

Team Roles

by David Gouws



1. INTRODUCTION: LEADERS, TEAMS AND TEAM ROLES

In thinking and talking about the qualities needed to be a competent leader we sometimes compile lists of desirable characteristics and skills which may include: intelligence, vigilance, good judgement, the ability to see the big picture, insight and imagination, willingness to accept responsibility, a sense of humour, a sense of justice, ability to co-operate, ability to discern and formulate the common purpose, ability to monitor the progress of the team, skill in giving feedback, the ability to follow through etc.

A moment's reflection will remind us of many successful (or at least temporarily successful) leaders who, very conspicuously, did not possess some of the qualities listed above. As R.F. Tredgold observed many years ago: *"the longer and more comprehensive the list of qualities, the more obvious it must be that their possessor would be of no use as a junior leader in industry, for he would inevitably be in demand elsewhere as a Prime Minister, or maybe as an archangel"*.

Furthermore, how does it happen that managers who lack certain important leadership qualities perform well in practice and keep on performing adequately? The answer to this question might lie in the concept of team roles.

Team Role Research

The idea that different people, due to their personal characteristics, may perform certain roles in the team better than, or at least in preference to, some other roles, is not entirely new but has received only scant attention. Bales and Slater in 1995 published the results of a series of studies in which two distinct team roles were identified – the 'ideas' person (also called the task specialist or instrumental leader) and the 'best-liked' person (also called the socio-emotional or 'maintenance' specialist). These roles can be complementary, i.e. the task leader can consciously involve the socio-emotional specialist to help keep things on an even keel, and the latter can consciously support the task leader, in which case the team generally performs better than when such mutuality is absent.

Little attention was subsequently given to distinguishing any further characteristic roles in work groups, as the attention veered more towards leadership 'style', where the tendency was to see 'versatility' or 'flexibility' as the major issue, i.e. the ability of the aspiring leader to function differently in different situations. (Blake & Mouton, Reddin, Hersey and Blanchard, etc). However, Fred Fiedler, who has devoted his career to the study of leadership, was less optimistic about people's ability to change their styles. He recommended that situations should rather be selected or adapted to fit the "givens" of a particular manager's style.

Solo & Team Leadership

Underlying this whole line of thinking was the implicit notion of the leader role as more or less a solo affair, rather than to think alternatively of it as a circulating phenomenon, where at different times, different people might temporarily take the lead because their knowledge, skills and contributions are most relevant to the task then at hand. My own conclusion, after observing hundreds of managerial teams, is that effective teams, especially teams composed of people who are comparable with regard to intellectual ability and experience, often show this phenomenon of circulating, participative leadership, which

not only allows people with different skills, interest, etc to make unique contributions at critical junctures, but demonstrates in a dramatic manner the interdependence among team members.

2. THE WORK OF BELBIN AND THE INDUSTRIAL TRAINING RESEARCH UNIT FROM CAMBRIDGE

The fascinating story of the gradual discovery of the nine team roles in Belbin's system is told in his book: R Meredith Belbin (1981). *Management Teams – Why They Succeed or Fail*.

What follows is a brief description of the nine team roles, as identified over a 10 year period at Henley Management College and subsequently refined and validated in numerous real-life applications to management situations on five continents during the past decade.

At Henley, Belbin and his colleagues – who had no teaching responsibilities and could concentrate full-time on research – found a fortunate situation: a successful residential management training establishment with competent staff and with participants of whom 85 – 90% had completed a comprehensive battery of personality and ability tests upon entering the College, the results of which were available to them.

The 'financial' results of teams in an intensive computer-based business simulation covering twelve periods was used as a criterion of team performance. This simulation was difficult and varied enough to be regarded as a good approximation of real life situations.









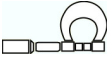
2.1 The loyal, hard-working Implementer (IMP)



An early approach was to study the member characteristics of the teams that did well in the business simulation, and to compare these with the characteristics of members from teams that performed poorly. A distinctive pattern of personal characteristics and behaviours typical of the majority of the members of winning teams was indeed established and originally called the 'company worker' by Belbin and his associates. This team role is now known as the **Implementer**.

