



High performing teams: Belbin's team roles

Have you ever been part of a team, which, despite all your efforts, consistently fails to deliver? Or lucky enough to be involved in a team that just works – able to deliver on the task every time while maintaining supportive, co-operative relationships? And have you ever thought how useful it might be to be able to *predict* the effectiveness of a team before a project begins? In this article, we explore the roles social psychologist Meredith Belbin identified that people assume in teams, and how to combine these roles for team effectiveness.

Background

In the early 1970s, management psychologist Dr Meredith Belbin worked with the Henley Management College to try to discover a way to predict the success of teams. As part of that research he ran a series of experiments using business simulations and dividing participants up according to various psychological types – introverted/extroverted etc. He hoped to find the perfect team mix.

Over a period of 5 years he established that there are certain clusters or patterns of behaviour which can be used to predict team success in specific kinds of projects. Individuals often have a preference for one or more of these clusters. He also established that no one team was ever perfect for every task.

Belbin eventually identified 8 and then later 9 such clusters. He called these clusters *team roles*, defined as “a tendency by an individual to behave, contribute or interrelate with others in a team in certain ways.” He also gave these clusters names such as Shaper, Plant and Monitor Evaluator. The names are meant to give a clue to the kinds of behaviour that an individual with access to that cluster or role might exhibit in a team.

Belbin was able to predict which teams would succeed in which specific projects by analysing the strengths any given group of individuals would bring to a specific team engaged in a specific task. This analysis reinforces a hypothesis that team success relies on the interdependence and mix of its members.

Why Belbin is useful to you and your team

So, does your team have a balanced mix of Belbin's roles? By understanding the roles in your team you'll be able to:

- identify why you prefer to do certain activities in teams and dislike others
- establish whether other members of your team have the same experience and feelings about roles
- be able to recruit a mix of team members for specific kinds of projects and tasks

Belbin's Typology of Roles

Belbin uses a specific language to describe different roles in teams. This language provides an easy shorthand way to discuss specific behaviour without team members feeling you're stereotyping them.

So using Belbin's typology you can talk about whether you're an Implementer or a Shaper. Or you can work out if your team has a Plant. Or even clarify if you need to get some Completer Finishers on board.

Below we outline the *strengths* each of the eight key roles brings to team, the '*allowable weaknesses*' – often the complement to the strengths – and some *behaviours to avoid* that may drag the team off track and into poor dynamics.

We also give you our *top tips* if you are a manager in that role.

The Implementer

Implementers are often described as practical, systematic, loyal and conservative. They tend to be endowed with copious amounts of common-sense and they're down to earth and self disciplined. The main contribution of the Implementer is to turn theoretical concepts and general plans into a practical brief, and then systematically work through that brief.

"If it can be done, we'll do it, but can we work out some practical details?"

Allowable weaknesses:

- can lack flexibility and be resistant to change – if it ain't broke why fix it?

Behaviours to avoid:

- obstructing change
- unconstructive criticism of other team members' ideas

Top tips for Implementers as managers:

- try to strike a balance between perseverance and adaptability
- focus on your strength for clarifying objectives in practical terms

The Co-ordinator

Co-ordinators are often described as calm, confident and controlled and tend to be mature in outlook and approach. The Co-ordinator focuses on the team as a whole and how everyone working together can achieve the team's shared goals. The main contribution of the Co-ordinator is a calm ability to control and organise the team in a way that gets the best collective performance with the resources available.

"We always aim at consensus"

Allowable weaknesses:

- low creativity
- a strong process focus – may not be as clear on output

Behaviours to avoid:

- taking the credit for team successes or blame for failures
- using calm determination to mask rigidity or obstinacy

Top tips for Co-ordinators as managers:

- you are in a great position to use your talents overtly to get the best out of your team
- be clear on objectives and monitor progress regularly to ensure you don't lose sight of the task

The Shaper

Shapers are often described as assertive, outgoing and dynamic. Shapers are usually highly motivated people with a lot of nervous energy and a strong desire to achieve. Shapers are probably the most likely members of a team to make things happen. If obstacles arise, they'll generally find a way round. Shapers can handle and even quite enjoy confrontation and challenge. The main contribution of the Shaper is to give shape and form to the team's activities towards the achievement of the project outcome.

"I'm not satisfied we're achieving all we can"

Allowable weaknesses:

- can be blunt and impatient with other team members
- may be easily irritated

Behaviours to avoid:

- steam-rolling other team members
- taking on more authority than status warrants

Top tips for Shapers as managers:

- make sure you allow time for reasonable debate and discussion before making your final pronouncement on what has to be done
- your aim is to impose some shape or pattern on the team's activities as a means of successfully achieving the project outcomes in the most effective and efficient way you can

The Plant

Plants are often described as individualistic, creative and unorthodox. Plants can be highly creative, whether they're providing the seeds from which major developments spring, or the (sometimes unorthodox) solution to a complex problem. Plants are independent-minded, often clever and always original. The main contribution of a Plant is to act as a prime source of ideas and innovation for the team by generating new proposals and solving complex problems.

