

Group Development Theory: Leadership Issues

Dependence

The formation stage. The group and leader come together; gather initial impressions of each other, make initial judgments. A new group is being formed. There is usually a time of tentativeness and uncertainty. The leader and members of the group are concerned about being accepted by the other and what the cost of that acceptance will be. The relationship is superficial. Anxiety increases as different styles of working and making decisions begin to become evident. Dependency may be either productive or unproductive. The leader is expected to deal with the group's anxiety and the ambiguity of the situation. This stage will be managed more or less smoothly depending on 1) The degree of working style similarity between the leader and key group members; 2) Their tolerance for ambiguity and 3) The leader's ability to stay present as a person and at the same time as the leader.

Counter-dependence

The group and leader experience a time of tension over influence and control. What one model calls the storming stage. There are more disagreements (some real, some manufactured). People may get more aggressive in attempts to gain influence; others may withdraw. People may begin to focus on differences in order to reestablish their individuality. There is a negative reaction to the feelings of earlier dependency that emerges. There may be a lot of "testing" the leader (or the leader testing the group); initiatives by the leader are commonly resisted. As with the first phase – counter-dependency may be dealt with in a manner that is more or less productive or unproductive. This process continues until the leader and key group members begin to act in more independent and interdependent ways. Beginning to listen carefully, and to offer reasonable suggestions to resolve issues, are critical factors in the group's ability to move beyond this stage.

The degree of struggle and conflict involved usually needs to be contained if the group is to be productive. But this phase is both inevitable and necessary if the leader and the group are to negotiate ways of dealing with power and decision-making. Attempts to escape this stage will cause a cycle of moving between the two stages of dependency and counter-dependency.

Interdependence

Leader and group sort out roles and processes for communicating and deciding. Norms emerge for how we will treat each other and work together. There is more collaboration and a focus on the work to be accomplished. There is a lot of functional behavior that contributes to the task and maintaining good working relationships. A sense of belonging emerges; an acceptance of each other with strengths and weaknesses. Trust is stronger. At higher levels of functioning there is a strong sense of interdependence; of the value of the leader and the member's differences in temperament and skills; of deep appreciation and even affection; and of high productivity. Stages of "norming" and "performing."

The dynamics involved: There is no avoiding the phases. The leader and group may move through the phases more or less quickly; may get stuck at a phase. They may cycle back to earlier stages -- there may be times of regression when group members are experiencing a period of high anxiety, threat or helplessness; the recycling may bring deeper insight, increased spiritual and emotional maturity, and closer bonds.

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The initial work identifying the three phases was done by Richard Weber.