

The struggles of team self-organisation

Observations by BlinkLane agility experts

By Fayette Bosch and Ali Hajou – June 2018

There is always that one team that is the organisations' star child. The team that delivers what it promises, always proudly presents its results while attracting many spectators, and does it by occasionally breaking a rule or two. Some might find this team annoying, but the managers often use them as an example. From a distance, these might be the characteristics of a self-organising team. A team that follows its own course by adhering a self-made overarching goal, with a dynamic and collaborative approach to pursue it. A team that delivers value with a sustainably short lead-time.

At BlinkLane Consulting we see that companies increasingly express the need for speed in the delivery of value. These companies acknowledge to therefore require a structure that allows decentralised decision-making. Supporting their teams in becoming self-organising has often been the approach to achieve this. However, we have observed that these teams are 'self-organising' in name only. In this article, we elaborate on the characteristics of the truly self-organising teams that we have encountered. Additionally, we take you along the roadmap to self-organisation based on Tuckman's "Stages of group development", and the input of various BlinkLane colleagues, who kindly shared their experiences and best practices for the purpose of creating this roadmap.

Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

Bruce Tuckman researched group development amongst students and group development amongst teams within companies. His well-known findings were published in 1965 and elaborate on the four stages of group development (Tuckman, 1965). These stages have been used since to visualise the inevitable stages teams go through to grow, face challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, plan work and deliver results. The model has been incredibly applicable due to its genericity and it is being used in practices that tend to divert from 'command and control-management'. Tuckman's model consists of the stages 'Forming', 'Storming', 'Norming', and 'Performing'. In this article we have plotted our observations of (agile) teams going through these phases onto these four stages.

Forming

Forming constitutes to the testing people do "to identify the boundaries of both interpersonal and task behaviours. Coincident with testing in the interpersonal realm is the establishment of dependency relationships with leaders, other group members, or pre-existing standards" (Tuckman, 1965, p. 396).

Teams that have been formed, either by themselves but more often by management, start to define their own way of working, search for their boundaries and juggle for scope. In the forming stage teams are often still monitored severely. We see that these teams have to spend time on reports, have to comply with pre-existing processes, standards, and hierarchies. Teams have to stay 'within the boundaries' which forces them to become more inward facing and adopt a protective attitude. Besides, these teams often do not yet have a clear goal or purpose other than 'to do work'. The tug-of-war between organising oneself and having to adhere to practices and instructions defined outside the team is quite an effort. Moreover, we see that in the forming phase teams struggle with 'electric fences'. Electric fences are a metaphor for the boundaries in which teams operate. These are often unclear, sometimes invisible and move regularly. One of the BlinkLane consultants experienced that "*boundaries can even change overnight: what was allowed yesterday, wasn't allowed the day after*". These unclear, moving fences create an

environment in which teams are less experimenting because they are scared to get the blame when things do not go like expected. However, we have experienced that defining clear and fixed electric fences is often hard for management and requires time and experience. In the end, the more these fences are clear and fixed, the better the team is able to organise oneself.

BlinkLane has identified three constantly recurring factors that accelerate the forming process within teams;

- 1) providing teams with a clear-cut mission statement (understand ‘why’ we do what we do);
- 2) supporting management in defining clear and fixed electric fences;
- 3) giving them the freedom to do their chores.

Tips to facilitate this phase:

- Organise a ‘pre-mortem’ in which the team identifies potential risks of misalignment, disorganisation, and struggles. These findings allow for early undertaking of preventive measures.
- Support the team in the creation of their own mission statement, and thus their own ‘why’. Visualise this in a ‘Team Poster’ and place this close to the teams’ work area.
- Identify tasks that require external approval. Organise a team brainstorm and agree with the external stakeholders on the necessities and requirements for (partially) levitating these approvals.

Storming

Storming “is characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues, with concomitant emotional responding in the task sphere. These behaviours serve as resistance to group influence and task requirements” (Tuckman, 1965, p. 396).

BlinkLane identifies that most teams that have not been allowed to work and collaborate according to their own needs, processes, and abilities, persist in the vicious cycle of storming. We have noticed that Agile teams have the freedom to adjust their own practices and procedures. If the team resides in the storming stage the behaviours result in anti-agility. Rather than to respond and react to their environment, these teams avoid and deflect. By avoiding difficult topics, not (willingly) taking ownership, and the lack of transparency, teams protect themselves from judgement and turn to the occasional finger pointing. We see this as residue from the traditional working methods, where process-controls and phase gates made sure that people followed procedures. Blame was for those that did not. As a BlinkLane consultant states: *“Why should a team make decisions themselves if they are to be blamed afterwards?”*

BlinkLane states that the storming stage is crucial and requires an external force that challenges the teams’ decisions to continuously focus on the end goal. Some organisations employ coaches, others empower seniors. Challenging current practices and behaviours leaves the modus operandus open for experimentation, which is essential for the transition to the norming phase.

