

Team Chemistry Comes From Letting Players Mix



Jeff Janssen

Facilitate your program's progression through the four stages of team development

By **JEFF JANSSEN**,
Janssen Sports Leadership Center

While chemistry class is not required for most coaches, it is typically one of the most important subjects to comprehend. One of the best ways to build team chemistry is to have a clear understanding of the typical stages of team development.

Much like a child growing up, every team progresses through certain developmental stages throughout the course of a season. Your role as a coach is to use the following stages of team development as a guide and facilitate your team's natural progression through them.

It is important to remember that not all teams automatically progress sequentially through these stages. However, this model, developed originally by a group dynamics expert named Bruce Tuckman, serves as a good guide for developing your team's chemistry. Most problems arise when coaches are not familiar with the stages of team development or when they try to push a team to "peak" too soon.

Stage 1: Forming

Forming is the first stage of team development, which occurs as your athletes begin each new season. Your returning athletes are a year older (and hopefully wiser) and your new freshmen and/or transfers are trying to figure out what is going on.



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Not every team makes it to the final stage of progression during the season. To reach this stage, called Performing, you must monitor conflict during the year.

This initial stage involves excitement as well as uncertainty because some athletes are not even sure if they are going to make the final cuts. Others know they are going to make the team, but are unsure about the role they might play. Experienced athletes are trying to get a feel for the newcomers to see if they can help the team or if their position might be threatened.

On the surface, most people are cordial and friendly as they meet and interact with the new team members, but internally there are often a lot of unanswered questions that cause stress.

Stage 2: Storming

The second stage occurs when a group of individuals with different goals, personalities and insecurities starts to more closely interact and compete with one another.

Inevitably, because of the various individual goals and idiosyncrasies on your team, conflicts between athletes, coaches, staff (and any combination of these groups) are sure to arise. Athletes test your standards just as you test theirs. Individuals overtly and covertly vie for starting positions and leadership roles. Work ethics, as well as positive and negative attitudes are exposed. Your

team begins to discover who is playing what positions and roles, and how much playing time each person might get.

Remember that each athlete enters the season with a certain set of individual and team expectations. Naturally, conflict arises when the expectations and desires of various individuals come into contact.

What many coaches do not fully understand and appreciate is that the Storming stage is a necessary and important stage of team development. Your goal as a coach is not to prevent conflict from happening, which of course is impossible, but to handle and channel conflict into effective individual and team development. Your approach to conflict is a crucial variable in successful team building.

You may even want to alert your team that not everyone is going to agree and like each other 100 percent of the time, and that this is a normal and necessary part of team development. The biggest key is how constructively your team handles the inevitable conflict. Invest some time on the front end to teach your athletes some conflict-management skills in an effort to weather the Storming stage.

Stage 3: Norming

The Norming stage occurs when your team begins to settle on a set of rules and standards as to how things will be done. Norming relates to your team's standards in practices, the classroom, weight training, conditioning, social life, community service, etc. Occasionally, these standards are formally written and agreed upon, but typically they evolve unobtrusively over time as "this is the way we do things."

Obviously your team's norms and standards concerning attitude, work ethic, team support, academics, etc., have a tremendous impact on the success of your team. As a coach, it is important that the team norms you establish help to create and foster a successful environment.

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During my work with teams in our Leadership Academies, I encourage the athletes to openly discuss, establish and monitor the standards for which they want to commit themselves — both on and off the field.

Stage 4: Performing

The Performing stage is the eventual goal of all teams. This stage typically follows successful Norming and occurs only after effective standards are in place and firmly embraced by the team. The team performs as a cohesive unit that respects and trusts each other. They know what to expect from each other and this yields a sense of comfort, confidence and consistency.

Coaches talk a lot about peaking at the end of the season. This Performing stage is exactly the "peaking"

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that coaches are trying to achieve — when the team is jelling and working as a well-oiled machine.

Unfortunately, the Performing stage is not a guaranteed aspect of your season. Performing requires that your team has constructively handled the conflict of the Storming stage. Not only do you need to overcome the conflict, but you and your team also have to be sure that you have set effective rules and standards in the Norming stage to ascend to the Performing stage.

Common Problem Areas

Teams can go back and forth between these stages, especially as new challenges and demands arise during the season. Injuries, conflicts and losses can cause a team to regress from the Norming stage back into the Storming stage. As you probably realize, team building is a complex, ever-changing process that must be continually monitored and managed. Here are two problem areas to monitor.

1 Stuck in Storming Stage

Keeping these stages in mind, most of the problems that I see with teams are ones of conflict where teams get stuck in the Storming stage.

Conflicts are continually flaring up because individuals often do not have the skills or maturity to effectively handle their differences. These differences are either perpetual open sores, or they are swept under the carpet only to fester and rear their ugly heads at the most disastrous times.

2 Negative Norms

Additionally, some teams make their way through the Storming stage, but the unproductive norms that are established become their eventual downfall. The norms that are established may be totally counterproductive to your team's success.

"I" RESPONSE SUBJURY COLLECT. COMMIT.

For example, "Do just enough to get by," "Every person for themselves," "Coach plays favorites," are all norms and attitudes that have prevented teams from reaching their potential. Teams with poor standards continually keep themselves from progressing.

A. In this situation, it is often best to intentionally shake up your team and move them back into the Storming stage. This is where you as a coach challenge their attitudes, work ethics and standards because you recognize that they are actually hurting the team.

B. Your goal is to get them to recognize their behavior and how it runs counter to the goals they have set. Then, you need to encourage and help them establish more effective standards — or sometimes even impose more effective standards. CAD

For ways to build your team's chemistry, check out Jeff's book *Championship Team Building* at <http://www.jeffjanssen.com/coaching/resources.html>



AND YOUR TEAM!
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