

CHAPTER 3: ROLES PEOPLE PLAY IN A TEAM

Part of your ability to create a high-performance team will be to understand better the roles that people take in a team. In this chapter I describe:

- The different behaviours which characterise the various roles that people take in a team.
- How you can better understand the roles and work with them to create an effective IT team.

An effective team

Imagine you are a fly on the wall in a project meeting looking in at a high-performance team in an IT environment. What you will probably find is that it is easy to see what the team is doing, what they are working on and what is being said (the content of the meeting). You will also probably be aware of how the team is organising itself to carry out the project or tasks, the structure or processes they are using. (I'll call this the procedure).

What might not be as clear is what I'll call the team process: how people are working together and what is happening while the team is working. These tend to be things beneath the waterline such as the level of openness and trust there is and the roles that people take in a team (see Figure 2).

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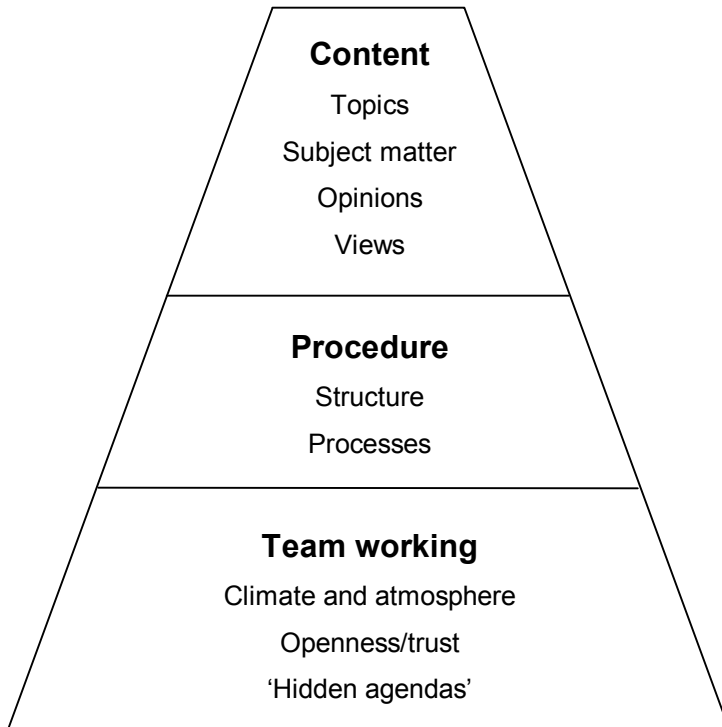


Figure 2: Content, procedure, team working

When a team is working well you will see that

- the team has an effective leader,
- team members demonstrate drive and ambition,
- team members are able to complete tasks and meet objectives,
- team members develop new ideas,
- team members turn ideas into practical actions,
- team members network with stakeholders and sell ideas,

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- team members think strategically and make objective decisions, and
- team members see problems from others' perspective and generate harmony.

They also have a mixture of people who adopt different and complementary roles.

Our behaviour preferences

Look at any team and you will see a mixture of behaviours and personalities. Sometimes the people in a team can be complete opposites of each other and there will be clashes; other times there will be synergy in the team. The 'process' part of the team will be very dependent on the behaviour preferences that team members display.

The management psychologist Dr Meredith Belbin was one of the first people formally to identify the different roles that people play in teams. Over a period of nine years when he was based at Henley Management College he originated the concept that we all take different roles in a team. Belbin studied the behaviour of managers from all over the world. Over time he identified different clusters of behaviour as contributing to the success of teams. He recognised that in teams there are people who take action-oriented roles. Some team members are more people-focused and others more cerebral.

What does this mean for you as an IT professional? The first step to understanding better the roles that people play in teams is to understand best the role that you prefer to take.

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Just because you have the word ‘manager’ in your title does not mean necessarily that your preference in a team is to be the chairperson or co-ordinator. We all have a preference regarding our role in a team, and this can be more than one role. If another member of the team displays the behaviours which seem most natural to us (our preferred team role), then we can potentially assume other roles in order to avoid clashing with this person. If your natural role is chairperson, you may take on the role of ideas person, for example.

Finally, there are roles in a team that each person avoids. For example, if you are not into detail, you would be very uncomfortable having to take on this role in a team. Therefore you would potentially avoid this.

The work of Belbin and others suggests that there are eight different types of behaviour people display in a team. Here is my own interpretation of possible team roles:

Action-orientated team members

These three roles are focused on achieving the task:

The driver

This person drives the team forward to succeed. They are challenging and competitive. Future-focused, they like to overcome barriers and lead the way.

To other people who are not like this, they may appear forceful, impatient and opinionated.

