

The Ascent: A Leader's Guide to Team Dynamics

Navigating the Five Stages of Group Development with Tuckman's Model

Lucian Balazs

Based on the work of Bruce Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman & Jensen (1977).

Every team embarks on a journey. Few have a map.

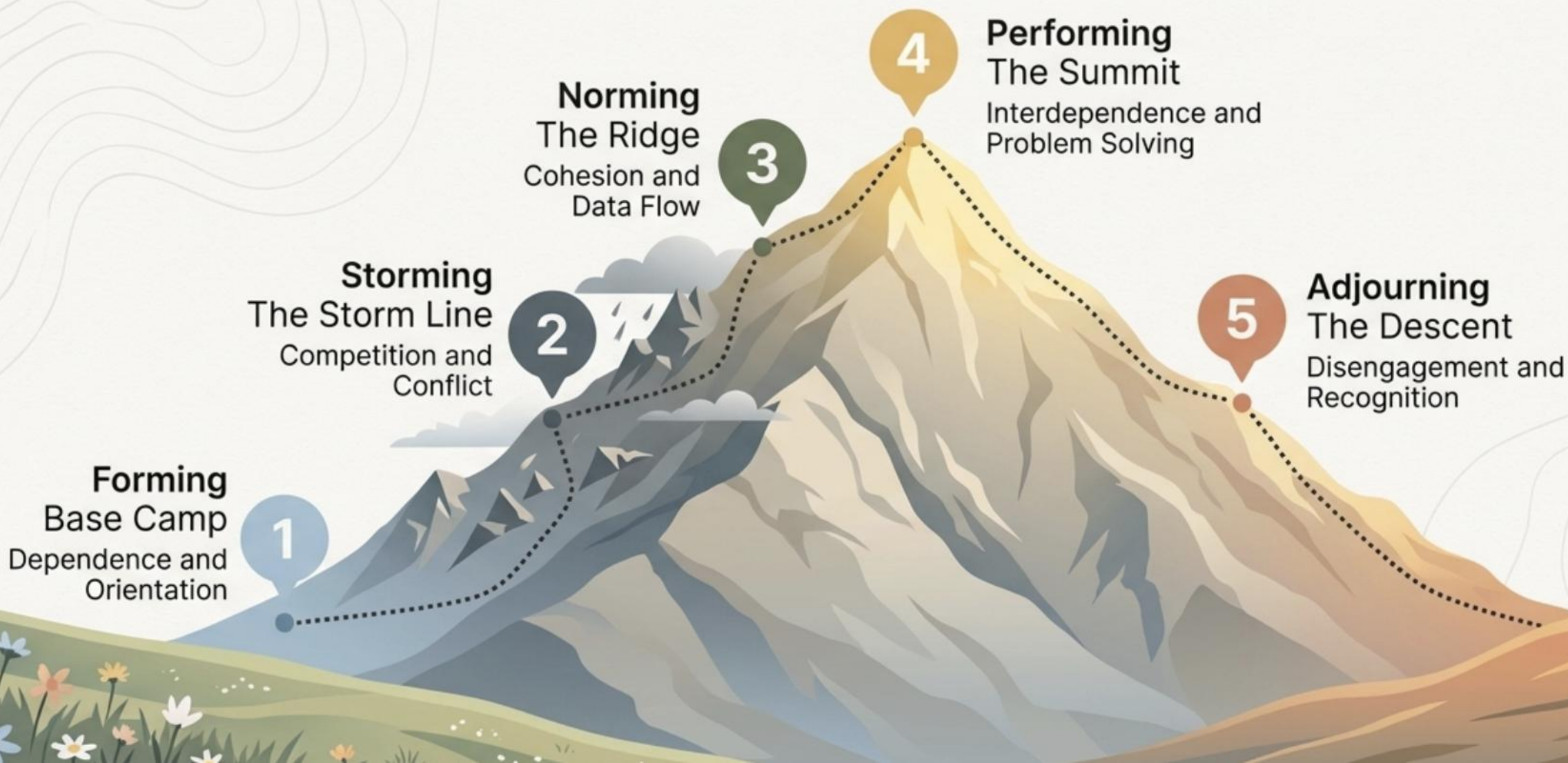
Why do some teams click instantly while others descend into conflict? Why does a high-performing team suddenly lose its momentum?

The stages of a team's life are not random; they follow a predictable, sequential pattern of development. Understanding this pattern is the key to guiding a team from its uncertain start to its peak performance.

This model provides the map.



The Five Stages of the Ascent



Stage 1: Forming

Landmark Metaphor:

The Base Camp

Core Dynamic:

Dependence & Politeness

Observable Terrain (Behaviors):

- Members rely on safe, patterned behaviors and look to the leader for direction.
- A strong desire for group acceptance and safety.
- Discussions focus on task orientation: defining scope, approach, and gathering impressions.
- Serious topics and feelings are avoided to prevent controversy.

The Crux (The Challenge):

To grow, members must relinquish the comfort of non-threatening topics and risk the possibility of conflict.

The Way Forward (Leadership Action):

Provide clear guidance and direction. Establish structure and define the team's mission.



EVIDENCE FILE #831-A



ANATOMY OF A MUTINY

Deconstructing group dynamics and
the 'Storming' phase through the
lens of Money Heist.



