

Lessons From Geese

A team building exercise



Where are we now? The four stages of team development.

Generally there are four stages a group goes through once they have been formed or reformed. It's a little like a group of people being asked to take part in a recreational sports event, for example a social soccer team.

When everyone first comes together they are generally polite and greet one another. They try and learn as much about each other as they can. They question the purpose of the group - why they're together; what the objectives are. Then things get a little chaotic. People are questioning, asking what the rules are, finding out how far they can go, and what other people are doing.

Soon everyone is trying to find a place for themselves on the team - what role, what position. Some will take on a role very quickly and readily, others may stand back and wait. Some natural leadership arises from people with previous experience ... or people who just like to organise others.



Later the team will evolve their own idea of what is normal and acceptable behaviour. Behaviour which doesn't conform to this unwritten code attracts censure from other team members. Finally, when everyone knows the others and has worked with them, knows their role and what they contribute to the team, and understands what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, the team begins to perform.

The stages are:

- * Forming
- * Storming
- * Norming
- * Performing

The time spent at each stage varies with the composition of the group and the task. A group with many dominant, self-confident personalities will probably spend more time Storming. A group of people who are sociable and care about people's feelings will probably spend more time Forming and Norming.

Often we call a team dysfunctional when we see it Storming, but it is only so if they spend a great deal of time in this stage without showing signs of moving on. When Norming begins, the team begins to police itself, which tends to moderate Stormy behaviour.

Forming - meeting and greeting

In this first stage you're getting to know the other group members - who they are and what they're like. You seek information about the other members, ask questions and are, in turn questioned by others, or at least they talk to you. As a group you also try and clarify what the group's purpose is and what the limits and boundaries are. You are beginning to identify a role in the group for you - your place. Soon you are ...



Storming - jostling for position.

People now try and “carve a niche” or make a place for themselves in the group. You’ll seek a place that best suits your own personal needs, for example:

- * to be left alone (you stand back a little),
- * to belong (you seek the company of other group members),
- * to have control and power (you look for functions to take over, e.g. recording minutes of group meetings or looking after the reports or representing the group at other meetings),
- * to avoid having control and the responsibility that comes with it (you don’t take added responsibility), and so on.

There may also be a little rebellion - pushing the team leader to see how they react, pushing the boundaries. It is important to let this Storming happen in a team, otherwise conflict will be buried and will surface again some time later as a grudge.



Norming - setting the expectations

Once you know your place and role in the group, and have tested the boundaries (and the team leader) you’ll begin to almost sub-consciously agree standards of behaviour and what is acceptable or not (the team’s “norms”). Pretty soon everyone has a shared understanding of things we do and don’t do. Getting drunk and noisy may be acceptable for a team of rugby supporters, but may be unacceptable to a team of customer service professionals. Among the subtle “rules” may be standards of appearance (how we dress and how we’re groomed). In fact some teams ask to be able to wear uniform or corporate wardrobe. Others almost unconsciously adopt an unwritten dress code (e.g. business or business casual).

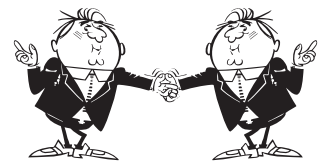


By this stage, too, the conflict seen in the Norming stage has mostly been sorted out, although that which remains has to be managed, which is one of the functions of the informal “rules”. During the Norming stage you and your fellow team members begin to take on individual responsibility and start taking on your roles.

However, some “norms” may be unhelpful: that you’ll be aggressively competitive with other teams, that you will bury conflict (“anything for a quiet life”), or that you won’t trust any other team.

Performing - getting on with the job

When you and your team members are co-operating, supporting each other and achieving goals, and everyone feels their needs are being met, your team is entering the Performing stage. Your team will work well at this stage with members supporting and communicating with each other, challenging and stimulating each other, achieving the work goals and socialising together.



The rules - the “norms” - are well in place and act to regulate the team, and the conflict and jostling of the Storming phase is well behind you

How effective are we as a group?

