



**Working together seamlessly includes first navigating through turbulence**

Dr. Shari L. Frisinger | Sājet Solutions

© 2014 2021

## Introduction

Teams have just as many opportunities to falter and fail and they do to prosper and succeed. Teams, and team members themselves, progress through developmental stages where members learn to work within the team constraints and with each other.

Successful teams have insightful leaders who can help them navigate through the turbulence and allow them to bask in the smooth flights. All teams grow through stages, although this growth may not be linear or sequential. There are even times when teams will regress – and that is not to be taken as a negative!

## Stage 1 - Forming

Forming is the first stage. Your team could be in this stage because they have not worked together before (despite having known one another prior to becoming a team) or because there are one or more new members. The interpersonal interactions will shift whenever a new member joins the team, a current member leaves the team, and any time a perceived 'power shift' occurs. Having a contract pilot or flight attendant as part of your crew falls into this stage; transitioning from a contract crew member to a permanent crew member also puts the team back in this stage. Both excitement (starting something new) and uncertainty (how each member fits into the group dynamics and what role they will play) surround the team.

Generally speaking, people are on their 'best behavior' in this stage. They want to make a good impression and get along with other team members. They may be hesitant to ask for clarification on team dynamics, deciding instead to wait for answers. Individual contributors are adjusting to being part of a team. What may appear to be a cohesive or productive team is in reality each team member finding their 'place'. People may agree with the majority or status quo because they are hesitant to voice their disagreement.

However, there are times when someone (usually the new person to the team), in an effort to prove they 'deserve' to be on the team, will take a more proactive or aggressive stand on a situation. This could be giving deeper or more elaborate explanations, asking very specific and detailed questions, or insistently raising what they believe are potential issues. A pilot may be emphatic about FBO's or hotels in a certain location. In private, they need positive feedback, emphasizing the strengths they bring to the team.

Unconscious assessments are made by each team member about the dynamics, personalities, positions and roles of others. Interpersonal bonds begin to form. Expectations are reinforced, tabled or diminished. The challenge in this stage is to understand how members work as a team to complete the necessary tasks and communicate in an efficient and professional manner.

### *What to look for:*

- Any team member that appears to be hesitant in speaking up.
- Groupthink – everyone in total agreement.

### *Actions to take:*

- It is important that you outline your expectations and provide guidance and organization to the team.
- Culture norms and what defines 'successes' also need to be clearly conveyed.

Teams progress to the next stage because their communication processes begin to break down. Specifically communication between team members, who takes (or is supposed to take) what actions, resolving conflict and making decisions. This leads us to our next stage, the **storming** stage.

## Stage 2 - Storming

The storming stage occurs when team members become more comfortable with their position in the group and with each other. Work ethics, biases and assumptions, insecurities and needs, and positive and negative attitudes all become more visible in team interactions. Excuses for disruptive behaviors become apparent and these may or may not be tolerated. Commitment can waver, as can apathy and professionalism. This stage is the most difficult to get through. Team members begin to show their true personalities and arguments become more common. Perceived conflicting goals are fought over and informal leadership positions can be challenged. Behaviors that previously were accepted are now contested. The status quo is questioned and alternatives are presented. Limits are tested and quarrels erupt. Sides are taken and inter-team groups are formed. Relationships are cemented or smashed. Productivity can decline and undermining may occur.

This stage is critical in the team's development. Much like a caterpillar spinning a cocoon, struggling to break through that enclosure to shrink its body and stretch its wings, the team must learn effective behavioral and emotional communication methods. These events teach team members how to settle disagreements and resolve conflict more professionally.

This is the stage where tempers can get out of control and safety can unknowingly be compromised\*. This is also the stage where you, as the leader, can demonstrate the constructive ways to handle conflict. One of the best ways to do so is to ask questions – clarifying, explanatory, or paraphrasing. This changes the 'source of power' and dynamics of the conflict and gives all parties the opportunity to be heard and to regain their emotional footing. It also provides a venue for the offended and offending parties to explain their perspective which usually leads to a focus on the true discrepancies.

This is not to say that the trials and tribulations of this stage are negative. Long-standing or outdated procedures can be revamped, leading to increased efficiency. The consequences and complacency of groupthink are shattered. Teams can emerge more accepting of each other's' strengths and weaknesses, realizing that these differences can allow the team to accomplish more than if everyone thought alike.

### ***What to look for:***

- Cliques forming and a sense of tension in the air.
- Disagreement that get heated, loud or unruly.

### ***Actions to take:***

- It is important that you maintain your composure and not get sucked into the disagreements or take sides without hearing all views.
- Provide a safe environment for your crew members to raise issues, challenges and concerns.
- Be a role model on resolving differences and conflict. Ask questions, validate their emotions and help them identify the root cause of the arguments.

