

# Leading Teams #5: Norming<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Following the forming and storming stages, the norming stage is hallmarked by agreement, consensus, and shared understanding of roles and responsibilities (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). This publication is part of the *Leading Teams* series and focuses on the norming stage of team development. This article provides an overview of what leaders and team members should know and includes helpful tips for working through the norming stage of team development.

## What is norming?

Members should begin to feel more cohesive at this point in team development. Teams reach the norming stage once they have worked through their initial interactions and conflicts (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In this stage, the roles, responsibilities, and behaviors of team members are established and regulated (Levi, 2016). During norming, team members' confidence in the team and individual members increases, and trust and interdependence of team members are strengthened (Levi, 2016). This stems from team members consistently meeting and upholding ground rules, or norms, established in earlier stages. Moreover, teams in the norming stage have learned how to manage conflict productively and experience less counterproductive conflict at this point.

In the norming stage, team members respect and adhere to ground rules, or norms, established in the forming stage. Norms help teams express their values, establish predictable behaviors, encourage participation from everyone, and create a group identity that will help the team persist when personal motivations interfere, or uncharacteristic behaviors occur (Feldman, 1984). Positive norms should include effective decision-making processes, open discussion of team challenges, taking on shared leadership roles, and establishing a workflow pattern. These norms promote team productivity. By this stage, team members should have a strong understanding of their role and the team's direction and goals. In functional teams, members are committed to their teams and uphold their individual responsibilities for reaching the collective team goals (Lencioni, 2002).

## What Leaders Should Know

As a team leader, it is important to understand that teams may not follow a linear path through the stages of team development (Franz, 2012). Teams may skip stages or go back to storming if necessary. Successfully moving through the norming stage requires teams to establish relationships and methods for navigating conflict through the forming and storming stages. The team leader may need to remind team members to rely on the established ground rules and encourage them to work through any conflicts that may arise. The team can still experience tension in the norming

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stage, particularly when establishing team roles and task assignments. However, the team leader should help team members recall the processes they have developed and use the techniques refined in the storming stage to continue navigating these challenges.

Team norms can be developed in different ways. They may evolve gradually over time—with or without being discussed explicitly by team members. Alternatively, leaders may need to set a precedent or expectations (Feldman, 1984; Levi, 2016). Leaders must be aware that team members may enter a new team with norms and behaviors from previous team experiences. While this is not inherently negative, leaders should help the team ensure that the norms they adopt are appropriate for and reflect the culture of the current team. This is why establishing ground rules, discussing desired team norms, and producing team contracts are so helpful in the forming stage. These tools assist in building trust and keeping people invested in the team. Team size may affect member participation during this stage (Wheelan, 2009). Leaders should revisit team policies often and help facilitate discussion with larger groups to ensure all team members' voices are heard.

The norming stage also presents an opportunity for shared leadership roles. While the team may have an assigned leader, emergent leadership and balancing of roles should begin to occur in this stage. The assigned leader should promote shared leadership experiences and encourage team members to take on leadership roles that match their strengths and assigned tasks. It is important for members to feel valued, heard, and appreciated by other team members for their contributions. Providing this type of support is paramount for a team to move to the performing stage.

## What Team Members Should Know

Developing team norms and establishing behavioral expectations are integral to the team's success (Feldman, 1984; Levi, 2016; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Team members share responsibility for ensuring positive and productive norms guide their behavior. It is important for team members to adhere to established work processes, collaborate authentically, share responsibility for achieving team goals, and build cohesion within the team.

While norms will help to provide structure, it is also important to know that individuals will take on different roles. The three primary types of roles are task roles, social or relationship roles, and dysfunctional roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Task roles are purposely created to ensure that all members have meaningful work that contributes to

the collective team goal (Levi, 2016). Task roles may include initiator, information seeker, information giver, evaluator, energizer, etc. (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Relationship roles, which can be a facet of task roles, are roles that team members can take on informally (Levi, 2016). These can include things like encourager, harmonizer, compromiser, follower, etc. (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Dysfunctional roles are those that disrupt group processes and include things like aggressor, recognition seeker, self-confessor, etc. (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Dysfunctional roles should be avoided; when recognized, teams should rely upon their established norms to address them. Each team member is responsible for knowing what roles they fill on a team. For example, if a team member has a humorous personality, they may benefit the team by helping defuse tensions during stressful situations. Likewise, if someone on the team is very focused on achieving the goal, they may be "assigned" the role of keeping the team focused when fatigue starts to set in. If a team member is aware that they tend to be a disruptor of the team, they may ask a teammate or the leader to help them regulate how often they act in this role. Informal relationship roles may not be as well-defined as formal task roles; however, they are important for meeting the team's needs and reducing the amount of ambiguity within the team (Feldman, 1984).

