GROUPS ACT IN predictable and natural ways. It doesn’t matter whether we’re talking about boy scout troops, manufacturing teams or executive leadership groups. We can describe the life of all groups in terms of observable stages of group development. Understanding these stages can help us to participate in groups more effectively and to lead them with excellence.

Some of us have been part of groups that have become high performing teams. It’s an experience that is usually treasured by those who experience it. How can we reproduce these peak functioning experiences in new teams?

If we can describe groups as behaving in predictable ways, then we can equip leaders, managers, and consultants with the tools necessary to help groups become effective, high-performing teams. This article is an introduction to Group Organics, which is a philosophy and a set of tools designed to do just that. Group Organics, as applied to group “growth”, has a parallel to natural human development. We use these comparisons in our description of the stages of Group Organics.

The observation that there is a natural lifecycle to groups and teams was probably one of the greatest discoveries made in the early sociological research done in the 1940’s and 50’s, notably by Ron and Gordon Lippitt. This action research model was continued at the National Training Laboratory (NTL) and the University of Michigan, among other places. We also owe a dept of gratitude to Bruce Tuckman, who in his article, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups”, 1965 Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399, coined an initial set of terms for group development. These terms have become a standard framework for understanding

“The Group Organics Model helps team members, team leaders and practitioners by predicting the stages of group development and comparing these stages to phases of human maturation.”

By Stas’ Kazmierski and Catherine Lilly
group development, and they form one of the foundations of our Group Organics model.

Figure 1 is a graphic of the stages of our Group Organics model as contrasted to the stages that Tuckman originally described.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Organics™</th>
<th>Tuckman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forming</td>
<td>Forming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norming</td>
<td>Storming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storming</td>
<td>Re-norming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-norming</td>
<td>Performing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing</td>
<td>Termination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FORMING**

**Overview:**

The forming stage of Group Organics describes the initial gathering of the group, and can sometimes extend through several meetings.

**Members:**

In the forming stage of a group, members are anxious and questioning, no matter what their experience level.

"Is this group going to accomplish anything? Will I be accepted? Will my contributions be valued? Will I enjoy it? Is the leader competent?"

We all deal with this anxiety through our own characteristic patterns. Most of us will hold back in some way, waiting to see what will happen.

**Group Maturity Issues:**

In Group Organics, we think of a group as a developing psyche or personality. The forming moment is the moment of birth of this group entity. At the very first meeting, the group is like an infant, an unformed consciousness with tremendous potential, waiting for impressions from the world around it.

**Leaders:**

Group Organics consist of both people-related behaviors and task-related behaviors. During the Forming Stage, a top-down, directive style of leadership is called for, regardless of whether or not this is a natural style for the leader.

First, the leader needs to define the initial structure and mission/purpose of the group and lead the group through its agenda. Second, the leader must ensure future participation by all members, by forcing entry into the group through participation in an icebreaker.

Icebreakers can be simple or complex, and high or low in risk taking or silliness. They should be related to the tone or purpose of the group. For example a group whose purpose is focused on creativity might have a playful icebreaker, while future project team members may describe past experiences with a successful project. Their key purpose

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is to allow members to “break the ice” of the group psyche by sticking a toe in the water.

Good morning. I’m glad to see you all here for the first meeting of our Intergalactic Connectivity Group. We will be meeting weekly at this time for our project updates. Today I will review with you our charge and context. In the next several meetings we will be developing our project plan. To get started, I would like to go around the room and have each of you introduce yourselves, Please say why you were nominated for this project, and tell us a little bit about your previous experiences working in teams.

NORMING
Overview:
The next predictable stage in Group Organics is called norming. Even though we talk about norming as a second stage, in fact, many norms are set by behaviors exhibited by members at an initial meeting.

At our first meeting, we get started late. Tom sits to my left, Mary sits next to him, and Jason sits across from all of us. At the second meeting, we again start ten minutes late, everyone same seats. What do you imagine the seating arrangement and the starting time for the third meeting?

At our fourth meeting, a visitor joins our group and sits in Mary’s chair. As the members fill the room, everyone looks at everyone else and there’s nervous laughter as we see what will happen when Mary arrives.

A norm is a conscious or unconscious habit that a group develops about the way it does its business. Most norms are unconscious, much as the standards that we learned from our parents are now unconscious guidelines. Often we can only identify a group norm by the discomfort that happens when it’s been violated.

Members:
In the norming stage of a group, members are trying to determine what’s expected of them and how to behave. There’s a pressure to conform, and members will often unconsciously agree to behaviors that do not serve them personally.

