INTRODUCTION

Emergency response personnel are being forced to become involved in collaborative efforts involving people outside their own specific disciplines and often outside their local communities. It is important to understand that when individuals come together from different areas of an organization or from different organizations and form a team, a complex developmental process occurs. Often, when we think of intra and/or interorganizational team development, we think of the key stages a team experiences as it evolves as an entity. However, in order for a team to achieve long-term effectiveness, it must evolve on several levels including the formation of various relationships that must be nurtured over time. This article focuses on illuminating the critical stages of team development and the associated dynamics of team evolution. Team members can manage their team’s growth and development at a more rapid pace if they are aware of these stage and dynamics.

There are several types of teams that can be called into play in a collaborative environment, each having a unique focus. Table 1 summarizes these types of teams and their common charter.

Regardless of the type of team, when people get together to work as a team, they will go through five stages of development. Often these stages need to be navigated rapidly so a team can fulfill its tasks.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

There are five stages that teams follow according to COG’s1 Ladder of Group Development. As members of teams, leaders and response personnel need to understand each stage of development, the different dynamics that are played out, and the resulting changes in the relationships within the team. The five stages and their definitions are:

1. Honeymoon—the stage of getting acquainted;

2. Dependence—the stage of initial “take-over”;

3. Counter-dependence—the stage of rebellion and revolution;

4. Interdependence—the stage of true teamwork; and

5. Revitalization—the stage of rejuvenation of the team.

Each stage describes a phase of the development and maturity of the team. Within each of these stages, members work their way through personal and team dynamics. This ascent through the stages shows how the team matures. If a team does not progress through the stages, it becomes “caught up” in difficult personal and group dynamics, which causes the team to stagnate in a particular stage. It is not uncommon to find that teams are developmentally “stuck” somewhere within the three lowest phases (one through three). If the larger organization and/or leadership are prepared to deal with the issues which arise at
this period during the team’s development, the risk of getting stuck can be substantially reduced.

1. Honeymoon stage—getting acquainted

The “honeymoon” stage is often a period of excitement when members are focused on larger concerns. It is often seen as a “risk free” stage. At this point, the direction of the team is often unclear; members do not yet know one another, the team has not developed its ethos. Typically at this stage, people will avoid engaging in behavior that, for example, might generate conflict or reveal personal or professional agendas.

When people initially meet to form a team, their approach is polite and accommodating. They are social, they want to “get together” and share general information about themselves and what they do. Those with past team or organizational experience often tend to keep to themselves and not reveal personal agendas. They have learned through experience to remain circumspect until they are aware of the leader’s expectations, the organizational rules, and the working structure of the team.

During this stage, social and work “cliques” usually form. (Cliques are factions within a team that have similar agendas, philosophies, and/or missions.) They often initiate the formation of the team’s informal work processes. The tendency during this stage is for members to associate with others with similar interests, values, and work backgrounds (e.g., fire, police, administration, and EMS).

This stage can last anywhere from one or two meetings to many meetings. A brand new team can expect to spend more time in this stage for developing their working relationships—in fact, this is desirable and necessary to provide a strong foundation for any team’s future development. A team made up of people who have worked together in the past, however, may move through this stage more quickly. It is imperative to ensure that the group’s relationship agreements are focused on the current project and include all team members. Sometimes, members of a team that have worked together will exclude the other team members and create difficulties, consciously or unconsciously.

The transition to the next stage starts when there is pressure, either internal or external, to get down to the “real” work of the team.

2. Dependence stage—the initial “take over”

As the team moves beyond the honeymoon stage, it begins to ask questions such as: Why are we here? What is our purpose? Key team members begin to wrestle with issues such as organizational structure, roles and responsibilities, and normative behavior. Individual agendas, which were usually hidden during the honeymoon stage, begin to emerge, and some