## Support your team through successful norming

During the norming stage, it is important to establish and define team culture. Culture can be thought of as the shared values, beliefs, and behaviors among teammates. Teams can accomplish this through prioritizing social norms, such as scheduling activities to connect, both during work hours and outside of work time. Culture will be reinforced through the actions of both the leader and team members. Team members should hold themselves and each other accountable and provide regular feedback. Team identity will also be solidified during this time. Team names, logos, member titles, and the way people dress all convey identity as well as team culture (Griffith & Dunham, 2014). Team leaders can deliberately create team culture, or they can let culture develop more organically.

Teams and leaders can utilize specific norming activities to elicit input from all members. These activities can be facilitated anonymously if it helps group members feel more comfortable sharing. Activities that encourage open sharing and feedback should be prioritized. Leaders can provide examples of team norms to help encourage conversation if team members have difficulty articulating norms.

Writing a team contract and ground rules can help solidify roles and tasks and provides a tangible document that members can consult when conflict arises. A team contract is a document that defines the expectations of all team members and holds teams accountable throughout the performing stage. A team contract also helps team members stay focused by clarifying specific tasks (Levi, 2016).

What types of norms should your team discuss and establish? Below are a few examples of norms:

- **Communication:** How will your team communicate? Will you have virtual or in-person meetings? How often? Do you prefer emails, phone calls, or text messages?
- **Conflict resolution:** How does the team prefer to navigate conflict? How is accountability handled?
- **Problem solving and decision making:** How do you make decisions? Is it through majority or consensus? Do you have a distinct set of problem-solving processes?
- **Formal roles:** How are roles assigned to meet specific goals? Are they delegated or volunteered for? How are deadlines enforced?
- **Informal roles:** Who is responsible for writing meeting minutes? Are people bringing snacks?
- **Attendance and socialization expectations:** How do you hold individuals accountable for not attending meetings? What is your policy on side conversations during or outside of a meeting? Is responding to email, text messages, and phone calls acceptable during team meetings?

## Conclusion

Norming is a vital stage of team development which allows team members to organize roles and tasks, establishes team culture and identity, and guides teams through future conflict. As teams move into the next stage of development, performing, it is important that teams rely on their norms and team contract to ensure that they are successful in accomplishing their goals.

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## Appendix A: Leading Teams Series Overview

### Leading Teams #1: Introduction

A description of teams that discusses the benefits of and challenges faced by teams, ways that teams are different from groups, and a brief review of models and concepts to be expanded on through the series.

### Leading Teams #2: Stages of Group Development

An in-depth description of the stages of group development model by Tuckman & Jensen (1977).

### Leading Teams #3: Forming

An explanation of the forming stage of group development, accompanied by strategies to effectively lead teams through the forming stage. This publication provides tactics to help clarify team purpose, establish team culture, and guide team member socialization.

### Leading Teams #4: Storming

A description of the storming stage of group development. This publication supplies strategies for conflict

management, communication, and decision-making approaches.

### **Leading Teams #5: Norming**

An outline of the norming stage of group development. This publication discusses approaches to defining roles and responsibilities, establishing an ideal team climate, and building organizational culture.

### **Leading Teams #6: Performing**

An explanation of team performance and the performing stage of group development. This publication provides tips for leading effective meetings, supporting collaboration, enhancing team cohesion, and using proper evaluation and feedback procedures.

### **Leading Teams #7: Other Considerations for Leading Teams**

This publication concludes the series with a short overview of adjourning and other suggestions and considerations for leading teams, including working with virtual teams, encouraging motivation, and managing team adjournment and team member termination.