Group Maturity Issues:
During the norming stage, the maturity of the group is like that of a three or four year old child. The child is looking around for cues about how to behave, and what will gain approval. Once set, these “childhood” norms are very hard to change at a later time (as is also the case with our own early programming).

Leaders:
There are two key responsibilities to managing this stage. The first is to make norming immediately into a conscious and participative activity.

I’d like to take some time today to agree on our group Rules of Conduct. We can talk about both Housekeeping guidelines (calling in absent, rotating minutes) and Group guidelines (arriving on time, fulfilling assigned tasks, listening to each other). Let’s brainstorm for a few minutes and then come to agreement.

The second responsibility that the leader has is to reinforce agreed-upon norms during the subsequent meetings.

Hang on there a second, Tom. In our Rules of Conduct discussion, we agreed that we wanted to listen and not interrupt each other, and I’m not sure Mary’s finished making her point.

Note: it is helpful if one of the norms that the team develops during the norming stage incorporates continuous self-reflection or “Team Critique”.

STORMING
Overview:
The next stage of group development is called storming. No matter how skillful the leader is, no matter how experienced the group members are, teams will always pass through this stage. Storming is characterized by the emergence of conflict. It often happens about a third of the way into the life
of the group.

I'm feeling concerned about the team. Lately Tom and Mary have been arriving half an hour late. Jason mentioned after last meeting that he believes the group has been wrong all along in the strategy they chose. Two other team members have consistently begun to make significant negative eye contact during meetings.

A period of creeping fragmentation may signal that storming is occurring. Or, more overtly, there may be disruption or conflict so explosive that progress is suspended for a period of time.

Members:
In the storming stage of a group, members are (often unconsciously) testing to see how their group will deal with conflict. They may experiment with expressing their real feelings or opinions. They may ally with the team leader (dependence) or with a powerful emerging coalition (polarization) or feel uncomfortable or isolated (withdrawal).

Group Maturity Issues:
The developmental stage of groups during the storming stage could easily be compared to that of adolescence.

Like a teenager, the group is asking:
- How much control do I have over my life?
- Can I actually succeed?
- How can I have conflicts with others and still have positive relationships?
  These questions will be resolved during this stage of group development.

Leaders:
The temptation may be strong to respond to these adolescent or challenging behaviors by being strict or authoritarian. However, effective team leaders realize that the advent of the storming stage is the cue for a change in leadership style.

Leaders must answer the questions posed during this stage by skillfully turning the responsibility for the answers over to the group itself.

We call this the “aikido style” of group management. In the aikido style, effective leaders deflect the conflict energy back to the group for resolution. These leaders let the group be in charge of the task, yet stay present to support members in learning how to handle conflict together. At key points during this stage, leaders remind the group of their common goals.

I've noticed recently that we are no longer all here at the beginning of our meetings. We agreed early on to respect each other, and to value each person's input. So I've set some time on the agenda to talk about starting time, as I'd like to hear what the rest of you think about this.

Jason, you make an interesting point about our strategy. I'd like to hear more about your ideas and then let's see what the rest of you think about Jason's recommendations.

In high-performing teams, conflicts are seen as normal occurrences and are resolved by the members, with the leader (and eventually other members) being skillfully facilitative. Members are valued as strengths and resources. Inclusion of everyone is seen as necessary to success. All feel committed to working together towards the goal.

WHAT HAPPENS IF AIKIDO IS NOT USED?

During the storming stage, the norms for how to handle conflict will be set. In low-performing teams, we see many other variations from the aikido model. For example, conflicts are only raised privately with the leader, who acts single-handedly to resolve them. Some groups create scapegoats. Some groups will simply deny that conflicts exist.

When the norms for dealing with conflict are set in an unhealthy way, members can’t fully contribute. The ownership for success rests mostly on the leader, who feels the heavy burden.

RE-NORMING

Overview:
Once members feel freely able to raise conflicts, many norms that developed in earlier stages
come into question. As members voice their differing points of view, the group realizes that it needs to change in order to function optimally for each member. This is the stage that Tuckman identified as Norming, but may be more accurately characterized as re-norming.

I'm glad that we all realized through our discussion last week about why it's better for everyone if we meet at 9:30 instead of 9:00. I was glad to see you all here on time this morning.

Characteristics of a group that hasn’t re-normed might be:
- Over-reliance on the leader
- Formation of cliques and coalitions
- Escalation of interpersonal conflicts
- Unwillingness to engage in conflict resolution
- Overall lack of progress

Members:

As more flexible and inclusive norms are set, members feel an increased sense of comfort in expressing themselves. They feel valued for being who they are.

