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Navigating & Minimizing Storm Damage in Behavioral Health Teams

A Guest Article from President and Founder of The Initiative Institute Inc. Kirk Weisler

In behavioral health, much like in other fields, we prepare for difficult situations, whether it's a challenging client session or a critical situation in a healthcare setting. Being unprepared can lead to stress, burnout, and, ultimately, turnover. Just as we consult the weather forecast to pack for an impending storm, leaders in behavioral health can prepare for the natural storms teams experience by understanding the dynamics that shape group behavior.

One model that has been immensely helpful to me in my years of leadership is Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing model. Understanding this progression allows leaders in behavioral health to guide their teams through difficult phases, reduce friction, and foster a sense of connection and engagement.

I have often used this model to help teams I was a part of prepare for what was about to happen by teaching it to them before we even boarded the ship (think onboarding). Then as we left the harbor and began to hit rough water, I could ask them directly which phase we were in, and what we should expect, and what we could do to navigate. I love it as a tool to teach, reach and inspire. So...let's explore the four stages of team

development—Form, Storm, Norm, and Perform—and how they can be leveraged to strengthen team cohesion, reduce turnover costs, and build a healthier workplace culture.

Stage 1: Form

In this initial stage, team members are asking, “What are we here for?” In the context of a behavioral health team, this might involve understanding the team’s mission, roles, and objectives, particularly in a fast-changing environment where clarity is crucial for effective service delivery. People are looking to leadership for guidance and clarity on how the group should function. Anxiety is common, as people wonder about their place in the team and whether they will be accepted and valued. Leaders can smooth this phase by:

1. Ensuring everyone feels included and that their voice is heard and respected.
2. Creating a shared understanding of the team’s mission and the goals they are expected to achieve.

When leaders focus on creating a welcoming environment in this stage, it sets a foundation for trust, helping to prevent high turnover and the emotional disengagement that often arises when individuals feel disconnected.

Stage 2: Storm

The storm stage is inevitable in any team’s life cycle, especially in high-stress environments like behavioral health. Once team members have settled into their roles, differences in working styles, opinions, and personalities begin to surface. In this phase, conflict may emerge as individuals test boundaries, try to understand and fit into the culture, or perhaps resist it and challenge leadership. For behavioral health professionals, this might look like disagreements on treatment approaches, workflow or even workload distribution.

However, leaders should not fear the storm—it’s a natural and healthy part of team development. The key is to address conflicts openly and constructively. Leaders can reduce turnover and absenteeism by handling this stage with empathy and transparency. Staff members who see conflict handled well are more likely to stay engaged and committed to the organization.

Key Strategy: Let the team know this phase is expected and that it’s a necessary part of developing stronger relationships and working effectively together. A confident leader reassures the team that they will get through it, which helps to calm anxiety and build resilience within the group.

Stage 3: Norm

After the storm passes, the team begins to settle into established norms. In a behavioral health setting, this might involve solidifying treatment protocols, defining how the team supports one another, and aligning around shared goals for client care. Members will feel more secure, knowing what is expected of them and how they will contribute to the team's success.

At this stage, leaders can focus on reinforcing the team’s vision and purpose. Behavioral health

professionals often enter the field with a deep sense of purpose, but this can become lost in the stress and complexity of daily tasks. Reiterating the team's mission at this stage rekindles passion and can prevent burnout—a key factor in employee turnover.

Key Strategy: Leaders should remind their teams of the shared mission—whether it's improving patient outcomes, providing compassionate care, or fostering mental wellness in the community. This is also the time to establish clear processes for conflict resolution and accountability, ensuring that everyone is aligned with the team's vision.

Stage 4: Perform

By the time a team reaches the performing stage, they are functioning cohesively, collaborating effectively, and operating with high morale. In a behavioral health setting, this might look like seamless collaboration between counselors, social workers, and administrative staff to deliver the best possible care to clients. Individuals are working to their strengths, taking ownership of tasks, and showing initiative.

For leaders, this is the stage where team autonomy is at its highest, and creativity flourishes. Leaders should observe team members taking on more responsibility and stepping into leadership roles, which not only drives engagement but also decreases turnover by making staff feel valued and invested in their work.

Key Strategy: Encourage leadership at all levels. When staff feel empowered to make decisions and innovate, they are more likely to stay with the organization, reducing the high cost of turnover and promoting a culture of ownership and pride.

Stage 5: Reform (Adjourning)

Teams often return to the form stage, either due to changes in membership, leadership turnover, or a shift in organizational goals. This is common in the behavioral health industry, where the emotional demands of the job can lead to frequent transitions. Instead of seeing this as a negative, leaders should embrace it as an opportunity to revitalize the team, develop new leaders, and reinforce the organizational culture.

Key Strategy: Succession planning. Ensure that team members have opportunities to develop leadership skills, so that transitions are smoother and less disruptive. This reduces the costs associated with turnover and fosters a culture where growth is continuous.

Conclusion: Leveraging the Model to Improve Culture

Understanding and applying the Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing model can provide behavioral health leaders with a roadmap to navigate team dynamics and strengthen workplace culture. It helps to anticipate challenges and turn them into opportunities for growth.

By using this model proactively, leaders can reduce the costs associated with turnover, increase employee engagement, and improve team cohesion. With staff retention and engagement at the heart of any

successful behavioral health organization, mastering these stages can make a measurable difference in both the quality of care provided and the overall health of the workplace culture.

Kirk Weisler is the President and Founder of The Initiative Institute Inc., a leadership development laboratory and “action tank” dedicated to helping people help themselves and their organizations through the creation of sensory rich and emotionally laden experiences that accelerate relationships, learning, and positive team behaviors. He also presented a keynote session as part of our Fall Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona, this week. Look for his session recording coming soon to: <https://mhca.com/conference-presentations/2024-scottsdale-az>

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