Implementers typically are practical, disciplined, loyal members of the team. They are good organisers who favour hard work and are committed to fulfilling their obligations to their team, rather than promoting their self interest. They have a positive self-image and good internal control (i.e. are not plagued by serious internal conflicts). They are tough-minded (i.e. unsentimental, self-reliant, unselfpitying, matter-of-fact), reliable, tolerant towards others, and conservative – in the sense of respecting established views and procedures, etc.

TABLE 1: BELBIN'S NINE TEAM ROLES

	Team Role contribution	Allowable weaknesses
	RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR: (RI) Extrovert enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts.	Overly optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed.
	TEAMWORKER: (TW) Co-operative, mild perceptive and diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction, calms the water.	Indecisive in crunch situations. Can be fearful of conflict.
	CO-ORDINATOR: (CO) Mature, confident, a good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision-making, delegates well.	Can be seen as manipulative. Delegates personal work.
	SHAPER: (SH) Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. Has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles.	Prone to provocation. Liable to offend others.
	IMPLEMENTER: (IMP) Disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions.	Somewhat inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities.
	COMPLETER FINISHER: (CF) Painstaking, Conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time.	Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate.
	PLANT: (PL) Creative, imaginative, original, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems.	Ignores details. Too pre-occupied to communicate effectively.
	MONITOR EVALUATOR: (ME) Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately.	Lacks drive and ability to inspire. Sceptical and critical.
	SPECIALIST: (SP) Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply.	Contributes on only a narrow front. Dwells on specialised personal interests.

Blue = Thinking roles; Green = Action roles; Orange = People roles

Strength of contribution in any one of the roles is commonly associated with particular weaknesses. These are called allowable weaknesses.

Individuals are seldom strong in all nine team roles. Most people have a preference for working in their 2-3 strong roles, are able to handle 3-5 roles reasonably where required (by the team), and are weak in 1-3 roles. The interdependency of roles in a team and how they are played out is the key to team success (capsule descriptions of the team roles are given in Table 1. Note especially that accompanying the strong points of each team role is a set of 'allowable weaknesses').

The next step in this experimentation was to form teams consisting only of Implementers. These pure Implementer teams failed to produce better than average results. Observation of such pure Implementer teams in action showed that they were well organised and hardworking, but lacked new ideas. They tended to be inflexible once they had established their frame of reference. They were strongly committed to what they had set in motion and were disturbed by having to change plans that had been successful in the past.

In general the experience with pure teams showed that they could perform well if the demands of the situation happened to coincide with their strong points, but since business simulations – and much more so the real world – over time pose new and different problems and make novel demands, a well-balanced and effectively co-operating heterogeneous team was found to have far better prospects of success in the longer term.

2.2 The self-confident, unobtrusive Coordinator (CO)



The management simulation at Henley had six conventional management 'functions' which each team had to allocate amongst its members. Each team appointed – according to their own choice – a chairperson, a company secretary, and specific members to look after respectively finance, production, marketing and management services.

To determine what abilities and interpersonal behaviours characterised the chairpersons of successful teams the first seventy-five teams competing in the management simulation were divided into three groups in terms of their results in the business simulation (good, intermediate and poor).

A distinctive team role associated with chairpersons of successful teams, subsequently called the **Coordinator**, was established. The distinguishing feature of **Coordinators** was their ability to get their team members to work towards a common goal. They were quick to spot the individual talents of fellow team members and to use these in the pursuit of group objectives. They were mature, trusting, calm and confident and delegated readily, without feeling threatened by possible loss of control.

Although not necessarily the cleverest member of the team they had breadth of perspective and were respected by their teammates. Their interventions were not conspicuous, except at critical points, when they would take command striving to pull the team approach and effort together, preventing meetings from getting out of control and always ready to impart a sense of direction and common purpose when there was internal dissension. Coordinators perform well when put in charge of a team or people of near or equal general caliber, but with diverse skills and personal characteristics.