CLASSIFIED



CLASSIF

EVIDENCE FILE #831-A
CROSS-REFERENCE: LEADERSHIP CONFLICT
STATUS: ACTIVE - HIGH RISK



INCIDENT REPORT: FORENSIC SUMMARY

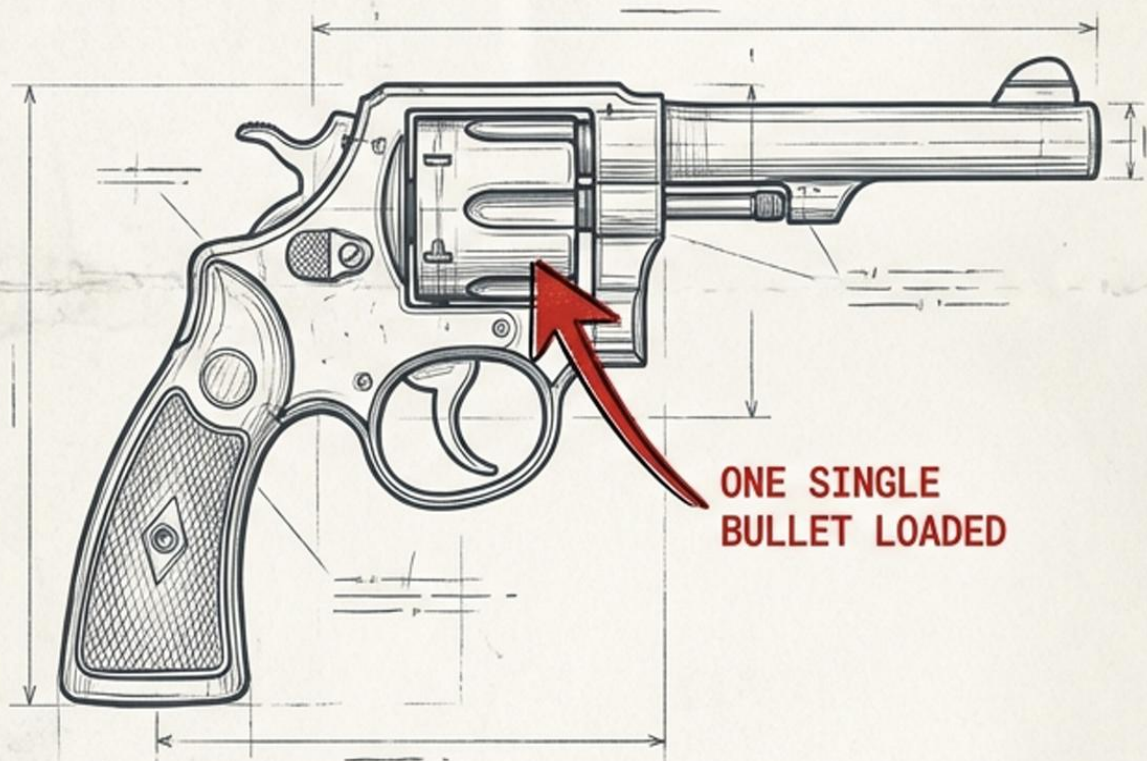
CONFIDENTIAL

██████████, ██████████,
██████████ ██████████

SUBJECT: The Standoff

LOCATION: The Royal Mint of Spain

EVENT LOG: ██████████

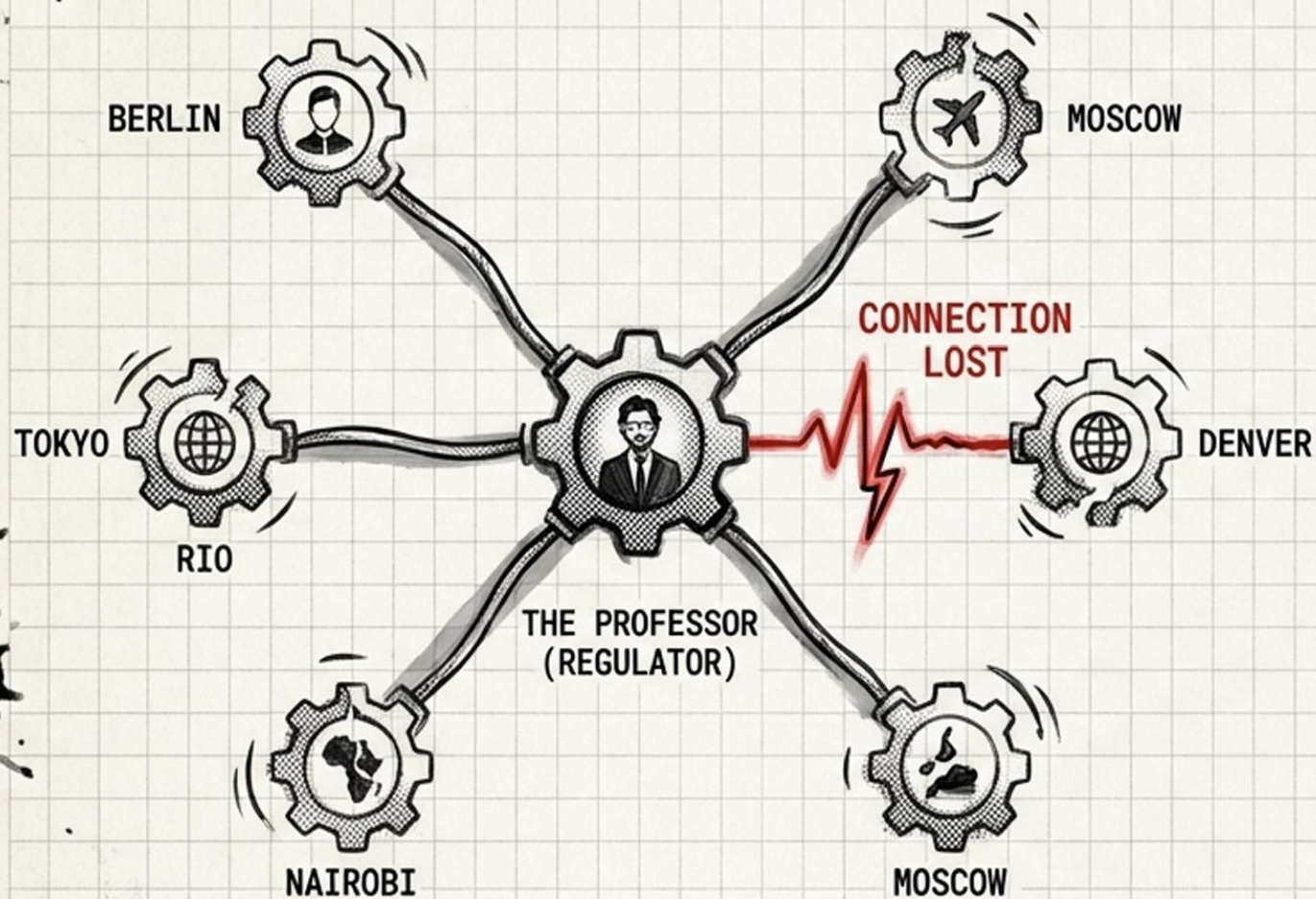


**ONE SINGLE
BULLET LOADED**

██████████ ██████████
██████████ ██████████

1. **THE EVENT:** Tokyo (aided by Rio and Denver) physically restrains Berlin, the heist's leader. She ties him to a chair in a bathroom and smashes his life-saving medication.
2. **THE ESCALATION:** Tokyo loads a single bullet into a revolver and initiates a one-sided game of Russian roulette, firing repeatedly near Berlin's head.
3. **THE DEMAND:** Tokyo uses lethal coercion to demand the details of "Plan Chernobyl".
4. **THE FALLOUT:** Nairobi attempts to intervene but is met with personal attacks; Moscow attempts to de-escalate; the team fractures completely.

CHAOS ENSUES WHEN THE EXTERNAL REGULATOR GOES DARK



THE SYSTEM FAILURE

The team is isolated inside the Mint without their external guide, The Professor.

THE VACUUM

His silence creates a "Legitimacy Crisis." Berlin holds formal authority (assigned by the Professor), but without the Professor's real-time backing, he lacks moral legitimacy.

THE TRIGGER

A prior vote on leadership was rejected by Tokyo. The "operating system" of the group—roles, boundaries, processes—collapses under the pressure of survival anxiety.

