

# BUSTED: SOME TEAM TRUTHS

**Harry Onsman** takes a look at the “storming, norming” model of team building.

THE CONCEPT OF “team” (and its close cousin, “teamwork”) continues to hold strong appeal to those who manage organisations. People are trained in how to work with others as part of a team; organisations are structured around teams; and leadership is commonly based around the notion of “the leadership team”.

To gauge the extent of support for the team concept, just try arguing against it. To be against teams is second only to being un-Australian on the scale of heresies. Yet the concept is often based on widespread misunderstanding of what makes a team different from a group. Most managers are not interested in the research and model-building that goes on in the background. What they want is the practical stuff.

Every now and again a piece of knowledge or a model makes the transition

from academia to the world of business and becomes received wisdom. And so it is with the idea that teams (or groups) evolve from a collection of individuals to being a “real” team by going through a series of developmental stages.

This phased development model is generally credited to Bruce Tuckman, who first theorised in 1965 that groups go through distinct phases or stages of development. These stages have become known popularly as forming, storming, norming, and performing. (Some 10 years later, Tuckman added another stage, adjourning.)

If you’ve been through any kind of team-related training program you will have heard about the model. Typically, it is presented as a universal model applicable in all situations where people come together to form groups, and as valid regardless of context or background.

Here’s the rub. There is very little evidence to back up this claim of universality, and considerable evidence

that it is not valid. There is a huge question mark over its applicability to groups that comprise people other than white, male Euro-Americans, who (until recently) were the subjects in virtually all organisational research conducted.

Women were excluded as subjects from much of this research. This resulted in many a theory that worked fine with the male slice of society. For women and members of minority groups, these theories and models often seemed remote. Many women will say that the idea of coming together for a project and storming away until some ground rules are established is not how they prefer to operate – and especially not if the group consists exclusively of women.

The storming phase in particular is associated with males establishing boundaries that define power and identity. As more recent research has suggested, that is not necessarily the driving force for women, who can more easily establish connections

and relationships without the need for ego-boosting, pecking-order confrontations. But it takes a while for business practices to catch-up with more recent research. Trainers still peddle the Tuckman model and managers still talk the language of “orming”. Any suggestion that it may not be necessary to storm or norm every time is quickly rejected because “that’s not what the experts say”.

For those forced to endure regular bouts of storming and norming whether you like it or not, unless you have the numbers (that is, more women than men), it’s best to just accept it. It’s a man thing!

*References:*

- B. Tuckman, “Developmental sequence in small groups”, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965, number 63.
- J. White, M. McMillen, A. Baker, “Challenging Traditional Models: Towards an inclusive model of group development”, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, March (2001), Vol 10, Number 1.

IT’S A CORPORATE jaunt with a difference – one linking brands as varied as Bang & Olufsen and Disney. The two iconic brands, along with others that include watch-maker Rolex and food giant Nestlé, are to be brought together by branding consultant Martin Lindstrom (also a Dane) as part of a corporate jaunt with a difference. Exploring the World of Branding will take senior executives and marketers from Fortune 500 companies on a one-week tour of some of the world’s leading brands, departing from Copenhagen in November this year and again from New York in March 2006. A similar trip from Sydney is planned for later that year. According to Lindstrom, whose latest book, *Brand Sense* (Simon & Schuster 2005) is co-written with Philip Kotler and due for release in Australia soon, it’s an opportunity for corporate big beasts to take a behind-the-scenes peek at the way their global peers operate. At a likely cost of about \$35,000 a person, Lindstrom will certainly be under pressure to come up with the goods.

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