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Belbin Team Role Theories

By Peter Mackechnie, sourced from a number of articles

Some organisations are quite prescriptive when building teams and will use team role theories to 'build' what they believe is the best performing team for a particular project.

A widely recognised team role theory was suggested by Belbin in 1981. Belbin believes that each of us possesses a pattern of behaviour that characterises one person's behaviour in relationship to another in facilitating the progress of a team.

Dr Meredith Belbin defines a team role as:

"A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way."

(Management Teams – Why They Succeed or Fail-Second Edition 2003)

What are the Belbin 'Team Roles'?

Everybody has a tendency to behave in a particular way when working with other people, which doesn't mean, of course, that they'll always behave like that. Meredith Belbin and his colleagues found that that are common clusters of these behaviours, and these clusters are stable enough to be separately identifiable. Everybody seems to have a preference for one or more of these 'Team Roles' when behaving naturally in a group. If you have more than one 'natural role', then you can switch between them if you choose, and this is useful knowledge if you ever need to fill a different role in a team.

The significance is that by observing real teams over a period of several years, Dr Belbin and his group learned how to predict whether a team would succeed or fail, just by knowing the mix of roles within the group. They could also make a failing group succeed by adding somebody with the right-role - or make a successful group fail by taking away a vital supporting role. They also found that if team members identify, share and discuss their team roles then this improves how people work and live together. They refined things as they went along, so some roles have more than one name.

The nine roles

There are nine main roles, two of which are possible leaders, and a ninth specialist role. All the roles are significant, though some have a higher profile than others; exactly which ones matter most depends a lot on the circumstances - size of the team, nature of the task, stage of team development and so on. Teams can work even with missing roles, but to work at their best they need:

- some kind of leader, a Co-ordinator to balance tasks and people, or Shaper to drive projects through to completion.

- people who communicate and support others: Team Worker, Resource Investigator

- various kinds of 'doers': Implementer, Completer-Finisher, Monitor-Evaluator

- an 'ideas person': Plant-Innovator

- and perhaps an Expert-Specialist to give depth of expertise

There are a number of ways to use the outcome of a 'Belbin'. Identification of team structure, team performance, team roles, individual roles, and individual performance. Each person has a preferred way, or ways, of working within a team. The Belbin analysis allows the identification of other roles (manageable roles) that the team member can perform well, if asked. It also shows roles that the team member would absolutely hate to be asked to perform (least preferred roles). There is an inherent danger in providing 'name tags' or 'putting people in boxes' by using these types of approaches. "You are this sort, therefore you will do this job because the analysis says so". Or, "You are bad at this and need to get better, therefore you will now do this".

Usually organisations want to 'develop' their people and do so for a number of good reasons, but they tend to concentrate on the negatives – the WEAKNESSES. Managers use the Belbin roles in different ways, but let's look at one in particular, the individual. Managers will call the individuals' least preferred roles 'weaknesses' and the majority of managers want to believe that if these weaknesses are converted to strengths, their staff will become 'better' people. Normally, however, the opposite happens. If you take someone who is performing well in their preferred role and slot them into a least preferred role – for personal development! – what tends to happen is that their performance will diminish, their communication skills diminish, and their health diminishes – spot the common theme? – instead of developing they go downhill rapidly (do you recognise anyone like this; does this ring a bell for you; do you feel you know someone in this position?). This situation is caused by 'out of role stresses. The team member has been taken out of a role that they are good at and comfortable with, and given a job that they dislike and are uncomfortable with because they have been 'boxed' in a least preferred role in a particular area. In my experience this will inevitable lead to failure for the individual and the organisation. There are alternatives.

Each person has a number of roles which they can manage comfortably if they cannot, for whatever reason, operate in their most preferred role. If the organisation seriously

wants to develop that individual, consideration needs to be given to tasks, goals, and jobs that would give the individual the opportunity of working within a role that they can manage. They will face a developmental challenge by taking up the role but they will not be placed in a situation where they will inevitably fail. Ideally the individual should be in a position within a team where they are in their preferred roles. If this is not possible, the next best placement is the manageable role. In this situation you are making the individual stronger in areas in which they can develop whilst ignoring areas where they are least (weaknesses). The worst-case scenario is that an individual is placed in a position of continual 'out of role stress'.

Which would you rather have?

A team whose members are developing in areas where they have a chance of succeeding in whilst at the same time delivering the results desired; or

Teams whose members are struggling to come to terms with significant 'out of role stress' and are failing in their day-to-day tasks?

