

Building Your Team's Performance And Cooperation With Some Simple Activities

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Posted By **Bix Firer and Pat Brehm**, Monday, April 8, 2019

Establishing buy-in and cooperation from the young climbers in a climbing program must go beyond simply establishing a set of rules and reactively enforcing them. Rather, it is important that the structure of the program is built on a foundation of activities and participant-created expectations that promote cooperation and give youth climbers agency over their own progress and development. In doing so it is possible to create a programmatic environment that keeps climbers engaged while promoting their independence. This structure also holds them accountable to their peers and themselves rather than just to their coach. These practices can make the task of keeping climbers focused on practice much easier for coaches. Among the most intentional ways to build this cohesion and accountability in a group is to cater activities to help a group develop together.

Using Tuckman's stages of group development as a road map, coaches can build simple activities into their practices that promote individual and group cooperation. Depending on the stage of your team's development, the coach can use climbing-related activities to contrive situations that assist the larger group to act as a unit, commit to the process, and move forward to an ultimate goal of performing well together. In doing so, the coach can foster an inclusive environment that values commitment to self and team, which often leads to the team holding its individuals accountable for meeting goals rather than letting that responsibility fall solely on the coach – a dynamic that can be very challenging for the coach.

When a group comes together, educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman proposed that they naturally move through 5 stages of development. Most groups will move through in the same order, and these stages of development will generally be observed as a new group comes together (i.e. as your team all meets each other), when a significant change happens (i.e. a new coach or a bunch of new team members join), or as a major goal is put forth (i.e. competitions are looming).

The developmental stages are as follows:

Forming - Your climbers will be reserved. They will focus on determining their role within the group and be conflict-avoidant.

Storming (some groups may skip this stage) - Members of your team begin to create judgements about each other, their coaches, and their ultimate goals. This stage requires skillful openness, conflict resolution, and an ability for your team members to be heard and find a unifying project. Conflicts over process, communication, and interpersonal differences are common.

Norming - This stage is all about making sure your team understands their common goal - whether it's an upcoming competition or a focus on holding each other accountable during training. During this stage it's essential to allow your group to practice succeeding together and celebrate their successes.

Performing - In this stage, if you have helped your team reach a high level of performance by ushering them through the previous stages, your job is to facilitate activities that will help your team perform above and beyond their expectations, using the collective energy and focused goals you have helped curate.

Adjourning - If your climbers are to perform well, they must reflect as they complete their goals. This is the greatest investment you can make in helping your team come together quickly as they continue to take on new challenges.

Here is a simple framework of climbing-related activities that can help your team work through these stages:

1) Forming - Sorts and Mingle Climbing Partners

a) Climbers are performing a simple warm-up (Jumping Jacks, Burpees, etc.) to start each round. Coach yells out a number, cueing climbers to form groups of that number. Coach will assign one activity and one discussion topic for groups to complete (Ex: Complete three high-five push-ups and discuss your favorite climbing style). Once complete, climbers return to the warm up exercises and wait for the next number to be called out.

b) After a few rounds, coach leads debrief encouraging climbers to share something they learned about a teammate.

2) Storming - Team Points

a) Instruct the team that their goal is to climb a certain number of V-Points or YDS-Points collectively as a group. Set the goal based on time allotted, number of climbers and general ability level of climbers. Give the team 15 minutes to strategize with each other before they begin. The strategy session can include discussion of individuals' strengths and planning for who will climb which routes/problems. Adjust the challenge by allowing or not allowing boulder problems or routes to be climbed by more than one climber or establish a maximum number of total problems (Ex: 50 V-Points in 10 or less boulders). This will encourage the team to discuss the best strategy and assign certain problems/routes to certain climbers.

b) As potential conflicts in strategy or ability arise, pause the activity and work with the group to come to a resolution that suits all members of the group.

3) Norming - Blindfold Buddy Climb

a) In groups of three, one person is the climber, one is the belayer, and the other is the guide. The climber wears a blindfold and attempts to climb a route (well below their flash level) while

the guide to instructs their movements.

b) Be sure all group members perform each role.

c) Focus your debrief on the successes of your group.

4) Performing - Train Your Weakness

a) Climbers are paired up based on their strengths and weaknesses such that ideally, each climber is strong or at least proficient in his/her partner's weakness (If this is not possible, partners should be flashing around the same grade). Groups then play PIG with boulder problems. Climber 1 chooses a problem they think will challenge their partner's weakness and attempts to climb it in one try. If they are successful, Climber 2 must complete the problem. If they do not, they get a "P". Partners take turns choosing the problem until the time allotted has run out, or a group member gets PIG.

b) The debrief should focus on supporting each other in improving and communicating needs. Encourage your climbers to focus on how these skills will help them succeed at their ultimate goal.

5) Adjourning/Reflection - Team Add-On

a) The team is instructed by the coach that they need to set a new boulder problem or route (with existing holds) that represents the accomplishments of the team. This can be done following a competition, at the end of a season, or at the completion of a longer-term team goal. Each climber should be represented in the finished product by at least one move that represents something that they accomplished or that they brought to the team. (Ex.: A climber who developed their crimp strength over the season might add a difficult crimp move that they might not have been able to do when they joined the team. A climber might add a move that resembles a move on a boulder in a competition they won or did well in). The coach should take a backseat in the process of creating the boulder or route. When the route is complete, the climbers take turns climbing the entire problem or route and explain why they added the move they did and how it represents their accomplishment or contribution to the team.

Creative Coaching: Tools to Help Climbers and Coaches Meet Their Goals

Want more tips, tricks, and strategies to implement in your youth climbing program? Don't miss the Headwall Groups's [pre-conference workshop](#) at this year's CWA Summit. For assistance adding a pre-conference to your registration, reach out to us at 720-838-8284 or events@climbingwallindustry.org.

About The Headwall Group



The Headwall Group distills the lessons learned as educators and leaders working in dynamic and high risk environments and brings them to youth-serving organizations. The Headwall group provides trainings, consultation, and curriculum development services that are rooted in our experience as outdoor experiential educators for climbing gyms, summer camps, and schools. The Headwall Group was founded by Bix Firer and Pat Brehm. Bix Firer (MA, University of Chicago) is currently the Director of Outdoor Programs at College of Idaho and has worked as a wilderness educator, trainer, facilitator, and experiential educator for over a decade. Pat Brehm works as a professional organizational trainer and has spent his career as a climbing coach, facilitator, and outdoor educator.

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