WHY THE SYSTEM FAILED TO CONTAIN THE STORM

A technical architectural drawing of a building structure, showing a cross-section with various rooms, corridors, and structural elements. The drawing is rendered in black lines on a white background, with some text labels in small font. It is positioned in the background, behind the three red stamp-like boxes.

**SYSTEM ERROR:
NO CONFLICT
CHANNEL**

There was no agreed-upon forum to voice grievances or challenge leadership safely, leading to a physical coup.

**SYSTEM ERROR:
INFORMATION
ASYMMETRY**

Berlin was the sole holder of critical knowledge (Plan Chernobyl). In a low-trust environment, secrets become weapons.

**SYSTEM ERROR:
LOW
PSYCHOLOGICAL
SAFETY**

The team did not believe that reason would work, leading to an immediate escalation to violence.

THE SCENE EXHIBITS FOUR TEXTBOOK MARKERS OF A TEAM IN CRISIS

1

EVIDENCE MARKER

EVIDENCE #1: LEGITIMACY CRISIS

Description: "Who leads now?" Tokyo rejects Berlin's command ("You're not in charge anymore") and attempts a hostile takeover.



2

EVIDENCE MARKER

EVIDENCE #2: NORM BREAKDOWN

Description: The team's agreed decision-making rules (voting) are discarded in favour of vigilante justice and coercion.



3

EVIDENCE MARKER

EVIDENCE #3: SUB-GROUPING

Description: The team fractures into tribes. Tokyo/Rio/Denver (The Mutineers) physically align against Berlin (The Authority), while Nairobi and Moscow are forced into bystander/mediator roles.



4

EVIDENCE MARKER

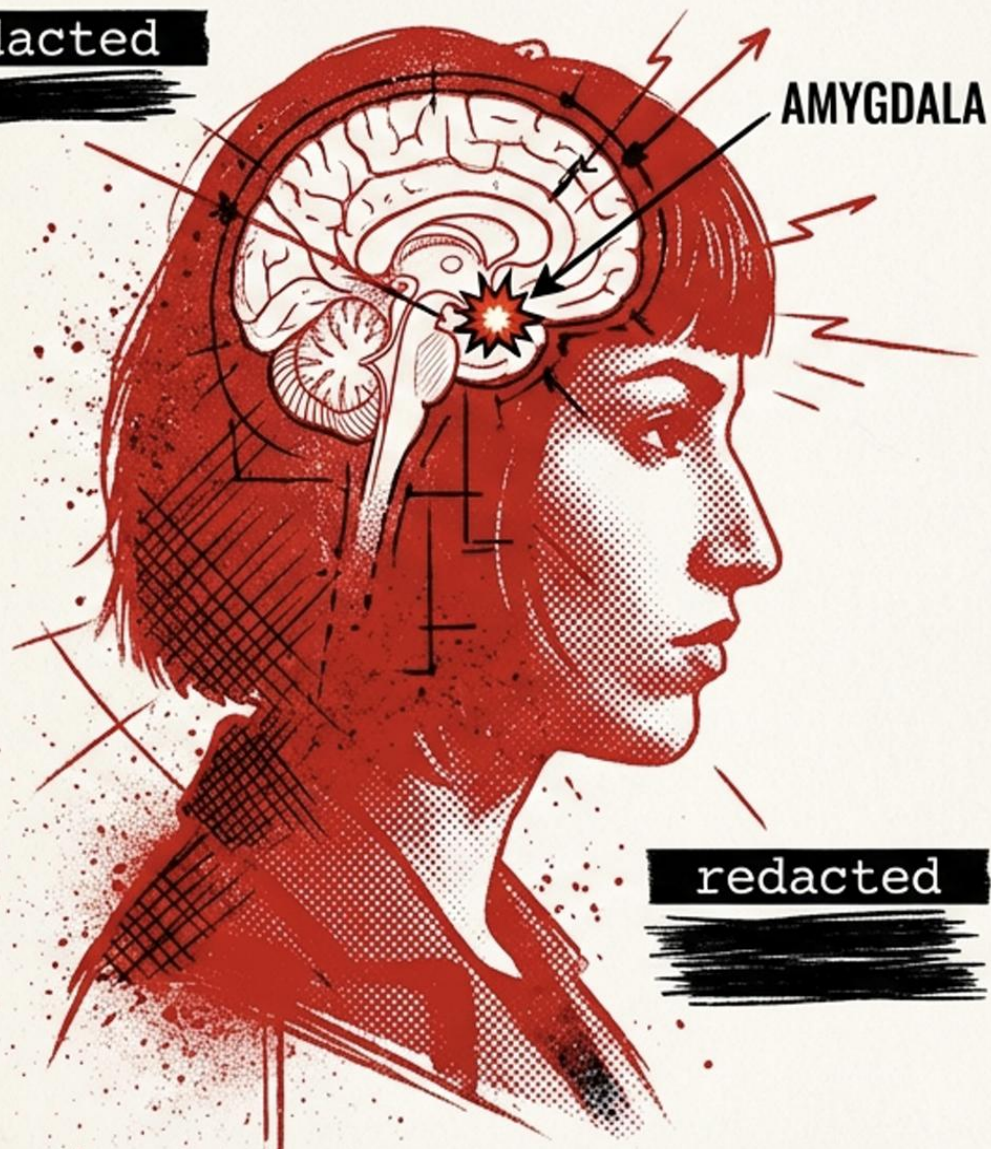
EVIDENCE #4: TASK TO RELATIONSHIP SHIFT

Description: The conflict moves from 'How do we escape?' (Task) to 'I want to hurt you' (Relationship). The goal becomes humiliation, not resolution.



PROFILE A: TOKYO AND THE AMYGDALA HIJACK

redacted



redacted

THE DRIVER

Threat response (fear of death/failure) combined with a loss of control.

THE BEHAVIOUR

Restoring agency. When the plan fails, she uses high-intensity violence to feel in control again.

COGNITIVE DISTORTION

Moral disengagement. She frames the torture as "necessary for the plan," reducing her guilt.

ROLE IN STORMING

The embodiment of uncontained conflict. She represents the "Fight" response in the Fight/Flight/Freeze triad.

PROFILE B: BERLIN AND THE WEAPONISATION OF SCARCITY



THE DRIVER

Dominance and control. He understands that showing fear undermines authority.

THE BEHAVIOUR

Cold regulation. He uses irony, laughter, and silence to destabilise Tokyo. "You don't have the guts."
(Quote in Courier Prime)

THE TACTIC

Leverage via scarcity. He hoards "Plan Chernobyl," turning information into a hostage to maintain his status.

ROLE IN STORMING

Rigid authority. Instead of de-escalating, he provokes, proving that his status matters more to him than his safety.