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The handyman	This person's talent lies in turning plans into practical actions. Task-focused and efficient, they get things done in a team in a reliable fashion. To other people who are not like this, they may appear to be rigid and inflexible. Once they are up and running they are unlikely to change their plan.
The proofreader	The proofreader is a conscientious person. They deliver on time and in exact detail. To other people who are not like this, they may appear too focused on detail and reluctant to delegate or let go of the finer points. They are also reluctant to change.
People-oriented team members There are three roles that people-orientated team members, who invariably focus more on relationships than they do on the task, play in a team:	
The chairperson	This person tends to facilitate discussion in the group. They are adept at drawing out the opinions and views of others in the team and in chairing the discussion. To other people who are not like this, the chairperson can seem reliant on others to make decisions and lacking in strong opinions.
The accommodator	This member of the team is quiet, co-operative and sensitive to others' needs. They are good listeners and respectful of others. As a consequence they help build a good atmosphere in the team. To other people in the team who are not

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	like this, they can appear shy and indecisive. They don't like to be put on the spot or make decisions that go against the needs of other people in the team.
The networker	This person is outgoing, communicative and enthusiastic. They enjoy networking and meeting other people. To other people in the team who are not like this, their desire for variety and new things can mean that they seem easily bored and distracted.
'Thinking' team members Finally, there are two 'thinking' roles people can take in a team:	
The evaluator	This member of the team thinks strategically; they are good at judging all options, being realistic and discerning. To other people in the team who are not like this, the evaluator's sober style can appear uninspiring. They can also appear cautious and slow to change.
The ideas person	The ideas person is good at generating options. They are creative and unorthodox. To other people in the team who are not like this, the ideas person can appear unrealistic and impractical.

Table 1: Roles people take in a team

Recognising the different types

Part of building an effective team is being able to recognise the different types in a team. The phrases below are

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indicative and representative of different behaviour associated with different roles that people take in a team. Look at what is said and when and guess which team type this represents.

Phrase	Said at what point in the meeting	Your guess
'To summarise, the main points seem to be ...'	Throughout	
'So we've heard from Sue, what are other people's views?'	Throughout	
'What we have to do is ...'	Throughout	
'No, you're wrong; we need to focus on ...'	Throughout	
'How about looking at it from a different perspective?'	Beginning/middle	
'I've an idea; we could possibly ...'	Beginning/middle	
'The problem with that idea is ...'	Middle/end	
'Let's not overlook ...'	Middle/end	
'A practical way of doing this within our budget is ...'	Middle/end	
'Let's turn this into a workable plan'	Middle/end	

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'I know someone who can ...'	Beginning/middle	
'I can persuade Sales to ...'	Beginning/middle	
'I agree with Joe'	Middle/end	
'I've listened to what Sue was saying'	Middle/end	
'Let me check that we have all the detail ...'	End	
'What about Article 3, Paragraph G, Sub-paragraph iv in the ninth volume?'	End	

Table 2: Guess who says what

Effective teams

Effective teams are made up of different types of people and they consist of different types of roles.

The mix of role types that play in a team determines their effectiveness. For example, how do you think an IT team made up of two drivers, a networker and two accommodators would perform if working together on a detailed IT project implementation?

The chances are that some of this team will talk a good talk (the drivers and the networkers), but the other two members of the team may be ignored (the accommodators). As there is not a handyman or a proofreader in the team, the detail of the project may be ignored and timescales missed. There is also no chairperson in the team, which means that potentially the two drivers' strong opinions may go

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unchecked. The networker may become bored and decide to network elsewhere!

Ideally it is useful to have a mix of all the different roles in a team. In reality this is not always possible. A healthy team will have a mixture of action-orientated, people-orientated and thinking people.

So what can you do to manage the roles people take in a team?

There are a number of team diagnostic tools that can help you and your team assess the roles that you play in a team. Working with an accredited user you can discover what types each of you and your team members are. This will allow you to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your team as well as how other people may perceive your team. It will also help facilitate a discussion with the team about blind spots and how these can be overcome.

In addition, this assessment will help you identify gaps in the team which may potentially be filled via secondments or new recruitment to the team.

Activity to undertake with your team

Explain and discuss the roles that people undertake in a team using my description above. Invite each team member to say which role(s) they believe best describe(s) them. Ask other people in the team for their opinions too.

Hold a discussion about the balance there is in the team around action-orientated, people-orientated and thinking people and what this means for the performance of the team. Ask the team to identify what they need to be more

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aware of or watch out for in order to make them a more effective team.

Summary

How people work together as part of a team is two thirds of its success. I strongly recommend that to create a high-performance team, you take time to better understand team roles and the different behaviours which characterise these.

Here are some questions that you can ask of yourself and others in your team:

- Thinking about the ‘process’ of your current team – i.e. the climate in the team – how would you describe it?
- Looking at the characteristics of different team members, which one best describes you? (You can be a mixture of several types). Which ones best describe your team members?
- How would other people outside your team describe the characteristics of your team? How can you verify this?
- What team types are missing from your team? What actions can you take to address this?

Answers

Here are the answers to the guess-the-team-type quiz:

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Phrase	Said at what point in the meeting	Answer
'To summarise, the main points seem to be ...'	Throughout	The chairperson
'So we've heard from Sue, what are other people's views?'	Throughout	The chairperson
'What we have to do is ...'	Throughout	The driver
'No, you're wrong; we need to focus on ...'	Throughout	The driver
'How about looking at it from a different perspective?'	Beginning/middle	The ideas person
'I've an idea; we could possibly ...'	Beginning/middle	The ideas person
'The problem with that idea is ...'	Middle/end	The evaluator
'Let's not overlook ...'	Middle/end	The evaluator
'A practical way of doing this within our budget is ...'	Middle/end	The handyman
'Let's turn this into a workable plan'	Middle/end	The handyman
'I know someone who can ...'	Beginning/middle	The networker

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'I can persuade Sales to ...'	Beginning/middle	The networker
'I agree with Joe'	Middle/end	The accommodator
'I've listened to what Sue was saying'	Middle/end	The accommodator
'Let me check that we have all the detail ...'	End	The proofreader
'What about Article 3, Paragraph G, Sub-paragraph iv in the ninth volume?'	End	The proofreader

Table 3: Guess who says what – answers