2.3 The driving, challenging Shaper (SH)



In running team-building seminars, which attracted considerable numbers of successful Managing Directors and other top-level managers, Belbin and his associates were surprised to find relatively fewer types among their participants.

In due course they were able to identify and describe a second, quite different, type of team-leader attending these brief courses:

"The general impression of the proven top performers to which the evidence both of their test profiles and behaviour in the exercise contributed was that of extroverts abounding in nervous energy and actuated by the need for achievement.

In many ways they were the antithesis of team players. They challenged; argued; disagreed. They were impatient and easily frustrated. Their proneness to aggression would produce a reciprocal reaction from other team members yet they would respond with remarkably good humor and resilience as though they thoroughly enjoyed a battle. Winning was the name of the game as far as they were concerned and learning was very much the secondary objective. If their team was doing poorly they would question the rules or the fairness of the umpiring, yet they had no hesitation in pursuing their goals by illicit means. Once the simulation had ended and concentration on winning could be set aside, a new and sudden interest erupted in the lessons for the future, in the way in which the message could be put across back at the firm. The more poorly the members' (teams) had performed, the

greater the intensity of their interest, in spite of their smarting at the mistakes which they, ore more usually in their eyes another member of the team, had made."

Shapers like to lead and push others into action. When obstacles arise they tend to show strong emotional reaction and a redoubling of effort to find ways round. They are highly competitive and may lack interpersonal understanding.

Shapers are useful as team leaders when decisive action is required to overcome internal lethargy and stagnation, or external obstacles and threats. They can bring about needed changes because they don't mind taking unpopular decisions.

However, they may be too impetuous and impatient to be good leaders of the team when the need is to arrive at unpressurised, carefully considered strategic conclusions where the inputs of people with diverse talents and perspectives have to be digested and integrated.

2.4 The imaginative, unorthodox Plant (PL)



Belbin and his associates were also interested in the phenomenon of creativity within teams. Extensive research into individual creativity had shown that high intellectual ability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for individual creativity. What is also needed is a set of additional personal attributes including tendencies to introversion, sensitivity, being imaginative, intuitive, serious-minded and concerned, fairly assertive, not tied to traditional thinking, preferring own decisions, etc.

By utilising the available psychometric data Belbin and his associates were able to identify such innovative individuals who were then "planted" into teams to observe what effect they had. Teams certainly benefited by having such a **Plant**, but teams with more than one **Plant**, were found to fare no better than teams with none.

How a team handled the Plant clearly was critical for success. Plants' potential contributions had to be recognised by giving them scope and a fitting role, for example, by not allowing them to pursue unrewarding lines of thought that happen to engage their fancy and keeping them in their place.

Under such conditions Plants were found to produce significantly more original ideas than the other team members.

Plants often prefer to operate by themselves at some social distance from the other members of the team, using their imagination and intellect, working in an unorthodox way and often producing radical and unrealistic ideas, which yet on occasion provide the seeds from which major developments spring. Plants, although independent in their originality, tend to react strongly to criticism and praise. They may be weak in communicating with teammates, because they may not take the trouble to translate their ideas into common language and understanding.

2.5 The extroverted, inquisitive Resource Investigator (RI)



In the process of studying innovation within the team the Belbin group identified a different type of team member who also produced new ideas, although not fitting the Plant's personality pattern or typical team behaviour, whom they called the **Resource Investigator**. In this case, the source of ideas proved to be the external environment rather than the person's own creativity.

Resource Investigators were found to be sociable, enthusiastic, inquisitive people who actively explored the resources in the environment and carried back to the team useful information and ideas picked up from diverse sources. They were also excellent liaison people and negotiators with external stakeholders, having skill in quickly forming positive relationships with new acquaintances.

Typical RI's are particularly skilled at making friends quickly and getting other people to confide in them. This enables them to probe for and pick up ideas which they then develop and report back to their teams.

RI's are open and relaxed and quick to see the possibilities in anything new. However, unless stimulated by others they may lose interest in the ideas they championed yesterday, as their attention is captured by the novelty of today's attractions. **Resource Investigators** can think on their feet and tend to be good at win/win negotiations.

