

Team Roles in a Nutshell

Ever wondered why some teams just seem to work and others hit the rocks? When things don't work, it is obvious to all and it often has a profound effect on the people involved, as well as the project or objective to be achieved.

In the 1970s, Dr Meredith Belbin and his research team at Henley Management College set about observing teams, with a view to finding out where and how these differences come about. They wanted to control the dynamics of teams to discover if – and how – problems could be pre-empted and avoided.



Over a period of nine years, international management teams were studied. Each participant completed a battery of psychometric tests, so that attributes such as personality and behaviour could be brought into play and their effects on the team could be accurately considered.

As the research progressed, the research revealed that the difference between success and failure for a team was not dependent on factors such as intellect, but more on behaviour. The research team began to identify separate clusters of behaviour, each of which formed distinct team contributions or “Team Roles”. A **Team Role** came to be defined as: **“A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way.”** It was found that different individuals displayed different Team Roles to varying degrees.

The first Team Role to be identified was the **“Plant”**. The role was so-called because one such individual was “planted” in each team. They tended to be highly creative and good at solving problems in unconventional ways.

One by one, the other Team Roles began to emerge. The **Monitor Evaluator** was needed to provide a logical eye, make impartial judgements where required and to weigh up the team's options in a dispassionate way. **Co-ordinators** were needed to focus on the team's objectives, draw out team members and delegate work appropriately.

When the team was at risk of becoming isolated and inwardly-focused, **Resource Investigators** provided inside knowledge on the opposition and made sure that the team's idea would carry to the world outside the team. **Implementers** were needed to plan a practical, workable strategy and carry it out as efficiently as possible. **Completer Finishers** were most effectively used at the end of a task, to “polish” and scrutinise the work for errors, subjecting it to the highest standards of quality control. **Teamworkers** helped the team to gel, using their versatility to identify the work required and complete it on behalf of the team. Challenging individuals, known as **Shapers**, provided the necessary drive to ensure that the team kept moving and did not lose focus or momentum.

Whilst some Team Roles were more “high profile” and some team members shouted more loudly than others, each of the behaviours was essential in getting the team successfully from start to finish. The key was balance. For example, Meredith Belbin found that a team with no Plant struggled to come up with the initial spark of an idea with which to push forward.

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However, once too many Plants were in the team, bad ideas concealed good ones and non-starters were given too much airtime. Similarly, with no Shaper, the team ambled along without drive and direction, missing deadlines. With too many Shapers, in-fighting began and morale was lowered.

As well as the strength or contribution they provided, each Team Role was also found to have an **“allowable weakness”**: a flipside of the behavioural characteristics, which is allowable in the team because of the strength which goes with it. For example, the unorthodox Plant could be forgetful or scatty; or the Resource Investigator might forget to follow up on a lead. Co-ordinators might get over-enthusiastic on the delegation front and Implementers might be slow to relinquish their plans in favour of positive changes. Completer Finishers, often driven by anxiety to get things right, were found to take their perfectionism to extremes. Teamworkers, concerned with the welfare and morale of the team, found it difficult to make decisions where this morale might be compromised or team politics, involved. Shapers risked becoming aggressive and bad-humoured in their attempts to get things done.

It was only after the initial research had been completed that the ninth Team Role, **“Specialist”** emerged. The simulated management exercises had been deliberately set up to require no previous knowledge. In the real world, however, the value of an individual with in-depth knowledge of a key area came to be recognised as yet another essential team contribution or Team Role. Just like the other Team Roles, the Specialist also had a weakness: a tendency to focus narrowly on their own subject of choice, and to prioritise this over the team’s progress.

The Team Roles that Meredith Belbin identified are used widely in thousands of organisations all over the world today. By identifying our Team Roles, we can ensure that we **use our strengths to advantage and that we manage our weaknesses as best we can**. Sometimes, this means being aware of the pitfalls and making an effort to avoid them.

Most people have a number of “preferred Team Roles” or behaviours they frequently and naturally display. We also have “manageable roles”, roles which might not be the most natural course of behaviour for us, but which we can assume if required and might wish to cultivate. Lastly, we have least preferred roles, those we should not assume, since we’ll be playing against type. In this instance, the effort is likely to be great, and the outcome, poor. If work requires Team Roles other than our own, it is a much better bet to find and work with others who possess roles complementary to our own. Since people tend to display more than one preferred role, a team of four could quite easily represent all nine Belbin Team Roles.

So, in a nutshell, the Belbin philosophy is about celebrating – and making the most of – individual differences. The message is that there is room for everyone in the team: all positive contributions are welcome.

