



The Lifecycle of Groups

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Groups, like people, go through different stages in their development. It's important to understand where a group is in that lifecycle before trying to shift that group's behavior.

There's been a lot of work trying to articulate the different stages of group development. I want to discuss four models here:

- iScale Network Lifecycle and Assessment
- Drexler / Sibbet Team Performance Model
- MG Taylor Stages of an Enterprise
- Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing (my model of choice)

Different models have different strengths and weaknesses, so it's helpful to have these different perspectives. Exploring different models also offers clues as to what makes a *good* model.

Each of these models are oriented toward specific types of groups: networks, teams, and organizations. However, while the structures and strategies of actions might differ depending on the group, the stages more or less apply to all types of groups.

iScale Network Lifecycle and Assessment

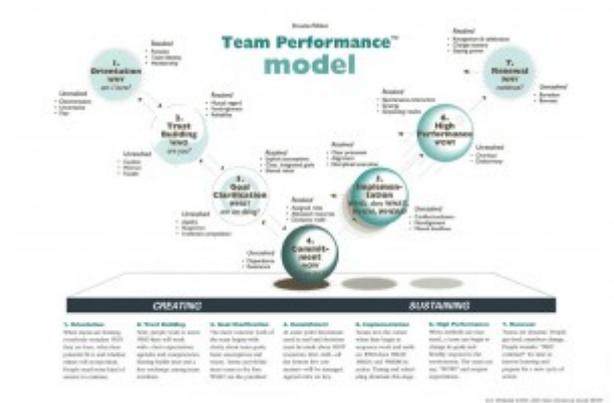
The **iScale Network Lifecycle and Assessment** is the only model here that's specific to networks. It defines four different stages:

- Catalyzing
- Launching
- Enhancing and Expanding
- Transforming or Transitioning

I like the network-specific language, such as "catalyzing," in this model. I also like how it's oriented as a cycle rather than as something that's linear.

However, the language in the detail feels more top-down and organizational than it does bottom-up and emergent. What does, "Leadership group formulates an existing Theory of Change," mean in the context of a bottom-up network without formal leadership? At a high-level at least, this is a good model for exploring the different lifecycles of large groups.

Drexler / Sibbet Team Performance Model



The **Drexler / Sibbet Team Performance Model** is probably the most directly actionable of the four models. It has seven stages with key questions associated with each stage:

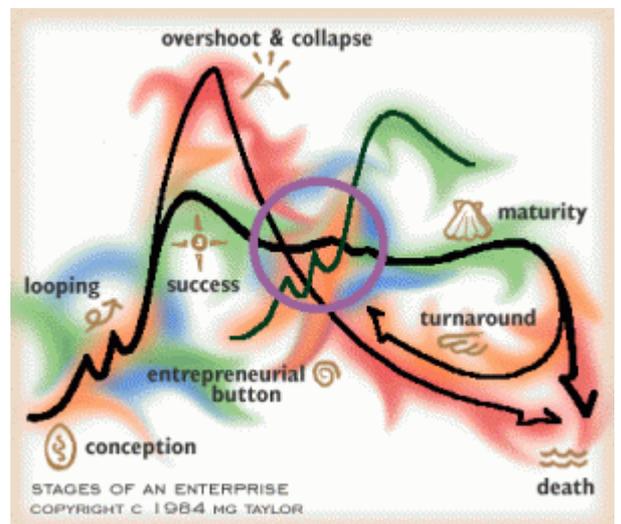
- Orientation (Why am I here?)
- Trust Building (Who are you?)
- Goal Clarification (What are we doing?)
- Commitment (How will we do it?)
- Implementation (Who does what, when, where?)
- High Performance (Wow!)
- Renewal (Why continue?)

I particularly like how Drexler and Sibbet define both positive and negative states for each stage and how the transitions are not linear. I also find it interesting how the visual “V” shape (creating / sustaining) parallels [Theory U’s](#) sensing / presencing model.

Thanks to its questions and states, this model serves as a great template for strategically thinking through the different stages of a group. However, this is a case where the model is less applicable toward large groups — especially networks — as it is toward its intended target of small teams. You are likely to have more overlap and ambiguity when trying to map these stages to a larger group.

MG Taylor’s Stages of an Enterprise

I’m partial to **MG Taylor’s Stages of an Enterprise**, as I consider both Matt and Gail Taylor mentors. Like the Drexler / Sibbet model, the MG Taylor model also has seven stages and nonlinear transitions.



What’s different is that, instead of offering a model, they’re offering a modeling *language*. In other words, they’re giving you tools to create models that map to the evolution of your specific group, and they’re

offering patterns to look for within those models.

There are deep questions embedded in this model, which make it weighty and powerful as an exercise for groups. For example, what does the Y-axis represent here? Productivity? Performance? The good folks at MG Taylor don't answer that question for you. They want you to answer it for yourself.

As with the Drexler / Sibbet model, the MG Taylor model is a powerful template for thinking through lifecycle and strategic issues. Its power lies in its complexity, which makes it more accurate, and it also makes it more difficult to comprehend.

Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing

Which brings me to my favorite group lifecycle model, Bruce Tuckman's [four stages of group development](#):

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing

It's catchy, which makes it memorable, but it's also accurate and actionable, which makes it meaningful.

Of the four models described here, it's the only one developed by a researcher rather than by consultants, which in turn means that it's the only one that doesn't have trademark or other IP associated with it. (The broad consultant practice of aggressively claiming IP over models such as these is a pet peeve of mine. This is a subject for another blog post.)

The simplicity of Tuckman's model enables you to integrate it into more participatory exercises and thinking. You can ask groups which of these stages they think they're in, and you can easily facilitate discussions about what it takes to move from one stage to another. Moreover, groups are more likely to remember the different stages.

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