THE BLAST RADIUS DAMAGES THE ENTIRE TEAM STRUCTURE

MOSCOW
(The Co-Regulator)
Acts as the 'adult in the room,' attempting to regulate the group's nervous system and prevent irreversible harm.



CONFLICT CORE
(TOKYO vs BERLIN)

NAIROBI
(The Stabiliser)

She attempts to protect the 'Task' (the plan). Tokyo responds by attacking Nairobi's 'Identity' (her motherhood).



RIO & DENVER
(The Coalition)

Demonstrate 'coalition behaviour' under ambiguity—siding with the loudest voice (Tokyo) when the official leader (Berlin) feels unsafe.



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DECODING THE **VISUAL LANGUAGE OF ENTRAPMENT**



BLOCKING

Physical restraint visually represents “coercive control” and the total collapse of hierarchy.



PROPS

The smashing of medicine vials is symbolic domination—“I control the resource that keeps you alive.”



CINEMATOGRAPHY

Frequent close-ups on eyes and hands emphasise “fight or flight” activation and high stakes.

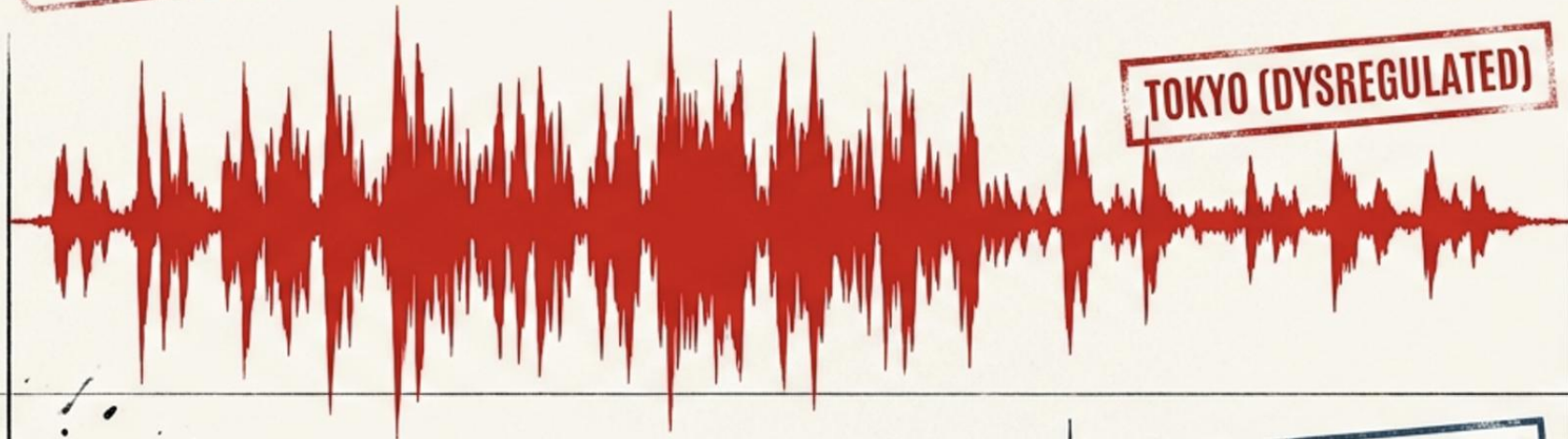
TOP SECRET

ENVIRONMENT NOTE: The scene takes place in a cramped bathroom. The confined space acts as a psychological ‘pressure cooker’ with no exit.

THE SOUNDSCAPE OF DYSFUNCTION: VOLUME VS. SILENCE

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TOKYO (DYSREGULATED)



High volume, breathiness, rapid pacing, vocal cracks. Auditory signals of an activated nervous system (panic/rage).

BERLIN (CALCULATED)



Low pitch, measured pauses, silence as a weapon. His refusal to scream denies Tokyo the satisfaction of dominance.

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tokr ipresentilty som arbouin infliction.

TOP SECRET

THE DIALOGUE SHIFT: The language shifts from logic ("The Plan") to ad hominem attacks ("Bad mother"). This signals that the conflict is no longer about the heist: it is about inflicting pain.

THE TOOLKIT: INTERVENTIONS TO MOVE FROM STORMING TO NORMING



IMMEDIATE (STOP THE HARM)

Physical separation.
Enforce non-negotiable
boundaries (e.g.,
"Weapons down").



SHORT-TERM (RE-CONTRACTING)

Explicitly redefine
roles and decision
rights. Who decides
what? How do we
disagree?



STRUCTURAL (INFO PROTOCOLS)

Eliminate single points
of failure. Critical
intel must have
redundancy so it cannot
be leveraged for power.



MEDIATION

Separate "Task Conflict"
("We need the plan") from
"Relationship Conflict"
("I hate how you treat
me").

TOP SECRET

REWRITING THE SCENE: THE 'NORMING' ALTERNATIVE



- THE CHALLENGE:** Instead of a gun, Tokyo initiates a formal "Vote of No Confidence" based on agreed protocols.
- THE RESPONSE:** Berlin shares "Plan Chernobyl" with a second-in-command (redundancy) to lower the team's anxiety, removing the need for coercion.
- THE BOUNDARY:** The team collectively enforces the rule that violence against a member results in immediate isolation, preventing the bystander effect.

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE; VIOLENCE IS NOT



1. STORMING IS VALID

It is the cost of a team becoming 'real,' but it must be managed with **process**.

2. AUTHORITY IS FRAGILE

Formal titles (assigned by the Professor) mean nothing without **moral legitimacy** (earned from the team).

3. INFORMATION IS TRUST

Hoarding information creates tribes; **sharing information** builds cohesion.

4. THE LEADER'S JOB

Without a mediator to channel energy into problem-solving, teams revert to **tribalism** and **survival instincts**.

Storming Under Fire: A Case Study in Team Collapse

Anatomy of a Storming Crisis

Navigating Toward the Norming Phase



Legitimacy & Power Struggle

Leadership is no longer accepted as legitimate, leading to hostile takeover attempts and coercion.



Shift to Relationship Conflict

The focus moves from "the mission" to personal humiliation, identity attacks, and emotional retaliation.



Subgroup Factioning

The team splits into "tribal" coalitions, causing the collective operating system to collapse under stress.



Establish Safe Conflict Channels

Create structured forums for challenging authority to prevent grievances from erupting into violence.



Role Re-contracting

Explicitly redefine decision rights and information protocols to ensure knowledge isn't used as a weapon.



Boundary Enforcement

Set non-negotiable consequences for internal threats to restore the team's psychological safety.



Stage 2: Storming

Landmark Metaphor:

The Storm Line

Core Dynamic:

Competition & Conflict

Observable Terrain (Behaviors):

- Conflict is inevitable as members organize for the task.
- Individuals bend their ideas and beliefs to fit the group structure.
- Questions arise about roles, responsibilities, rules, and leadership.
- Some members may dominate, while others remain silent due to "fear of exposure" or "fear of failure."