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team type</th>
<th>Common charter</th>
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<tr>
<td>Natural-work team</td>
<td>Design, develop, and/or improve work conditions and/or response productivity. For example, work-unit teams of several fire departments get together to focus on a specific challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process-improvement team</td>
<td>Review collected data and recommended processes for improved response. Outcomes are oriented to the bottom line; effects in such things as costs reductions, performance effectiveness, and efficiencies. For example, organizational representatives coming together to reduce costs of HAZMAT responses and make the emergency services more effective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solving team</td>
<td>Identification of symptoms and their associated underlying causes culminates in a recommendation and offering to fix the problem(s), a suggestion of ways to work around it/them. For example, a collaborative effort focusing on reducing costs of transportation of resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Co-located team</td>
<td>Teams that are cross-functional that are physically moved to a new location to complete a project. Normally this team categorizes designs and develops new products and/or services. For example, a FEMA response to a disaster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-functional team</td>
<td>Teams composed of members from different specialized work functions across several organizations whose charter is to design, develop, and/or problem solve. An example of this is the management of a mass disaster involving, local, regional, and federal jurisdictions and divisions.</td>
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members may attempt to impose upon the rest of the team their particular vision and approach.

It is common during this stage for some team members to display dependence on a certain individual perceived as a “doer” who sees him/herself as “the” leader of the group. This self-proclaimed leader may attempt to “take over” the team and push it toward completing the work.

Doers can be one of two types of people. The first type is an individual who tries to force the team to create a series of goals, objectives, and rules in order to complete the task as the doer understands it. The second type of doer is a strong natural leader who has a more cooperative and collaborative approach toward working and developing a team. This leader emerges early on to direct the proper evolution of the team and then backs off when members begin working well and accomplishing the team’s goal. This second type of doer is often not recognized as a leader until the third or fourth stage of the team’s development.

To navigate successfully through this second stage, teams first need to have a thorough and shared understanding of their assignment, their team’s purpose. Next, they need to create a plan to accomplish their assignment which all members “buy into” and support. Because this stage is often stressful, teams sometimes abandon the appropriate developmental steps necessary for more holistic, sustainable development. Simply put, the team chooses to focus on concrete tasks rather than the “soft side” of relationship development. In this scenario, the leader gives out specific tasks and the members follow, creating an environment where resentments can grow and the “blame game” can develop.

During this period, some members actively participate while others quietly follow, often appearing passive. Some are silent supporters, others are gathering information (the “wait and see” contingent), while others are evaluating the group dynamics and figuring out how they want to position themselves within the team. Thus, “political camps” or “factions” form. These cliques are often based on power and control issues—who is “politically correct” can become a major concern, rather than what is the right thing to do for the team and the larger organization. One or more discontented subgroups may attempt to build strength for an “insurrection.”

In some cases, team members will attempt to avoid the discomfort of this stage by reverting back to honeymoon stage behaviors or just playing a passive role (e.g., “just doing the job”). The team may alternate between these first two stages several times, even during the same meeting, until something interrupts this counterproductive cycle.

If the team can successfully navigate through these various obstacles, they move onto the next stage.

3. Counter-dependence stage—rebellion and revolution

If the team is skillful, mature, and perhaps a bit lucky, they may progress through this stage very quickly or skip it altogether. This third stage, which clearly emerges out of the dependence stage, can often be triggered by a negative event such as the leader burning out, losing effectiveness (for reasons including credibility, accountability, and reliability), or being rendered impotent by the team’s members. When assignments are not completed and responsibilities are “dumped” on the leader—who either tries to do all the work or to take greater control of the group—you have the beginning of a revolution in the group’s relationships and structure.

During such a “junta” there is a great deal of competition around leadership: who decides, what are the roles and responsibilities, who is in control? The initial leader is repeatedly challenged. There is a flurry of behind-the-scenes activity as members try to rationalize their positions and justify their personal agendas. Unfortunately, this experience is usually negative and counterproductive to the development of the group.

On occasion a self-appointed leader may naturally begin to share leadership responsibilities with other team members. When this occurs, team members may start to understand how they fit into the larger structure and begin working with the leader and other members. This, obviously, is a healthy development for the team, which will help foster its effectiveness as it matures.

Oftentimes, personalities are the major factor determining a team’s success. Power struggles can cause members to resign or be reassigned. Individuals may complain about roles that have been defined for them or for others. It is not uncommon for these kinds of personality clashes to occur during this third stage. Too often, those “in charge” only want to accomplish what
they want completed and in the way they think it should be completed, an approach that leaves little room for substantive input from the other team members. When this happens, there is usually little appreciation of human diversity or recognition that certain tasks can be successfully completed in several different ways.

