

Starting to understand team process

Your team has started to work on its assignment. You have followed all the guidance about understanding individuals' strengths and how to allocate roles so things are going to run smoothly, right? Well, not necessarily!

Groups generate dynamics that influence both individual and group behaviour. With some awareness of such dynamics you can minimise their interference with progress. One commonly used model of the life-cycle of a work group or team as both a **social** and a **task-focussed** process was first proposed by Tuckman in his 1965 article *Developmental sequence in small groups*. A simplified version of that model is used here.

Stage	Some social characteristics	Some task characteristics
Forming	Members 'test' their way towards a balance in terms of interpersonal behaviour within the group	Identification of what the task is and how it might be tackled
Storming	Possible resistance as individuals respond to the demands of their subtasks, or challenge each other	Task progress can be compromised as individuals work through feelings and individual differences
Norming	The group and the differences amongst its members are now recognised and appreciated	Diversity is understood as an asset that can contribute to overall task achievement
Performing	Members work on 'what needs to be done', without preciousness or a jobsworth mind-set	Group energy is now devoted to outcome achievement and solutions to the various problems presented by the subtasks appear

What this model suggests is that your team, by using the *Working in groups* series of ASK handouts and allocated team roles, has probably achieved the **forming** stage of development as a team. What may now arise is unexpected disagreement: for example about the 'balance' or 'fairness' of the various allocations agreed initially, or possibly doubts being expressed about other team members' commitment. You are in the **storming** stage.

Although there is no law that says it will occur, the two most unhelpful things you can do at this **storming** stage are either to pretend that it's not happening and try to ignore it, or to forget that you all have a common interest in success (i.e. a high grade) and focus instead on ego-driven personal attacks. Although 'avoidance' or 'attack' are different, the outcome of both is that successful assignment task completion is threatened.

Storming is evidence that some or all team members are outside their comfort zone and as a result individuals may well be feeling vulnerable – it is easy to go 'on the attack' or withdraw in such a situation. But it is also evidence that the conditions for rapid and significant learning exist, for both individuals and the team as a whole.

To help manage this storming stage revisit the 'allowable' weaknesses outlined in Belbin's Team roles model (see ASK handout *Allocating and developing team roles* from the *Working in groups* series

of handouts). Any team, whether it is sending an interplanetary probe to Jupiter, introducing a new corporate logo or implementing improved health-care protocols, will have many weaknesses yet still achieve fantastic and significant things! One way of dealing with apparent weaknesses in an objective way is for the team to do a Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis. You can quickly produce a hand-drawn matrix on a white board or A3 sheet of paper to do this.

Let's look at what the team from ASK handout *Starting to understand team strengths* from the *Working in groups series*– produced when they did this.

	Opportunities <i>We have a booked group tutorial with our tutor A chartered marketeer has offered to critique our draft proposal</i>	Threats <i>Hitting our deadline with our current project timeline One of our research subjects has become unavailable</i>
Strengths <i>We established good, initial inter-team communication We are actually quite dynamic! We can all use Google drive</i>	(1) <i>~Zahraa will contact tutor to bring forward meeting by a week. Within two days. ~Nikhil will transfer all our documents to 'the cloud'. By tomorrow</i>	(2) <i>~Nikhil will reschedule our task milestones. By tomorrow. ~Suzie will approach alternative potential research subjects. By next progress meeting.</i>
Weaknesses <i>We have a tendency to theorise rather than 'do' Our project experience is limited and we underestimated how long tasks can take</i>	(3) <i>~Sam will discuss our current proposals with the marketeer to ensure we don't waste future effort on ideas outside our capacity/capability to deliver. Within two days.</i>	(4) <i>~We have all added two extra progress meetings to our diaries to increase our accountability to each other. Today.</i>

Notice how the team has written specific, **objective** things and has used the pronoun 'we'. In their SWOT discussion the team respected their own ground rules (see ASK handout *Introducing team work*). They also paid attention to the language they used in their conversation. For example, rather than saying "You don't understand..." (a closed statement which invites a defensive response) they restated the comment in an open question form by saying "What do we need to understand about..?" which allows further exploration. Again rather than blame each other, for example by saying "You haven't done a thing.", they focussed on the positive by saying "Do we have the task balance right and in what way can we improve it?". This is not easy to do as you have to separate the personal from the professional, but you will find this becomes easier the more you practise it.

Using SWOT helps to produce strategies where strengths exploit opportunities (1), and neutralise threats (2), opportunities overcome weaknesses (3) and weaknesses and threats are mitigated and/or avoided (4). By doing a SWOT, the 'problem' is reframed as a **problem-solving activity** and this helps to side-line individual ego in the service of the common goal.

References: Belbin, R. M. (2010). *Team Roles at Work* (2nd ed). New York: Routledge.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental Sequence in Small Group, *Psychological Bulletin*, (63)6, 384-399. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cmedm&AN=14314073&site=eds-live>

For further guidance, contact the Academic Skills Unit (ASK).