The Crux (The Challenge):

The group is wrestling with conflicts over leadership, structure, power, and authority.

The Way Forward (Leadership Action):

Facilitate open communication. The "most important trait" is the ability to listen. Shift the team from a "testing and proving" mentality to a problem-solving one.



Stage 3: Norming

Landmark Metaphor:

The Ridge

Core Dynamic:

Cohesion & Data Flow

Observable Terrain (Behaviors):

- Group cohesion is the primary characteristic.
- Members actively acknowledge contributions and build community.
- Leadership is shared; cliques dissolve.
- Creativity is high, and members share feelings and ideas openly.
- A tangible sense of group belonging and relief.

The Crux (The Challenge):

A potential drawback emerges: members may begin to fear the group's eventual breakup and resist change of any sort.

The Way Forward (Leadership Action):

Encourage continued open feedback and shared leadership. Reinforce the group's positive momentum without letting it become static.



The Journey at a Glance: Comparing the Stages

	Forming	Storming	Norming	Performing	Adjourning
Focus	Personal acceptance, avoiding conflict	Gaining influence, establishing roles	Cooperation, group harmony	Task achievement, high standards	Closure, emotional separation
Member Behavior	Tentative, polite, leader-dependent	Argumentative, emotional, competitive	Cohesive, trusting, sharing data	Interdependent, self-directed, collaborative	Reflective, sometimes anxious
Leader's Role	Directive, providing structure	Coaching, facilitating conflict resolution	Participating, empowering	Delegating, overseeing	Guiding, providing closure

Stage 4: Performing

Landmark Metaphor:

The Summit

Core Dynamic:

Interdependence & Problem Solving

Observable Terrain (Behaviors):

- The group reaches true interdependence; members can work independently, in subgroups, or as a total unit with equal facility.
- Roles and authority adjust dynamically to the needs of the group.
- Members are self-assuring and no longer need group approval.
- Unity is complete: group morale is high, and loyalty is intense.
- The group is highly productive, focusing on genuine problem-solving and achievement.

The Way Forward (Leadership Action):

Delegate and empower. The leader's role shifts to oversight, support, and focusing the team on optimal solutions.



The Input: A Singular Point of Reflection

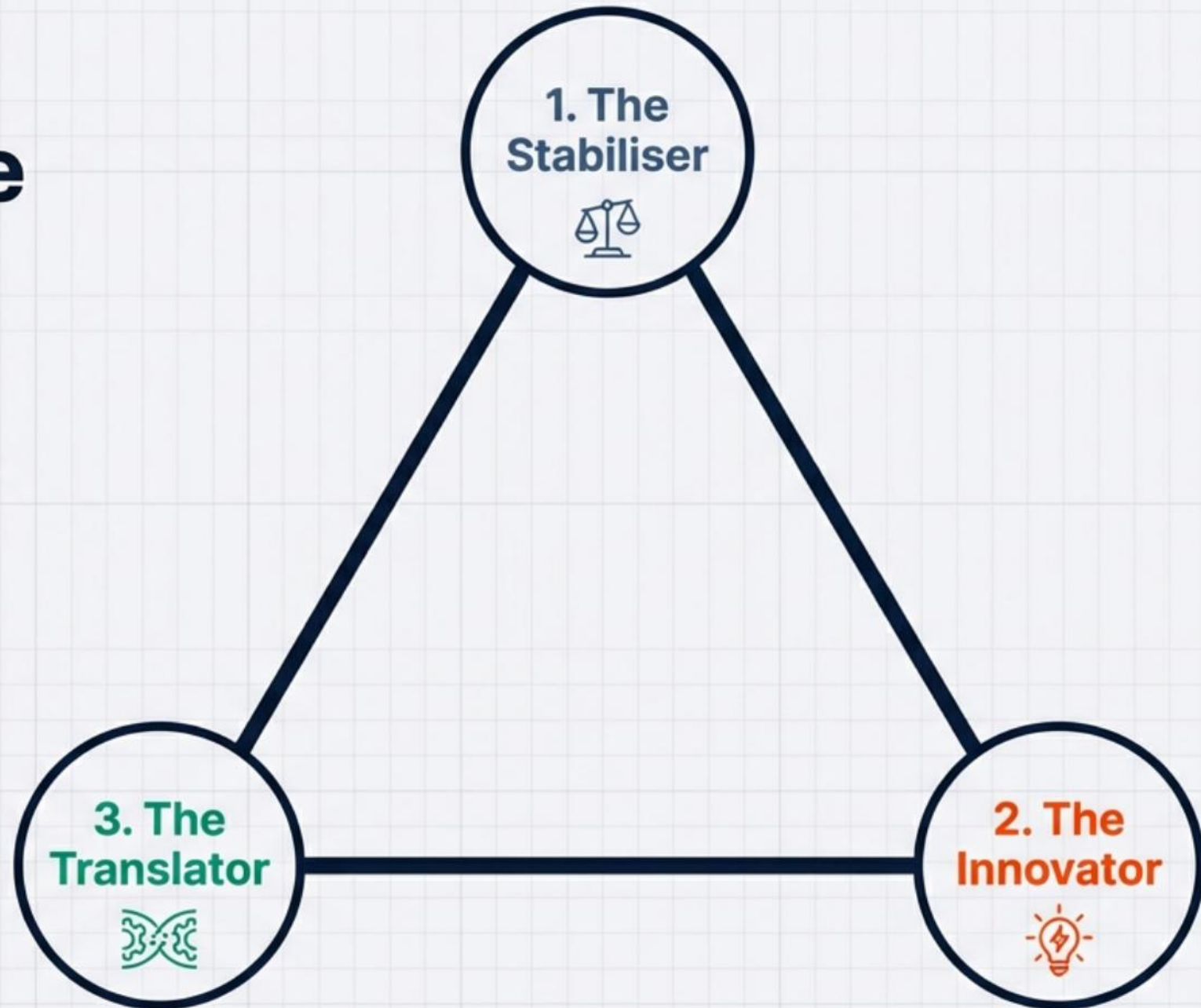
“What do I consistently bring to this group when we function at our best?”



Before the group creates the map, every participant must answer this foundational enquiry.

