



M253 Resource Sheet

Team roles

1 Overview

There are a number of functional roles, such as team leader and meetings secretary, that are important to the smooth running and effective operation of a team. While these functional roles are important to the success of the team, there is another role – a *team role* – that members play which is complementary, or in addition to, their main functional role in the team. A member's team role has more to do with the personal qualities and preferred way of working of the team member than with their functional role within the team. In this *Resource Sheet* we will explain the importance of team roles to the team, describe the different team roles that have been identified, and show you how you can identify your own team roles.

2 Introduction

Members of a team contribute to the overall objective and purpose of a team in at least two ways. Firstly, individuals draw upon their own professional and technical knowledge in working on the team task. This can be called their functional role within the team (we have already mentioned the functions of team leader and meetings secretary). Depending upon the nature of the task that the team has been assigned, other functions that your team might need include designers, writers, software developers, engineers, or researchers. All of these roles relate to the function that a person might fulfil in the team.

Secondly, individuals can also play a team role, through the way in which they interact with other team members in order to facilitate team processes and the progress of the team towards its overall goal. The way in which a team member applies their skills and experience to their functional role in the team is influenced, if not determined, by their team role. Therefore, a person's team role, as well as their functional role, is important to the smooth running and effective operation of their team.

Several systems have been developed for identifying individual qualities that contribute to, or are characteristic of, specific team roles. These systems, or classifications, can be used by the team as the basis for discussion or in team-building exercises. This enables the members of the team to recognise the teams' strengths and weaknesses, and to take action in order to overcome these weaknesses. In Section 4 we will describe one of the better known systems for classifying team roles.

3 Skills audit

At an early stage in the course it is worth ensuring that the team is making the best use it can of the skills and prior experience of its members. One way of doing this is to carry out a skills audit of the team. In other words, each member of the team should summarise what skills they have and can therefore bring to the team. Such a skills audit may help you to identify the functional roles that each team member can take on. Given that M253 is a practical course on team working, you could also include a list of skills that you would like to acquire, or functional roles that you might like to take on for your own development.

One reason why you should undertake a skills audit in your team is that you may find that your team lacks skills in certain areas. If so, then individuals in the team may need to acquire such skills. Such a skills acquisition task should appear as an additional task in the project plan, since it takes time to acquire new skills. Presumably these skills will be needed before the project can be completed. For example, if your team was asked to design and build a website, technical skills that you would need include design, development, evaluation, and usability expertise, particularly applied to websites. If your team has designers but no evaluators, or developers but no usability experts, then one or more members of the team could be assigned to research evaluation or usability as appropriate.

4 Belbin's team roles

One of the most widely known systems for identifying and classifying team roles is the one devised by Dr. R. Meredith Belbin. His system is based upon observational studies that he made of hundreds of small teams while the teams carried out a collaborative task such as the one in which you are now engaged. (It is worth noting that there is at least one difference between the teams that Belbin studied and your team: Belbin studied teams who were collaborating face-to-face, rather than electronically as you are.) On the basis of his research, Belbin concluded that each person in a team tends to behave in a way that can be classified according to one of nine distinct roles (Belbin 1981, 1993). In addition to identifying these nine roles, Belbin also found that the relative balance of the different roles between the members of a team can have an impact on how well or badly the team performs, an issue to which we shall return in Section 5 of this *Resource Sheet*.

Table 1 lists Belbin's classification of nine team roles. Each role has a list of typical features or characteristics that can be used to identify the role. Each role also has a list of *allowable weaknesses*. This term describes the finding that people with strengths in any one of the roles often have weaknesses that are also associated with that role. These weaknesses may be compensated for by a person's strengths in this role or by one of their other team roles.

Table 1 Belbin's team roles (adapted from Lane 2000)

<i>Team role</i>	<i>Typical features and characteristics</i>	<i>Allowable weaknesses associated with the team role</i>
Plant	People who fall into this category tend to be creative, imaginative and unorthodox. They are innovative and often are the team's source of original ideas.	People who are plants may have a tendency to ignore details of procedures and tasks. They can be too preoccupied with their ideas to communicate effectively. They can be easily upset.
Implementer	An implementer turns ideas (often those of other people) into practical actions. They can also turn team decisions into manageable tasks that the rest of the team can take on in order to make progress towards the team goal. They can bring a methodical approach to the team's activities.	A weakness of the implementer is that they can be somewhat inflexible and slow to respond to new possibilities and opportunities.

