

R Meredith Belbin

Team building

R Meredith Belbin (b.1926) is acknowledged as the father of team role theory. As a result of research carried out in the 1970s, he identified eight (later extended to nine) useful roles which are necessary for a successful team. His contribution has gained in significance due to the widespread adoption of teamworking in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Belbin is an academic who has also spent periods working in industry and who now has his own consultancy company. It was whilst working at the Industrial Training Research Unit in Cambridge that he was asked by Henley Management College to conduct some research into the operation of management teams. The college's approach to management education was based on group work, and it had been noticed that some teams of individually able executives performed poorly and others well. This impression was reinforced when a business game was introduced to one of the courses. Belbin discovered that it was the contribution of particular personality types rather than the merits of the individuals themselves that were important to the success and failure of such teams.

There has been a continuing interest in Belbin's work because teamworking is increasingly an important strategy for organisations. There are many reasons for this. Teamworking is variously seen as a means of:

- providing greater worker flexibility and cooperation
- helping to achieve cultural shifts within an organisation
- improving problem solving and project management
- tapping the talents of everyone in the organisation.

There are different types of teamworking: for example, temporary teams, cross-functional teams, top management teams, and self-directed teams.

Because of this interest in teams, the issue of team building, including team selection, group dynamics, and team performance, becomes particularly vital. Although there are many models of team relationships, such as *Team Management Systems (TMS)* developed by Margerison and McCann, Belbin's model is probably the best known.

Team role theory

It is important to remember that Belbin's findings relate to teams of managers rather than other types of team. They were first published in *Management teams: why they succeed or fail* and later refined in *Team roles at work*.

In Belbin's own words a team role "describes a pattern of behaviour characteristic of the way in which one team member interacts with another where his performance serves to facilitate the progress of the team as a whole."

The essence of his theory is that, given knowledge of the abilities and characteristics of individual team members, success or failure can be predicted within certain limits. As a result unsuccessful teams can be improved by analysing their shortcomings and making changes. But it is also important for individuals within the team to understand the roles that others play, when and how to let another team member take over, and how to compensate for shortcomings. Although each of the eight roles have to be filled for a team to work effectively, the eight roles are not needed in equal measure, nor are they needed at the same time. There can be fewer than eight people in a team, since people are capable of taking on back-up roles where there is less need for them to fulfil a primary team role.

These roles are determined largely by the psychological make-up of those who instinctively adopt them, measured in terms of four principal factors: intelligence; dominance; extroversion/introversion; and stability/anxiety. The ratings are shown as traits in the list of team role contributions.

Roles and Descriptions Team-Role Contribution		Allowable Weaknesses
PL 	PLANT: Creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems.	Ignores incidentals. Too pre-occupied to communicate effectively.
RJ 	RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR: Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts.	Over-optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed.
CO 	CO-ORDINATOR: Mature, confident, a good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision-making, delegates well.	Can often be seen as manipulative. Off-loads personal work.
SH 	SHAPER: Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. The drive and courage to overcome obstacles.	Prone to provocation. Offends people's feelings.
ME 	MONITOR EVALUATOR: Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately.	Lacks drive and ability to inspire others.
TW 	TEAM WORKER: Co-operative, mild, perceptive and diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction.	Indecisive in crunch situations.
IMP 	IMPLEMENTER: Disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions.	Somewhat inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities.
CF 	COMPLETER-FINISHER: Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time.	Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate.
SP 	SPECIALIST: Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply.	Contributes only on a narrow front. Dwells on technicalities.



The self-perception inventory and the Interplace system

Belbin devised a self-perception inventory, which has been through several revisions, as a quick and easy way for *individual managers* to work out what their own team roles should be. It was, however, taken up by *organisations* and used to determine employees' team types, and it has been questioned whether it is psychometrically acceptable for this purpose. Academics were concerned that it was too subjective and recommended that feedback should come instead from a range of sources. Belbin answered this criticism by reiterating that the inventory was never designed for this purpose and by developing a computerised system called Interplace to cater for the needs of organisations.

Interplace is a more sophisticated approach to role analysis than the self-perception inventory because it incorporates feedback from other people, not just the individual concerned. The main inputs to the Interplace system use data from self-perception exercises, observer assignments and job requirement evaluations. Interplace filters, scores, stores, converts and interprets the data gathered. It offers advice based on the three inputs in terms of counselling, team role chemistry, career development and behaviours

needed in certain jobs and team positions. The system works as a diagnostic and development tool for organisations.

Later theories

In the 1990s, Belbin has extended his work on teams to explore the link between teams and the organisational environment in which they operate. He suggests that an effective model for the new flatter organisation may be a spiral or helix in which individuals and teams move forward on the basis of excellence rather than of function.

Belbin has also very recently devised a system for defining jobs which he calls "Workset". The aim of the concept is to define the boundaries and content of a job through an interactive communication process between the manager and the job-holder. Colour is used to denote different aspects of the job. There should be five key outcomes:

- the facilitation of empowerment
- the encouragement of greater job flexibility
- the promotion of teamworking
- the support of cultural change
- a continuous improvement process for jobs and job holders.

It is too early to say what impact the Progression Helix theory or Workset system will have. They are undoubtedly a contribution, however, to managing in today's delayed organisations and flexible working environments, with the associated need to involve and communicate with staff.

In perspective

Although independent recent research has thrown doubt on the existence of nine separate team roles, Belbin's broad findings have not been questioned, nor has the popularity of his theories been disputed. There has been an enduring interest in team role categories on the part of practising managers in a wide variety of organisations. This is because:

- there is an increasing interest in teamworking
- Belbin made his ideas accessible to the lay person
- Belbin is recognised as the first to develop our understanding of the dynamics of teams.

Key works by Belbin

Books

Changing the way we work

Oxford: Heinemann, 1997

The coming shape of organization

Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1996

Team roles at work

Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1993

Management teams: why they succeed or fail

London: Heinemann, 1981

Journal articles

True colours, Meredith Belbin, Barrie Watson and Cindy West

People Management, 6 March 1997, pp36-38,41

Other reading

Journal articles

An empirically-based assessment of Belbin's team roles, Barbara Senior

Human Resource Management Journal, vol 8 no 3, 1998, pp54-60

A psychometric assessment of the Belbin team role self perception inventory, Adrian Furnham,

Howard Steele and David Pendleton

Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, vol 66 no 3, 1993, pp245-261

(This article includes Belbin's criticism of the research and the response of the authors.)

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