

STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Bruce Tuckman's Five-Stage Model (1965 & 1977)

A Concise Study Note in Easy Language with Examples

Who was Bruce Tuckman?

Bruce Tuckman (1938–2016) was an American psychologist and educational researcher. In 1965 he studied 55 small groups and noticed that almost every group goes through the same stages as it develops — from a group of strangers to a strong, working team. He named these stages: Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. In 1977, together with Mary Ann Jensen, he added a fifth stage called Adjourning. This model is now one of the most widely used frameworks in social work, management, education, and counselling.

What is Group Development?

Group development means the process by which a group of people gradually learn to work together, trust each other, and achieve their goals. Just like a person grows from a baby to an adult through stages, a group also grows through stages. Each stage has its own challenges, feelings, and behaviours. Understanding these stages helps a social worker or group leader guide the group more effectively — knowing when to step in, when to step back, and how to help the group move forward.

Tuckman's Five Stages of Group Development

Stage 1: FORMING — *Orientation / Getting to Know Each Other*

This is the very first stage when a group is just starting. Members are new to each other and do not know what to expect. They are polite, careful, and a bit nervous. No one wants to say the wrong thing, so conversations stay on safe topics. Everyone is trying to figure out: 'What is this group about? What am I supposed to do? Will I be accepted here?'

Key features: Politeness and positivity on the surface. Members look to the leader for direction. Anxiety and uncertainty are common. People observe more than they speak. Goals and roles are unclear.

Example: *A social worker forms a new support group for women who have experienced domestic violence. In the first session, the women sit quietly, answer only when asked, and avoid sharing personal details. One woman says, 'I am not sure what we are supposed to do here.' The social worker introduces everyone gently, explains the group's purpose, and sets simple ground rules like confidentiality and respect. Slowly, members begin to relax and introduce themselves.*

Worker's Role: The worker must be warm, clear, and directive. Explain the purpose, set ground rules, help everyone feel safe, and break the ice with light introductions or activities.

Stage 2: STORMING — *Conflict / Testing and Challenging*

Once members feel slightly more comfortable, they begin to show their real personalities — and that is when conflict begins. People start disagreeing about how the group should work, who should lead, and what the rules should be. This stage can feel uncomfortable, but it is a normal and necessary part of group growth. Without going through storming, a group cannot develop genuine trust.

Key features: Arguments, disagreements, and tension. Competition for leadership or status. Some members dominate; others go silent. Frustration with the task or with other members. Cliques may begin to form.

Example: *In the same women's support group, by the third session, two members argue about the format: one wants structured activities, the other wants free discussion. A third member complains that one person talks too much. The social worker acknowledges the conflict openly: 'It is good that you are expressing how you feel. Let us find a way that works for everyone.' She helps the group agree on a balanced format — 20 minutes of structured activity followed by open sharing. The tension eases.*

Worker's Role: The worker should NOT suppress conflict — it is healthy. Instead, acknowledge it, listen carefully to all sides, help members see each other's perspectives, and guide the group toward problem-solving rather than blame.

Stage 3: NORMING — Cohesion / Coming Together

After working through their conflicts, group members begin to trust each other more. They develop shared norms — agreed-upon rules and ways of behaving. Members start listening more, cooperating more, and supporting one another. There is a growing sense of 'we' instead of 'I'. The group starts to feel like a real team.

Key features: Increased trust and openness among members. Clear roles and shared norms emerge. Members support and encourage each other. Disagreements are resolved constructively. Sense of group identity and belonging develops.

Example: *By session six of the women's group, members begin to share deeply personal experiences about their trauma. One woman listens carefully to another and says, 'I felt the same way — you are not alone.' The group spontaneously creates a rule: 'Whatever is said here stays here.' Members also agree to take turns facilitating one activity per session. The social worker notices that she needs to intervene much less — the group is managing itself.*

Worker's Role: The worker's role becomes more supportive and less directive. Encourage members to take ownership of the group, celebrate small wins, and build on the growing trust and cohesion.

Stage 4: PERFORMING — Productivity / Working at Full Strength

Not all groups reach this stage. Those that do have become a high-functioning unit. Members work together smoothly, trust each other deeply, and focus on achieving their goals. The group no longer needs constant guidance from the leader — it is self-directed. Members support each other through challenges and celebrate each other's successes. This is the most productive stage.