The Output: Constructing the Strengths Map

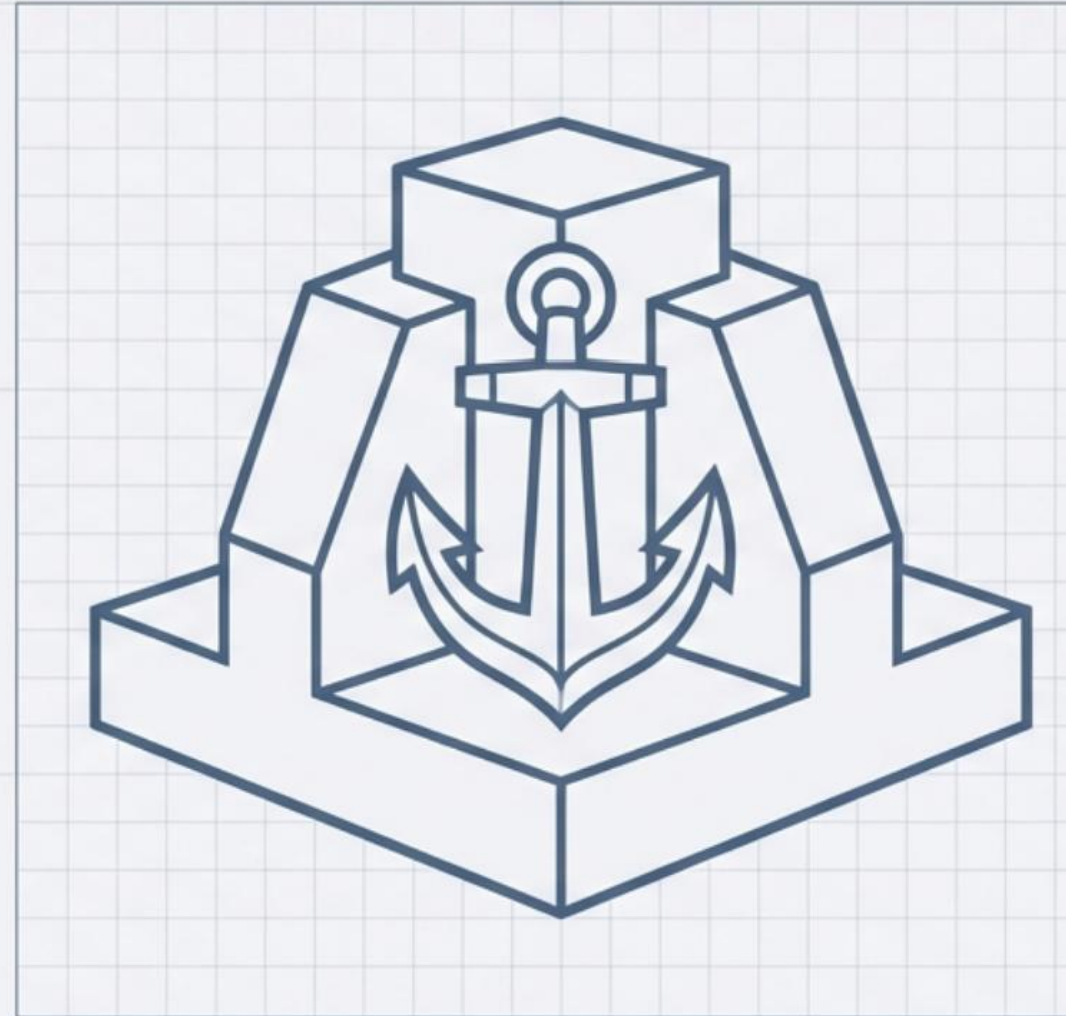
Individual reflection acts as the data source. The 'Strengths Map' is the visualization of that data. It organises individual contributions into a functional network.



Node 1: The Stabiliser

The Core Question: Who stabilizes?

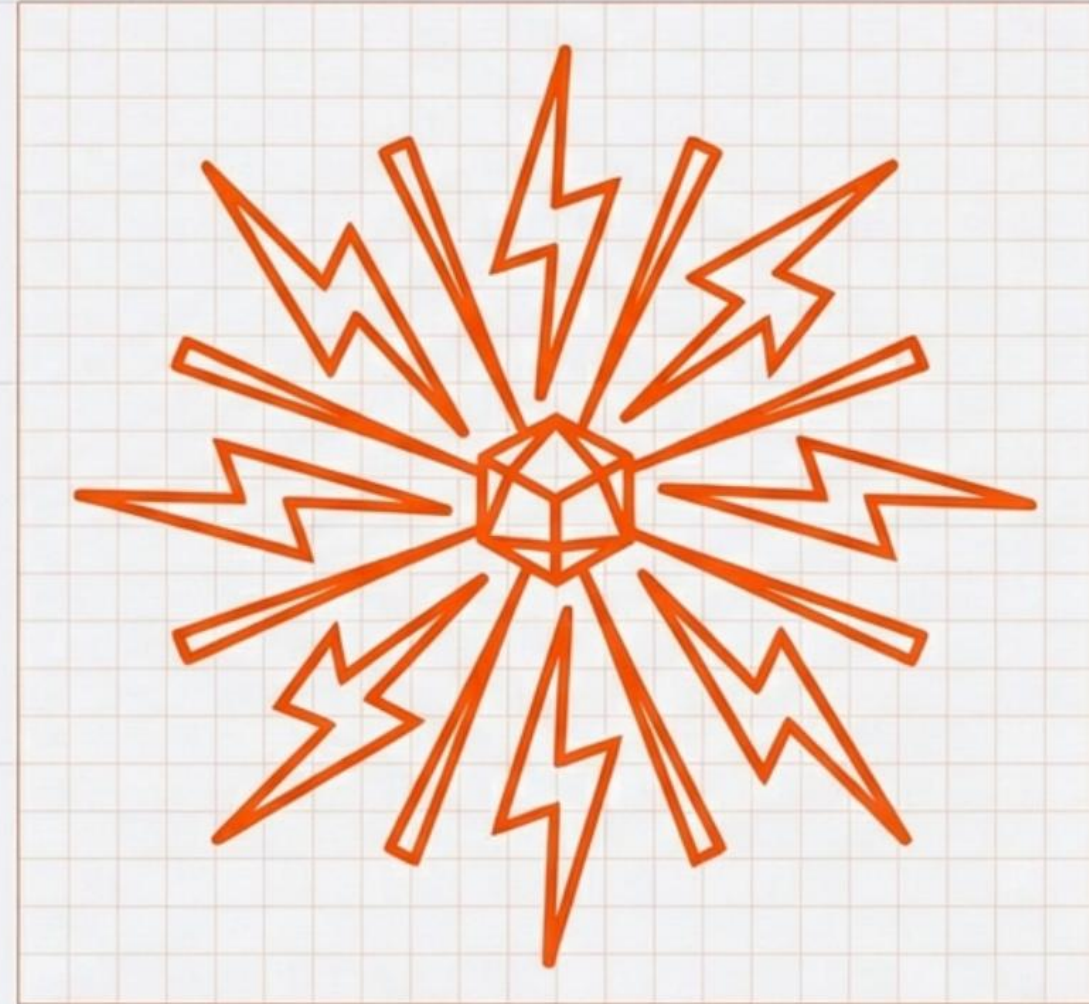
Functional Definition: These individuals provide the foundation. They ensure continuity, mitigate risk, and maintain the structural integrity of the team's operations. They are the anchor in the storm.