One point to note: an allowable weakness can become disallowable if it starts to impact negatively on the team's performance.

The main characteristics, functions, and allowable weaknesses of the Belbin team roles are as follows:

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PLANTS (PL)

Characteristics
Plants are innovators and inventors and can be highly creative. They provide the seed and ideas from which major developments spring. Usually they prefer to operate by themselves at some distance from other members of the team, using their imagination and often working in an unorthodox way. They tend to be introverted and react strongly to criticism and praise. Their ideas may often be radical and may lack practical constraint. They are independent, clever, and original but may be weak in communicating with other people on a different wavelength.

Function
The main uses of a PL are to generate new proposals and to solve complex problems. PLs are often needed in the initial stages of a project or when a project is failing to progress. PLs have usually made their mark as founders of companies or as originators of new products. Too many PLs in one organization, however, may be counter-productive as they tend to spend their time reinforcing their own ideas and engaging each other in combat.

Strengths
Produces lots of ideas, provides the vital spark, and sits in a corner thinking things through, capacity for complex & strategic planning, very original & potentially rewarding ideas.

Weaknesses
Can ignore the incidentals and can become too preoccupied to communicate effectively. Can be over sensitive and prickly. May need careful handling by Coordinator or Team Worker within the team. Can become isolated and may be difficult to rescue once stereotyped by the team.

Key Words
Independent, unorthodox, imaginative, original, radical, clever, loner, dominant, socially bold, uninhibited, forthright.

Relates well with
Coordinator, Team Worker & Monitor-Evaluator.

Powerful Role Combinations:
Shaper, Completer-finisher.

Potential Conflict
All other roles, except Team-worker.

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RESOURCE INVESTIGATORS (RI)

Characteristics
Resource Investigators are often enthusiastic, quick-off-the-mark extroverts. They are good at communicating with people both inside and outside the company. They are natural negotiators and are adept at exploring new opportunities and developing contacts. Although not a great source of original ideas, the RI is effective when it comes to picking up other people's ideas and developing them. As the name suggests, they are skilled at finding out what is available and what can be done. They usually receive a warm reception from others because of their warm, outgoing nature. RIs have relaxed personalities with a strong inquisitive sense and a readiness to see the possibilities in anything new. However, unless they remain stimulated by others, their enthusiasm rapidly fades.

Function
RIs are good at exploring and reporting back on ideas, developments, or resources outside the group. They are the natural people to set up external contacts and to carry out any subsequent negotiations. They have an ability to think on their feet and to probe others for information.

Strengths
Brings ideas and information back to the team. Gets around, meets people, poses questions, and finds treasure in unexpected spots. Easily integrated into the team. Has masses of contacts, prevents the team from stagnating, and promotes communication.

Weaknesses
Can become overly optimistic; lose enthusiasm once the initial eagerness has passed. Can be lazy and complacent unless working under pressure.

Key Words
Communicative, relaxed, sociable, enthusiastic, outgoing, gregarious, versatile and innovative.

Relates well with
Most members of the team.

Powerful role combinations.
Shaper, Team Worker.

Potential conflict.
Completer-finisher, Implementer.

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MONITOR EVALUATORS (ME)

Characteristics
Monitor Evaluators are serious-minded, prudent individuals with a built-in immunity for being overenthusiastic. They are slow in making decisions preferring to think things over. Usually they have a high critical thinking ability. They have a good capacity for shrewd judgments that take all factors into account. A good ME is seldom wrong.

Functions
ME's are best suited to analysing problems and evaluating ideas and suggestions. They are very good at weighing up the pros and cons of options. To many outsiders the ME may appear as dry, boring or even over-critical. Some people are surprised that they become managers. Nevertheless, many MEs occupy strategic posts and thrive in high-level appointments. In some jobs success or failure hinges on a relatively small number of crunch decisions. This is ideal territory for an ME - for the man who is never wrong is the one who scores in the end.

Strengths
Ensures the team doesn't make mistakes. Soundness of judgement, unaffected by emotion, personality, or prejudice. Good at thinking through complex issues and taking all factors into account in giving an opinion.

Weaknesses
Can sometimes lack drive and ability to inspire others. Aloof and something of a cold fish. May become isolated if a good relationship with the chair is not established. May appear dry, boring, over-critical and pessimistic.

