Leading Teams #7: Adjourning[1]

Sarah A. Bush, Carrie N. Baker, and Laura L. Greenhaw[2]

Introduction

Teams are often formed to increase productivity, make shared decisions, lead initiatives, and tackle large or complex projects (Franz, 2012). Team leaders invest time in deciding who should be on a team and what talents, skills, and expertise are needed, but can undervalue the importance of how the team is designed, evaluated, and rewarded. Additionally, team leaders often invest in goal setting and monitoring teams' progress toward those goals, but they should also consider the importance of celebrating team accomplishments and acknowledging the end of a project or the team's time together (Franz, 2012).

As a part of the *Leading Teams* series, this article reviews the fifth and final stage of group development: the adjourning stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). An overview of recommendations for performance evaluations and rewards systems is provided. Additionally, the importance of investing time in the adjourning stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) and ways to start a new project after the completion of the original team project are described.

Reward Systems and Performance Evaluation

The term "adjourning" logically signals the completion of something, which ideally lends itself to evaluation. However, evaluation and rewards should be considered long before a team project comes to a close. A common mishap for teams is reward systems and performance evaluations that are not aligned with the team or individual tasks. When individuals are rewarded for team goals, and some receive a higher level of recognition than others, this can create animosity among team members and harm workplace culture (Franz, 2012). Conversely, when a team is rewarded for the work of one or a few, this can also be frustrating for those carrying the bulk of the load. Therefore, team leaders need to consider how they provide performance feedback and design their reward systems based both on the individual's contributions and the overall success and progress of the team.

Many teams struggle with uneven effort and are impacted by free riding or social loafing (Tavoletti et al., 2019). Performance evaluation — including both leader and peer evaluation — can be an effective way to combat these struggles and hold others more accountable. Therefore, it is important that teams have an accountability structure that is not just centralized on feedback from the leader but encourages others to provide feedback to their peers (Lencioni, 2002). This also requires the leader to provide feedback on overall team performance (Lencioni, 2002). Both individual feedback from peers on areas for improvement and opportunities for growth and team feedback from the leader can increase the productivity of a team (Lencioni, 2002). This applies not only to performance evaluations but also to rewards systems.

In a study regarding compensation systems, Katz (2001) broke team-based contribution into five categories:

- Pay equality where everyone is paid the same.
- Pay equity where individuals are compensated based on their individual performance.
- An individual/group hybrid with a group threshold where, if the team meets their overall goals, then individuals are compensated based on their individual performance.
- An individual/group hybrid with an individual threshold where, if every member hits their individual targets, then they are compensated based on individual performance.
- A relative ratio where everyone is compensated for individual performance, but once the highest-paid individual meets a predetermined threshold, some compensation is transferred to other team members.

The outcome of this study was that the hybrid compensation led to the highest performance (Katz, 2001). Importantly, this highlights that teams should have both team and individual goals. While this study may be focused on pay, other rewards such as recognition and awards can be looked at through the same lens. Team members should be evaluated and receive rewards individually for meeting individual goals, while teams should be rewarded and celebrated for the achievement of team goals. This keeps individuals accountable to their teams and teams accountable to their greater organizational goals.

The Importance of Adjourning

In this series, we explored the forming, storming, norming, and performing stages of group development that were included in Tuckman's (1965) original model. The adjourning stage emerged in Tuckman and Jensen's 1977 article after they recognized the importance of the end of a team. Teams come to an end for many reasons, including the end of the project, exit of specific team members, high levels of conflict, completion of goals, etc. When teams adjourn, members may go their separate ways or stay together to start a new project. Regardless of whether they will work together in the future or not, it is important for team members and leaders to celebrate accomplishments and, if appropriate, to grieve the loss of the team.

The adjourning stage can be difficult for team members who have become close and interdependent upon one another. They may be saying goodbye to one another and may not see each other again or as often as they did while working with the team. However, this stage may also provide a sense of relief for those who were struggling to work with other members of the team, or it may free up time for team members to focus on tasks they are more invested in. This stage will hopefully mark a time for celebration where team members can feel proud of their accomplishments and those of others. This requires taking time to celebrate and debrief the work of the team. Skipping this stage may leave team members feeling unappreciated and/or without closure to their experience.

Supporting Your Team through Successful Adjourning

Team members and leaders can engage their team in a healthy adjourning stage. Some recommendations are listed below.

1. Hold a debriefing session to discuss triumphs, obstacles, and opportunities for improvement in the future. This session could allow time for individuals to discuss how they could improve in the future while also highlighting strengths and achievements.

2. Recognize that some team members may grieve and have difficulty saying goodbye in this phase. Providing a time and place for those to hold their goodbyes can help in this process. Someone who struggles with the end of a team may also struggle to be on a new team and may compare these experiences. Therefore, it is important to gain closure on the work the team has completed and to ensure individuals recognize and acknowledge the end of the team.

3. Plan a social celebration. We shared the importance of social interactions for building trust early in a team's development. However, a social gathering at the adjourning phase of a team can also provide time for individuals to celebrate one another and their overall team accomplishments. If the team is staying intact but moving on to a new project, it is particularly important to keep motivation high by celebrating the team's accomplishments.

4. Ensure performance evaluations include measures for task accomplishment and teamwork or collaboration processes. It is important to provide team members with feedback, both positive and constructive, not only regarding individual and team goals, but also on ways team members are expected to work together. For example, if a team member was overly focused on individual goals during the beginning stages of teamwork and struggled to build trust with teammates, evaluation measures

could help to acknowledge that and provide a learning opportunity for future teamwork experiences.

5. Collect feedback on the overall team experience. This feedback can be used to determine future teams and opportunities for improving the team experience. For instance, if two team members struggled to work together and do not foresee that improving in the future or are not willing to try to improve their collaboration, it may be best to not place them both on the next team. Another example could be that team members felt they never took the time to know one another and would have preferred more time to develop interpersonal relationships in the beginning. This feedback can be valuable when considering future projects and teams.

Starting a New Team Project

After a team has completed their goals, it is often time to start a new project. This can require bringing together a new team of individuals or reconvening the same team for a different task. Whether there are new members on a team or not, it is important to return to the forming stage to set the precedent of new team goals, rules, and contracts. Additionally, it is essential to consider if all members should or need to remain on the team. While individuals may enjoy working together, someone without a role or needed expertise on a team may be unable to make a contribution others perceive as valuable, or they may feel they are wasting their time. Remember that every successful team may not be successful for a second project or initiative. Therefore, we recommend reviewing this *Leading Teams* series to set up your new team for success.

References

Franz, T. M. (2012). *Group dynamics and team intervention: Understanding and improving team performance* (1st ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Katz, N. (2001). Getting the most out of your team. *Harvard Business Review, 79*(8), 22. https://hbr.org/2001/09/getting-the-most-out-of-your-team

Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team*. Jossey-Bass.

Tavoletti, E., Stephens, R. D., & Dong, L. (2019). The impact of peer evaluation on team effort, productivity, motivation and performance in global virtual teams. *Team Performance Management, 25*(5/6), 334–347. https://doi.org/10.1108/TPM-03-2019-0025

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin, 63*(6), 384–399. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100

Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. C. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group & Organization Management, 2*(4), 419–427. https://doi.org/10.1177/105960117700200404