

Can't Get To Performing Without Storming

Working as a Team

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Why do some teams seem to speed shift straight to overdrive, produce amazing results, and have a blast doing it, while other teams just seem to stay permanently stuck in park, producing nothing and going nowhere?

As a professor teaching Program Management and Leadership in the Defense Acquisition University's former Level III Certification Course in Program Management—the 14-week Advanced Program Management Course—I've pondered this question often as I've watched over 50 teams go through the process of forming, storming, norming, and per-

You know, I always thought I knew something about leadership, but despite my best efforts, this pole is acting just like my program costs—no matter what I do, it keeps going up.

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forming. Not all of them made it to performing. But many did.

So what separates the “overdrive” teams from those “stuck in park?” The ability to successfully storm. If you want to reach the pot of gold, you have to follow the rainbow. But the rainbow doesn't appear until *after* the storm.

Team Building

One of the most dramatic examples of this I've seen occurred one sunny morning out on a grassy parade field. I was facilitating a group of 12 students through some team building exercises. We had worked our way through awareness and trust, and were taking a short break after debriefing a challenging problem-solving exercise the group had just completed.

Toward the end of the break, as we sat in the grass sharing stories and waiting for the others to return, I asked the six students who were there if they'd like to try a little “extra” exercise. Having nothing better to do, they agreed.

Now this exercise, on the surface, appears quite simple. I asked the six of them to stand shoulder to shoulder in two lines of three, with the two lines facing each other. I then asked them to bend both their arms at the elbow, and with their forearms horizontal, to point at the line of folks opposite them with their index fingers. After repositioning a few folks slightly to put all their index fingers in a straight line, I placed a long, slender, lightweight rigid pole (a thin green tomato stake) so that it sat on top of their fingers. After explaining that they had to keep their index fingers in contact with the bottom of the pole at all times (“grabbing” the pole in anyway was against the rules—they had to simply let it rest on their fingers), I told them their task was to “simply” lower the pole to the ground.

I asked the group if they understood the task, and then released my hand

from the center of the pole. The pole immediately began to move—slowly and steadily *upward*. The group was not overly concerned by this, and indeed, judging from their giggling and laughter, appeared to find this unexpected turn of events amusing. Despite their numerous conversations and best efforts, the pole had soon moved from waist level to eye level. Since this is not a very comfortable position, I asked them if they'd like me to reset them so they could try again. They quickly agreed, and with a few quick words of encouragement from me they were off again. Their discussions remained quiet, calm, and extremely polite, and by now the other six students had returned and were watching with interest. As I explained that we had decided to do an “extra” exercise for fun, we all watched the pole slowly rise again to eyeball level.

At this point the participants declared the task undoable, and asked if they could quit and do a “real” exercise. Noting to myself that this group got nowhere near the storming phase, I cheerfully agreed.

The full group of 12 then worked their way through three more problem-solving exercises, each significantly more challenging than the last. The group did well, and really began to pull together as a team. They had come to see each new exercise as a “challenge,” and they were now sharing their ideas and criticizing each other's ideas fast and furiously as they raced the clock to complete each new challenge.

I was delighted with their progress, and although we were nearly out of time, I decided to return to the “lower the pole” exercise. Since we hadn't debriefed the earlier “failure,” I wanted to try and squeeze some learning out of that experience.

I asked the group if they were ready for their final challenge of the morning. “Bring it on!!” they all chorused. They were a bit surprised, and a little concerned when I announced we'd be doing the “lower the pole” exercise again — after all, they'd all “seen” with their own eyes that it couldn't be done.

Recognizing the need for encouragement, I assured them that it could indeed be done, and asked the six students who had not previously done the exercise to please line up. I asked the others to step up close and watch. After placing the pole on their fingers and removing my hand, the pole began to, you guessed it, rise.

But it was different this time. Based on what was said, and how it was said, it was obvious this group was very concerned about the pole moving in the wrong direction. Without any real discussion, John and Tom both took over and began giving instructions. When they didn't get the results they wanted, they began shouting directions, louder and louder, but the pole continued to rise.

And then it happened—the accusations. Tom was yelling at Gary that it was all his fault, and that he was the one making the pole go up. Amazingly, save for a few murmurs of protest, Gary remained silent. But then John and Susan began to yell at Gary too. “Get your act together, or we're all going to fail because of YOU!” This was more than Gary could stand. He exploded! Yelling at no one in particular, but everyone at once, he pulled his fingers down a foot below the bar and exclaimed that it couldn't be his *%?!* fault because he wasn't even touching the !<?*# pole!