<i>Team role</i>	<i>Typical features and characteristics</i>	<i>Allowable weaknesses associated with the team role</i>
Completer–finisher	Completer–finishers are painstaking and conscientious. They can spend considerable time searching out errors and omissions in the project documentation. They are able to deliver things on time and see projects through to completion.	Completer–finishers can be inclined to worry unduly. They tend to be introverted. They are reluctant to delegate and they can irritate others through their painstaking attention to detail.
Monitor–evaluator	These people have a sober, strategic and discerning view of the project. They tend to look for all possible options then evaluate them carefully and accurately.	Their main weaknesses include a lack of drive and an inability to inspire others. They can be overly critical of other people’s work. Lacking in warmth and imagination, they can lower morale in the team.
Resource investigator	These people have a tendency to be extrovert, enthusiastic and communicative. They will explore opportunities and are able to make and develop contacts outside the team.	Resource investigators jump from one task to another and thrive under pressure. They tend to lose interest once the initial enthusiasm for a project has passed.
Shaper	Shapers are challenging, dynamic and also thrive under pressure. They have the drive and enthusiasm to overcome obstacles in their path.	Shapers can be easily provoked or frustrated. They are impulsive and impatient in their dealings with others so their lack of tolerance may hurt other people's feelings.
Team worker	Team workers promote team harmony and work to diffuse friction within the team. They have the patience to listen to others, to build relationships with them, and take forward their ideas.	Team workers can be indecisive in critical situations. They tend to avoid confrontation and may avoid commitment when decisions have to be taken.
Coordinator	Coordinators are good at clarifying the team’s goals and are good at chairing meetings. They are natural communicators and are good social leaders.	Coordinators are sometimes seen as being manipulative. They are inclined to let others do the work and may even take credit for the team’s work.
Specialist	Specialists are single-minded, dedicated individuals. They have specific skills and knowledge that are in short supply. In other words, they are consultants that you might consider employing for their specific technical skills.	Specialists often contribute only to specific aspects of the project. They may dwell on technicalities and details within their domain of expertise, hence they can overlook the wider issues and implications of their work. In other words, they have a tendency to focus on the detail at the expense of the ‘big’ picture. They may also be poor communicators.

When reading the list of team roles in Table 1, you may have thought ‘I am like that’, or ‘I find it irritating when someone else in the team does that’. However, before reflecting further about your own or anyone else’s team role, it is worth being aware of the following points.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the Belbin team role(s) which a person takes on are not fixed. Individuals may change their roles, depending upon the nature of the team and the activities that the team is engaged in. Secondly, while individuals often have roles to which they are best suited or that they tend to play, if certain roles within the team are missing then other team members can play these missing roles as a secondary role within the team. Thirdly, the roles that people play in a team may change over time as people develop and gain experience of team working.

4.1 Identifying your own Belbin role

When working in any team situation it is useful to know your own preferred team roles so that you can be an effective team member, but how do you identify your own team role? One way of doing so is to consider a recent team discussion that you have been involved in. Identify two or three of Belbin’s team roles that best fit your perception of your role in the discussion. You should write down your team (Belbin) roles in your project log and then repeat your analysis at the end of the course to see how your role in the team has developed.

While you can carry out this activity by yourself as a piece of self-reflection, you might also like to ask another team member for their perception of your team role(s). Instead of inviting a free-for-all in a discussion forum that is open to the whole team, it is easier to pair up with someone else to share your perceptions of your own, and someone else’s, roles in the team. This can be quite fun – and revealing.

Finally, you might like to consider what your ‘allowable weaknesses’ are and whether they are consistent with your team role? What can you do to compensate for your allowable weaknesses?

Remember to record your reflections in your project log book, since you will find it helpful to review your analysis of team roles as the course progresses. You may also find your analysis to be valuable source material for the personal reflection section of your milestone reports.

5 Belbin roles and successful teams

Through observation of many teams collaborating together, Belbin (1981,1993) found that the composition of teams, in terms of the roles that team members played, was important to the success of the team. Successful teams tended to have members with a balance of roles that was different from less successful teams. The following paragraphs summarise some of the differences that Belbin identified between successful and less successful teams.

Successful teams were those that tended to have the following team roles.

- A good coordinator (who might also have the functional role of team leader).
- A strong plant, who was creative and generated a lot of good ideas.
- A monitor–evaluator, who could find flaws in proposals that the team developed (based on the ideas that the plant generated) before it was too late.

Less successful teams had a major imbalance of team roles, such as:

- A team that had a coordinator and two or more dominant shapers. In such a team, the coordinator is unlikely to be allowed to take the role of coordinator by the shapers, who often indulge in a tug-of-war over the structure and direction of the team.

- Two resource investigators and two plants. In this sort of team there are too many people generating ideas and not enough people turning ideas into action.
- A completer in a team of monitor–evaluators and implementers, with no coordinator. Such a team would tend to get bogged down in details and so make very slow progress. In this situation, the team needs a coordinator in order to make things happen and move the team towards its goal.

