FORMING, STORMING, NORMING AND TRANSFORMING:  
THE LIFE OF A TEAM

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CHAPTER 15
Jake Jacobson practices at the Counseling Center of Denton, which is the Denton location of CCD Counseling. His clinical and forensic interests are all related to divorce, and that all too brief period that precedes it, the marriage.

Jake’s has a BA in Psychology from Houghton College, where he also grew up as a faculty brat. He began his career in the wilderness therapy field, leading wilderness trips for at risk youth. He then became interested in the family therapy side of those programs, and earned his MS in Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington while working as a classroom counselor for Salesmanship Club in Dallas. With license in hand, he began seeing clients at his wife’s agency, a highly advantageous arrangement for him that she continues (at this writing) to tolerate. Even if she changes her mind now, Jake is confident he can reach a twenty year marital anniversary. Since she is also collaboratively trained, he is certain they would enter the collaborative process and he would just state in the first joint meeting that his number one interest is getting to celebrate 20 years together.

While Jake had done some independent study of divorce in graduate school, it was his experience in clinical practice that led him to pursue it as a specialty. He recognized the significant number of troubled youth whose challenges seem to rise directly out of their parent’s divorce. To address this, he wrote a curriculum for divorce parent education, a workshop the agency continues to provide in the community. Increasingly, Jake’s interest has focused on divorce. He conducts child custody evaluations, serves on Collaborative teams, and coaches parents in their co-parenting efforts. Jake is active in the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), attending many of their conferences and occasionally, presenting. He served on an AFCC task force to develop “An Educator’s Guide to Separating & Divorcing Parents,” a resource for teachers and school administrators, which should be published this year. This past year he got also got to serve CLITX on an ad-hoc website committee.

Contrary to the image portrayed by this bio, Jake actively avoids participation in committees and task forces to jealously guard time spent in his favorite activity, being a father. He is however confident that in a few years, when his children are both firmly in adolescence, they will despise the sight of him, and he will need committee work to fill his lonely evenings and weekends. Keep him in mind. In the meantime, he is basking in his children’s delusion that he is competent, compassionate and capable.
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FORMING, STORMING, NORMING AND TRANSFORMING: THE LIFE OF A TEAM

I. INTRODUCTION

Bruce Tuckman is credited for perhaps the most influential contribution to the labeling of group stages of development. His ideas were first presented in an article published in 1965, titled “Developmental sequence in small groups.” Since that time, he and many others have expanded on those basic stages, adding, dissecting and modifying them to assist a generation of group leaders in working with their groups.

This is not an academic paper about group stages of development or, for that matter, anything else. Smart people have devoted much study to the topic, however, and interested professionals can find lots of books and articles about group dynamics, stages and processes with a quick search. (Google result for “Group Dynamics” - 1,500,000 hits)

This is a practice paper. While it may fall short on academic standards, it’s intent is to take the work of these bright folks, and find out how it applies to our work in Collaborative Law. Knowing something about underlying theories should inform our work and make us better practitioners.

II. QUICK OVERVIEW OF STAGES

For our purpose, we’re going to take Tuckman’s original stages and blend them with some of his later work, as well as the work of others and pretend that there is one simple four stage model of group development. The four stages are: a) Forming, b) Storming, c) Norming, and d) Transforming.

When we talk about “stages”, we’re talking about characteristics that might best describe most groups at different periods of time. There are several questions our model should answer for us: 1) What does the group look like at this stage?; 2) What are the tasks they need to accomplish at this stage?; 3) What qualifies them to move to the next stage?; and perhaps most importantly, 4) Knowing these things, what might the Collaborative Professional do to assist the group in moving to the next stage?

A. Forming

Forming is where it all starts. Forming is also commonly referred to as the “Honeymoon” stage, which instinctively tells a lot about its characteristics. It’s fueled by love and fantasy and conflict avoidance. The important tasks that the members need to accomplish in this stage are: a) committing to a common purpose and b) creating a culture that supports that common purpose.