2.6 The prudent, unemotional Monitor - Evaluator (ME)



The people playing this role in the Henley teams combined high intellectual capacity with emotional detachment. Their judgment of a proposal was determined by a serious, objective, comprehensive and analytic evaluation of the soundness of all the evidence and the reasoning presented, uninfluenced by emotional appeals. They tended to have low drive, low originality and low enthusiasm, which helped them to make impartial judgements.

Monitor Evaluators may strike the superficial observer as being rather dry, boring and overcritical, but Belbin has found that many of them occupy strategic high level positions, especially in Corporate Offices.

The **Monitor Evaluator** style of management is the exact opposite of seat-of-the-pants management. In a particular period the latter will cheerfully make many decisions, aware that quite a few will be wide off the mark. Monitor Evaluators, by contrast, will take their time and make only a few decisions, but pride themselves that they would seldom be wrong. When it comes to vital strategic choices among several complex alternatives, the team may find it advantageous to use the **Monitor-Evaluator** as the final arbiter of a decision, rather than the Shaper or the Coordinator.

2.7 The perceptive, supportive, friendly Teamworker (TW)



The **Teamworker** was characterised by high sociability coupled with low dominance, a trusting and sensitive, perceptive person who liked interaction with people and was not seen as a threat by anybody. In the team situation they were very good listeners, talking less than average and being considerate and diplomatic in what they said. They called attention to and tried to build on, the promising ideas of other team members. They tried to avoid friction and build the morale of the team.

They were supportive and had a soothing, lubricating effect on team action, especially when a driving Shaper tended to ruffle the team. However, they had a tendency to be indecisive in crunch situations. Belbin found that Teamworkers were quite common among the top managers in their groups.

2.8 The conscientious, perfectionistic Completer-Finisher (CF)



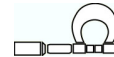
In the Henley experiments it was found that a team which seemed all set to win, which had able members and a good strategy and which had been very successful up to that point, sometimes faltered because of lack of attention to detail and follow-through.

The **Completer-Finisher** team-role represents the sort of person who can step into this breach. Completer-Finishers tended to be anxious introverts. However, their anxiety often is

not noticeable to their teammates because they also are high in self-control and self-discipline. They seem to look for and absorb stress (an ulcer could be a promising sign of a **CF**). They favour steady, orderly and consistent effort to attain high standards and are less interested in the glamour of spectacular success. This style is quite common among successful top and senior managers.

Completer-Finishers are hard, systematic and effective detail-oriented workers, who try to finish everything they start. They are reluctant to undertake anything they may not be able to see through to completion. They press for finishing things on time and for using time responsibly and may strike others as fussy. They are not keen on delegating and due to their concern for detail may not be able to see the wood for the trees.

2.9 The dedicated, single-minded Specialist (SP)



The **Specialist**, the last of the team roles identified by Belbin and his co-workers, shared with the Completer-Finisher the tendency to anxious introversion. Specialists pride themselves on acquiring ever greater technical skill and specialised knowledge in their chosen field. Their priorities centre around maintaining professional standards and on furthering and defending their own field. While they show great pride in their own subject, they lack interest in other people. They could be more concerned about their own speciality than about the organisation they work for.

Eventually, the **Specialist** 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 first class **SPs**. **Specialists** have an indispensable part to play in some teams, where they provide the rare information and skill upon which the firm's service or product is based. As managers of their technical operations they command support because they know more about their subject than anyone else. They can usually be called upon to make decisions based on in-depth experience, provided the decision involves only their own speciality. They tend to lose interest in team discussions if the topic is outside their own specialised area.

3. TEAM ROLES AND TOP MANAGEMENT POSITIONS

Belbin has found that top managers can have practically any team role as their strongest role. Implementers, Teamworkers, Plants, Shapers, Monitor Evaluators, etc may all rise to top positions, depending on what is required and who is available at a particular time. Teamworker top managers, for example, are often seen as a threat to no one, as a benefit to the common interest and as the sort of person their peers would be most prepared to serve under.