Key words
Prudent, hard-headed, intelligent, dispassionate, analytic, unemotional, hardly ever wrong, serious minded, shrewd, judge of proposals, uncommitted, immune to enthusiasm, rations interventions to a minimum.

Relates well with
Plant

Powerful role combinations
Completer-finisher

Potential Conflict
Shaper, Resource-investigator, Plant.

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CO-ORDINATORS (C0)

Characteristics
The distinguishing feature of Coordinators is their ability to cause others to work towards shared goals. Mature, trusting and confident, they delegate readily. In interpersonal relations they are quick to spot individual talents and to use them in pursuit of group objectives. While COs are not necessarily the cleverest members of a team, they have a broad and worldly outlook and generally command respect.

Function
COs are well placed when put in charge of a team of people with diverse skills and personal characteristics. They perform better in dealing with colleagues of near or equal rank than in directing junior subordinates. Their motto might well be "consultation with control" and they usually believe in tackling problems calmly. In some situations COs are inclined to clash with Shapers due to their contrasting management styles.

Strengths
Guides team to achieving its objectives. Ensures the best use is made of each member's potential. Good at summing up at team discussion. Accepts people as they are without suspicion or jealousy. Never loses grip on a situation. Able to intervene decisively to pull team together in moment of crisis.

Weaknesses
Can be seen as manipulative and offload work onto others.

Key words
Calm, self-confident, open, good listener, talent spotter, self-disciplined, commands respect, trusting by nature, strong moral commitment, unflappable in face of controversy, naturally enthusiastic, good speaker, thinks positively.

Relates well with
All members of the team. Needs to foster relationship with Plant and Monitor-evaluator.

Powerful role combinations
Implementer, Team Worker.

Potential conflict
Shaper – over leadership of the team.

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SHAPERS (SH)

Characteristics
Shapers are highly motivated people with a lot of nervous energy and a need for achievement. Usually they are aggressive extroverts and possess strong drive. SHs like to challenge others and their concern is to win. They like to lead and to push others into action. If obstacles arise, they find a way round. Headstrong and assertive, they tend to show strong emotional response to any form of disappointment or frustration. SHs are determined and argumentative and may lack interpersonal sensitivity. Theirs is the most competitive role.

Function
SHs generally make good managers because they generate action and thrive under pressure. They are excellent at sparking life into a team and are very useful in groups where political complications are apt to slow things down; SHs are inclined to rise above problems of this kind and forge ahead regardless. They are well suited to making necessary changes and do not mind taking unpopular decisions. As the name implies, they try to impose some shape or pattern on group discussion or activities. They are probably the most effective members of a team in guaranteeing positive action.

Strengths
The driving force or engine of the team. Ideal project leader. Leads from the front. Galvanises team into action. Makes things happen. Gets the team out of the rut.

Weaknesses
Can be prone to provocation and can also offend people's feelings.

Key words
Dynamic, impulsive, challenging, looks for a pattern, compulsive drive, nervous energy, strong need for achievement, sociable, opportunistic rather than conscientious, tough minded, emotional, fearless and unflinching in face-to-face contact.

Relates well with
Team worker, Resource-Investigator

Powerful role combinations
Resource-investigator, Completer-finisher

Potential conflict
Plant, Coordinator, Monitor-evaluator.

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IMPLEMENTERS (IMP)

Characteristics
Implementers have practical common sense and a good deal of self-control and discipline. They favour hard work and tackle problems in a systematic fashion. On a wider front the IMP is typically a person whose loyalty and interest lie with the Company and who is less concerned with the pursuit of self-interest. However, IMPs may lack spontaneity and show signs of rigidity.

Function
IMPs are useful to an organisation because of their reliability and capacity for application. They succeed because they are efficient and because they have a sense of what is feasible and relevant. It is said that many executives only do the jobs they wish to do and neglect those tasks which they find distasteful. By contrast, an IMP will do what needs to be done. Good IMPs often progress to high management positions by virtue of good organisational skills and competency in tackling necessary tasks.

Strengths
Turns ideas and plans into manageable projects and defined tasks. Systematically sets about the tasks that need doing. Identifies with and works for the team or organization rather than in pursuit of self interest. Never flinches from a task because it's boring.

Weaknesses
Can be inflexible and slow to respond to new possibilities. Can lack imagination. May have difficulty monitoring and inspiring others.

Key words
Methodical, practical, hard working, reliable, systematic, tough minded tolerant, self controlled, orthodox, strength of character, organizational flair.