Tips to facilitate this phase:

- Organise a week of ‘One-Day-Sprints’ in which the team collectively chooses a task and collectively works on finishing it that day. This requires team members to support outside their function profile description, and makes potential team struggles apparent. These impediments can be discussed during the retrospective at end of the day.
- Drastically celebrate achievements of the team, not the individual. Solving a problem, or finishing work, should be the norm. Involve senior management to propagate the wins and support the decisions teams make to collaborate better.

- Focus on the creation of trust by investing time in trust topics in the retrospective or other events. Motivate team members to bond involving defining team values, and work on their team spirit.

Norming

Norming “is the stage in which in-group feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed” (Tuckman, 1965, p. 396).

Where storming teams have a deflective attitude towards ownership of results, teams that have arrived in the norming stage tend to actively show interest in their results. This interest often embodies into ownership of the created product/service and a shared sense of responsibility over the outcome. In the norming phase, teams develop its own vision and adopt a more collaborative approach. At BlinkLane we encourage teams to experiment with methods for collaboration, like trying out the ‘one-day-sprint’.

In the norming stage, teams also adopt a more collaborative approach with management as they show their progress and successes via involvement instead of reports. Moreover, this is the time to ‘jump the chasm’, meaning a radical change where “*the transformation will rely on senior management’s willingness and courage to go all in*” (Groen & van Coevorden, 2017). The relationship between management and self-organising teams start to change; managers value the teams’ opinions and truly trust them. Management also becomes more focused on providing teams with the necessary resources to become fully self-organised, and on taking away frustrations instead of solving the teams’ issues. As BlinkLane we identify that teams thrive when the management openly identifies the terms and acquired rights for owning a solution, product, result, or domain. An example might be: ownership requires to adhere to terms like an external Service Level Agreement, maintaining interfaces with other teams, follow audit procedures, investigate upcoming regulations, and so forth. And in exchange, the team will have the ability to fully deploy software functionality to production.

If the organisation (lead by management) does not set the environment for exploration, experimentation, and therefore ‘jump the chasm’, teams will not derive much benefit from self-organisation and they might even stay self-organised in name only. As a BlinkLane consultant experienced: “*Teams could not experiment with approaches that could result in faster delivery, increase product quality, or an increase in delivered value, because they had to adhere to predefined procedures and were audited accordingly*”.

Tips to facilitate this phase:

- Organise sessions that trigger innovation such as Hackathons, drawing teams to take ownership for solutions they came up with, and providing trust at management that the team has the ability to come up with the next step.
- Provide insight on how to measure outcome that can be used by the teams itself. Give teams the ability to earn authorisations (such as ‘Deploy into Production’). Measure the effect on outcome of the team with increased authorisations.

Performing

Teams that have reached the performing stage find themselves in the dynamic “in which interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities. Roles become flexible and functional, and group energy is channelled into the task. Structural issues have been resolved, and structure can now become supportive of task performance” (Tuckman, 1965, p. 396).

Performing teams' primary objective is the frequent delivery of valuable results. This is different from 'being productive'. A characteristic of performing teams is that they often 'swarm' on difficult topics. Swarming is "an approach which includes no formally defined roles, performs no estimates, and [where the team] seldom works on more than one task at a time" (Arsenovski, 2018). They help each other by default, rather than by exception. "Blame is for failure to help or ask for help" - Jorgen Vig Knudstorp, CEO Lego Group. This mantra creates a level of transparency about issues and potential weaknesses which is essential to be able to swarm. In order to be able to attract this behaviour, the team knows exactly WHY they do what they do, but continuously and collectively fine-tune HOW they do their work. This result-driven approach resonates with Agile teams, as the 7th principle of the Agile Manifesto clearly states that "working software is the primary measure of progress" (Beck, et al., 2001).

Self-organising teams that have reached the performing stage often achieve a new level of autonomy. This level includes limited dependency on managerial steering and full transparency about their proceedings, improvements, and achievements. This means that the result of their behaviour is assessed by themselves, and is made visible to everyone. At BlinkLane we see that these teams measure at least the following result-indicators: 1) Business Value, 2) Quality of delivery, 3) Lead-time, 4) Predictability, and 5) Team Engagement. These indicators are objectively measurable facts in their own context. Performing teams continuously improve themselves to sustainably realising growth on each of the indicators. How the team achieves these better results is totally up to themselves.

Additionally, teams that self-organise manipulate their environment, and thus influence other teams and management to improve and grow. Therefore, performing behaviour reaches far beyond the teams' boundaries. A BlinkLane consultant states that performing teams "*are often perceived as being annoying, as they instruct the management, rather than the other way around*". Performing self-organising teams are using the knowledge and reach out to management to achieve their overarching goal; delivering value with a sustainably short lead-time.

Tips to facilitate this phase:

- Challenge the teams by involving difficult organisational issues in their work of solutioning. Make sure the teams involve management to collectively work on new approaches, a new vision, and new opportunities.
- Identify the links between the team and the customer base. Collaborate with management to reduce the number of links for shorter communication lines and an increase in customer orientation.

Conclusion

Growth comes with growing pains. In fact, it is necessary for teams to go through these phases to understand the boundaries of their current way of working in order to push them. The only thing you can do is to recognize each phase to understand what step to take next.

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