Groups move out of the Forming stage and into the Storming stage for the same reason that couples move out of the honeymoon stage. It’s mostly fatigue from pretending everything is perfect, but on a more positive note, it also occurs when group members have enough trust in the group to risk letting them know that everything isn’t perfect.

B. Storming

Once again, the name of the second stage tells us something about what it looks like. Storming is not generally pretty or pleasant. Members begin to share their real feelings, and they often forget the agreements that they have made and those shiny new communication skills they were taught (which may have made it easier to hear their real feelings). Conflicts over power and control are common.

The tasks that need to be completed at this stage primarily revolve around passing the reins of power from the leader to the group. The group must begin to exercise their conflict resolution skills and the styles of communication they have committed to during the Forming stage. As they do this successfully, they gain trust in one another and in the process. This success and confidence are what permit them to move on to the Norming stage.

C. Norming

The third stage of the group, here called Norming, is the group’s “working stage.” The stage has the characteristics that we imagined when we agreed to be part of the group. Group members relate to one another effectively and progress is made toward the group’s goals. The tasks of this stage are directly related to it’s larger goals and to the ongoing maintenance of group life. This is not a conflict free stage, but conflict is handled appropriately. Eventually, the goals of the group are met, and the group moves to the final stage.

D. Transforming

This is where this particular group ends. However, as implied by it’s name, “every end is a new beginning.” The group says goodbye, and transitions into the next stage of work or life. The task of the group at this point is what we often refer to both seriously and in jest as “closure.”

III. COLLABORATIVE AND THE THREE EASY STAGES

The Collaborative process is no different from other group processes when it comes to developmental stages. Collaborative teams and clients move through the stages in a predictable fashion. At each stage, they have the same tasks that need to be accomplished and they move to the next stage when those tasks are accomplished. Let’s take a quick look at the first, third
and fourth stages and see how it plays out on the Collaborative stage.

A. Collaborative Forming

Most of us recognize the honeymoon characteristics of the Forming stage in Collaborative. While experienced practitioners do a good job of warning clients that Collaborative is not all “milk and honey,” there is still a level of romanticism that exists in many cases during the first joint meeting. The professionals are also not immune to this seduction. Sometimes a post-meeting debrief will include comments such as, “This couple is perfect for Collaborative;” or “they’re such a cute couple. I can’t believe they are getting divorced.”

The tasks of any group at this stage is to identify group goals and to develop an effective culture for the work ahead. The Collaborative process (as described or implied by CLITX Protocols and other Member forms and documents) does a very good job of providing structure for that. The first meeting includes review of Participation Agreements, contracts and offers information on effective negotiation or communication. These all provide structural support for the culture we are trying to create. The team has the opportunity to role model effective communication. The agenda specifically includes time for the clients to share interests and goals, which are, in this case, the group goals.

When a first joint meeting (and related events such as team pre-conference, debrief, minutes, etc…) are well executed, there is a very good chance that the required group tasks will be accomplished. Perhaps the only danger at this stage is when we let the romanticism of the honeymoon seduce us into skimping on this foundational stage. “These people get along so well, I think we can skip the ‘Expectations of Conduct.’ “We’ve worked together before, we probably don’t need a conference call ahead of time.” Professionals should enjoy the honeymoon, but, to mix metaphors, don’t drink the Kool-Aid.

B. Collaborative Norming

We’re saving the most fun stage, Storming, for last, so let’s skip now to the Norming stage. If you are really in the Norming stage (the fun section will cast some doubt), you’ll know it because it is the easiest work you have ever done. It’s the easiest work that you have ever done because power has been passed to the client and they have internalized the culture of interest based negotiation. They clearly are attempting to help one another meet identified interests. To quote the Unitarian theologian Dr. Suess, it feels like you are “On the banks of the beautiful River Wah-Hoo, where they never have troubles! At least, very few.” Perhaps most importantly, when that conflict does arise, the clients and the team know how to address it effectively and constructively. The Collaborative Norming stage is our reward for embracing this approach.

