task achievements, and interpersonal relationship (E.T.I for short) in each stage. For instances, in the storming stage, the educational model describes the student's E.T.I as competitive between students in gaining self-esteem. Students are no longer being shy and uncomfortable about the environment. Competing between each other, however, helps the students to establish their interpersonal relationship and development in the storming stage (Stetson, 2003). On the other hand, Tuckman's original description was mainly about “intragroup conflict,” meaning group members are hostile toward each other as an expression of their individualities. Lack of unity is the theme of the storming stage. Although I specifically separated Tuckman's theory into two versions to draw a comparison, nowadays, “Tuckman's four stages of group development” generally implies the educational version as it is frequently applied for educational research purposes.

A real life educational example would be more convincing than a theoretical explanation. The incident I experienced was started by a simple unit conversion problem. I called on a student to work out a problem on the blackboard while the rest would be the judge, determining whether the answer was correct. The disagreement started soon after the student finished writing on the board. A second student became the

primary questioner, harshly judging the answer on the board. Suddenly, the student at the board and the questioner seemed to lose their senses. The questioner stood up from his seat and faced the board-writer. This was the first aggressive move that alarmed me. Out of instinct, I moved to stand between them and tried to distract them to ease the tension between the two students. My purpose was to stop the confrontation, so I put on a big smile and offered to finish the problem myself. But this was ineffective to cool down the heat of this argument. They ignored me and kept on talking. At that moment, I knew the situation was getting serious because these two students were not paying any attention to the rest of the group or to me. By the time I analyzed the situation, the intense discussion had already evolved into a quarrel. Meanwhile, the students who at first were either enjoying the incident or had been apathetic about it now shared the identical facial expressions: wide-opened eyes and an “O” shaped mouth.

An immediate solution was needed to terminate this quarrel before it could get out of control like a forest fire. A hundred ideas instantly came across my mind, but only a few of them were qualified to fit the role of a workshop leader. I knew I wanted to be polite, not discouraging, and especially non-violent. I tried *what I could think of*: clapping, tapping shoulders, trying to persuade them, but this only increased my feelings of frustration and stupidity. Worst of all, at that moment I felt physically invisible even though I was right in front of them. Seeing me struggling and exhausted from my attempts to cool off the argument, some of the other students joined me, trying to stop the two students from continuing the quarrel. They too stopped in frustration.

Up to this point, everything was happening according to Tuckman’s theory. During the storming stage, conflicts will be raised due to differences in agenda, leadership, and authority. Competition and aggression are the common types of conflict, which according to Dixon (2000), may also be called Self-Oriented Behaviors, which are “disruptive and impede group progress” (p. 16). *Competition* describes students who tend to try to gain favor from leaders or peers by demonstrating knowledge. *Aggression*, similarly, describes students who tend to show hostility by criticizing or belittling other students. These two students of mine, fortunately, were demonstrating competitive behavior, in which they were trying to gain validation from their peers through arguing for a correct answer. However, this is as far as the description goes regarding the storming stage while my story has not ended yet.

“That’s it,” I thought “I am giving up.” I certainly knew there could be a hundred reasons for me not to give up, but those two students were totally living in their own world at that moment. Even if I kept on trying, the result would be that I would be talking to myself. The other students started to put both of their hands on their faces, signaling “I give up.” I gave another glance at the two students, feeling remorse for my own defeat, when a miracle happened. The two students stopped arguing.

A moment of strange silence filled the room. Then the chattering resumed, but this time it was different. No more anger or disagreement was mixed into the conversation between the two students: they had reached understanding and agreement. They shook hands and returned to their own seats as if those past five minutes had never happened. It was a great relief for me as well as to the other students. Watching this miraculous scene, I could not help knowing that I had started to smile, and then I asked “That question was easy, right?”

From this personal experience, Tuckman’s theory is well-supported and illustrated in terms of predicting specific events and the approximate stage of development of such an occurrence. However, the theory failed to state the learning achievements for the students within each stage. For instance, during the storming stage

in my workshop, although those two students might have had an unpleasant time in arguing right or wrong, they still made a forward step in learning. In fact, arguing can be seen as a good way for genuine ideas to get exchanged, simply because no one wants to be the loser. When students argue, they will use the best of their knowledge to defend themselves, and this is how each participant is benefited. When either side wins or loses, the idea of that subject matter gets reinforced better than merely doing exercises or reviewing textbooks, or perhaps simply by discussing a problem. This missing part from Tuckman's theory is essential to group learning because it is consistent with the priority objective of workshops, to facilitate learning, moving from storming to norming, and performing. After all, Tuckman's four stages of development still are a reliable suggestion of what a group goes through in developing into a team. To do this as a learning technique, to have students understand the merits of debate without devolving into a negative experience, will need development and practice. This idea also speaks to the need to look at what participants learned at each stage, so that team members become aware of their own processes, learning about what they learn – the course material and how they learn - group dynamics.

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