Node 2: The Innovator

The Core Question: Who innovates?

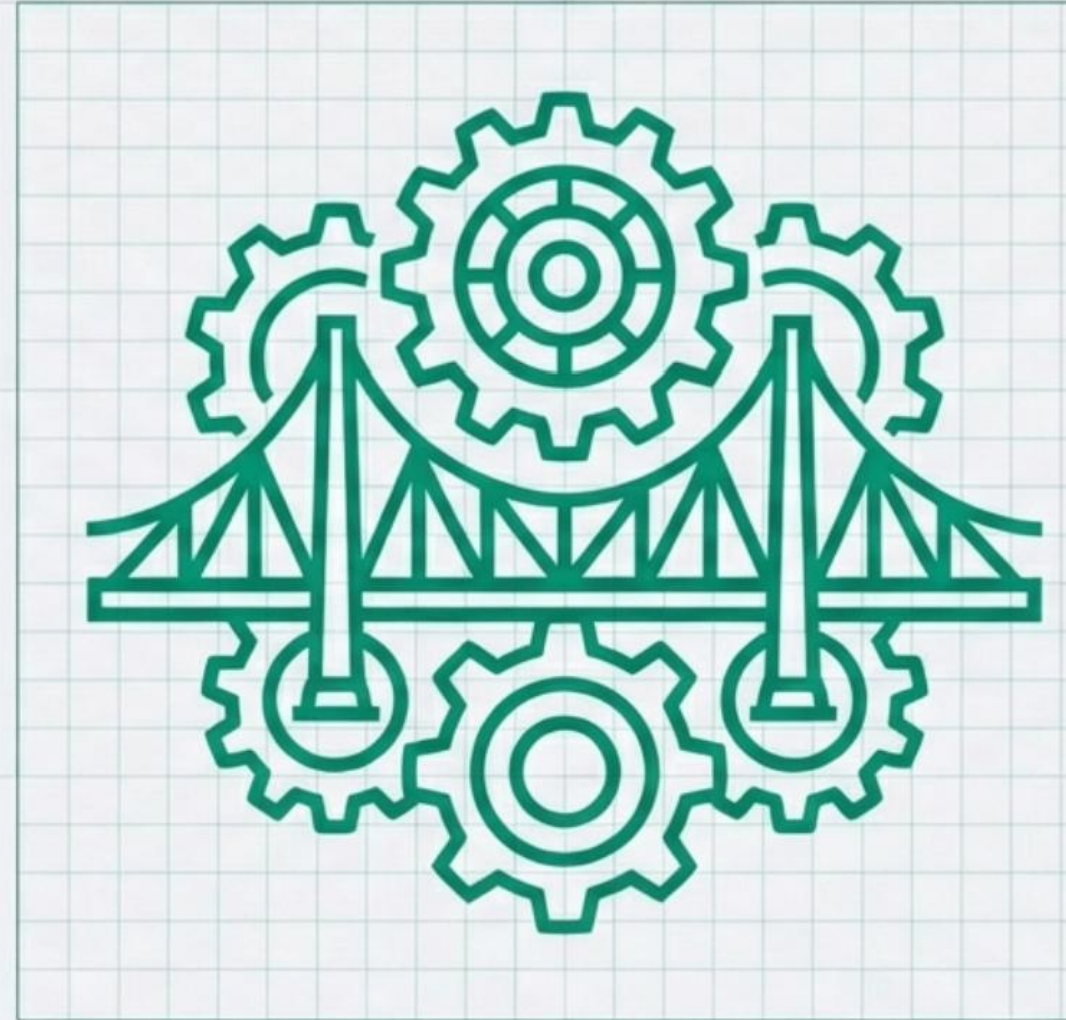
Functional Definition: These individuals provide the spark. They introduce new variables, challenge the status quo, and drive the evolution of the team's output. They are the vector of change.



Node 3: The Translator

The Core Question: Who translates vision into action?

Functional Definition: These individuals bridge the gap. They metabolise the raw ideas of the Innovator into the structured reality of the Stabiliser. They are the mechanism that turns 'what if' into 'what is'.



Stage 5: Adjourning / Mourning

Landmark Metaphor:

The Descent & Reflection

Core Dynamic:

Disengagement & Recognition

Observable Terrain (Behaviors):

- Involves the termination of task behaviors and disengagement from relationships.
- Concluding the group can create apprehension or a “minor crisis.”
- A planned conclusion allows for recognition of participation and achievement.
- Members have an opportunity to say personal goodbyes.

The Crux (The Challenge):

Managing the sense of loss while celebrating the group’s accomplishments.

The Way Forward (Leadership Action):

Facilitate the termination and disengagement process. Create space for reflection and structured goodbyes to honor the team’s work and relationships.





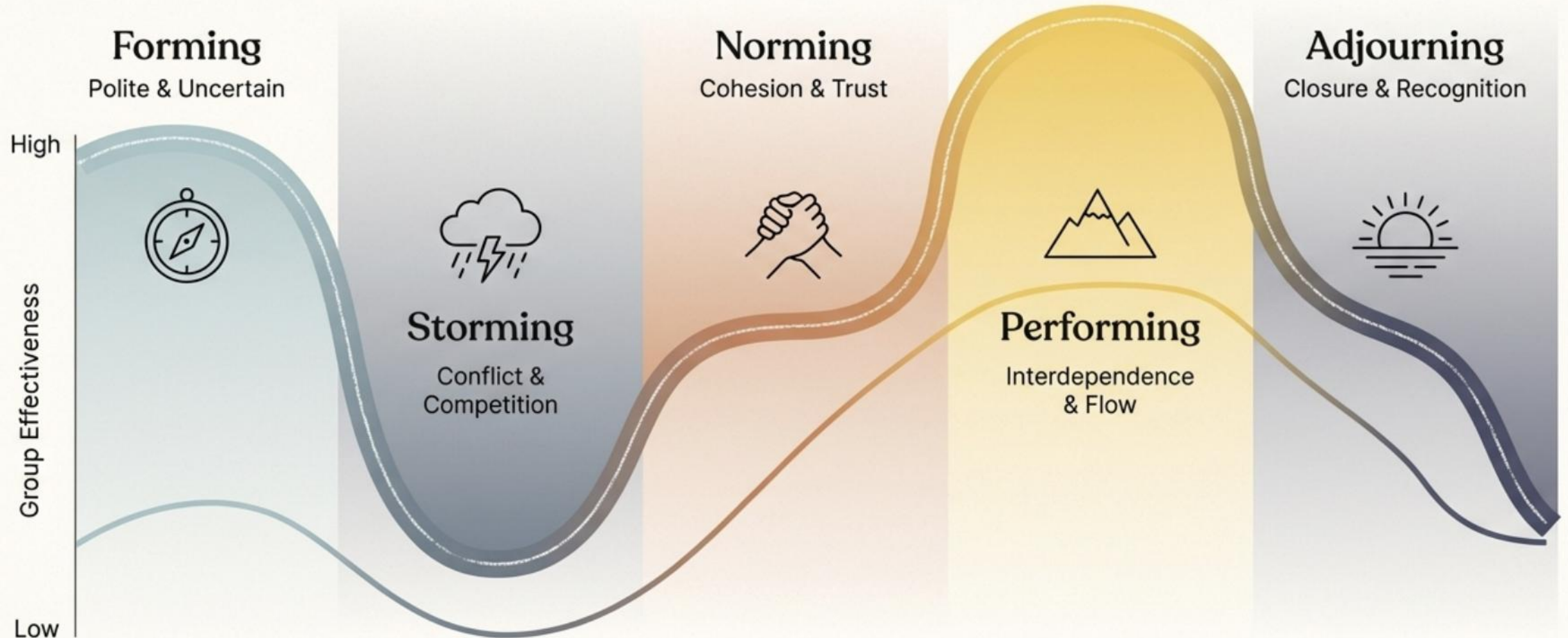
Not Every Team Reaches the Summit.

