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CAREERS

The Dynamics of Team Formation

by Robert W. Wallace



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Abstract

In a previous article, [Making Teamwork Work: The Importance of Diverse Psychological Types](#), the author described the varied personalities to be found in research teams, and how, when brought together to achieve a common goal, those differing temperaments can combine in creative and productive ways. But what actually happens in the course of that collaboration? Here, the author looks at some of the pangs and processes undergone by an evolving team.

As many researchers have learned the hard way, forming a team that can function effectively over time to achieve a difficult task is not an effortless process, and certainly not instantaneous. Frequently, it takes more time for the diverse individuals on the team to come together as a community than it does actually to accomplish the work. But as Robert Reusing, acting director of programs and services for the [Foundation for Community Encouragement](#), says, "Community building is a practice, much like yoga or meditation. It can be cultivated with an ongoing effort."

The path that a group or team typically follows when seeking to become a productive community is described by psychiatrist [M. Scott Peck](#) in his book [The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace](#). Peck's writings have focused largely on the spiritual growth of individuals, and at first glance they may seem an inappropriate model for team formation in a research or academic environment. However, I believe that Peck's approach is very powerful in this context. To me, there is nothing more spiritual than exploring the frontiers of our understanding of life.

**A
spiritual-growth
book is a good
model for
team building.**

At the end of *The Different Drum*, Peck describes how he believes his model applies to a variety of different types of organizations; and numerous consultants, such as Robert Reusing, have worked over the past 10 to 15

years to successfully facilitate community building in private, business, and academic organizations within a wide diversity of cultures. Manufacturing, service and high-tech companies - even the United States Army - have used the principles of community building to develop more effective teams, notes Reusing.

Upon first forming, a team will usually try to "fake it," writes Peck, who refers to this stage as "pseudocommunity." "The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant to one another and avoiding all disagreement. . . . The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance. . . . The basic pretence is the denial of individual differences." Obviously this is not a state in which individuals with the diverse personality types that make up a properly formulated team (see [Making Teamwork Work: The Importance of Diverse Psychological Types](#), HMS *Beagle*) will be very productive. Team members squelch what they truly think in order to avoid conflict with other members of the group. Such reticence is a poor formula for developing novel solutions to a pressing research problem or negotiating an effective compromise for a difficult set of conflicting priorities. I've participated in a number of groups that never seemed to get beyond pseudocommunity. We meet on a routine basis, go through the motions, and are all very pleasant, but usually nothing of substance gets accomplished. Eventually the group disintegrates as we all find more important work to do.

The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance.

After wallowing in pseudocommunity, the team, if it continues to work as a team, may next progress into what Peck calls "chaos." As the group gets to this stage, it becomes increasingly obvious that differences of opinion and viewpoint do exist between the individuals in the group. This is a period where "individual differences are, unlike those in pseudocommunity, right out in the open. Only now, instead of trying to hide or ignore them, the group is attempting to obliterate them. . . . The stage of chaos is a time of fighting and struggle," writes Peck. It is an unpleasant period and carries the danger that the group may disintegrate as a functional unit. Sometimes the team leader will be the subject of attack and, if he or she does not understand the overall dynamic, may give up in despair, vowing that this group of people will never be able to work together effectively.

Should the team survive the chaos phase, the next step toward community, according to Peck's paradigm, is "emptiness." In this stage the group enters a phase of letting go: those who felt the need to be in control of the group give up their need to control. Individual members drop their preconceptions, expectations, prejudices, and pet solutions to the problem at hand. In many ways this is a time of exhaustion. The team members collectively recognize that no one person has all the answers and begin to feel that they must come together in honesty and sincerity to work as a single entity. Once this stage, a stage of "death" in Peck's terminology, is reached - if it is ever reached - then it is but a short jaunt into community.

Mature communities ask individuals to relinquish control.

In community, the team is ready to do its work. The team is now a safe place, where widely diverse opinions and approaches may be expressed and are welcomed. Now, each individual is free to make his or her unique contribution to the work of the team as a whole. At this stage the group's effectiveness and creativity are at their maximum and the team is much more than the sum of the individual members' contributions. Community can be a time of great synergy. Brainstorming can be very effective as novel ideas emerge because each individual feels free to make his or her contribution to the vision of the group. Once the group finds its way into community, the actual work that the group needs to accomplish frequently gets done rapidly, and problems that once seem impossible to solve often are found to have obvious solutions.

Unfortunately, this community phase may be fleeting. Ongoing teams may move from community all the way back to chaos or pseudocommunity, and then have to work their way back through emptiness and into community, again and again over the life of the team. There seems to be no way to permanently freeze the team in community; the team-building process must continue throughout the life of the group.

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The standard model for stages of team development in organizations, which is routinely taught in team-management courses, is the [forming, storming, norming, and performing](#) paradigm. In many ways it is similar to Peck's model: forming compares to pseudocommunity, storming to chaos, and performing to community. The big difference between the models, says Robert Reusing, are the stages of norming and emptiness. In norming, the members of the group may finally understand its task, or else one dominant member of the group may persuade the other members that their vision is the best and everyone follows. Emptiness, on the other hand, consists of all the team members letting go of their individual agendas to allow something to emerge from the group as a whole that may be unexpected and highly innovative.

The standard forming, storming, norming, performing paradigm is likely to be found in organizations where a centralized "command-and-control" management style is dominant. The community-building paradigm described by Peck, on the other hand, will only work in organizations where the individual team members are fully empowered to work as integral members of the team rather than an extension or representative of a manager who is outside of the team.

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[Community in the Workplace Website](#) - offers a reading list, annotated online resources, book reviews, and a list of community-building institutes and centers.

[Team Technology](#) - offers articles, exercises, and links on team building using the Myers-Briggs test.

[Team Building Articles](#) - contains a collection of related articles. From [Teambuildinginc.com](#).

[Center for the Study of Work Teams](#) - provides access to articles as well as educational and research information.

[Teamzene](#) - offers ideas and techniques to help build effective teams. [Past issues](#) are archived.

[Stages of Team Development](#) - reviews team development including Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing.

Related HMS *Beagle* article:

- [Making Teamwork Work: The Importance of Diverse Psychological Types](#) - examines psychological type as it relates to teamwork.

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