The Five Stages of Group Development

As you work with a support group, or with almost any group of people who are working together toward a common cause, the group will go through a set of predictable stages. As a facilitator, knowing what to look for and how to manage the challenges can have a big impact on how your group progresses.

As with many things, the progress of a group isn’t always neat and tidy. Sometimes groups will regress to an earlier stage if there’s a major change, if a group member leaves or another is added, or for various other reasons. Having said that, here’s an overview of how groups typically develop and progress.

**Stage 1 -- Orientation (Forming):**

Group members are learning what to do, how the group will operate, what’s expected, and what’s acceptable. Students watch the facilitator and each other for cues and clues, and seek guidelines and stated expectations. They want to feel safe and comfortable, and many will do only limited sharing until that comfort zone is established.

Some students will be comfortable sharing openly even on the first day, either because they enjoy this type of interaction, or because they already feel comfortable with the facilitator and/or the other students in the group. As a facilitator, you can call on these students to give examples, be the first to answer questions, and model positive interactions for the other group members.

As the group leader, you can also help your students move through this stage successfully by providing clear guidelines, information, and structure, by listening with compassion and keeping communication open and respectful. You may want to begin your group with some low risk warm-up activities that help them get to know each other or get more comfortable in the group setting.

**Stage 2 -- Power Struggle (Storming):**

In this stage, it’s normal for some power struggles to emerge. As students become more comfortable, they may challenge each other or the facilitators, attempt to form cliques and exclude or ignore certain students, and push limits. This stage can be frustrating for everyone involved, but it helps to know it’s just a stage, and things tend to get much better once it’s past.

As a facilitator, one of your main challenges is to maintain boundaries, be an active but compassionate leader, let everyone be heard and express thoughts and feelings, while teaching,
reminding, and requiring them to stay respectful and productive. You can acknowledge differences, and still model creative problem solving, helping students to focus on what they have in common, and building a more cohesive group.

**Stage 3 – Cooperation and Integration (Norming):**

This is where being in group becomes fun and enjoyable most of the time. Group interaction becomes easier, more cooperative, and productive, with balanced give and take, open communication, bonding, and mutual respect. If there is a conflict or disruption, it’s relatively easily resolved and the group gets back on track. Group leadership is still important, but the facilitator can step back a little and let group members initiate more and move forward together.

As a facilitator, you can stay aware and help the group get back on track as needed, encourage participation and creativity, and enjoy the flow of the activities. Continue to give support and encouragement, reinforce the positive feel of the group, and fine tune as needed.

**Stage 4 – Synergy (Performing):**

Not every group reaches this stage, and if you spend most of a school year in Stage 3, it will still be a productive and enjoyable group. Stage four happens when the group shifts or evolves into another level, often without realizing what’s happening. In this stage, there’s a sense of group unity, group members looking out for each other even outside of the group setting, deepening friendships or bonds, and a dynamic energy no matter what the task. This is the epitome of “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

I worked with a group of students in one school over a three-year period, starting when they were in sixth grade. Two of the students were ready to talk openly on the first day, two didn’t talk much for the first six months, and the rest fell somewhere in between. The power struggle stage lasted quite awhile with these students, because they all knew each other and had their own sets of histories and struggles.

I’d say we got to Stage 3 in the second semester of the first year. But in the second and third years, we spent most of the time in Stage 4, and it was one of the most productive, enjoyable, funny, connected group of students I ever worked with. Many of them stayed in touch even after they left our school – some are still connected now.

**Stage 5 – Closure (Adjourning):**

The closure stage of a group can be confusing and disconcerting if you don’t know it’s coming. After weeks or months of a smoothly running group, as the end of group or the school year
approaches, things may start to fall apart for no apparent reason. Students may bicker with and criticize each other, and anger may surface in unexpected ways.

This is a normal part of group process. Many students (and adults, for that matter) have no idea how to deal with endings, goodbyes, or losses, and they don’t know how to find closure. Being angry with each other, or in conflict, is easier for many students than feeling or addressing the sadness of saying goodbye. It’s easier for most to be angry than to be vulnerable. Students who have abandonment issues may become especially argumentative or unruly.

As a facilitator, one of the best things you can do is explain to the students what’s happening, validate their feelings, set clear boundaries, and treat the whole situation as another opportunity to learn and practice a vital skill – how to say goodbye. You can facilitate a group closure activity, a party, or a ceremony, and find ways for students to thank and celebrate each other, and honor what they’ve achieved as a group.