## Stage 3 - Norming

The third stage of team development is a result of team members accepting each other's personalities and quirks, and settling into a routine - rules and procedures of how to get things done. Ground rules and culture norms are accepted and followed. Different opinions have been expressed and discrepancies worked through. Team members know where they collaborate best (and what to do to make that happen), and compromises are made. Each person has found their expertise and others acknowledge their area. Minor annoyances are disregarded as team members realize the give-and-take among each other. Motivation can increase, and less direction and formal instruction is necessary.

Patterns are formed in this stage, along with unspoken rules and behaviors. Loyalty between team members becomes stronger. Differences are appreciated, and collaboration comes more naturally and easily.

The team's success becomes more important than individual success. Feedback is not taken personally and ideas and suggestions for improvement are welcomed.

Those people not interacting with the team on a regular basis may find it difficult to persuade the team to accept different procedures. Complacency can begin in this stage, because people will begin to feel unchallenged. The status quo is often accepted as the best that can be achieved.

### *What to look for:*

- Apathy and sloppiness in performing tasks.
- Low energy levels and few new ideas.

### *Actions to take:*

- It is important that you remain alert to any signs of complacency or decreased productivity and take action to stop it in its infancy.
- Provide opportunities for each team member to challenge themselves by stretching their thinking and expanding their skills.

## Stage 4 - Performing

Not all teams make it to this last stage, despite their best efforts. This stage is the product of teams working through their conflict, settling disagreements, and appreciating the work environment. Each team member has a vested interest in the success of the team and the projects, and can disregard minor annoyances. They are confident that the team will respond (or react) as one unit, and mutual respect exists between members. Performance in this stage depends greatly on knowledge, practice and effort. Consistency, trust and comfort exist in the department. This stage is often referred to as "working as a well-oiled machine".

Procedures and 'rules of engagement' are second nature in this stage. Lines that should not be crossed are not crossed. There are very few surprises in the actions people take. Everyone performs according to their 'role' and will pick up any task if another falls behind in their duties. Each individual team member knows what the team's purpose is and the expected results. Team members rely on each other's skills. The leader automatically takes over and provides direction if necessary. Usually it is not necessary.

Remember: for a team to achieve 'performing' status, it must trudge through and emerge from the unfriendly and uncomfortable 'storming' stage. Every time a new crew member joins the flight department, the crew reverts back to the 'forming' stage. They probably will not spend as much time in that stage as in previous times; it will last until all members (especially the new crew member) feel they are accepted by the crew.

## Common Problems Teams Encounter

No team remains in the forming, norming or performing stage. Teams will revert to previous stages when a crewmember joins or leaves the team, when major conflicts arise, when an accident occurs or in several other situations. The storming stage is perhaps the most difficult to work through; crew members need to realize they are in that stage and need to be aware of their own thoughts, emotions and attitudes.

### ***1. Trapped in the storming stage***

More crews get stuck in this stage than any other. The inability to handle or manage interpersonal conflict is the cause to linger in this stage. Crew members try to show their expertise and irritate others. The TEA Tornado™ is in full swing: Thoughts run rampant which causes emotions to go unchecked and attitudes to decline. Crew members will revert to bickering, stubbornness, ignoring or otherwise getting on each other's nerves.

### ***2. Declining standards***

Teams that have found less-than-productive ways to escape the storming stage make these actions a habit. Skimming checklists, skipping procedural steps and doing the minimum amount of work (not getting to work earlier than necessary, shirking some duties, not engaging in discussions) become the norm and is accepted. This results in lower standards for the entire department ("He doesn't do it and he gets away with it, why should I do it?").

### ***3. Crew disciplines create silos***

If the pilots considered themselves a team, mechanics another team, the flight attendants a third team and the scheduler/dispatchers a fourth team, the flight department as a whole will have difficulty emerging from the storming stage. To counter this, set goals flight department-wide and have regular meetings where all members attend.

### ***4. Management does not interact as a team***

If the Directors and other leaders do not model teamwork and collaboration, others will take note and act in a similar manner. The other crew members will wonder whether managements' words have any meaning, or are they empty gestures.

## Conclusion

Successful flight department crews have progressed through the stages because they have worked through trust issues, knowing themselves, communication challenges, and appreciate each other's skills and strengths, and adjust responsibilities to overcome individual weaknesses. It is incumbent up on you, as their director, to monitor their attitudes and behaviors, to ensure they are providing the highest level of safety, security and service.

© Dr. Shari L. Frisinger, 2014, 2021

## References

Hansen, M. T. (2009). Collaboration: How leaders avoid the traps, create unity, and reap big results. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Press.

Lencioni, P. (2002). The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pfeffer, J., & Sutton, R. I. (2006). Hard facts, dangerous half-truths, and total nonsense: Profiting from evidence-based management. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.

[http://www.sideroad.com/Team\\_Building/team-development.html](http://www.sideroad.com/Team_Building/team-development.html)

<http://www.championshipcoachesnetwork.com>



## About the Researcher



### **DR. SHARI L. FRISINGER**

Human Behavior Consultant | SME  
[dr.shari@sajetsolutions.com](mailto:dr.shari@sajetsolutions.com)