Leaders:

During the re-norming stage, leaders need to take an aikido role in reinforcing the team’s ability to decide for itself what is best. They may also take an active role in reminding the team about its new norms and roles.

Group Maturity:

In the re-norming stage, the team moves towards young adulthood. Members have examined the norms that were established when the team was young, and have discarded those which were not supportive of the team’s success.

Members also understand that the team’s ability to succeed lies in the minds and hearts of the unique collection of individuals who are present.

When groups do not go through the storming stage in an aikido-based way, the re-norming stage never occurs and maturity never develops. This lack of maturity in group development marks one of the differences between groups and teams.

PERFORMING

Overview:

The performing stage marks the stage of a group or team’s continuous work towards the goal. The group may function in a high-performing manner, or not. Hallmarks of high performing teams are:
- Self-management
- Creation and adhering to plans
- Measurement and celebration of results
- Role fluidity (members take various roles as needed)
- Respectful treatment, even closeness, of all members by all members
- Appreciation of and utilization of member differences

Members:

At this point, members behave in accordance with the individual and group expectations that have been set. During the performing stage, as roles are fulfilled predictably, the group experiences stability.

Group Maturity Issues:

This is the adult stage in Group Organics. Adults come in all capabilities and levels of maturity and so do groups. During this stage, the status quo has so much momentum that change, even if it is needed, is often impossible.

Leaders:

During performing, the leader’s role is pretty well set; it is familiar and stable, even if flexible. Perhaps during the conflict stage, the leader’s role was re-normed, using aikido, perhaps it wasn’t. In our experience, no group that resolves conflict autocratically can ever achieve high-performing team standards. However, a group is still very often capable of meeting its goals.

TERMINATION

Overview:

Obviously, a group goes into the termination stage whenever its purpose is about to be achieved and its time together is ending. This occurs, for
example, in software development teams. We call this planned termination and in these circumstances, the stages of Group Organics are linear (as in Figure 1).

**Members:**

One characteristic of the termination stage is a slow down in production. Another surprising characteristic of a group in termination is that members are suddenly talking about the past. During the performing stage, member references to the past are functional, as in “didn’t we talk about this last week?” However, during the termination phase, member expression has a quality of nostalgia. (“Gee, this has been really fun.”) Comments occur more and more frequently which refer to something that happened in the past (“remember how it used to be when…”).

Some members don’t like endings and will withdraw, or lose energy. Members may be aware of feeling sad or uncertain (or relieved, if it hasn’t been a high-performing team) but also may feel happy, proud and successful.

**Group Maturity Issues:**

A mature individual knows how to deal with death. There are predictable stages to the grieving process and rituals to help us with this. For a planned ending, mature high-performing teams will naturally lead themselves through this stage as successfully as they have managed the other stages.

**Leaders:**

It seems to be in the nature of groups to deny or minimize their termination experiences. Because of this, at the end as in the beginning, the leader’s role is to once again take an authoritarian stance. The leader may have to become more directive in keeping the group energized towards the tasks at hand.

For the final set of activities, group processes mirroring the icebreakers used during the forming stage must be imposed on the group. These processes enable each individual to have the opportunity to terminate on an individual as well as a group level.

Termination processes must include two components. First, there must be some team reflection on the experience of the team, including an evaluation of the pros and cons. Second, individual group members must identify the lessons that have been learned and will be taken forward beyond the ending. Brief ceremonies, such as good-bye luncheons, going away potlucks, and Best Wishes cards also help deal with the emotional and symbolic aspects.

Well gang, I know that none of us want to think of this show as coming to a close, but the time is at hand. It may be hard for us to stay focused during the next several meetings, but there are a number of things that need to get wrapped up before we end. Two weeks from today we’ll have our last team meeting and I want you all to be there. Afterwards, I know a couple of you are planning a team celebration and I hope you all can come to that as well.

Team members will deal with the termination event very differently from one another, as they did with the opening icebreaker, and that’s to be expected. What matters is that each member says something, even if it’s just, “I don’t really have much to say. It’s been fun and good luck to everyone.”

**UNPLANNED TERMINATIONS**

**Overview:**

Our experience with teams teaches us a surprising fact that we believe is not widely understood. A team will also go through a termination stage whenever it experiences a change. This can include in a change in leadership, a change in membership (loss or gain), or a change in physical location. Sometimes, the termination stage even hits at the end of a phase of a large project. We call these situations unplanned terminations. These are very common in the lives of ongoing organizational teams or long-term project teams.