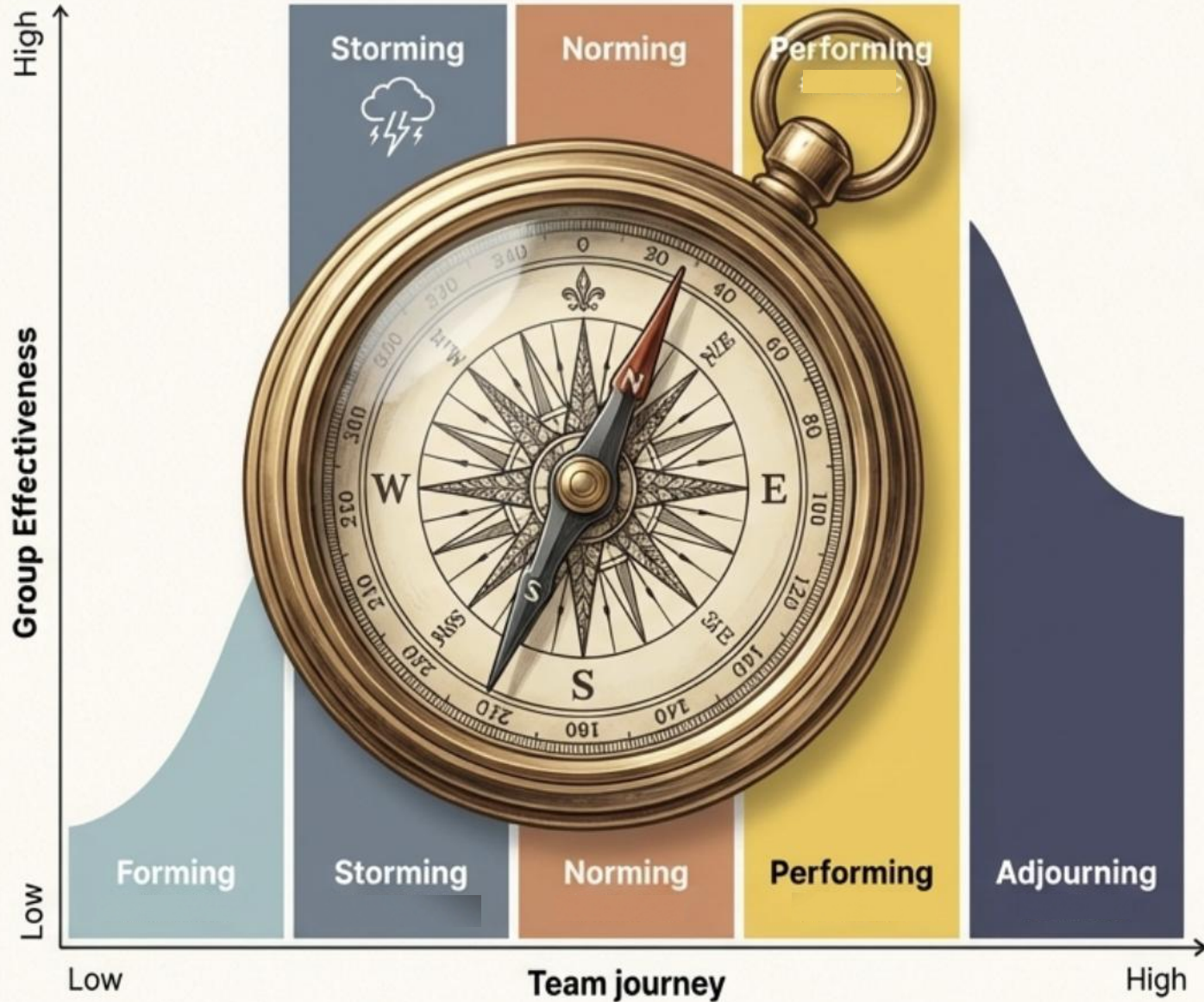
“The Performing stage is not reached by all groups.”

— Bruce Tuckman

Progression through the stages is not automatic. Many teams get stuck in the Storming phase due to unresolved conflicts or fall into complacency during Norming. Reaching the summit of performance requires conscious effort, skilled leadership, and a commitment from every member to navigate the challenges of the ascent.

The Team's Journey: A Complete Map





Using the Map: A Diagnostic Tool for Your Team

Tuckman's model is more than a theory; it's a powerful diagnostic tool. By observing your team's behaviors and dynamics, you can accurately identify its current stage. This allows you to:



Diagnose: Understand the root cause of current challenges.



Anticipate: Predict what challenges and opportunities lie ahead.



Act: Apply the right leadership and support to help the team advance.

Where is Your Team on the Map?

Tuckman's model is more than a theory; it's a diagnostic tool. Use this map to identify your team's current location.



Listen to their conversations: Are they polite and superficial (Forming) or challenging and direct (Storming)?



Observe their interactions: Is there unresolved tension (Storming) or a sense of shared purpose (Norming/Performing)?



Assess their focus: Are they still defining the task (Forming) or driving towards optimal solutions (Performing)?

Once you know where you are, you can provide the leadership, support, and environment needed to begin the next leg of the ascent.



The Leader's Role at Every Stage

Effective leadership is not static; it adapts to the team's needs. The leader's primary function shifts as the team matures:



DIRECTOR

Provide clear guidance and establish safety.



COACH

Mediate conflict and clarify roles and structure.



FACILITATOR

Encourage collaboration and shared leadership.



DELEGATOR

Empower autonomy and focus on goal achievement.



CELEBRATOR

Acknowledge contributions and facilitate closure.