Belbin has also analysed the (probable) team roles of some prominent historical figures. Charles de Gaulle is seen as a Plant/Specialist, Gorbachev as a Shaper/Teamworker, Gandhi as a Teamworker/Plant, Reagan as a Teamworker/Resource Investigator, Margaret Thatcher as a Shaper/Completer-Finisher & Barack Obama as a Resource Investigator/Coordinator.

4. TEAM ROLES IN PRACTICE

Despite years of further work since the ninth team role had been identified, no new team roles have come to light. Thousands of team members have now been studied and the results indicate that most managers have two, three or even four strong or natural roles, rather than only one. Extensive work has also been done on the topic of how to use one's own repertoire of strong roles to best advantage and how to compensate for weak roles.

Blockages to Team Role Performance

However, it should be noted that the fact that a particular member is strong in a particular team role does not necessarily mean that the potential contribution will be forthcoming. An unorthodox but sensitive Plant may, for example, be prevented from making creative contributions to the team by the restricting actions of a fast-talking, aggressive Shaper.

Furthermore, due to lack of a good role model to emulate and of deliberate practice in becoming effective in a particular role, high potential for that role may remain relatively undeveloped.

Another way in which things can go wrong is when team members try to emulate the team role characteristics and behaviours of an admired person, when this team role isn't one of their strong suits.

Best results are attained when team members are aware what their two or three strongest roles are and deliberately practice and develop these to a high level of competence. Team members should also be aware what roles, i.e. behaviours and contributions, are required by a particular set of circumstances.

It helps if they can recognise the roles they are weak in accept their necessary dependence on others in that regard and become skilful in identifying and involving those team members who can complement them in their weak roles.

Circulating Leadership

Finally, highly skilled team members give recognition and appropriate scope to the various team roles. Balanced heterogeneous teams have great potential for excellent performance in many different situations provided the **interdependencies** are realised and the greater demands of effective utilisation of team resources are satisfied. The notion of **circulating leadership** mentioned earlier will be appropriate in this context. Observation of effective management teams suggest that, although a formal leader or manager may be present, leadership actually circulates between different members, depending on who has a significant contribution to make. The higher the average caliber of the team the more relevant the concept of circulating leadership seems to be.

Participative Management

The notion of participative management is now more or less generally accepted, but how does it translate into practice?

The attraction of Belbin's system of team roles is that it gives substantive content to this notion, in the sense of giving us explicit guidelines as to what specific team members can contribute and what other team members can realistically expect of them.

During the 1980s Belbin developed a powerful computer-based technology, the "Interplace" system. This system provides appropriate information concerning a person's strongest and weakest team roles, provides guidance about team composition, which roles members could consider playing, including secondary roles where appropriate, etc.

The themes of diversity of talent and of consequent interdependence between team members can therefore be combined with the idea of participative management to help us form and develop high-performing teams more effectively than before.

Instead of overemphasizing the role of the formal leader we can now give more balanced attention to natural team roles, to the composition of teams, and to the development of circulating leadership skills by all members of the team.

For the formal leader of the team the important message is rather than striving to perform all roles by one-self, it may be wiser to strive for a versatile and well-balanced team.

5. CONCLUSION

In 1993 Belbin published his second book on team roles, *Team Roles at Work*, in which he relates the further development of his thinking and research. He discusses the notion of eligibility (e.g. having the right qualifications, experience) and of suitability (e.g. having the right team role make-up) in staff selection decisions, of solo leadership versus team leadership; of the interpersonal chemistry between people, and of the art of building a team. These topics will be demonstrated and discussed during the Workshop.

References:

Belbin, R M (1981) *Management Teams – Why They Succeed or Fail*, Oxford: Butterworth/Heinemann

Belbin, RM (1993) *Team Roles at Work*, Oxford: Butterworth/Heinemann

ETC's Team Performance Workshops help teams understand their special strengths and weaknesses and how to relate together for maximum impact in the workplace.

Contact

Website: www.etcglobal.co.nz
Email: trevor@etcglobal.co.nz
Phone: ++64 9 527-5008