The best way I know to describe the intensity of this moment is to tell you that the six students who were observing each unconsciously took two or three steps backward. The looks on their faces said it all.

There was a moment of stunned silence among the participants. Trent was the first to speak, “I think I know why the pole's going up.”

“Let's hear it,” said Susan.

“Well, we've been told we have to keep our fingers in contact with the bottom of the pole, but the pole is so light that by the time we feel the pole on the top of our fingers, we've already moved it



PATH TO PERFORMANCE

Although each team is as unique as its members, teams develop and grow along a predictable path. The most commonly accepted model of team development was published in 1965 by Bruce Tuckman, and consists of four distinct phases—*Forming*, *Storming*, *Norming*, and *Performing*.

Forming

This stage begins with introductions and is typically characterized by questioning. Why are we here? What are we supposed to do? How are we going to get it done? It usually involves a fair amount of apprehension. The team members are cautiously exploring the boundaries of acceptable group behavior. Individual roles and responsibilities are unclear and processes have not yet been defined. During this stage, the team typically makes little, if any, progress toward achieving its goal.

Storming

Conflict emerges as team members struggle to enact their personal agendas and react against the efforts of others to control them. The authority and/or competence of individuals are often challenged. Discussions can become heated and quite emotional. Team members try to rely solely on their personal and professional experience and resist collaborating with most of the other members of the team. Impatient about the lack of progress, team members often argue about what actions should be taken next and opinions can become quite polarized. This is usually the most difficult phase

for a team, but it's a natural and necessary step.

Norming

The team begins to experience group cohesion for the first time. Norms emerge as the team works through the conflicts, and a sense of mutual respect and support develops between the team members. They begin to see themselves not as individuals, but as members of the team. They accept the ground rules and their roles in the team. The team discusses and develops its processes. Enthusiasm is high, and the team is tempted to go beyond the original scope of its tasking. The team may engage in fun and social activities.

Performing

Having gotten to know one another, the team members understand each other's strengths and weaknesses. They make full use of their strengths as they begin using their team processes to troubleshoot, solve problems, and make decisions. The team has a shared vision and begins to get a lot of work done. Disagreements still occur, but are now resolved positively, with team members readily making any necessary changes to team processes or organizational structure. In addition to processes and structure, the team also spends time attending to relationships, and team members look out for one another. Working together as a team is fun.

Trent piped in, "OK, so now we know the problem—it's not to lower the pole—it's to get our team member fingers to work together."

"How do we do THAT?" asked Susan.

It was Gary, the previously declared "cause" of the problem, who offered the key—communication. "We have to get our fingers to talk to each other."

Susan instantly shot back, "But we already tried that. We talked, and yelled, and even cursed at each other, but the pole still went up! I don't think talking will work, and I really don't want to go there again."

"Think 'communicate,' not 'talk,'" said Trent, and with that Gary slid his fingers together, capturing Susan's. Trent's eyes lit up and he did the same, capturing one of John's fingers. Gary instructed everyone to slide their fingers into groups. "Look, now we have three players on the team instead of 12—communication has to be easier."

Tom suggested they shift to two groups of fingers, one at each end of the pole. Then, with quiet confidence, the group slowly and easily lowered the pole to the ground, their fingers "talking" through their shared sense of touch.

There was a long moment of quiet, hushed amazement as everyone realized what just happened—then the whole group erupted in loud, victorious cheers.

"Well, how many of you still think this exercise is unsolvable?" I asked as we stood in a circle preparing to debrief the experience we'd just shared.

"Ah-Ha!"

"What led to success? What prevented success in the earlier attempt? How are these two experiences different?" We discussed these questions at length, and squeezed a good deal of learning out of the experiences, but it was days later before I had the "ah-ha" that led to this article. I had witnessed the formation and growth, along a very compressed timeline, of two six-person teams. When I

up—up off the fingers of the people next to us. And then they do the same thing, over and over. The pole keeps going up and up."

