RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

Chairing a Presidential Committee
Process Observations and Strategies for Success
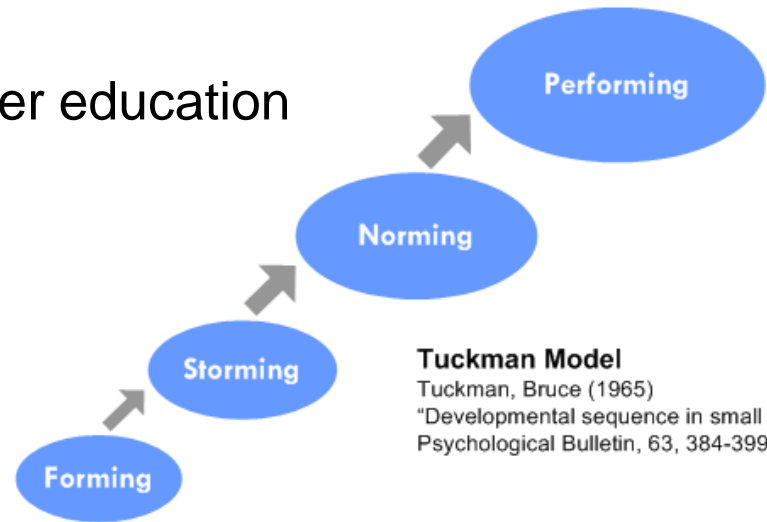
Linda Brzustowicz, M.D.
Distinguished Professor and Chair
Department of Genetics, Rutgers SAS

The Challenge

◆ Requested by University President to co-chair a major committee mandated by new strategic plan

◆ Large (N=25) committee of distinguished faculty

◆ High expectations, but some vague aspects of committee charge

◆ Two-year time frame for completion

◆ Areas of concern:

- Shifting University landscape, realities of political limits on work

- Defensive/territorial committee members, initial distrust, private agendas

- Lack of sufficient domain knowledge

- Busy committee members

Obstacles to Progress

◆ Committee size – Too large to function efficiently, but too much initial distrust to effectively work in smaller groups

◆ Length of charge – Knowing charge was two year allowed slow progression to Performing

◆ Significant time needed for member education

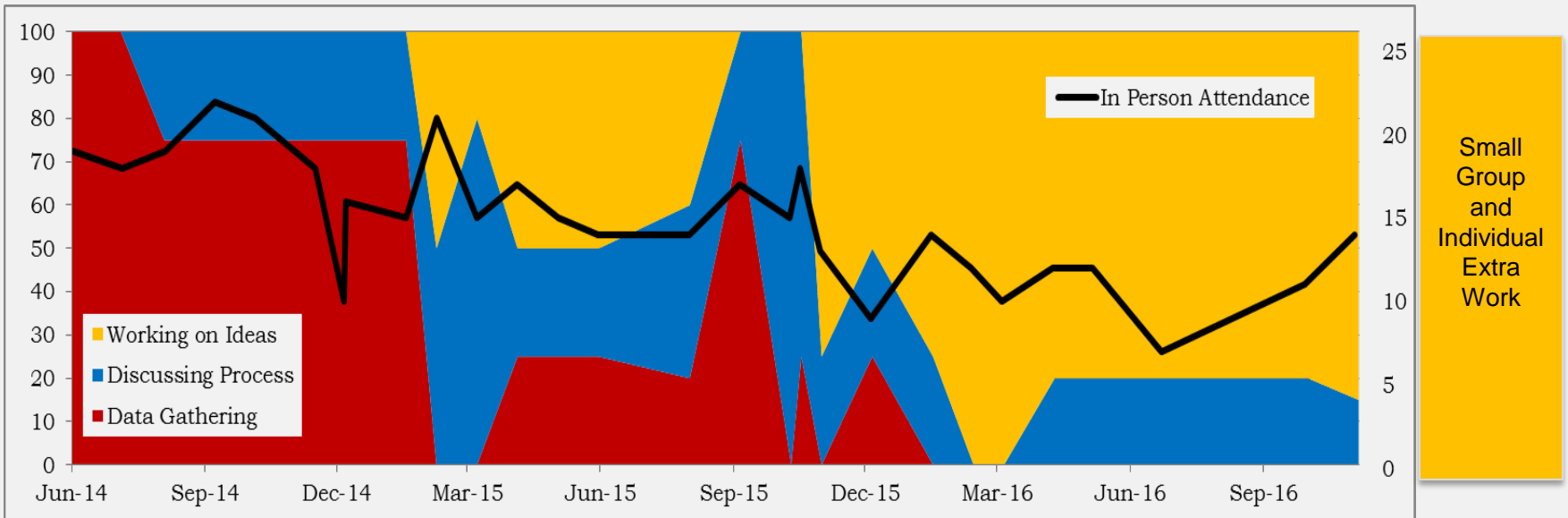◆ Changing University landscape

◆ Loss/near-loss of members/staff

Tuckman Model
Tuckman, Bruce (1965)
"Developmental sequence in small groups"
Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399

Process Observations – General Resistance

◆ Committee was tasked with producing "big ideas" – too vague a charge to be helpful

◆ Many members felt unprepared for task at hand

- Lack of knowledge about all components of University, exacerbated by recent merger

- Lack of technical expertise in many important areas (finance, HR) that could limit options

◆ As academics, natural response was to seek more data

- Some education was necessary, but reluctance to do "homework" outside of meetings resulted in lengthy fact-finding process

- Data gathering became a mechanism for avoiding hard discussions

• Background data gathering ultimately stretched out for 18 months

Strategies for Getting Unstuck

◆ Outside Intervention – Outside facilitator helped break log jam

- Expert status allowed committee to hear criticisms of process

- "In Class" exercise helped changed focus to producing deliverables

◆ Work Group Reconfiguration

- Committee too large to be effective as a whole

- Focused on doing real work in smaller groups

  • Initially assigned subcommittees, later self-assembling workgroups

◆ Education as a Productivity Tool

- Committee very information and data driven

- Data presentations related to specific ideas helped move them along

Process Observations - Conflicts

◆ Some committee members came with specific agendas

 – Initial positions generally representing interests of home units

 – Some saw committee as opportunity to push a longstanding pet idea

 – Some members were there to block a specific feared outcome

◆ High levels of initial distrust and some significant conflicts, but generally masked by extremely collegial interactions

Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

◆ Find Common Ground

- Identified on a focus (improving the student experience) that all either genuinely supported or were not willing to oppose in public

- While this was not the primary focus of all proposals, it provided an initial framework for working together on some ideas and building trust

◆ Overcoming Difficult Conversations

- Collegiality was an impediment when it prevented consensus by giving all minority views equal weight, indefinitely, in discussions

- Alternatives included special session on a topic (poor attendance signaled lack of interest); online votes (inclusive and private); outside agents restricting options

Other Observations

◆ Committee functioned better when fewer members were present

– First observed during a rescheduled meeting with only 12 members

– Did not correlate with presence/absence of specific member(s)

◆ Over time, the number of regular attendees dwindled

– Better working size

– Most committed members kept with it

◆ In the end, a core of 8-10 people did most of the report writing

– Group process was necessary for the rest of the committee to trust this core with this work

Can You Just Do One More Thing?

◆ Successful presentation of "final" report to President in early November

◆ President very supportive of ideas, but wanted "just a few more" items for some of the proposals, including some background budget feasibility work

– Continued to extend work of the committee, at least for some members

– New direction as previous guidance was for big ideas only, no need to worry about details such as budget numbers

– While out of scope of original charge, interesting work that should enhance probability of success

◆ Plan to have real final report submitted by end of March