C. Collaborative Transforming

When all the negotiations are satisfactorily complete and both parties can say that their interests have been adequately met, it’s time to move along. In theory, our Collaborative practice is well designed for providing group members with the closure they need. We help them design a plan for post-decree conflict resolution. We can prepare them for the standard language they will see in their decree. We can gather together for a final review of the drafted decree. The Collaborative culture invites us to give each person the opportunity to make some final comments. Each team member can extend their best wishes and clients can exchange appreciative comments or even a verbal commitment to their continued partnership as parents.

In practice, this sometimes doesn’t happen, and frankly it’s difficult to argue strenuously for the ideal ending. Sometimes it doesn’t happen because the group never really got to the Norming stage and don’t care to be in each other’s company. If they never got to Norming, they aren’t going to get to Transforming, even if they have another meeting. Sometimes it’s a financial issue and clients pragmatically decide to skip any final meeting and let the attorneys “finish it up.” When it comes to the Transforming stage, the Collaborative model is an interesting intersection of great opportunity and hard to sell cost-benefit.

For divorcing couples who truly have reached the Norming stage, and who plan to have any continued relationship (e.g. parents), the Transforming stage, and that last meeting is important. For them, it is not just the end of this group, it’s the beginning of the Forming stage for their next group experience as co-parents.

IV. COLLABORATIVE AND THE FUN STAGE OF STORMING

The Storming stage generally arrives like a great mid-western thunderstorm. There are thickening clouds, a little rumbling, perhaps a big boom, and then a down-pour. Let’s look again at that couple about whom we said, “These people get along so well, I think we can skip the ‘Expectations of Conduct.’ ” It turns out that they were really good at managing conflict until they got mad!

A. Preparation

A mid-western storm can be a beautiful thing if: a) you know it’s coming and b) you actively prepare. Likewise with the Storming stage of group development. We should know it’s coming. It always does. Knowing this can also relieve some of the
anxiety we experience. It is no longer the event that ruined the picnic. It is now the rain we needed to get us moving toward a good harvest.

Like a mid-western storm, Storming varies in intensity. There may be one bolt of lightning and a little shower or you may return to the office and find your legal assistants hiding in the storm cellar with Aunty Em.

There are several parts to proper preparation. The first, which bears repeating, is “know it’s coming.” It is coming. It’s the only way to get from the honeymoon stage to the third, and most productive stage, Norming. If you think it’s not coming, it’s because you drank the Kool-Aid during the honeymoon atmosphere of the Forming stage.

Since you know it is coming you will do have done some advance preparations. It’s very difficult to dig a storm cellar after the downpour begins, but sometimes, when we fail to acknowledge the inevitable, that’s what we end up doing. So now we are in the midst of conflict and we belatedly introduce some “Expectations of Conduct.” A better plan is to adequately prepare clients for the fact that there will be difficult moments ahead and that when that time comes, we want them to have some specialized skills to use. While they are still in the honeymoon, we remind them that the agreements they are making are agreements they will have to exercise when they are angry at their spouse, their attorney, and especially that Mental Health Professional.

B. Empowering Your Client to Move to Norming

Clients move from Forming into Storming largely as a function of time. No one is able to stay in the honeymoon forever. Unfortunately, the same is not true for the move from Storming on to Norming. Clients only move from Storming into Norming when certain tasks have been completed. Those tasks include successfully using conflict resolution and other communication skills they have been taught and sorting out the various roles that people play in the group, issues largely related to power and control. The central theme that all of those tasks have in common are ownership of the process. The Collaborative process can move to Norming when the ownership of the process has successfully passed from the professionals to the clients.

Getting the clients to take ownership also means that the professionals must become less directive and give up some of the ownership for the process. This essentially means that the professionals shouldn’t solve the clients’ problem for clients. The professionals should coach the clients to follow the Collaborative process. The professional team can remind the clients of the agreements they have made and expect them to follow them. The professionals can remind the clients of the new communication tools they have learned and invite them to use them.