"Man, is this a cruel party joke, or what?" interjected John, which brought a much needed laugh to the team. (The observers were beginning to feel comfortable enough to step back up to the group.) It was at this point that Tom said, "I guess we owe Gary an apology." Susan and John were quick to apologize

for their earlier hasty judgments, and Gary was graciously accepting these apologies while confessing that only moments before he was SURE that the real problem had been Susan, so he was just as guilty as they were.

Then out of the blue, Cheryl made an insightful observation. "Our fingers are like the people on a team, only they're not working together . . . they all know the goal . . . but they're not working together."

fit this experience into the framework of the forming, storming, norming, and performing model of team development, it's clear that the first team never grew past the politeness of the forming stage, while the second team clearly charged into and through the storming phase.

Examining the Storm

The "storm" starts in different ways for different teams. Just as teams differ in many ways, "storming" can begin within a team in many different ways. It may be as subtle as someone sitting in a different chair, or as unmistakable as an explosive outburst of anger. Storming, like the meteorological phenomenon it's named after, comes in many forms. But in every case, storming doesn't end until the team addresses the needs and desires of each of the team members.

When people come together to form a team, they do so to accomplish some common goal they can't achieve by themselves. However, while the team members may agree in broad terms on the goal and what needs to be done to get there, they each bring their own individual needs and desires with them. At the outset the individual needs and desires of each member remain largely unknown to the other members of the team. It's not until these needs and desires are shared and addressed that a team begins to coalesce and "perform."

So why is it so hard for people to share their needs and desires with the other members of their team? Well for starters, they're often strangers, so there's the real concern of embarrassment, ridicule, or even retribution, especially if the desires are self-centered or not politically correct. Thus, for most people there's a significant level of "discomfort" involved in sharing their needs and desires. In addition, because needs and desires, like assumptions, are often subconscious, team members sometimes aren't even aware of their needs and desires, so they don't get openly shared.

As long as the discomfort or fear remains, most people will avoid openly sharing their needs and desires. This leads to the polite, reserved behaviors

typically seen within teams in their early "forming" stage. But even at this stage, "norms" are inadvertently being set within the team. Team members begin to sit in the same chair—"their" chair. A few of the members begin to make decisions and to speak for the whole team, deciding what's to be done next and setting deadlines. Because these "norms" are not set explicitly—they usually happen without anyone talking about them—they often clash with the needs or desires of one of the team members. When this happens, it can open the door for the team to begin storming. But only if that team member feels safe enough to put his or her concerns on the table. If a team member believes that speaking up is more painful than living with the consequences of a proposed action or decision, and chooses to remain silent, then the team will miss the benefits of storming.

When something does get thrown on the table that is in direct conflict with someone else's need—something too painful to ignore—and the team member speaking up still feels a bit unsure of his or her safety, then the resulting challenge may be a bit clumsy and emotional. This can be painful (not meaning blood is spilled or punches are thrown), but until all team members have put all their needs on the table, and they've all been addressed by the

group, the team won't get to performing. It's necessary for a team to go through the awkward, uncomfortable discussions we've labeled as "storming." So don't be afraid of it. Encourage it.

It's About Trust

Storming is saying what you honestly think, despite the risks involved. This takes a tremendous amount of trust, which highlights why it's so important to spend time up-front in team development addressing things such as ground rules, common values, and roles and responsibilities.

When the members of a team develop trust in each other, they're willing to present ideas and defend them because they know that everyone will listen to their ideas, think about them, and give them honest criticism. That's the benefit. The process of storming improves and polishes ideas by identifying and challenging assumptions, obstacles, and expected outcomes. Better ideas result in better solutions, and better solutions equate to higher team performance. By "storming" ideas before implementing them, teams can create their rainbow and follow it to the pot of gold.

Editor's Note: The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact Patnode at Norman.patnode@dau.mil.

DFARS Transformation

The Department of Defense is kicking off a major transformation initiative to identify dramatic improvements and reductions to procurement policies, procedures, and processes in the Defense Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (DFARS).

A task force, under the direction of Deidre Lee, Director, Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy, will consider bold changes and make proposal recommendations. The task force will also develop legislative proposals for consideration by the Congress for future changes to the DFARS.

The public is encouraged to participate in generating ideas for improvements. To submit your proposals, go to the following Web site:

<http://www.acq.osd.mil/dp/dars/transf.htm>

DPAP will consider and post all ideas, but its aggressive schedule precludes responding on an individual basis.