(Adapted from Boddy, 2002)

We should stress that Belbin did not suggest that teams should have nine members, each playing one of the roles that were described in Table 1. Instead, teams should be balanced and this balance within a team should reflect the task that the team has been asked to complete. The balance of roles is dynamic and may change during the course of the project. In the beginning, teams need one or more plants to generate innovative ideas and potential solutions to the task that the team has been set. Next the team needs an implementer whose task it is to devise a set of activities that will turn the ideas into reality. Towards the end of the project, the completer–finisher comes to the fore to ensure that the project is completed on time and to an appropriate standard. Overseeing the team and the contributions of all team members should be a good coordinator whose functional role is to lead the team.

The foregoing discussion has not mentioned some team roles. That is not to say that these roles are not important. For example, team workers can resolve misunderstandings within the team, and specialists will be required if there are skills or knowledge missing from the rest of the team.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that people rarely take on purely one role; often they possess, or have a tendency to exhibit, characteristics that would put them in one primary role and one or more subsidiary roles. Therefore, team members can play more than one role in a team, or different team roles in different situations, or different team roles at different stages of a project.

6 Other research on team roles and personality types

Belbin’s classification of team roles is one of the better known categorisations of team roles. However, there are other categorisations, such as the Management Team Role-indicator (MTR-i™) that identifies eight different ways in which members of a team may contribute to team discussions and interactions. These roles have some similarity to, and overlap with, the team roles that Belbin identified. Links to detailed explanations of the Management Team Role-indicator may be found in Section 8 of this *Resource Sheet*.

In addition to there being categorisations of the way in which people contribute to a team, there are also a number of schemes for characterising personality types. One of the most popular characterisations being the Myers–Briggs personality model. In this scheme, individuals are classified into four opposing pairs of tendencies: introvert or extrovert; sensing or intuitive; thinking or feeling; judging or perceiving. In order to work out your Myers–Briggs personality type, and where you fall in the opposing pairs of tendencies, it is usual to have to complete a checklist questionnaire. Again, links to the Myers–Briggs personality model may be found in Section 8 of this *Resource Sheet*.

Many of the psychological and team role profiling classifications are related. So even though the Myers–Briggs personality type and the Management Team Role-indicator appear to refer to different aspects of a person (their individual personality and their role in a team, respectively), both schemes have a similar theoretical basis in Carl Jung’s work on personality types. Similarly, the Management Team Role-indicator identifies roles that have some similarity to Belbin’s team roles. These are just three of the more widely known theories of team roles and personality profiles. There are others in both categories.

7 Summary

In this *Resource Sheet* we have drawn the distinction between a person's functional role and the team role that he or she may play or take on in a team. Thus a team member may:

- take on a *functional role* because of their skills and experience – this often represents a person's practical contribution to a team;
- play a *team role* because of their personality and preferred way of working – this influences the way in which a person might perform their functional role within the team.

We have focused our discussion on different team roles. In particular, we described one popular categorisation of team roles, that which was devised by R. Meredith Belbin. We also described some of the characteristics of successful and less successful teams in terms of their Belbin team roles, and we noted some strategies for compensating for teams where there is an imbalance of team roles. Finally, we highlighted Belbin's categorisation of team roles to some of the other categorisations of team roles and personality types that have been devised.

8 Further resources

Belbin Team Role information site [online] <http://www.belbin.info>

A good source of information on Belbin's team roles.

Meyers & Briggs Foundation [online] <http://www.myersbriggs.org>

A description of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator.

Team Technology [online] <http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk>

This website describes the Management Team Role-indicator (MTR-i™), has some articles on the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator, and explains the relationship between the two:

Note that all three of the team roles and personality type classifications mentioned above are proprietary. Therefore, in order to categorise yourself or your team correctly and fully according to these classifications you would have to pay to take the tests. We are not suggesting that you do this on M253. However, there is extensive information available on the web both at the above websites and those listed below, on these and other team role and personality type classifications.

The next two websites provide detailed descriptions of Belbin's team roles and how they can be used to improve team performance.

Mind Tools Ltd [online] http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_83.htm
(Accessed 30 October 2007).

ChangingMinds.org [online]
<http://changingminds.org/explanations/preferences/belbin.htm> (Accessed 30 October 2007).

Group Dynamics Resource Page [online] <http://www.richmond.edu/~dforsyth/gd/>

This page contains an annotated list of links to web pages on all aspects of groups.

Typellogic.com [online] <http://typellogic.com/>

An online version of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator is available here.

Advisor Team [online] <http://www.advisorteam.org/>

Another personality type characterisation, which has many similarities to the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator.

9 References

Belbin, R. M. (1981) *Management Teams: Why they Succeed or Fail*, Butterworth–Heinemann.

Belbin, R. M. (1993) *Team Roles at Work*, Butterworth–Heinemann.

Boddy, D. (2002) *Managing Projects: Building and Leading the Team*, Financial Times/Prentice Hall.

Lane, A. (2000) T205 *Systems thinking: Principles and Practice*, Concept File 3: 'Groups and teams at work', The Open University.

10 Acknowledgements

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