Key features: High productivity and strong teamwork. Members are flexible and take on different roles as needed. Decisions are made collectively. Group morale and motivation are at their peak. The leader can step back significantly.

Example: *By session twelve of the women's group, members have become each other's strength. One woman who was completely silent in session one is now supporting a newer member joining the group mid-way. Another woman helps a fellow member prepare documents to file a legal complaint against her abuser. The group has developed a shared resource list, a buddy system, and even plans a community awareness event together. The social worker is mostly an observer — the group has truly taken charge of its own growth.*

Worker's Role: The worker delegates, trusts, and steps back. Offer encouragement and resources when needed, but resist the urge to over-manage. Celebrate the group's achievements and independence.

Stage 5 of Tuckman's group development model, known as Adjourning (or "mourning"), **was added in 1977** by Bruce Tuckman in collaboration with **Mary Ann Jensen**. They updated the original 1965 four-stage model after reviewing 22 further studies that indicated a final, necessary stage of disbanding, task completion, and separation, often marked by feelings of achievement and loss.

Stage 5: ADJOURNING — Closure / Ending the Group

Every group must eventually come to an end — whether because the task is complete, the programme has finished, or members must move on. This stage involves wrapping up, saying goodbyes, and reflecting on the journey. Members often feel a mixture of pride in what they achieved and sadness about losing the group. Some may resist the ending. A well-handled closure helps members carry the lessons learned into their individual lives.

Key features: Completion of the group's task or programme. Mixed emotions — pride, sadness, anxiety, gratitude. Members reflect on personal growth and group achievements. Saying meaningful goodbyes is important. Risk of regression if the ending is poorly managed.

Example: *In the final session of the women's support group, the social worker organises a small celebration. Each member shares one thing they will take away from the group. One woman says, 'I came here broken. I am leaving with hope and sisters I never had.' Another says she has filed a police report — something she could not imagine doing six months ago. The social worker facilitates a certificate ceremony and helps members exchange contact details so the support network can continue outside the group. Tears and laughter fill the room.*

Worker's Role: The worker must plan the closure carefully and with compassion. Give members time to process the ending, acknowledge their growth, celebrate achievements, and help them transition to life beyond the group.

Quick Summary: All Five Stages at a Glance

Stage	Key Word	Mood of Group	Leader's Style
Forming	Orientation	Polite, anxious, dependent	Directive — gives clear guidance
Storming	Conflict	Tense, competitive, confused	Coach — listens and resolves
Norming	Cohesion	Trusting, cooperative, open	Supportive — encourages sharing
Performing	Productivity	Confident, motivated, united	Delegating — steps back
Adjourning	Closure	Proud but nostalgic, reflective	Celebratory — marks achievement

How Can a Group Develop Well? (Tuckman's Recommendations)

According to Tuckman and Jensen (1977), a group moves through its stages successfully when the following conditions are met:

- Rotate facilitation responsibility among members so everyone feels ownership.
- The purpose and goals of the group must be clearly understood by all members — and revisited regularly.
- Ground rules should be created early and followed consistently.
- Members should understand that conflict is normal and even necessary for growth — not something to fear.
- The group must develop the habit of really listening to each other.
- Each session should end with a brief, meaningful wrap-up where members reflect on what was learned.

- Everyone must contribute — it must be a shared responsibility, not the work of one or two people.

Important Points to Remember

Groups do not always move forward: A group may go back to an earlier stage if new members join, there is a sudden conflict, or leadership changes. For example, a performing group that gets a new manager may slide back into storming.

Not all groups reach Performing: Some groups get stuck in storming or norming. The worker's skill is critical in helping the group progress.

Adjourning was added later: Tuckman's original 1965 model had only four stages. The Adjourning stage was added in 1977 when he and Jensen realised that endings are as important as beginnings.

The model applies widely: This model is used in social work groups, school groups, corporate teams, hospital wards, community organisations, and anywhere people work together toward a shared goal.

Conclusion

Bruce Tuckman's five stages of group development — Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning — give us a simple but powerful map of how groups grow. Every group starts uncertain (Forming), goes through some friction (Storming), finds its rhythm (Norming), achieves its best work (Performing), and eventually concludes (Adjourning). For a social worker, understanding these stages is like having a compass. It helps you know where your group is, what it needs right now, and how to guide it gently toward its full potential. The goal is not to avoid difficult moments — it is to understand them, work through them, and help the group emerge stronger on the other side.

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