Relates well with
Coordinator, Completer-finisher.

Powerful role combinations
Implementer, Completer-finisher, Shaper, Monitor-evaluator.

Potential conflict
Plant, Team worker, Resource-Investigator.

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TEAM WORKERS (TW)

Characteristics
Team Workers are the most supportive members of a team. They are mild, sociable and concerned about others. They have a great capacity for flexibility and adapting to different situations and people. TWs are perceptive and diplomatic. They are good listeners and are generally popular members of a group. They operate with sensitivity at work, but they may be indecisive in crunch situations.

Function
The role of the TW is to prevent interpersonal problems arising within a team and thus allows all team members to contribute effectively. Not liking friction, they will go to great lengths to avoid it. It is not uncommon for TWs to become senior managers especially if line managers are dominated by Shapers. This creates a climate in which the diplomatic and perceptive skills of a TW become real assets, especially under a managerial regime where conflicts are liable to arise or to be artificially suppressed. TW managers are seen as a threat to no one and therefore the most accepted and favoured people to serve under. Team Workers have a lubricating effect on teams. Morale is better and people seem to cooperate better when they are around.

Strengths
Promotes unity and harmony in the team. Creates and maintains informal network of communication between team members. Boosts team spirit by placing team objectives above personal interest. Good at coping with awkward people. Skilled at averting dispute.

Weaknesses
Because they take into account all viewpoints and the full complexity of informal, hidden personal issues they may be indecisive in moments of crisis.

Key words
Sympathetic, understanding, sensitive, aware, sociable, low dominance, trusting, strong interest in human interaction and communication, leads from behind.

Relates well with
All members of the team, but especially good at managing difficult characters of shaper and plant.

Powerful role combinations
Completer-finisher, Implementer.

Potential conflicts
Over domineering Coordinator.

COMPLETER-FINISHERS (CF)

Characteristics
Completer-Finishers have a great capacity for follow through and attention to detail. They are unlikely to start anything that they cannot finish. They are motivated by internal anxiety, yet outwardly they may appear unruffled. Typically, they are introverted and require little in the way of external stimulus or incentive. CFs can be intolerant of those with a casual disposition. They are not often keen on delegating; preferring to tackle all tasks themselves.

Function
CFs are invaluable where tasks demand close concentration and a high degree of accuracy. They foster a sense of urgency within a team and are good at meeting schedules. In management they excel by the high standards to which they aspire, and by their concern for precision, attention to detail and follow-through.

Strengths
Ensures the team meets its obligations and delivers on time. Ensures nothing is overlooked and that the detail is not neglected. Makes sure the team doesn't waste time.

Weaknesses
Can be inclined to worry unduly and are slow to respond to new possibilities. Needs to avoid over perfectionism.

Key words
Painstaking, conscientious, follows through, strong attention to detail, relentless, high self-control, appears unflappable but prone to internal anxiety, consistent, capacity for hard and effective work, impatient of slapdash.

Relates well with
Plant, monitor-evaluator

Powerful role combinations
Shaper, monitor-evaluator.

Potential conflict
Implementer, Shaper, Team worker.

SPECIALISTS (SP)

Characteristics
Specialists are dedicated individuals who pride themselves on acquiring technical skills and specialised knowledge. Their priorities centre on maintaining professional standards and on furthering and defending their own field. While they show great pride in their own subject, they usually lack interest in other people. Eventually, the SP becomes the expert by sheer commitment along a narrow front. There are few people who have either the single-mindedness or the aptitude to become a first-class SP.

Function
SPs have an indispensable part to play in some teams, for they provide the rare skill upon which the firm's service or product is based. As managers, they command support because they know more about their subject than anyone else and can usually be called upon to make decisions based on in-depth experience.

Strengths
Able to prove a reasoned technical answer to technical problems if qualified in that field. Logical thinker often has scientific training.

Weaknesses
Contributes on a very narrow front and tends to concentrate on technicalities. May seem aloof, theoretical, and impractical. Doesn't contribute much to the team outside the area of specialism. Acquires knowledge for its own sake.

Key words
Calm, logical, detached, uncommunicative, highly competent in his/her field of expertise, interested only in the exercise of that expertise, accurate, conscientious, may be a dogged finisher.

Relates well with
Coordinator, Team worker.

Powerful role combinations
Shaper, Monitor-evaluator, Implementer.

Potential conflict
All other roles except Team worker.

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