"Let's think laterally for a moment"

Allowable weaknesses:

- can seem to be 'in the clouds'
- can focus on concepts to the detriment of practicality

Behaviours to avoid:

- being prickly if ideas are evaluated/rejected by the team
- not listening to other team members' input

Top tips for Plants as managers:

- exercise self-discipline and listen to the team's comments
- try not to let the stresses of managing a team stifle your creative input

The Resource Investigator

Resource Investigators are often described as extroverted, enthusiastic and curious. They like and are adept at exploring new opportunities and developing contacts. Resource Investigators are often relaxed personalities with a strong inquisitive sense and a readiness to see the possibilities of anything new. The main contribution of the Resource Investigator is to explore just what resources are available and to develop external contacts that may be useful to the project team.

“Let's make contact with the people who can help.”

Allowable weaknesses:

- can have a limited attention span
- may be undisciplined, and can 'wander off'

Behaviours to avoid:

- letting people down to pursue own interests
- relaxing too much when the pressure of work eases

Top tips for Resource Investigators as managers:

- use your diplomacy skills to build bridges outside the team
- allow junior colleagues to bounce ideas off you

The Monitor Evaluator

Monitor Evaluators are often described as serious and prudent. They are the ones who are anxious to ensure the consequences of any decision are fully thought through. They enjoy analysing problems and evaluating ideas, and shine when asked to weigh up the pros and cons of different options. The main contribution of the Monitor Evaluator is to evaluate the feasibility and practical value of ideas and suggestions that come from both within and outside the project team.

“Have we exhausted all the options before making our decision?”

Allowable weaknesses:

- tend to slow moving and can be prone to 'analysis paralysis'
- might lack inspiration or ideas

Behaviours to avoid:

- being over critical of other team members' ideas
- excessive negativity which can lower morale

Top tips for Monitor Evaluators as managers:

- take care not to over-dominate team members and stifle their creativity
- try to match your capacity for high critical thinking with fair mindedness and receptivity to change

The Team Worker

Team Workers are often described as sociable, rather mild and generally sensitive. Team Workers are seen to be the most supportive members of a team, concerned about how others are feeling and with a great capacity to adapt readily to different situations and different people. The main contribution of the Team Worker is to help individual members to achieve and maintain team effectiveness.

“It’s alright with me if it’s alright with you”

Allowable weaknesses:

- may struggle under pressure and find it difficult to make decisions
- may lack toughness or robustness when facing conflict

Behaviours to avoid:

- avoiding making difficult decisions
- siding with one team member against another, or forming cliques

Top tips for Team Workers as managers:

- use your skills to develop members of your team and to delegate
- remember it’s not always possible to keep everyone happy all the time

The Completer Finisher

Completer Finishers are often described as painstaking, orderly, conscientious, detail people. Completer Finishers have a great capacity for follow through and wouldn’t normally start something they couldn’t finish. The main contribution of a Completer Finisher is to ensure all the team’s efforts are as near perfect as possible, and that nothing is overlooked.

“This is something that demands our undivided attention”

Allowable weaknesses:

- a reluctance to delegate – “it’s better to do the job properly yourself”
- focusing on the detail at the expense of the overall project outcomes

Behaviours to avoid:

- allowing anxiety to get things right to have an effect on the morale of the team
- refusing to accept help from other team members, even when hugely overworked

Top tips for Completer Finishers as managers:

- try to strike a balance between your need for perfection and the more practical outcomes required of the team
- in order to avoid overloading yourself, ensure you delegate effectively – be clear about the standard you are looking for then let them get on with the task

As mentioned above there is a ninth role, that of **Specialist**. This role refers to someone who brings a specific skill set to a team but does not impact too much on team dynamics. An example might be an IT person or an accountant who provides technical advice to a project team.

Creating the 'Ultimate' Team

Reading the roles above you can probably identify people in your team who fit them. (Belbin is clear that we often have a preference for two roles – a primary and a back up. So you might be able to identify a person you know in one or two possible roles.)

How do you combine these roles and the people who prefer them to create the ideal team? Well, Belbin is clear there is no such thing as the 'ideal' team – simply teams that are more or less suited to a specific task. When you're putting together a general team Belbin suggests the following factors are key:

- aim for wide coverage of all the key team roles – or select people base on the nature of the task – e.g. Completer Finishers and Shapers for projects with deadlines
- secure a good match between *functional* role and *team* role – so use Coordinators or Shapers in leadership roles
- create an awareness by team members of the various team roles and how they will impact on team performance

Further help

If you want to find out more about Belbin's team roles and how they can contribute to forming and managing successful teams, then join us for **=mc's 3-day Project Management** programme. You will get the opportunity to take a personal assessment of your team roles, and to get feedback from fellow participants on your behaviour in live team projects.

For further information and to make a booking, please visit www.managementcentre.co.uk/pm or call us on **+44 (0) 20 7978 1516**.

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