Solving the problem for the client is extremely difficult to resist for several reasons. First, Collaborative Professionals are all in the business of helping people - that’s what we do. More significantly, when the Collaborative Process is in the Storming stage - it’s no fun for anyone, and often frightening for the professionals. Everyone may fear they might “lose” the case if they don’t intervene. Mental Health Professionals may feel unrealistic responsibility for client behavior, and may be working with other professionals who don’t understand group stages and believe the MHP should just fix this chaos.

Waiting for the client to take ownership is like sitting in the passenger seat when it appears that your 16 year old driver has somehow forgotten all of the rules of the road. We fear the whole thing is going to crash. At moments it may seem like the risks that will come from grabbing the wheel are less than the risks of your teen’s apparent driving path.

Fortunately, no one dies in a crashed Collaborative case, but that’s little assurance when we can see where the client’s behavior is headed. Why is it so important that the professionals let the clients figure it out? Because it’s the only way to get to Norming. If the professionals intervene and solve the problem, it will appear peaceful again. But the client still does not own the process. We have not moved to Norming. We’ve simply moved back into the honeymoon stage, which other theorists have accurately called “Pseudo-Community.” Forming is the place of conflict avoidance and the clients have managed to avoid the conflict, because someone else solved it. For the moment it’s nice to be back in that peaceful honeymoon setting, but since staying in the honeymoon is just a function of time, guess what is coming next? Another round of Storming.

If you ever thought you were in the Norming stage and then found yourself in Storming, you were never in Norming. You were in “pseudo community.”

To illustrate the consequences of intervention or non-intervention, lets look at a type of group we all have some familiarity with. Let’s say there are two different fifth grade classrooms. We’ll name their teachers Smith and Jones. It’s November, well into the school year, and enough time has passed to theoretically be at the Norming stage. Smith leaves the class and goes next door to consult with Jones about the faculty meeting that afternoon. While down there, Smith begins to hear a rising disturbance, a scream, and the sound of 19 fifth graders laughing. Smith hurries back to the classroom in time to see students diving back into their desks and trying to look busy as the last paper airplane settles to the floor.
Jones, who is curious about Smith’s sudden departure follows down the hall. Seeing everything under control, Jones decides to go to the office and check on some forms they need this afternoon. On the way back, Jones swings by the teacher’s lounge to grab a cup of coffee. While Jones is gone, the students in the Jones classroom finished the assignment they were working on. They know, in that situation, they are allowed to choose a book off the classroom shelf, work on other homework, or work quietly with a partner in the classroom learning center. They do those things. They don’t really notice Jones’s return until they hear a voice instructing them to get out their math books.

The difference between these two classrooms is that in one classroom the teacher has all of the power and is responsible for solving all the problems. Their presence is required for work to take place. If we were academics, we might suggest an external locus of control. In the other classroom, the students own the process and have learned that life is better for them when they use the tools they have been given - an internal locus of control.

The real incentive for Collaborative Professionals is gained when we look forward and see which teacher is most exhausted at the end of the semester and which teacher will seek a new profession after about three years. Solving problems for the group gives short term relief and invites the group to assign you the permanent role of problem-solver. They now have no incentive for avoiding the chaos that comes from Storming, because they know an adult will solve it. Jones class went through the Storming stage in September. They experienced chaos and got a clear message that if they wanted the chaos to end, they had to use their resources and solve the problem. They chose to do that and everyone got to move to Norming.

C. Rules for Riding the Storm Out

1. Know Storming is coming and get adequately prepared.
2. Welcome Storming when it arrives. It means that the clients now trust the system you have sold them and are ready to test drive it.
3. Say it out loud (and calmly) to your team - “We’re in the Storming stage. Does everyone remember what to do?”
4. Don’t echo or amplify the client’s distress to your professional teammates. It will make them think that one of you should fix the problem. Remind each other that only the client can solve the problem. Strategize ways to empower the client to do so.
5. Don’t work harder than the client - Empower the client to solve the problem by using the skills they have been taught and to keep the agreements they have made. Coach them.
6. Trust the process - Billions of groups have made it to the Norming stage because the group leaders let the group members have the power. Millions of groups have cycled repeatedly through the Storming stage because the leadership kept fixing the problem.
7. Trust the Collaborative process - The Collaborative process is very well designed for preparing for, and moving through the Storming stage.