There have been many studies of what goes to make an effective team. While the way in which a team is led, how the organisation treats its people generally, and what’s happening to the organisation (whether it is stable or changing) all affect how teams perform,



there are a number of factors that team members can themselves control by what they do and how they act towards each other.

Generally there are ten such factors which influence how well a team performs.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| A. Goals | The extent to which members understand the goals and objectives of the team as a whole. |
| B. Participation | The extent to which members participate in the workings of the team and show an interest in the team. |
| C. Using Skills | The extent to which people's individual talents and skills are recognised, valued and put to good use by the team. |
| D. Communication | How well the team members communicate with each other and the extent to which open communication prevents misunderstandings. |
| E. Mutual Support | How well team members support each other emotionally and practically. |
| F. Role Clarity | How well individual team members understand their role in the team and what they can contribute to the team's smooth running. |
| G. Responsibility | The extent to which team members accept responsibility for taking action and doing tasks. |
| H. Working together | How well team members work together and help each other out. |
| I. Feedback | The extent to which team members encourage each other and give each other feedback. |
| J. Handling Conflict | How well team members handle differences and conflict among themselves. |

Effective teams tend to do all these things well, and many do some of these things well. In order to become more effective it is important to know how you, the team members, rate this team according to the ten factors. To do this we will be using a simple questionnaire.

Lessons from Geese

Canada Geese are found in far Eastern Russia, Alaska, Canada and the northern US. They are migratory birds and their travels have been well studied. Each northern hemisphere winter they fly south in flocks of 200 to 300 birds in distinctive V or W shaped formations. Their migration is the subject of the feature film Fly Away Home, and a television commercial you may have seen.

So what can we learn from Geese? There are five lessons in all.



Flying in formation

Geese fly in a V formation which results in a 71 per cent extra flying range. Teams are more powerful than individuals on their own. By sharing a sense of being a team, and trusting one another, we can help each other get where we're going more easily.



Staying with the flock

If a goose drops out of formation they lose speed and lift provided by the other geese and soon re-join the formation. We should stay with our teams and get the benefits of membership, but we also have to accept responsibility for giving and receiving help.

Rotating the lead

When the leading goose becomes tired it drops back and another takes its place. We should share the hard tasks and respect each others' skills and abilities.

Honking to encourage others

Geese will honk to encourage the geese ahead of them to keep up their speed. We should encourage others in our team because then we'll be more productive. If our honking is quality honking we'll become more confident as team members.

Standing by each other

When a goose gets sick and falls out of formation two other geese will follow it down and protect it. We should stand by each other in bad times and good.

In fact when a flock of geese are feeding, some geese move to the perimeter of the group and act as sentries. They are relieved at intervals by other geese so that they, too, can feed.

If we were a flock of geese how would we rate?

We can relate Lessons from Geese to the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire and the ten factors that make a team effective. In this explanation the factors are in brackets.

Team Effectiveness Questionnaire & Geese

Flying in formation

To fly effectively in formation means everyone must know where we're heading (Goals) and must know the role they play in the team (Role Clarity).

Staying with the flock

To remain with the flock and give and receive the benefits of being a team member requires us to take part in team activities (Participation) and to take responsibility for contributing and taking action (Taking Responsibility).

Rotating the lead

How well we rotate the lead position depends on how well we recognise and value each others' skills (Using Skills) and how well we actually work together (Working Together).



Honking to encourage others

The extent to which we honk encouragement at each other depends on how well we communicate (Communication) and how well we give and receive feedback (Feedback).

Standing by each other

Whether we help those who fall out of formation depends on how well we support each other (Mutual Support) and how well we deal with our differences (Handling Conflict).

Summary

If we are to become an effective team, and keep being one, we can do worse than follow the lessons from geese.

Fly in formation - teams have a much greater chance of getting where they're going than individuals.

Stay with the flock - be a team member; give as well as receive, and take responsibility.

Rotate the lead - share the hard stuff and respect each other.

Honk to encourage the others - if you want people to honk you, you'd better be prepared to do some honking yourself!

Stand by each other - give support in bad times and good.

It's up to you. Good luck.



Go for it and keep on honking!