By this stage, conflicts between group factions are generally no longer polite. Strong feelings of “we” versus “they” emerge. Alliances are strengthened. Tension rises over roles and responsibilities. People become protective of their “turf”—and the chaos grows. The rebellion and revolution of this stage is usually quelled in one of two ways:

1. When a stronger leader takes over, in which case the team often regresses back to the dependence stage and can then go through this same experience again, though with different protagonists; or

2. The team realizes a new strategy and discovers “what it takes” to work together effectively. This may take some time, but they will not make the same mistakes of the counter-dependence stage.

At this point, the next stage is launched.

A team struggling in this manner may need outside assistance to help guide it through all the confusion and conflict. If the culture of the larger organization supports collaboration, understands team development, and accepts that failure is a part of learning, teams at this stage can benefit greatly. A skillful leader who understands team development will not micromanage or take over the team process but will be able to intervene quietly to coach team leadership and remove obstacles and then just as quietly step out.

4. Interdependence stage—true teamwork

Unfortunately, many teams never achieve this stage because of “party politics” or team structure, as described above. Also, the larger organization overseeing the team may not understand, or place any value on, the process of team building necessary to reach this critical stage. In addition, the organization may lack the leadership or interest to coach team members through these early stages.

Having developed as a team through the previous stages, several things occur during this interdependence stage:

- First, the overall team becomes effective.
- Next, individual and team attitudes improve.
- Team members agree on a common focus so they are working in harmony.
- True team spirit emerges, and over time the team’s initial focus is deepened and refined.
- Real progress is made toward achieving the team’s objectives.

During this stage, team members refine their roles and responsibilities. They come to understand that no one person can do it all, and that the team has to work as a whole if it is going to succeed.

Individual behavior changes as well when this stage is reached. Most notably, leadership is often shared among members. People recognize and accept each other’s strengths and weaknesses. In addition, a balance often occurs among strategy, task, and maintenance activities. Members accept and tolerate individual variances in behavior as well as personal agendas, since everyone now is focused on the same goal. A feeling of pride and accomplishment develops often along with a spirit of conviviality.

5. Revitalization stage—rejuvenation

Although the team can sustain the stage of interdependence for a long period of time, things eventually change. Personal agendas change, personnel turn over, new assignments come along, and the larger organization’s direction may shift. All of these factors are a normal part of development and evolution of a team.

Every team or organization, whether small or large, needs periodic revitalization. If this does not occur, the team will begin to lose its effectiveness and eventually stagnate or die. A team needs to continually improve
and grow, and the “esprit de corps” needs ongoing nurturing.

To remain vital, teams need to celebrate their accomplishments and continually look for new challenges. For an individual as well as for a team, learning should never end, and evolution is an ongoing process. Peter Senge’s book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, focuses on creating an
environment so that the organization improves with age. Maturation is a journey, not a final destination.

If we do not attend to renewal, we lose spirit: we must acknowledge that attitudes change just as members of a team change. Change and disruption tend to push teams back into earlier stages of development. But for teams to remain vital, they must constantly recognize and grapple with the continuous challenges presented by change.

Many teams do not continue past the achievement of their initial goals; they are disbanded when their work is completed. When terminating a team, it is important to do it in a way that leaves the individual members with a sense of closure, appreciation, and satisfaction for their collective achievement. This helps to improve morale in the greater organization while setting the stage for any future teams these individuals may join.

Table 2 (pg. 5) summarizes the five stages of team development.

CONCLUSION

In today’s emergency management world, new teams are being formed at a rapid pace and with very high expectations. Prevention of disasters and the saving of lives are at stake. Understanding how teams evolve through natural stages of development has never been more important.

It serves us well to think of team development stages building on one another, each providing a footing for the next level of maturation. It is important to note that teams will traverse these stages differently and not always linearly. It is also important to remember that teams can get stuck or, at times, regress to an earlier stage. Teams may temporarily and briefly repeat earlier stages to help integrate a new member into the team. We must look at the overall progress of the team to determine how it is evolving.

It is very important that the team and its leaders are aware of the natural stages of team development in order to have the perspective to understand and overcome the inevitable challenges they will face.

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REFERENCES