

Make Team Learning Fun: Using Group Dynamics to Accelerate Learning

By Peggy Grall

Trainers are always looking for that edge, that extra “something” that helps them deliver the learning more effectively. It’s been my experience that knowing where a training group is in their development, and adjusting your training style to fit, can increase training fun and success.

Much has been learned about group process through the work of B.W. Tuckman. He identified 4 distinct phases that most teams, divisions and training groups move through on their way to productivity. Groups can spend anywhere from a few minutes to a few months in each phase, largely dependent on the skill of the leader. The first stage of group interaction, Forming, begins even before you get to the training site. Pre-training information sheets are a great way to facilitate a new group’s need for structure. You can include a brief introduction of yourself, your training style and your goals and expectations for the day.

When workshop participants arrive to a training day they need to know:

- 1) What am I here to learn
- 2) What do you expect of me
- 3) Can you handle this group?

Their developmental tasks are to determine structure, define roles, time-lines and get to know each other. It’s vital that you demonstrate your readiness to provide an atmosphere of safety, where they can interact and ask questions of each other and begin to form working alliances. As the training progresses, they will take more of the lead, but for now – providing strong leadership creates an environment in which they can begin the task of forming themselves into a working group.

Another great way to ease groups through the Forming stage is to greet each participant as they come in the door, introduce yourself, and direct them to an opening activity. Having an activity in progress when they arrive also gives participants an opportunity to discharge social etiquette and identify expertise; this initial exercise gets these tasks out of the way and readies group members to focus on learning.

Artfully handling the next phase of group development – Storming- is what separates the novice from a seasoned trainer. The issues at work are: the potential for conflict and power plays, the emergence of individual differences, frustration and confusion with materials and each other. You know the scene; you’re introducing the core of your materials and one or more of the participants begin to make jokes, distract others or openly takes issue with your ideas or presentation. What this group needs to see in you now, is that you have the presence and skill level to remain the leader *but* that you also welcome and value different perspectives. A group in conflict is your cue to model and make room for debate, challenge and constructive criticism of your ideas and applicability of the material.

A recent experience I had with a manufacturing group in the storming phase was, when I presented a workshop on *Tolerance in the Workplace* to an all male audience. I was explaining the need for employees to embrace diversity and find ways to handle disputes without violence, when a young man blurted out that my ideas, “just won’t work here”, because they were all men in the plant and the way I was suggesting they approach each other, “just isn’t how guys do it”. Several men looked around, rolled their eyes and then watched intently, to see what I would do. I smiled, gave it a humm...and said that I might have overlooked some ways that men handle conflict and that if this group could get consensus on the, Top 5 Ways *Real Men* handle conflict - that I’d let them out 10 minutes early for lunch! That young man went from heckler to hero in an instant; the group breathed a sign of relief, and got to work on their lists. By respectfully and assertively addressing this individual’s control issues, I helped move this group out of Storming and onto the next phase, Norming.

When you have a group for a training day, often the Norming process begins just before lunch. Throughout the morning, roles and rules have been clarified, conflict has been successfully worked through and they are now ready to problem solve, share control, and support each other in the learning process. To hasten their movement through the Norming stage, I suggest that you make an effort to do a mini-recap just before breaking for lunch. Ask group members to identify what has been learned so far *and* how they assisted each other in grasping the concepts presented. As they articulate how they have progressed as a group, they will gain confidence to move into the deeper waters of the meat of your materials. You can suggest that the afternoon will be used to see if the ideas presented can hold up in light of their individual work environments.

The lunch break is a good time to invite them into the Performing process. Give the group a fun exercise that challenges conventional wisdom on the morning’s subject and then, dismiss yourself. Your stepping back will encourage them to own the learning process; they will share insights, issue challenges to each other, recall information from the morning, and by the time you return after lunch, they will be a real working team. This is a way of encouraging group cohesion as well as offering them the challenge of owning the material. They’re ready to begin to Perform, when they take up this challenge.

The shift from Norming to Performing is a beautiful thing to watch. You can see it in the faces of the participant’s as they interact with each other. They are more direct with each other, confident in asking questions, challenging concepts and constructively grappling with the material. This is when synergy happens; group members begin taking the lead in discussions and will often present new ideas and suggest novel applications. Morale and energy are high and the group is focused on learning. Now is when you can give the group practical application exercises and scenarios. Save some of your more difficult concepts for this phase; those that require people to be open, bold, innovative and questioning. Performing groups can handle autonomy, challenges, conflict, and in the end; will relish celebration. Brainstorming is well positioned here; they are ready for that type of freewheeling exercise at this stage. Your role now is one of coach, facilitator and cheerleader.

Whether you have a group for a morning, a day or ongoing, you will see the same developmental features unfold. Your job is to hasten the process. Keep your group from getting stuck in the politeness of Forming, derailed in the confusion and conflict of Storming, complacent in the calm of Norming and capitalize on the rich learning environment of Performing. Working with a group’s process is key to maximizing training time and retention of materials. As you prepare for your next

training assignment, think about how to facilitate group process, and which of your own unique exercises, games, tasks and presentation styles would fit best with each stage.

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