V. THE PROFESSIONAL TEAM’S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Collaborative groups are interesting because they have several subsets. Your professional team has a developmental life of its own. The same principles that apply to every other group also exert forces on our Professional team.

A. New Rule

To discuss some of the challenges of the Team’s developmental stages, it’s important to understand another rule of group development: Every time any group changes membership - they start again at the Forming stage because it is a new group. Let’s go back to the Jones Classroom. Let’s say that Jordan, moves here from Ohio and becomes the 21st member of the classroom. This highly functioning team is now at the Forming stage because everyone’s role and social status are now in question. Since Jones is a clever teacher, the classroom will spend some time getting to know one another and reviewing their classroom agreement. It they do this, they will move very quickly back to the Norming stage. There will be a brief trip through Storming when Jordan realizes how obnoxious Steven is and gets tired of his constant interruptions. But this experienced group will help Jordan utilize the classroom problem solving model and they’ll work back to Norming.

This “rule” is important for us to remember so we don’t forget to cover the basics every time we start a new case. It also might make us think twice about introducing a legal assistant to take minutes for the first time in the fourth meeting. Membership changes impact group stages. With that in mind, let’s look at the Forming and Storming stages of Professional team development.

B. Professional Forming

The first time a professional team works together, they are in the Forming stage. If three of you have worked together for 40 cases, but there is one new professional, what stage are you at? If all four of you
have worked for 40 cases together, how does the change of clients (new case) affect your team’s developmental stage? Like Jordan’s new classmates, a professional team that has experience together is likely to move quickly back to a Norming stage, but should always assume they are Forming, and cover the basics again.

Everyone should recognize the honeymoon nature of a new team. You may even hear someone say something like, “It’s o.k. that you didn’t let me know ya’ll were having a conference call. It’s all good.” While we do this stage very well with our clients, we are likely to neglect the basics for our team. Do we create a good contract with one another? Do we explicitly commit to give one another honest feedback? Do we commit to keeping all the group members in the loop? Do we discuss the roles we expect one another to play in the process? Do we discuss styles and preferences?

C. Professional Storming

Professional teams certainly experience a Storming stage. However, the most common dysfunction of professional teams isn’t the ugliness of Storming. The more common error is a subsequent retreat into “pseudo-community,” avoiding the conflict. We tend to be conflict avoidant for several reasons. I want you to like me and I want you to invite me to your next case. I fear that I might not get invited if I mention that I would appreciate it if you would be on time to phone conferences. I may tell everyone else about your short-coming, but have a difficult time telling you. So I simply retreat into pseudo-community for the duration of the conference call, and likely, the case. We often spend our post-meeting debriefs strategizing about the couple, rather than identifying the strengths and weaknesses of our team performance in an honest exchange of compliments and criticism.

Some teams (and some clients) just remain in “pseudo-community,” gritting their teeth and never addressing real issues in the team’s performance. To move our teams to Norming, we need to use the skills we teach our clients. You’ll have to find a way to respectfully tell me I need to re-take the basic course, or better, give me specific feedback on how I did not appear neutral in my MHP role during today’s joint meeting. You’ll have to trust me to listen patiently. I’ll have to send a clear message that I appreciate feedback and try not to personalize it. We’ll have to practice what we preach and reveal our interests and trust that the other will help meet them.

D. Layers

Any Collaborative professional may be on a dozen different teams at any given time. That’s a lot of honest work to do with one another. And not to overwhelm anyone, but did I mention that all of those teams exist within a local practice group with it’s own developmental life? And that organization exists within an organization called CLITX with it’s own developmental life? While it looks like a lot of work, we have really good tools at hand. If we trust the process, and use our resources we can be like the character in Dr. Suess’s Solla Sollew, who returns to his own Storming stage with new tools and says, “I’m all ready you see. Now my troubles are going to have troubles with me!”

REFERENCES

Tuckman, Bruce W. (1965) 'Developmental sequence in small groups', Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399.