In these situations, members are usually unconscious about the fact that they are facing the organics of the termination stage. They believe that they can remain in the stage of performing, despite the change that is occurring. “Of course we’ll miss Tom, but it shouldn’t make any difference. The rest of us are still here.”
Predictably, this denial causes the team to slip into a state of regressed storming. All of a sudden, little work is getting done, members are in conflict again, and forward momentum slows or grinds to a halt.

Years of experience show us that a team can stay in an extended stage of regressed storming indefinitely. How many of us have seen organizational teams that have somehow gotten “frozen in the past?”

Members:

In addition to regressed storming, a key diagnostic of a group in a lingering unplanned termination stage is the degree to which members are talking about the past. It can be striking. “You know, I still don’t understand why our group had to be split up.” (Two years ago!)

Productive action may rest on a committed few (often newer) members who will typically end up feeling resentful. On an unconscious level, after an unplanned termination, other members may feel scared, sad, frustrated, a sense of loss or confusion, or at the very least, tired. For typical team members, denial of most of these natural feelings is the norm and everyone struggles to “keep on keepin’ on”.

Group Maturity:

The unplanned termination phase has sometimes been described in the literature as “transforming”. We believe that this is misleading. When learning to successfully manage group organics, the nature of a group death experience, even one brought about by a relatively minor change, must be understood.

If it is not, the group will remain regressed in a rebellious or dependent adolescent condition, with high reliance on the leader.

Leaders:

Termination activities for unplanned endings are essentially the same as for planned endings. The leader (or new leader or facilitator) must be directive and must design activities that include the same two components; reflections and lessons learned.

As I told you last week, before we head off for

Tom’s going away potluck, we’re going to take the final fifteen minutes of today’s meeting to bring a close to Tom’s time with the team. At this point, I’d like to go around the table and have each of you say a few words to Tom about our time together as a team. What’s been good, what’s been not so good? What will you remember? Then Tom, I’d like to give you a chance to say a few words yourself.

RAPID CYCLING THROUGH THE STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

In some team environments, leaders face frequent changes in their teams and therefore must deal with termination stages continuously. Is there any way to avoid low performance or significant delay?

The answer is yes! We have noticed that in high performing teams equipped with the knowledge of Group Organics, both the formal leader and team members identify “termination” events and raise them immediately. The leader/team must then consciously cycle through the stages of forming, norming, storming and re-norming to get back to performing. In rapidly changing, high-performing team environments, we find that this cycling occurs in an almost standardized fashion.

In dialog, this might look and sound like this:

Forming: the Next Round

Well, now that Tom has gone, and Sandy has replaced him, I wanted to take a few minutes today to help Sandy get oriented to our team.

Let’s go around the table and introduce ourselves and talk about our experiences on this team.

Norming: the next round

That was great! As you’ve noticed, I’ve also decided to lead the group from this side of the room, and everyone has moved around a bit. Now let’s also review the Rules of Conduct that we developed before and see if they still make sense. Sandy, I would be particularly interested in your thoughts about norms that you’ve seen work in your past experience. Let’s also remember to catch Sandy up on any insider jargon that we use.
Storming/Re-norming: the next round

A leader must anticipate a brief storming stage, as roles shift, new norms are created and the team integrates the changes that have occurred. These new norms will begin the re-norming process for this new team.

Sandy has brought to my attention that everyone thinks that he should be changing the toner in the printer, though that’s not really part of his job. As you remember, Tom took on that task when he was here, but that’s because he was often here first in the morning. Perhaps we should come to a different agreement about how to do that. What are your ideas?

Figure 2 describes the flow of this rapid cycling thought the Group Organics Model stages.

It is our experience that once aware of Group Organics, teams can rapidly recycle from forming through re-norming to performing in a very short period of time. This is usually done during a team meeting and it is minimally completed in 1–2 hours.

CONCLUSION

The Group Organics Model helps team members, team leaders and practitioners by predicting the stages of group development and comparing these stages to phases of human maturation. It explains that most groups form and perform in predictable ways and that by understanding the stages and applying some simple facilitation tools, team maturation and performance can be accelerated.

Group leadership requires the use of two, polarized, facilitation styles: authoritarian and aikido. The first and last stages of organic growth are “forming” and “termination”. These require that the leader direct the team through the appropriate processes.

In contrast, as a group matures it becomes more appropriate for the leader to use the style we call aikido. This leadership style is characterized by a more participative and interactive mode. The leader acts as reflector of energy, focusing the group in positive, constructive, and performance-centered directions. When aikido is used, members find the flexibility to allow various individuals on the team to capitalize on their strengths and appropriately act in any number of team roles.

Finally, with the knowledge of Group Organics in hand, teams can become equipped to successfully rapid cycle through unexpected changes. They become able to remain mature and high performing, no matter what challenges they face.